

7 Multireligious Architecture: Accommodating Plurality

*Cuadrados y ángulos
Casas enfiladas, casas enfiladas,
Casas enfiladas.
Cuadrados, cuadrados, cuadrados.
Casas enfiladas.
Las gentes ya tienen el alma cuadrada,
Ideas en fila
Y ángulo en la espalda.
Yo misma he vertido ayer una lágrima,
Dios mío, cuadrada.¹*

In the last chapter, Highgate Cemetery and The National Covid Memorial Wall were discussed as places which bring together diverse religious and other traditions and worldviews. Through multilayered spatial practices, they provide individuals and communities with places for locating and remembering the dead. Both case studies mirror spatial characteristics of plural societies in urban contexts that have attracted people of different origins, beliefs, and social backgrounds throughout the modern era. The urban formation and spatial practices linked to religious and existential worldviews interact in complex dynamics that are constantly transformed over time. Whereas in the case of the Victorian cemetery and the memorial wall in

1 »Houses aligned, houses aligned, / Houses aligned. / Squares, squares, squares. / Houses aligned. / People already have square souls, / Ideas in line / And angles in their back. / I myself shed a tear yesterday, / My God – square.« (Translation by the author). From the collection *El dulce daño* by Alfonsina Storni published in 1918 (Storni 2018, 149).

London diverse religious and other orientations interact in facing death and the remembrance of deceased loved ones, the places we will explore in this chapter respond to a contemporary trend in dealing with religious plurality. We will look at buildings designed to accommodate diverse religious rituals and communities. Accordingly, our journey leads us first to Germany where we visit a meditation and prayer room at Munich international airport. Later we move to Bern in Switzerland and discuss a larger project combining sacred and communal rooms for diverse religious and cultural communities with offices, housing and commercial services.

7.1 A tree trunk for praying and meditating

A huge tree trunk stands in a small square room illuminated by white and warm yellow light (fig. 66). The trunk rises from the floor and disappears into the ceiling. Its massive presence in this small, bare cubic space is astonishing. The vertical sculpture sparks the imagination, evoking the presence of a huge tree with roots stretching down into the foundations of the airport and its imagined branches sprouting out of the roof. The walls of the tiny room are made of glass. Simple benches placed in niches on the right and left side of the entrance invite those who come in to take a seat in this quiet spot. There are no windows, and the noise of the frenetic activity of an international transportation hub does not reach this secluded place.

This room for meditating and praying is situated in the non-Schengen area of Munich Airport. In 2002, when the decision was made to enlarge the airport by adding a new terminal, representatives of the Roman-Catholic and the Bavarian Lutheran Church suggested the inclusion of a room for prayer and silence, initiating negotiations with the management of the airport and the political authorities. In cooperation with all the stakeholders and thanks to the planning and financial support of the two state-recognised churches, this multireligious room was opened on 8 December 2005.²

2 Raum für Stille und Gebet im Flughafen München Terminal 2 2007.



Fig. 66: The Prayer and Meditation Room (room 2194 at level 05) in Terminal 2 at Munich Airport was completed in 2005. The cube is formed of glass walls, with a wooden floor and ceiling, illuminated by artificial light. It contains a huge tree trunk which rises out of the sand and disappears upwards.

The prayer room, measuring 650×500 cm, contains a construction in white opaque glass with a square base. The neon tubes illuminating the small cube are installed on the floor, behind the glass. Whereas the sides are bathed in a bright white light, the wall in front of the entrance, the background behind the trunk, is illuminated in a warm yellow hue (fig. 66). The trunk of a 130-year-old tree was transported here from southern Bavaria. It stands in a small square of sand. The floor is covered with wooden boards; the ceiling consists of a trellis with a checkered structure. On a floorboard in the middle of the entrance, a small metal compass indicates the cardinal directions. An arrow scratched into the wood by visitors points more explicitly to Mecca, witnessing the use of the compass for Islamic prayer practices (fig. 67).



Fig. 67: The compass at the entrance to the glass cube.

The glass container is accessible through a narrow vestibule whose walls are painted black and decorated with common symbols of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism (fig. 68). Selected texts from various religious traditions in diverse languages are painted in white on the dark background: an excerpt from the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa*, a Word of Buddha, selected verses from a Psalm in the Hebrew Bible, quotations from the Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew and the first Surah of the Koran. Translations into German and English printed on black paper hang under the quotations. The vestibule serves as a transitional space. On a wooden bookshelf there are sacred texts from diverse traditions. On the day I visited this room, prayer carpets were spread-out on one of the benches in the glass cube. In front of the Meditation and Prayer Room, there are separate facilities for women and men used for ritual ablutions. The religious room in Terminal 2 is indicated with the standard signs used for all other airport services (fig. 69).

The room was designed by Maximilian Kinseher, an architect of the archdiocese of Munich Freising, and the artist Erwin Wieglerling whose work is mainly dedicated to the relationship between human beings and nature.³ The trunk in this place looks out of proportion, creating a striking presence in the context of the technical design and functionalist aesthetic of an interna-

3 On his website, <http://hommage.e-lin.de/vita/> (accessed on 6 August 2025), Erwin Wieglerling (e.lin) characterises his work as follows: »e.lin shows us creation as a work of art that needs to be protected. His work stimulates, by means of discrete hints, a reflection on the imbalance between human beings and nature. His works use the languages of our time and witnesses meditative calm and spiritual expressiveness.« Translation by the author.



Fig. 68: The symbols of Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism on the wall of the vestibule in the Meditation and Prayer Room.

tional airport. There is a strong light contrast between the dark vestibule and the yellow illumination of the bare glass cube. In this architectural setting, a tree and the interplay with different shades of light were chosen as generic symbols that may be comprehensible for people from different cultures and religious traditions. This artistic elaboration of a tree and light was intended to refer to creation as a unifying concept, assuming that a reference to this motif is a common ground for diverse religious and non-religious orientations and practices.⁴

According to Christine Stöhr, the Lutheran pastor working at the ecumenical airport chaplaincy, the prayer room is frequently used by travellers and employees at the airport.⁵ More than 30,000 people from diverse cultures and nationalities work in numerous professions and services at Munich Airport.⁶ The prayer room is used especially by Muslim people for performing the daily prayer practices.

4 Raum für Stille und Gebet im Flughafen München Terminal 2, 2007.

5 Many thanks to the Lutheran Pastor Christina Stöhr for guiding me through the labyrinth of the airport and allowing me to access the Meditation and Prayer Room as well as the documents about the project.

6 https://www.munich-airport.de/_b/00000000000000014262414bb62dfec93/beschaeftigten-erhebung-2021.pdf (accessed on 6 August 2025).



Fig. 69: A sign indicating the Meditation and Prayer Room in the non-Schengen area at Terminal 2 of Munich airport.

The glass cube with its minimalist design and the absence of explicit references to a particular tradition seems to accommodate the needs of many. In the guestbook of 2023–2024, laid out in the vestibule, visitors, writing in different languages, frequently highlight the quiet atmosphere and the aesthetic quality of this intimate space. »Thank you for providing such a great place for prayer to our great Creator«, writes a traveller. Another note reads: »Thank you so much for providing this beautiful calm place for us to pray to Allah. We really appreciate it.« Other visitors note: »Thank you so much for providing a very beautiful place to do prayer/worship. Much respect for German Government for being fair to all faith and religions«; »Wonderful provision for travellers who want to connect with their Earth and find peace«; »It is good to have such a space of spirituality where everyone comes together regardless of their separate faiths«.⁷

7 The selected quotations are taken from the guestbook that covers the period from 11 May 2023 to February 2024. The quoted comments were originally written in English. The selection is not based on a detailed analysis, rather it conveys appreciation of the architectural design, which often recur in the guest book.



Fig. 70: The Christophorus Chapel built in 1992 at Munich Airport.

This room is not the first place dedicated to prayer at Munich Airport. The Christophorus Chapel was built in a central position in the public area in the new airport in 1992, together with the offices for the ecumenical chaplaincy. From the outset, this chapel was conceived as an ecumenical room. The architectural design presents typical elements of a Christian church (fig. 70).

There are striking differences between this earlier chapel and the Meditation and Prayer Room, even though both spaces result from a collaboration by the same main actors, the Lutheran and the Roman-Catholic Church. The Meditation and Prayer Room expresses a different attitude towards the need for religious practices or simply for a short quiet break for travellers and employees. The abstract design of the cube is open to various interpretations. The symbols and texts from five religious traditions in the vestibule frame the openness of the symbol of the tree; yet the reference to nature, or creation, strongly denotes this spatial arrangement.

Today, meditation and prayer rooms are considered a standard facility in airports. A new religious room for Terminal 1 has just been commissioned by the airport management. This development from an ecumenical Christian chapel to a meditation room for people from diverse religious traditions (or none) illustrates a transformation in locating plural religious practices in urban contexts in contemporary society.

7.2 Shared architecture for individual practices

Rooms dedicated to diverse religious traditions have become common in urban places such as airports, train stations, hospitals, universities, sports facilities, or shopping malls. In contrast to the hectic activities in the buildings where they are located, these rooms provide a quiet atmosphere. The association with silence and personal meditation characterises such religious architecture since its introduction in the mid-20th century.

In 1952 a Room of Quiet was opened in the United Nations Headquarters in New York. In 1957 it underwent a renovation. The initiative for the re-design of this religious space in the building of the General Assembly was taken by the Swedish General Secretary of the United Nations Dag Hammarskjöld and financially supported by Sweden. The re-designed room consisted of an abstract mural by the Swedish artist Bo Beskow, a rectangular block of iron, whose upper surface is illuminated by a single beam of light, and twelve benches designed by Carl Malmsten. (The benches were replaced by identical replicas in 2021). From the beginning, the room was planned as a »room of quiet«. In the opening ceremony, Dag Hammarskjöld addressed the character and aim of the new meditation room as follows:

We have within us a centre of stillness surrounded by silence. This house, dedicated to work and debate in the service of peace should have one room dedicated to silence in the outward sense and stillness in the inner sense... People of many faiths will meet here and, for that reason none of the symbols to which we are accustomed in our meditation could be used.⁸

This idea of a quiet room dedicated to personal reflection and meditation as part of a larger building hosting public services has since become widespread. From the 1950s onwards, similar rooms were built to accommodate individual practices for people from diverse cultures, religions or other

8 <https://www.un.org/ungifts/meditation-room> (accessed on 6 August 2025). On this site there is a photograph of the Room of Quiet. For more details about this place see Kraft 2007, 34; Duttweiler 2017.

ideological orientations, mirroring social changes stimulated by increasing mobility and plurality.⁹

The architecture dedicated to meditation, prayer and silence can be categorised according to various concepts and spatial designs, depending on their location and function in a specific setting. In a study surveying a range of rooms dedicated to silence within noisy, hectic contexts in diverse social spheres, such as public administration, political organisations, finance, health care, education, entertainment, or travel and tourism, the architect Sabine Kraft proposes five types built from the second half of the 20th century to date. *Chapels and other religious rooms* provide a place of silence by using architectural forms embedded in a specific tradition, in the European context mostly Christianity. *Multireligious rooms* gather diverse architectural and material objects as well as symbols referring to specific traditions in one place, providing a sense of identification for members of a specific community. *Interreligious rooms* address plurality by staging emptiness materialised by means of neat basic, abstract architectural forms. Also *universal rooms of quiet* do not refer to specific traditions but shape the room using abstract forms. Works of art and objects refer to values considered to be universally shared, such as tolerance, peace or a balanced relationship to nature. The prayer room at Munich Airport is a mix of the last two types. *Holistic rooms of quiet* can be understood as a further development of the latter type. A holistic concept of health and wellbeing is at the core of architecture that sustains processes of mental and bodily regeneration. There are no references to specific religions, but often to eastern practices of meditation.¹⁰

Across this typological system different architectural strategies and designs are used to convey the quality of the specific room. Nonetheless, a common aspect connects all these places: they address individuals seeking a short break from the restlessness of their daily routine. The quiet places, realised by deploying specific architectural forms, aim at fostering the individual's search for an inner balance.

Qualities of the physical space, notably the materiality and calm of such rooms, are ideally transported into the inner self of the visitors. The materiality of the architecture defines and orders, through its spatial practices,

9 For an overview of multireligious rooms see e. g. Beinbauer-Köhler / Roth / Schwarz-Boenneke 2015.

10 Kraft 2007, 28–39.

the functions performed in the building of which it is a part.¹¹ Accordingly, the meditation room at Munich Airport or the Room of Quiet in the UN Headquarters delimit places dedicated to silent reflection in environments characterised by a significant mobility and plurality. The simple arrangements, the staging of natural elements (in these specific cases, a trunk or an iron block), the artificial illumination imitative of natural light, and a careful use of simple forms are intended to be open to diverse interpretations by avoiding specific symbols referring to historical and contemporary traditions and communities. The architecture materialises the idea of silence and reflection by relying on abstract forms and staging natural elements everybody can connect with.

The openness of such architecture essentially addresses individuals. As is the case in the Meditation and Prayer Room at Munich Airport, objects such as sacred books, small prayer carpets or a compass, enable an individual to perform religious practices according to a specific tradition. Sharing rooms for performing community rituals, however, proves far more complicated. This is because collective religious practice depends on specific arrangements, consistent with architectural knowledge appropriate to each tradition's understanding of how to approach transcendent dimensions. These rooms express symbolic meanings grounded in an encompassing network of metaphorical references that are regulated within a community and its traditions.

7.3 Accommodating diverse religious communities

The Meditation and Prayer Room at Munich Airport combines a multireligious character (in the vestibule) with a universal approach to meditation and silence (the glass cube), which is, in my opinion, the focus of the room's design. The room and its location in a narrow side corridor tangibly express the contrast between frenetic activity and the individual's search for peace. The architectural arrangement allows individual religious practices to be performed according to community regulations. For example, it is possible for individuals to perform ritual ablutions correctly and to use required items

11 For an introduction to the relationship between religion and architecture see e.g. Jones 2000 and Karstein / Schmidt-Lux 2017.

for prayers. However, as an airport facility which is open to everyone and managed by a Christian ecumenical chaplaincy, the room is not intended for community rituals. Considering space as a multilayered practice embedded in a specific context, such a room interacts with diverse worldviews in the context of the mobility of people and goods, and the cultural plurality characterising an important economic hub. The encounters of diverse religious practices in this space are, therefore, transitory and contingent, consistent with the perspective of travellers. The use of the room by employees, however, highlights plurality as a characteristic and stable aspect of contemporary European cities, resulting from migration processes and demographic differentiation.

Reading the cultural texture of a city through this lens, draws attention to projects aimed at gathering diverse religious communities within the same area, combining specific rooms for specific communities as well as premises for encounters and exchange. In some cities, initiatives by religious organisations, civil society groups, and political actors have been promoted and, in some cases, realised.¹² These multireligious places combine common areas for cultural activities, interreligious education and exchange with specific premises for the groups involved, built according to their particular religious performances and needs.¹³ In most cases, as in the example we will discuss below, such rooms are arranged in a shared building.

As the sociologist Markus Schroer points out, buildings outline and delimit specific functions within a social context. The materiality of architecture facilitates orientations in routines, permits constructive responses to contingent situations, removes expectations from imaginations of possibilities, establishing them as concrete, inhabited places. Architectural materialisations gather specific social functions and spheres, they – literally – construct social order.

Accordingly, multireligious buildings in urban formations make religious diversity visible and locate the presence of plurality in a specific place.¹⁴ At the same time, they frame and regulate religious practices as well as the

12 See the examples discussed in Hohberg / Stolte 2015 and Burchardt 2021 (Berlin); Bossi / Giorda 2021 (Turin). For an overview see Rötting 2021.

13 Giammetti 2018; Averna 2021; Rizzi 2021.

14 Schroer 2015; Bräunlein / Weiß 2020.

exchanges between manifold traditions and communities.¹⁵ Multireligious buildings are often conceived of as an encounter between communities traditionally established in a territory and minority groups. Shared buildings always imply a selection and, consequently, an absence of some communities; depending on the social and political organisation, multireligious places can assume very different facets.

This aspect points out the regulative function of architecture as a negotiation of belonging and separation, of making visible and concealing.¹⁶ While the selected cases we are analysing express a contemporary approach to religious diversity, it is important not to forget that sharing and adapting buildings used by different religious communities is a spatial practice that can be traced down the centuries. Architectural arrangements reflect and shape religious and social dynamics inherent in urban formations in the past and the present.¹⁷

7.4 The Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen in Bern

The Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen (*House of Religions – Dialogue of Cultures*) in Bern, the capital of Switzerland, highlights the interrelation of religious communities, urban planning and lived plurality.¹⁸ In the western part of the city of Bern, a large, disused area became the object of a regeneration plan in the final decades of the 20th century. It was an unattractive place, bordered by a motorway and a busy main road, a railway track and local transportation lines: a kind of urban in-between.¹⁹ After a lengthy process involving stakeholders from politics, diverse civil society groups, religious communities and individual citizens, the whole urban area was re-organised around a new square and a multifunctional building encompassing shops, offices, private housing, and a vast multireligious compartment (fig. 71 and 72). New stations for public transport were constructed.

15 Beinbauer-Köhler 2015; Herbert 2017.

16 Buchardt / Giorda 2021. A range of examples of multireligious buildings are analysed in Giammetti 2019.

17 Baker / Beaumont 2011; Buchardt / Becci 2013; Beinbauer-Köhler 2015; Verstegen 2015; Rüpke 2020; Rau / Rüpke 2020; Christ / Fuchs / Iori / Keller / LätzerLasar / O'Reilly / Rau / Rüpke / Urcioli / Wagner 2023.

18 This part of the chapter is based on research published in Pezzoli-Olgiaati 2020a.

19 Herzog / Blaser 2015, 18; Schläppi / Sauer 2015, 13.



Fig. 71: A view of the area in 2004 (left) and in 2023 (right). The building containing the *Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen* is highlighted.

Currently, »Europaplatz« – which is the new name for the area – is connected to the central station in the historic part of the city by a short trip of just a few minutes.

The building was principally funded by the Canton and the City of Bern, who commissioned the studios Bauart (Bern, Neuchâtel, Zürich) and Urbanoffice Architects (Amsterdam) under the leadership of Madir Shah, the construction and real estate company Halter AG to design and construct the space.

The management of the resulting multireligious complex was undertaken by a committee which included the foundation Europaplatz – Haus der Religionen, the interreligious forum Runder Tisch der Religionen, and the Association Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen. Together they contributed to the development and realisation of this project, which was completed with an investment of 75 million Swiss francs.²⁰ After two decades of negotiations, on 14 December 2014, the new building was opened.²¹ Occupying 20 % of the total area of the multifunctional building, the Haus der Religionen is set at the core of the construction (figs. 72–74).

With this project combining diverse services, linking minority religious communities together and positioning them in a new, vibrant urban place, the initiators wanted to transform the disused area from a »non-place« (in German *Unort*) to a »place« (*Ort*).²²

20 Herzog / Blaser 2015, 18.

21 For a detailed historical reconstruction of the project see the publication *Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen* 2012; Haas 2014; Hauck-Hieronimi 2015; Widmer 2017; Arm / Leutwyler 2021; Rieger 2024.

22 Fischer / Lewis 2015, 34.

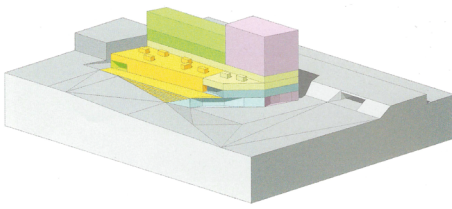


Fig. 72: The diverse areas of the multifunctional building: Haus der Religionen (dark yellow), offices (pale yellow), shops (light blue), housing (green and purple).

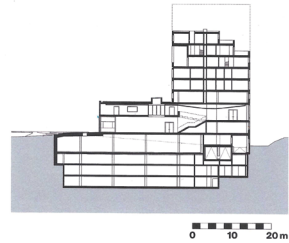


Fig. 73: Cross-section of the building.

The innovative project has proved successful. Today Europaplatz and the Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen are well established in the city of Bern. The efficient public transportation connecting the area with the historic city centre has transformed the once abandoned area into a central hub with a high standard of living. In the multifunctional building there are grocery stores, coffee shops and bakeries, a post office, restaurants, offices for companies, underground parking, and other facilities. The housing part accommodates long-term residents as well as commuters that work in the Swiss capital during the week. The multireligious building has become an important place for both religious communities and cultural initiatives. Furthermore, the Haus der Religionen is a popular tourist destination.

From a legal point of view, the Haus der Religionen is a shared property. The diverse religious communities, organised as associations, have bought the premises for their sacred rooms in the shell and completed them with their own financial and human resources, according to their specific religious norms, their preferred architectural style, the civil legislation building regulations and the needs of the various communities. The common areas belong to the Foundation Europaplatz – Haus der Religionen (founded in 2006) which, together with the association Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen (founded in 2002), manages the multireligious part of the building, including a restaurant, and is responsible for the cultural and education-

al programmes as well as for a broad range of activities. It also moderates the exchange between all the communities involved and the wider public.²³

In the region of Bern, the idea of supporting religious minorities to establish themselves in appropriate, attractive places for worship and for community life resulted from lengthy negotiations. For decades it involved a complex network of people and organisations aimed at fostering religious diversity as a paramount aspect of a democratic society and a resource for the whole nation.

In the 1980s, amidst sometimes polarised debates on the presence of communities from diverse nationalities, languages and cultural backgrounds in Switzerland, interest groups within and outside the state-recognised churches began to promote initiatives to stimulate interreligious dialogue. They involved communities that had settled in Switzerland for various reasons as well as local groups and individual engaged in enhancing a constructive exchange between diverse religious and cultural groups. Reconstructing this first phase of the interreligious dialogue in Bern, the theologian Albert Rieger summarises the spirit of those initiatives as follows: »Is there a third way between ›conformation or return‹? [...] And how could a true integration, a living together of cultures in our country, and, particularly, in the canton of Bern, be practically organised?«²⁴

The Haus der Religionen arose from the persistent work of diverse actors committed to interreligious and intercultural dialogue for decades, which culminated in the decision to realise an ambitious project in cooperation with the political authorities and civil society.²⁵ In the minutes of a key meeting of the Foundation Europaplatz – Haus der Religionen from April 2011 the main lines of the project are outlined as follows:

In the »Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen« that is to be constructed, local communities from five world religions will go about their religious lives autonomously, within their own rooms but united under a single roof. Under that same roof will also be a centre for intercultural and interreligious dialogue. Additional religious com-

23 <https://haus-der-religionen.ch/ueberuns/stiftung/> and <https://haus-der-religionen.ch/ueberuns/verein/> (accessed on 6 August 2025). For details on the legal and financial organisation see Hauck-Hieronimi 2015, 168–170.

24 Rieger 2024, 8.

25 See Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen 2012 and Rieger 2024.

munities and numerous institutions and organisations associated with migration, integration, and culture will participate in this dialogue. Communities of Alevis, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and Muslims have each expressed a wish to take responsibility for an individual religious space

The Jewish community, Baha'i, and Sikhs as well as numerous non-religious institutions and organisations will also participate in the dialogue of cultures, by engaging intercultural and interreligious questions as a contribution to peaceful coexistence. The dialogue of cultures will provide a platform for encounters, exchanges, and education. It will become anchored in the Bern region as a cultural institution concerned with cultural identity and praxis-oriented integration, for migrant groups in particular.²⁶

The idea of a multifunctional building was at the core of the plans for rearranging the abandoned urban area from the very beginning. The project was designed to correspond to various purposes: first, it had to provide a dignified place for religious minorities.²⁷ The move from garages and backyards to a central urban place would make them visible within the public space and honour their role within Swiss democracy. Second, the new construction was conceived as an opportunity to stimulate a dialogue within the communities and their multifaceted traditions. Accordingly, a third goal of the project was to sustain the minority communities in articulating their beliefs and practices in the Swiss context, considering the legal framework and other factors like language, the education system, gender roles and intergenerational relationships. Fourth, the house had to be a place of interreligious dialogue and of encounters between religious communities, cultural associations and the civil society for enhancing knowledge about the diverse religions, allowing not only an intellectual exchange about religion, but also experiencing religious practices and, consequently, contributing to a peaceful living together.²⁸

26 https://www.haus-der-religionen.ch/assets/files/1_Das%20Projekt_Haus%20der%20Religionen.pdf (accessed on 6 August 2025). Translation by Rona Johnston, see Pezzoli-Olgati 2020a, 26.

27 Hauck-Hieronimi 2015.

28 Haas 2016.

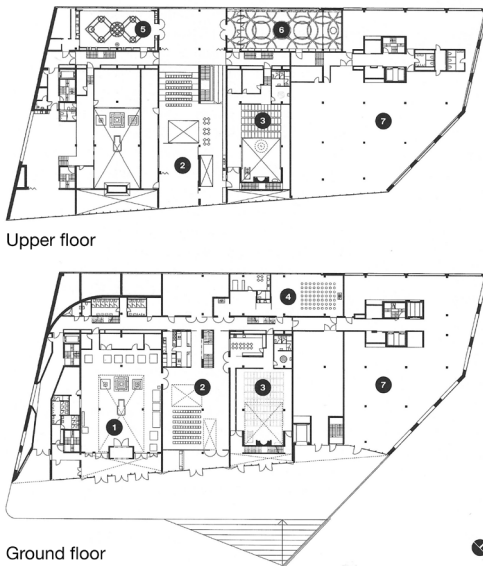


Fig. 74: Plans of the first and second floor of the building. The Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen encompasses 1 to 6. 1 Hindu temple, 2 area for dialogue, 3 mosque, 4 Buddhist prayer room; 5 Alevi prayer room; 6 Christian chapel; 7 shops.

The architectural layout of the Haus der Religionen moulds these aims into a spatial form (figs. 74 and 75). It combines the common areas for educational and cultural programmes with specific premises run by each religious community, dedicated to individual meditation, communal worship, festivals, and cultural activities.

Eight different religious associations joined the project, but not all wanted new rooms. The Jewish Community of Bern, a unified community with a modern Orthodox leadership, is a member of the Haus der Religionen, but does not own a room in it, since it has a synagogue and a community in the centre of Bern. Similarly, the Baha'i community participates in the multi-religious project, without having its own premises in the house. The Sikh community possesses four Gurdwaras in Switzerland and cooperates on an analogous basis with the multireligious project without residing in it. Nevertheless, these three communities are visually represented with dedicated windows exhibiting representative sacred objects in the main lecture theatre.

7.5 Rooms for worship and cultural activities

Five religious organisations have built rooms for worship in cooperation with different architectural studios from the region. Some have additional rooms for the community, other use the same room for religious rituals and festivals as well as for cultural events. The premises are built according to traditional architectural styles, ritual regulations, financial possibilities, and specific needs of the various communities. Consequently, the layouts differ significantly from each other.²⁹ In the context of the same building, the heterogeneity of the architectural languages results in an impressive spatial experience of plurality. In the space of a few metres, visitors enter places with entirely different atmospheres, a diverse use of light, proportions, colours, materials, and fittings, evoking specific interpretations of the religious tradition they are embedded in.

The mosque was built by an Albanian-Macedonian community, the Muslim Association Bern. Accordingly, the interior architecture features elements from East European Islamic traditions. To allow for a correct orientation of the room towards Mecca, the mosque is placed within a wider area (fig. 74). The room is organised on two floors with separate entrances. On the ground floor, the rectangular area of the mosque, entirely covered with carpet, is oriented towards the mihrab. On the right side, there is the minbar. The second floor is built as an inner loggia that is reserved for women during the Friday prayer. The walls are beautifully decorated with geometric patterns and calligraphies (fig. 76).

The mosque has an independent entrance. On the roof, a small dome indicates the presence of the mosque. It stands in place of a sculpture echoing a miniature minaret that was displayed after the completion of the mosque, an artistic response to the prohibition to build new minarets in Switzerland since 2009.³⁰ The mosque can hold up to 400 people and is one of the biggest in the country. Within the Muslim communities, the mosque in the Haus der Religionen assumes an inclusive role and is becoming an important place for negotiating a liberal Islam in Switzerland beyond the specific Macedonian-Albanian tradition.

29 For further information about the architectures of the diverse rooms see <https://haus-der-religionen.ch> (accessed on 6 August 2025). See also Hauck-Hieronimi 2015; Widmer 2017; Pezzoli-Olgiati 2020a.

30 See page 29 in this volume.



Fig. 75: Front of Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen on Europaplatz soon after the building had been completed. On the left side of the main entrance, the upper part of a Hindu altar sticks out of the roof. On the right side, a miniature minaret on the roof is placed to indicate the main entrance to the mosque.

On the other side of the building, a separate entrance leads to the Arulgnanamigu Gnanalingesurar Temple dedicated to Shiva (fig. 77). The community follows a Tamil tradition and is organised as the Saivanerikoodan Association. The temple's shrines and sculptures were made by a team of artists under the guidance of the temple builder Purushothaman Kaliaperumal. They travelled from India to Bern for this purpose and used traditional techniques and materials. Indian and Swiss planning strategies could not be entirely synchronised, and, therefore, the uppermost part of an altar sticks out above the ceiling and is visible on the roof from outside.

The Hindu temple and the related rooms for the community are the largest premises within the Haus der Religionen. Up to 600 people can be accommodated. The temple is open for individual prayers, for religious rituals and festivals as well as for private celebrations. The Association aims at reforming their religious tradition and at promoting Tamil culture in Bern and,

Fig. 76: Interior of the mosque with the mihrab, and, on the right side, the minbar.



more broadly, in the whole country. In 2015, for the very first time in this religious tradition, four female priests were consecrated. The exchange with Protestant reformed communities, the interest of female members in assuming an active role as religious experts, the search for renewal, and the openness to gender equality motivated this epochal transformation.³¹

The mosque and the temple are located at the opposite sides of the building and do not share a wall or an entrance: the location of the two sacred buildings is the result of a negotiation that took place in light of the conflicts between Muslims and Hindus, particularly in the Indian subcontinent.

The Association for the Promotion of Alevi Culture aims at promoting its culture and religion in Switzerland. The Dergâh, built on the second floor, hosts religious rituals and cultural events (fig. 78). The association commissioned the architect Patrick Thurston to design the room, and he developed a new symbolic language with references to the Alevi tradition, highlighting the link to nature, particularly to fire and light, air and wind, water and earth. Twelve illuminated niches symmetrically distributed along three walls refer to poets, philosophers and imams constitutive for the community's identity. The large window front opens up the room towards the urban surroundings at the back of the building. On the ceiling, a geometric pattern with diamonds in pale shades extends over the whole room.

Whereas the architectural programmes of the mosque and the temple follow the typical features of the respective traditions, for the Dergâh an original design was specifically developed by the members of the community and the architects. The room presents a unique orientation; the linear layout and

31 <https://haus-der-religionen.ch/hindus/> (accessed on 6 August 2025). Bühlmann 2015; Läubli 2015; Hui / Jeyakumar / Tharmalingam 2016.



Fig. 77: The interior of the Arulgnanamigu Gnanalingesurar Temple dedicated to Shiva.



Fig. 78: The interior of the Dergâh

the versatile, airy design allow manifold uses and can easily be adapted for rituals, dance and music performances, or common meals and celebrations.

Patrick Thurston also designed the Christian church located in front of the Dergâh, which was commissioned by the Association Church in the House of Religions, the ecumenical body that owns this room and in which Protestant, Roman-Catholic, Tewahedo, Moravian, and Christian Catholic communities are represented. This room is conceived as an ecumenical place devoted to the exchange between diverse Christian denominations and serves also as a chapel for the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church (fig. 79) and the Moravian Society (fig. 80).

The structure of the room results from the challenge of creating a church for very different traditions and liturgical uses. On the one hand, an Ethiopian Orthodox Church, one of the oldest Christian denominations, is characterised by an iconostasis, a separation between the nave, where the community gathers, and the sanctuary, which is the holiest place accessible only to the priests. On the iconostasis icons of saints are depicted. By contrast, in

Fig. 79: The room as Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church with colourful paintings on the iconostasis.



Fig. 80: The same room in the opposite direction with the Moravian star on the left.



the Moravian tradition, an early protestant denomination that emerged during the Bohemian Reformation in the late 15th century, churches are kept in an austere design, without images.

The Church in the Haus der Religionen accommodates these different spatial concepts by using the rectangular room in two different orientations. The iconostasis is placed on the northeast, while the Moravian community uses the same room in the opposite direction, directing the gaze to a hanging star and an organ that is integrated into the entrance wall. The main doors and the shutters on the window front, made in wood and painted in white, can be closed in order to create a rectangular, austere bright space.

The diverse liturgical uses of the church are united by the relief on the ceiling. The abstract ornament in white consists of intersecting circles, inspired by Gothic ribbed vaults. It refers to God, who is the same for all diverse Christian denominations. The furniture is mobile and can be used according to the needs of the communities for different events. Besides serving as a chapel for these communities, the room is used by The Association Church in the House of Religions, which is responsible for the ecumenical Chris-



Fig. 81: The Buddhist temple.

tian room, for a variegated programme of activities promoting an exchange between various Christian denominations and a theology of encounters within Christianity, with other religions and other worldviews.

A Buddhist cloister is located directly beneath the church, on the first floor. The premises include the entrance with an altar, a library and meditation room, a small kitchen and an apartment. In a similar manner to the Christian church, the Buddhist rooms are used by diverse Buddhist schools. The rooms are designed in a neutral style and can be adapted to the requirements of a particular Buddhist tradition with items that are stored in cupboards. The Inter-Buddhist Association in the House of Religion was founded in 2008 for promoting this project. Currently, Tibetan Buddhism, Theravada, Zen and Chan Buddhism are represented (fig. 81).

The heterogeneous rooms representing Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam and Alevism reflect diverse ways of negotiating a religious identity within a tradition. The Hindu temple and the mosque result from processes of adapting a tradition to the socio-political context in which the members of the communities live. The temple dedicated to Shiva has become a place of innovation of a Hindu tradition, which attracts a new generation born and brought up in Switzerland. Similarly, the multireligious project in Bern was an important opportunity for the Alevi community in Bern in its search for an identity within the Swiss context. For the Buddhist and Christian associations, the premises are linked to projects for increasing dialogue between the diverse denominations and schools who share the building. Furthermore, living together under the same roof fosters a continuous process of mutual understanding and conflict solving.

7.6 Common rooms for dialogue

In this urban context, building a house dedicated to diverse religions was only possible through a process of reflection and negotiation about the position and the role of the various religions in contemporary society. This involved reflecting on the inner diversity within religious traditions, as well as considering their cultural heterogeneity and language diversity, the influence of different historical developments, the specific causes of displacement and migration processes. The complex process of establishing a dialogue, planning the house, completing the rooms, and starting the various activities could be realised only because the minority communities involved, the state-recognised churches, political authorities at various levels, the civil society as well as the architectural studios joined forces for a shared purpose. The realisation of this project involved elaborate negotiations due to the different formations of each tradition and the socio-historical backgrounds of the associations involved as well as the diverse concepts of diversity and plurality.³² Sharing sacred places in the same building has been a new experience for all the partners involved. The process has always been accompanied by an interreligious moderation that culminated in the foundation of the Association Haus der Religionen, that has taken over the responsibility for the planning process since 2002 and continued after the premises were completed.

The association runs the common rooms dedicated to promoting the exchange between the diverse communities that inhabit the house. Furthermore, it offers a broad range of educational and cultural activities, to increase the understanding of religious and cultural diversity in society, addressing a general audience and specific groups, like schools.³³ Experts in the study of religion, interreligious dialogue and cultural mediation are responsible for the cultural programmes, which involves members of the diverse associations. The premises dedicated to the cultural activities are generous. The wooden fittings and the linear design create an inviting, sober atmosphere.

At the centre of the building, on the ground floor, the Restaurant Vanakam is a meeting point for people working in the Haus der Religionen, members

32 For a deep reflection on the multiple facets of the interreligious dialogue in the Haus der Religionen see Haas 2016.

33 For a reflection on the activities and the exchange in the Haus der Religionen see Haas 2016 and Leutwyler / Tharmalingam / Hofstetter Rogger 2019.

of the communities as well as visitors. The restaurant is open to the public and offers vegan menus and non-alcoholic drinks at lunch time from Tuesday to Friday. On Saturdays a brunch is served. Sasikumar Tharmalingam, the chef of Vanakam, is a Hindu priest whose engagement was crucial for realising the temple and enhancing the multifaceted aspects of his community's life as well as the Haus der Religionen as a whole.

7.7 A work of art for interconnecting religious traditions

Overall, the varied architecture of the Haus der Religionen highlights religious traditions as being complex and diverse. Such variety emphasises the differences between the specific projects, associations and religious communities that are part of the multireligious building. The various sizes and proportions of the premises, fittings and art, materials and colours reveal manifold strategies for materialising a relationship to divine dimensions. The educational and cultural programmes offered by the Haus der Religionen do not present »religion« as a harmonic phenomenon, rather they offer a deeper understanding of the traditions present and their practices, worldviews, rituals, communities and transmission processes as well as the challenges of contemporary society. Religious plurality is openly debated, negotiated and nuanced as a complex, contested and enriching dimension of society.

This commitment to plurality and to a constructive exchange is addressed by a work of art which confers on the building a visual uniformity. The artist Nika Spalinger, who teaches art in public spaces at Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, has created an ornamental pattern that envelops the building's facades and visually represents the concept of the Haus der Religion at Europaplatz. The motif is reproduced by means of a digital print on the large windowpanes (fig. 82). The pattern highlights the premises of the Haus der Religionen, visually detaching them from the surrounding shops and facilities of the complex.³⁴

34 Berger 2015/2016, 83.



Fig. 82: The ornaments on the façade on Europaplatz.

Realised in cooperation with Daria Tschapanova, the irregular pattern, inspired by motifs from diverse religious traditions, represents both the interconnection and the differences between the communities that inhabit the building. The artist explains:

The ornament combines everyday life, culture and religion – playing with different emphases, reflections, discontinuities and breaks. Formally, it characterizes the dialogue area and reinforces the lively interplay of light and weather through reflection and shadows.³⁵

The work of art wraps the building and emphasises the doors of the mosque and the temple on the south side. It is repeated on the north facade of the building.

³⁵ <https://nikaspalinger.ch/public-ornament-fassade/> (accessed on 6 August 2025).



Fig. 83: Looking through the ornament designed by the artist Nika Spalinger.

Observed from the outside, the impressive ornament on the large facades suggests, on the one hand, a consistent function of the whole construction. On the other hand, the irregularity and the variation raise an open question, a search for shared lines. Looking out of the windows from the inside, the ornament can be interpreted as a filter through which one may observe what happens outside (fig. 83): watching people crossing the square, the trains passing by, the intense traffic, and the whole urban context, it reminds the viewer that many diverse religious worldviews and identities coexist in contemporary society and that religion is a crucial dimension for many people and cultures that inhabit the city.

7.8 Building places for diverse religious practices and communities

The two case studies addressed in this chapter propose distinct responses to the challenge of gathering diverse religious traditions and communities in dedicated places in urban contexts.

Both are located in central areas of urban formations, a major international airport and a capital city. The decision to plan and construct rooms and buildings shared by diverse religious orientations, beliefs and worldviews in central areas makes religious plurality visible by means of spatial practices. From this perspective, these projects can be interpreted as commitments to the presence of religion in contemporary society. Beyond normative scholarly, political, and media debates about the role that religion assumes in today's complex societal formations, these rooms suggest that religion is a lived dimension that needs appropriate places. Moreover, in this context, »religion« refers to a wide range of practices that may be part of an institutionalised traditional community, or an expression of an individual attitude or a combination of both. These places stand for the presence of religion as a complex orientation that is always dynamic and mirrors the societal transformations that go along with intense mobility and transcultural exchanges.

Nonetheless, the planning and realisation of these shared places are articulated in different ways, according to distinct architectural types. The Meditation and Prayer Room at Munich Airport combines a multireligious with a universalistic character. The symbols of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism in the vestibule allow the members of communities belonging to these traditions to perceive an identification with these religions. Yet, the Meditation and Prayer Room in a strict sense, does not work with religious symbols but with a work of art. The reference to nature, that may be understood as creation, is open to diverse interpretations. A tiny, intimate room, it addresses individuals that may be travellers or employees seeking a short break for a prayer or a moment of silence. Mirroring the movements of individuals characterising a major transportation hub, this room brings together a form of plurality that is contingent and transitory.

The Haus der Religionen – Dialog der Kulturen in Bern was planned as a permanent building aimed at improving the position of minority religious communities in the city, the exchange between them and established church-

es as well as with the wider public. The project is committed to gather a plurality of communities, beliefs and practices that are part of the social fabric of the urban agglomeration of Bern and not only making it visible but also providing an opportunity to meet and experience the diverse worldviews, practices, traditions, histories, and food. The space dedicated to the Haus der Religionen within the multifunctional building is designed to highlight the unique features of the communities that actively participate in this challenging project. The worship rooms under the same roof illustrate, in a striking way, how diverse religious practices, worldviews, and ideas of the relationship to a transcendent, sacred dimension may actually be. The ways of negotiating religious belonging within and between the associations involved differ, and mirror multifaceted strategies to articulate religious belonging and identities in a plural context. The constellation of such diverse communities practicing religious rituals and fostering their specific worldview and relationship to the transcendent world in the same building encourage reflections and adaptations, with the potential also for tensions and conflicts to arise, as well as exchanges and common activities.

Both projects, although they differ in their scope, size and location, rely on an institutionalised moderation for the processes of construction and management. While the common use of the Prayer and Meditation Room is supervised by the ecumenical chaplaincy, the Haus der Religionen is run by a team responsible for the manifold tasks a project of this size requires: the management of the location, the common areas, the financial aspects, the cultural and educational programmes, the organisation and moderation of shared activities, the restaurant built into the frame in which the diverse religious groups reveal their community life and are perceived in the city.

The engagement of various actors including political authorities, representatives of established churches, pre-existing interreligious groups, organisations from civil society and private individuals were paramount, in both cases, for realising the projects. Multireligious places are rooted in a wider social debate involving diverse social spheres.

As complex spatial practices, multireligious rooms and buildings assume articulated symbolic meanings. Both cases considered in this chapter combine architectural concepts with works of art, which magnify the representative dimension. The sculpture at Munich Airport serves as a common ground and can be interpreted independently of the religious or ideologi-

cal background of regular users or occasional visitors. The ornament on the window panes of the Haus der Religionen embeds the core idea of the project: involving diverse traditions in a network of constructive and challenging dialogues and, at the same time, resisting the idea of a symmetry, moderating conflictual debates and fostering transformation. Overall, in this urban context, the architectural complex as a whole stands, on a symbolic level, for »religion« as a dimension of society. Alongside shops, services, offices, or housing, an urban formation needs a place for religious plurality to be open for confrontation, exchange and dialogue. From this perspective, the front windows, particularly at night, allow people to see into the Haus der Religionen. During festivals or cultural events, passersby can experience a glimpse of religious diversity and plurality by looking at the illuminated interiors of the buildings.

Architecture that accommodates religious diversity, making plurality visible in a place, is a complex, multilayered, and challenging process. On the one hand, these places respond to a need within the contemporary, mobile society. On the other hand, they stimulate innovation and transformation of lived religious experience in a specific socio-cultural process, which impacts diverse spheres of society, established religious communities and minorities and, overall, the public discourse about religion as a resource for democratic participation.