Marseille's Muslims need their Grand Mosque – why is it still a car park?

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The city's 250,000-strong Muslim community was promised its first official mosque in 2001. Then the 14 years of lawsuits, money issues and ego wars began

A rendering of the proposed Grand Mosque in Marseille. Nothing has been laid but a single foundation stone. Photograph: Bureau Architecture Méditerranée

In 2001, Marseille's incumbent mayor, Jean-Claude Gaudin, made a bold campaign promise: the city would build a Grand Mosque for its Muslim community. The 15th arrondissement site – former home, ironically enough, to a non-halal slaughterhouse – would host the country's biggest centre for Islamic worship, with a minaret, a religious school, a library, a restaurant and tea salon, at an estimated cost of €22m. For Marseille's Muslim population, the second largest in France, here at long last was an important acknowledgement.

Fourteen years later, the site remains a car park. Nothing has been laid but a single symbolic foundation stone, as legal challenges, money issues and ego wars continue to rage. Meanwhile, Marseille's Muslim population has in many ways never been worse off, heavily concentrated in some of the city's poorest areas of North Marseille – an economically deprived district that was spotlighted in the news two weeks ago after 100 French special forces locked down the Castellane estate (unemployment rate: 49%) when inhabitants opened fire with Kalashnikovs.

The story of the Grand Mosque's construction – or lack thereof – shows how deeply Marseille and France in general has struggled to figure out how to integrate its second largest religious community, which makes up 7.5% of the country's population.

Certainly Marseille's need for a new place of worship was clear. Despite being home to about 250,000 Muslims, the city doesn't have a single official mosque. The most visited monument in the city is La Cathedrale Saint-Jean, a Catholic church. And yet Marseille, the so-called "Port of the Empire" with its giant Mediterranean harbour, has historically been the first stop for millions of migrants from former French colonies, especially after the French-Algerian war in the 1960s.

The site in Marseille's north St Louis district that has been chosen for the Grand Mosque. Formerly a non-halal abattoir, it is currently a parking lot. Photograph: Google Street View

So the construction project was long overdue. "And indeed, the municipality did everything it could to make this dream come true," says Salah Bariki, a member of staff at Marseille City Hall who worked on the Grand Mosque project for years. "In 2006, we unanimously approved the construction permit – all except for one member, from the Front National."

It was an auspicious vote. A year later, the rightwing Front National joined with local shops to sue La Grande Mosquée de Marseille, the non-profit group in charge of gathering funds and building the mosque. According to French law, the rent of a building must be fixed before the building is itself erected, and the Front National were outraged by the low rate the mosque was set to pay: €300 a year. The judge agreed. "The court decided to raise the rent to €2,400 a month," Bariki says.

Then the Front National filed a new case, alleging that there was insufficient parking space. They claimed the lease should be cancelled outright. The judge again ruled in their favour.

The city's Muslim leaders have refused offers of support from Qatar, Algeria, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia

In a remarkable show of unity however, Marseille's 18 boroughs joined to pay for the 400 required parking spaces, saving the project. "Marseille's mosque will enable our fellow Muslim citizens to gather and worship in a place they fairly deserve," said Eugene Caselli, president of Marseille's metropolitan area.

By 2009, everything was ready to go: construction permit in one hand, lease in the other. The architecture firm Bureau Architecture Méditerranée was commissioned, the plans were drawn up.

Then they ran out of money.

“In 2011, we laid the first stone. Now we are waiting for the first prayer,” said Bariki. More than one prayer may be necessary. Of the total €22m required, the non-profit looking after the project has so far raised only €200,000. A clause in the construction permit prevents each donor from contributing more than 10% of the total amount, which complicates the financing process. And because France is a secular country, religious buildings must be financed by private donors alone. The governments of Qatar, Algeria, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have all offered their support. But Marseille’s Muslim leaders have refused – unwilling for their mosque to be affiliated with Salafists or other extremists, and keen that the mosque remain under Marseillaise control, headed by a French imam.

Marseille’s Mediterranean harbour has historically been the first stop for millions of migrants from former French colonies. Photograph: Gary Calton

Locally, a war of ego rages over who will control the Grand Mosque, should it ever get built. “It is important to understand that there are sub-communities,” says Frank Fregosi, a sociologist and a lecturer at Sciences Po Aix. “There are the first-generation immigrants, who are quite conservative; then the mystical communities; and lastly the religious ones, including salafists.” This division is the main reason why the Grand Mosque project is on hold, Fregosi says. “All the various communities are trying to show that they are the most legitimate group to represent Islam, and thus to manage the future mosque,” he says.

Without a mosque, Marseille’s Muslims make do with ad hoc prayer rooms – which have not lacked for controversy, either. These so-called underground mosques – in high street shopfronts or social housing blocks – are not registered as official religious spaces, but simply as non-profit organisations, which makes them harder to monitor. Some experts suspect that France’s small group of extremist Islamic teachers have taken advantage of the relatively hidden nature of these mosques to spread their ideology. After the Charlie Hebdo and Jewish supermarket attacks, “the French secret service are really keeping a close eye on the imams

right now, especially the people who run the unofficial prayer centres in Marseille," says Nassurdine Haidari, a well-known character in Marseille's Muslim community who went from street kid to imam, journalist and member of city hall, and who has raised more than €60,000 from his Comorian community.

The mosque is thus a symbol of moderation that many people think is vital. "These Kalashnikov rings [the gangs who fired on police in Castellane] have nothing to do with Muslim people," says Benoit Gilles, a journalist for La Marseillaise. "Ninety-nine percent of Muslims in France are not extremist, and they want to show that Islam is also part of the French culture. This is why they want the Grand Mosque to be run by a French imam, not someone from a Middle Eastern country."

The stakes are high. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development thinktank, Marseille is the most economically divided city in Europe. The richest of the 20 arrondissements are in the south, while new Muslim immigrants mostly live in the Quartiers Nords, the 13th-16th arrondissements, where the unemployment rate hovers around 20% – and 39% of teenagers under 15 have dropped out of school.

And yet Marseille's immigrant community has helped the city stake out its place at the forefront of modern French music and arts. From the French hip-hop superstars Keny Arkana to Psy 4 de la Rime to Iam, Marseille is a famous breeding ground for emerging talent. In 2013, it was the European capital of culture. "It is hypocritical to hide our origins and stay focused on the French part of our roots," says musician and cultural cooperative organiser Frédéric Nevchehirlian. "Everybody is from a different part of the world in Marseille, but there is a cruel misrepresentation in the media. 2013 should have been an unifying and defining year, but instead authorities chose to organise events in the wealthy southern part of the city. Even Iam, one of the symbols of Marseille's hip-hop scene for more than 20 years – and whose singer Akhenaton is Muslim – was not invited to perform. It was like not inviting the biggest act in town."

The future for the Grand Mosque itself looks increasingly Kafkaesque

A tent set up by artist Stany Cambot to raise awareness of the mosque. Photograph: Benoit Gilles

This attempt to whitewash Marseille's true colours will likely intensify in the upcoming March local elections, in which the Front National is expected to do very well. Meanwhile, the new National Union of Democratic Muslims – moderate but nonetheless controversial, being one of France's first openly religious parties – announced that they will field a candidate in a Marseille borough. Tensions during the campaign are expected to be high.

The future for the Grand Mosque itself looks increasingly Kafkaesque. The project has stalled; some fear construction may never begin. In 2011, artist Stany Cambot set up a tent to raise awareness of the mosque. Eventually he took it down. In the meantime, 250,000 people still wait for a place to gather and pray. "Muslims have one wish," says Haidari. "They want a mosque within walking distance, as much as Catholic and Jewish people do.

"The mosque has to be a symbol of the acceptance that our city is multicultural."