Islamic presence in western Europe is usually perceived as a post-war immigration phenomenon. However, early in the twentieth century Muslims were also sojourning on a regular basis in Europe, where they founded provisions and accommodations for their religious needs. The French city of Marseille is an interesting site for a historical reconstruction of representations about Islam and mosques in Europe. In colonial times, Muslims—mostly colonial workers or soldiers in the French colonial armies—frequented Marseille. Since the 1950s, large numbers of Muslims arrived in the city as migrant labourers, and many settled there to become permanent residents. The inauguration of the Mosque of Paris in 1926, gave an impetus to similar mosque projects in other French cities. In 1937, the founder of a real estate group in Marseilles, Louis Cot tin, created the Comité marseillais de la Mosquée de Marseille. Cottin was joined in his efforts by a local Algerian shopkeeper, named Talmoudi. The “mosque of Marseille” would provide for the religious needs of the colonial workers, be a “testimony of the French recognition towards our Muslim brothers who have died for the fatherland,” as well as, contribute to the “moral unity” of the North Africans in the city. Local architects developed a mosque complex, which also included a hostel, a restaurant, several dormitories, and medical facilities. Despite the fact that the Mayor of Marseille and the prefect of the Bouches-du-Rhône department supported the project, it soon became entangled in the party-political struggles that divided the city in those days. Plans to establish a mosque re-emerged after the Second World War, when the idea was taken up by a new Comité de reconnaissance aux soldats ayant combattu pour la France. The Mayor of Marseille, Michel Carlini, spoke out in favour of the new mosque and designated a plot of land in the centre of the city on which it could be built. Members of the municipal council hoped that the mosque might become an enrichment to the “artistic patrimony” of the city. Despite the availability of funds for the project, a problem arose in the expropriation of the real estate. By the early 1950s the rector of the Mosque of Paris, as well as the French secret service, fearing that a mosque in Marseille might become an instrument in the hands of Arab nationalist movements, also raised new objections to the project.

“Guest workers” and migrants
Migratory fluxes towards Marseille continued during and after decolonization. To provide for the cultural and religious needs of the Muslim “guest workers,” prayer rooms were established in the foyers for migrants and a larger house of worship in Marseille was established in 1977. Located in an old commercial building in the centre of the city, it became one of the first sites of contentious struggles over the visible presence of Islam in Marseille in the postcolonial period. In the early 1980s the leaders of the Mosque Committee wanted to enlarge the mosque and to decorate the entrance with a new façade. This was not to the liking of the Mayor of Marseille —Gaston Defferre—who, as rumour has it, said to the president of the Mosque Committee: “make a place… but don’t make it there… it is the entrance of the high way, I don’t want the tourists who come to Marseille to see the Arabs leaving the mosque.”

Despite the growing number of small houses of worship in the city, the idea that Marseille should have a real mosque re-emerged by the late 1980s. In October 1989 the Mayor of Marseille—Robert Vigouroux—declared that he was in favour of the establishment of a mosque: “like the one in Paris. I want it to be beautiful. In the first place, for the city. Moreover, such a mosque must be a symbol for the Muslims of Marseille. A bit like the Cathedral is for Christians.”

Less than ten days after the Mayor had expressed this sentiment, a local Algerian businessman—Mustapha Slimani—presented a project for a mosque, which combined a religious, commercial, and cultural complex. The project included a huge mosque with a ground surface of 9,000 square meters and a 50 meters high minaret, which would provide for 15,000 to 17,000 worshippers. Slimani’s megalomaniac project was completely out of financial support by the French government and the municipality of Paris. The mosque was intended to be a monument for the colonial soldiers who had fought in the French armies as well as a symbol of a pro-French loyalist Islam that could function as a counter weight to anti-colonial Muslim movements in North Africa. Thus the co-opted Algerian Si Kaddour Ben Ghabrit became the rector of the new Mosque of Paris until his death in 1954. The mosque was also to be enjoyed by the Parisian bourgeoisie, who could visit the steam baths or drink a mint tea in the Moorish café. Ironically, the new mosque did not primarily serve the religious needs of the Algerian colonial workers in Paris, and the poor Muslims who showed up at its doors were turned away because of their shabby clothing.
of touch with the ideas and expectations of the representatives of Muslim associations in Marseilles. However, somewhat unfortunately, in public discourse this project became understood as an illustrative embodiment of the future “Cathedral Mosque” of Marseilles. Public and political protest against the project grew rapidly, and representatives of the extreme right Front National argued that the Muslim newcomers threatened the Christian identity of Marseilles. Confronted with public protests and arguing that the Muslims in Marseilles were not able to come up with a joined project, the municipality decided to call off the project in 1990.

An Islamic religious and cultural centre

The issue returned on the local public agenda in the late 1990s. This time the demand for a Grand Mosque was articulated by members of a new elite of local politicians of Moroccan and Algerian descent. They framed their demand in terms of the need for an adequate and respectable place for Islamic worship, as well as the need for a symbolic gesture of recognition towards the Muslims in Marseilles.

The new round of discussions took place against the background of discussions about Islam in France, and the need for a national council of Muslim representatives. Accordingly, the municipality of Marseilles decided to start a consultation among representatives of Muslim associations in Marseilles and other local stakeholders. The idea was to build a central mosque that would be administered by a council of local Muslim representatives. The religious centre would be combined with a cultural centre, which would be subsidized by public authorities, and help stimulate dialogue.

In 2002, an opposition arose between two different factions of Muslim associations in Marseilles. Local Mosque Committees affiliated to the Mosque of Paris—predominantly representing Algerian Muslims—claimed to represent the silent majority of Muslims in Marseilles. Moreover, Soheib Bencheikh—an employee of the Mosque of Paris who since 1996 claimed to be the “official mufti of Marseilles” but who was not recognized as such by most of the local Mosque Committees—supported the idea of establishing an Islamic cultural centre in the image of the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris. This centre would be open and transparent and would contribute to the development of a liberal Islam. Those committees were opposed by local Muslim associations, which claimed to represent younger generations and different ethnic communities. The associations led by younger Muslim representatives, founded a Council of Imams of Marseilles. The Council of Imams primarily wanted the new Grand Mosque to become a religious centre, which would contribute to the unity of Muslims in Marseilles and would illustrate the public recognition of Islam in France.

In the post-September 11 context, the diverging ideas of the Council of Imams and the Mosque Committees affiliated to the Mosque of Paris, were increasingly framed in terms of an opposition between extremists and liberals. The media spoke of the “mufti” as a proponent of a liberal Islam and the Neighbourhood mosques,” whereas the dialogue between Muslims and French society would take place in a cultural centre that is to be linked to “a museum.” Much like the colonial exhibitions of the beginning of the twentieth century, Islamic culture would be transformed into an object on display in order to allow for exchanges between Muslims and non-Muslims in Marseilles.

Islam de proximité

In 2003, it became clear that the municipality intended to sign an agreement with the Mosque Committees affiliated to the Mosque of Paris and the “mufti.” However, when the Council of Imams and their allies came out victorious in the elections for a regional Muslim council in the Bouches-du-Rhône department, municipal authorities could no longer afford to bypass these associations. The municipality of Marseilles now argued that perhaps the idea of establishing a Grand Mosque was outdated anyhow. Many of the existing houses of worship in Marseilles had been renovated or enlarged, and a number of new projects had emerged for middle-sized mosques in Marseilles. In June 2004, the Mayor of Marseilles—Jean Claude Gaudin—declared that he had decided to acknowledge the need for a multiplicity of houses of worship and for an “Islam de proximité.” The municipality now wanted to support the establishment of an “Islamic cultural centre” in combination with an existing project for a new museum of immigration in Marseilles.

Historically, it appears as if Islam in Marseilles had come full circle. Ordinary Muslims in Marseilles would now worship in the existing “neighbourhood mosques,” whereas the dialogue between Muslims and French society would take place in a cultural centre that is to be linked to “a museum.” Much like the colonial exhibitions of the beginning of the twentieth century, Islamic culture would be transformed into an object on display in order to allow for exchanges between Muslims and non-Muslims in Marseilles.