

Local actions

Out of the cellar and into the landscape park Challenges around relocalization of a mosque in Roubaix

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Abstract

The objective of the initiative launched in Roubaix within the framework of the network entitled “Faiths and Social cohesion”, aims to study the way in which the local governments manage religious diversity and in particular their links with the Muslim presence and its mosques. The method adopted, in agreement with the coordination of the network supported by the European Union, was to have only one case study, i.e. a municipality with a significant Muslim population and the presence of one or several mosques, to study transactions of various types between religious communities and local institutions, as well as to experiment with a role of facilitation in the framework of these relations.

Keywords: Roubaix - France - Mosques - Relocalization.

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Roubaix is the second metropolitan area for the urban community of Lille with nearly 100 000 inhabitants. This city has over a long period of time represented one of the most flourishing examples of the French textile industry. The first immigrant workers to come to Roubaix were Belgians. Until the first half of the 20th century, they were the driving force of the city's industrial growth and they made up more than half of its population during the period of strong growth before 1914. From 1945 there was a very significant arrival of Italian immigrants, followed shortly after by the Iberian labour force, Maghrebian labourers and those from Black Africa. Certain researchers estimate that the population coming from countries where Islam is a majority religion was practically close to 40 % of the city, which represents a considerable proportion.

In 1990, out of a population of 97 793 inhabitants, Roubaix had 16 461 foreigners, but if one takes the nationality of the head of household into account, there were 29 938 people, that is to say 30, 62 % of the population, who lived in a household where the reference person was a foreigner or was naturalized. The statistical data on the geographical distribution of the populations indicate that out of the 13 districts that make up the city, some have a strong Community concentration. A quick glance at the geography of the city reveals a striking contrast between the southern part which has a lower population density, a pleasant quality of life and attracts a population of company executives and the professions who work outside the city, and the northern part, which underwent the pangs of an industrial decline and still bears all the scars of impoverishment. It is necessary all the same to point out that Roubaix went through several restructurings and at the moment there is a project for urban reconfiguration.

The political, economic, social, cultural and religious life in Roubaix are strongly marked by the presence of this population of foreign origin and, more particularly, by that of the communities originating from the Maghreb region. The question of integration of these populations has, until recently, strongly mobilized the elected officials and social and institutional actors, and in Roubaix it largely conditioned the implementation of what is called in France, the "the city policy". The use of the term "integration"

refers to the existence of the universe of representations where different sets of themes such as insecurity, Islam, immigration or unemployment are to be found. In certain domains, this led to the practice of discriminatory measures by the employers who refused to employ people of North African origin because they were “concerned” about preserving their image to their customers, but sometimes the elected officials also, who were not willing to enter into a conflict with a part of their electorate.

This discriminatory situation is not specific to Roubaix alone. It was also observed in the principal French metropolitan areas where the situation was more favourable in Paris and in the East of France. If initiatives exist to fight against this discrimination, it also happens that the actions of “positive discrimination” do not always work in favor of those populations who are of immigrant stock. Thus, the simple fact of classifying a district as a priority area to benefit from the city policy could reinforce the negative perceptions to the detriment of the inhabitants of this district. Generally speaking, discrimination in the treatment of categories of the population is very obvious not only in the difficulties of accessing employment, but also in the responses given to the requests pertaining to the exercise of their faith for Muslim people or Muslim associations.

1. Principal characteristics of Islam in Roubaix

The challenges of Islam felt at the national level have direct repercussions at the local level. We can thus say that in Roubaix, the ingredients of the configuration of Islam in France are perfectly visible, in particular through:

- A low rate of frequentation of the places of worship which is cyclical, according to the important moments of the year or in the life of practising Muslims;
- An ethno-national distribution of places of worship;
- A hiatus between old and young generations in their relationship with Islam;
- Very peripheral phenomena of radicalism, but which have nonetheless several times sullied the image of the faithful in the communities in the metropolitan area;
- Places of worship generally managed by rather old migrants.

The Muslim population in the city is thus characterized by its heterogeneity. Coming mainly from the Maghreb region, these Muslim immigrants can be divided into two principal groups, those coming from Algeria – with a strong proportion of repatriates (Harkis) - and those from Morocco, as well as fewer numbers of people from Tunisia. Finally, the people who came from Turkey and Black Africa who complete this table. This situation is responsible for maintaining a whole series of intra-community divisions among Algerians, but also between Algerians and Moroccans, in particular with regard to the management of places of worship where the Algerian element is dominant. The Turkish population goes to the mosque managed by the Islamic religious organization of the Turks in the North of France. It is thus difficult to talk about the existence of a local “Muslim community” in the strict sense of the term. One could say, in extreme cases, that the concept of “Oummah”, or community, plays a strong symbolic role, but is lacking in any kind of “concrete structure” both at the local and national level.

The town of Roubaix has, at the moment, eight places of worship for Muslims, of which six are officially recognised by the local authorities, and the remaining two are more like back rooms rearranged for older persons in the neighbourhood:

- The mosque managed by a Turkish association has a surface area of 600 m², it is located in an old factory, and brings together approximately 400 people every Friday. It is connected to the embassy of Turkey.

- The dominant element in the mosque managed by the *Religious and Cultural Association of Roubaix* is Moroccan. It is located in an old bookstore, and the prayer room has a surface area of 75 m², and brings together about fifty people on Friday.

- The Abou Bakr mosque, managed by the *Islamic Association of the Abou Bakr mosque* is established in two dwelling places and has a surface area of 700 m² and accommodates up to 300 faithful on Friday. The Imam of the mosque is appointed and remunerated by the Paris mosque.

- The Sunna mosque, managed by the *Islamic Cultural Association for the Arab Language*, is one of the largest in the area, has a surface of 2000 m² and accommodates several hundreds of people during prayer time on Friday. It is the only mosque in Roubaix that has a

minaret. The Imam is appointed and remunerated by the Paris mosque.

- The *Adaw'a* mosque which accommodates groups of preachers from Tabligh is located in an old warehouse with a surface area of 700 m² distributed over four floors. The faithful are mainly of Algerian origin.

- The mosque managed by the *Afro-Islamic Association*, or *2AI*, is in a bicycle garage located in a low rent housing public sector (HLM) in the district of Epeule.

If the diligent Muslims who observe the tenets of their religion are in the minority, the majority of the persons in charge of the mosques however state that they have increasing demands for the practice of their religion. More than just a question of enlarging the prayer rooms, additional needs emerge, in particular for women and younger persons. With regard to the present research-action coordinated by the association called "*From one World to Another*" in Tourcoing, the project initiated by the neighbourhood association which is the "Afro-Islamic Association" (or 2AI) was used as a starting point and place of major observation in its capacity as a local partner.

2. Study of the acquisition of a new place for Muslim worship

One of the places of prayer for the Muslim population of Roubaix is currently managed by association "2AI". The directing body of the association reflects the composition of the Muslim population of the district, which is mainly Moroccan. The president is a thirty year old trader who came from the North-East of Morocco, a few years ago. He succeeded the current vice-president who was 46 years old and whose parents were a couple of Algero-Moroccan migrants. It should be stated here that the vice-president is the director of an association for reintegration and very involved in local community life; he is well regarded by the faithful and the local councillors, as the life giving force of the association and the privileged interlocutor for the outside world.

The place of prayer of the association is located in a room where bicycles are stored, which measures 50 m², and for many years now it has been allowed to use it by the real estate company which manages the real estate housing in Epeule. It should be

noted that the prayer room for men, for women and the classroom are not located within the same space since they have three different entrances. Also, for more than three years now, the association has been requesting the town hall for a new place which would meet the needs of the local community that requires a new place of worship adapted to its requirements. This point was put on the Town Council's agenda in December 21, 2000, and until today, the project has not given the desired results, although it has made significant progress.

Indeed, as the local press has pointed out in several articles published during the year 2001, the project gave rise to a battle of words at the political level, with an action launched by the extreme right wing party during the election campaign, which with the local commercial union protested against the choice of the site earmarked at the beginning for the relocalization of this place of worship.

The dossier has moved along, until the end of the year 2002, in four stages:

- The town hall had first of all chosen to acquire, after a municipal debate on the subject, an old service station measuring 400 m², situated at the head of the main street in the district, and then to sign a long lease with the 2AI association. However, this street is also a commercial street which was registered in the programme that was part of the revitalization of the district. So there were divided opinions here, with an equal number of Muslim traders and non-Muslims on both sides. The latter got together in a commercial Union and then drew up a petition against the establishment of the place of worship, officially pointing out the inconsistency of the new use of the service station at the head of commercial street. Many informal discussions took place on this occasion. If the argument, in itself, is completely coherent in the plan of the project seeking to reorganize the district, the persons in charge of the Muslim association perceived the fear on the part of the union of the tradesmen, that the trading done in the street might suffer from the image related to the mosque. They then made another petition in favor of the establishment of the mosque and presented it to the mayor.

- In order to protect the different sensitivities at play here, the town hall then chose another place located in the waste land of an old factory site in the neighbourhood. The place was also appreciated by the Muslim association because it bordered the inhabited

area, and was very close to the new landscape park that the town hall intends to create by extending an existing park. The site was so old that the building was earmarked for demolition. But the Muslim association was not discouraged by all this and had every intention of setting up the future mosque in the park - the Municipality was still willing to let it build a place of worship there.

- The third stage was to open a series of consultations, where the organisation " *From one World to Another*" was asked by the Municipality, as a qualified structure, to coordinate discussions, under the authority of the mayor of the district, between the association of the inhabitants of the district, the architectural department of the town hall, and the Muslim association. This was the time period that followed the events of September 11, 2001. If the national media was largely responsible for increasing the fear of attacks on French soil, the local and regional press was positive concerning several projects for mosques carried out with the support of municipalities. In the local plan, the aftermath of after September 11 gave rise to much inter-religious consultation between Muslims and persons in charge of associations and institutions. In Roubaix, the Municipality supported the revitalization of an independent project called "Roubaix-Hope" (Roubaix -Espérance), which brought together both religious and lay personalities, and was inspired by the model known as "Marseilles-Hope". This council brings together personalities from each place of worship in the city, namely Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, Muslims and people belonging to communities who reflect on these subjects. In a peaceful climate, the challenge however, took on another dimension: this was nature and the architectural aspect of a place of worship located within an open landscape park.

- The fourth stage was the time to make a political decision. After having initiated a series of consultations with the members of all the religious denominations present in the city, concerned about the inherent needs for the practice of their faith, the mayor wanted to set up a "framework discussion"⁴, specifying the commitments

⁴ The "framework debate" established the general orientations of the town hall as regards direct or indirect actions for the cult. Later on, each place of worship must be discussed in specific terms in order to establish the exact nature and cost of the commitment. This debate which was prepared in consultation with the elected members of the opposition parties in the municipality was welcomed by all the political groups excepting the Far Right.

of the city, in the respect of the provisions of the law on Separation dating back to 1905⁵, for each place of worship requiring, if necessary, an intervention of the public bodies. The decision to grant a plot of land on long lease to association 2AI within the future landscape park in the district of Epeule was ratified.

2.1. A rather long political decision-making process

The various moments of consultation initiated by the association “*From one World to Another*” contributed to the political decision-making. After having organised a series of meetings with the members of the religious traditions present in the city, the mayor drew up the “discussion framework” clarifying the commitments of the city for each place of worship that required the assistance of public bodies. The decision to grant a plot of land on long lease to association 2AI was thus ratified by this debate, during a town council meeting held on December 19, 2002.

It was then a question of proceeding to completely demolish the industrial waste land, in order to hand over a plot of land to the association 2AI, by concluding a new long lease agreement during a new debate. This second round of debate was voted on during the meeting of the town council in October 16, 2003 - almost a year after the vote during the initial deliberation. The clauses of the lease remained to be defined, knowing that the waste land, the

⁵ In France, contrary to what one might think, the Separation law of 1905 does not seek to “privatise” religion, by making it a practice that is no longer visible in the public domain. It clearly seeks to organise a public manifestation of worship, in an associative form, considering the cult associations as legal entities on an equal footing with other associative structures, even if their specific objective gives them certain advantages. The articles of the 1905 law authorise the State and local communities to act in two ways with regard to the building used for worship: for those structures dating back to before the 1905 law, and where the State is the owner, the latter may take on the maintenance and conservation costs of the building. As regards the other buildings used for worship, the State may participate in these costs, or even take on board all repair costs. These possibilities have not been shored up by precise clauses in the General Code on territorial communities. Case law will therefore decide on the basis of the nature of the building, whether a local community which engages an action on a building used for worship, is responsible or not for the expenses involved in the maintenance, conservation or repairs of the structure.

destruction of which would go ahead after a public invitation to tender had been published, has not yet been done.

The rather long intervals between the political decision-making and its effective implementation were considered too spaced out by certain members of the 2AI association. The latter, not seeing the start of any clearing work on the industrial waste land since the time the framework discussions took place, began to doubt the good intentions of the municipality. In the first half of 2003, the president of association came up against the insistence of certain faithful who were strongly in favour of buying a house or a shop in order to establish the new place of worship there. But the fact of the visibility that the new mosque would have within the future landscape park has, until now, over-riden the eagerness of these faithful. In parallel, questions about the long lease seem to have found unanimous favour with the leaders of the association. There could be contradiction, according to them, with the statutes of the mosque which, according to Islam, would be regarded as a *waqf* or property bequeathed to perpetuity, without the possibility of retrocession.

These questions opened up a period of fluctuation within the association, which was further highlighted for a few weeks by the changing professional situation of the president and the vice-president, key factors in the project. The first one had opened up a trade and the second accepted the management of an association for reintegration where he was employed, which was being fully reorganized. This change had temporarily decreased their personal investment and their presence in the current mosque. Following the framework discussions, the Municipality had fixed three conditions for the leaders of the association:

- to comply with the provisions of the law of 1905, in order to guarantee free access to all the faithful;
- to guarantee the transparency of the financing, and to avoid finances coming from countries with a “negative” connotation;
- to see that the new association would be representative of all Muslims in the district, and in this context, it was particularly a question of the integration of the Algerian Muslims repatriated in the exclusively Moroccan management team.

From one World to Another found itself caught up in these various questions and requests, halfway between a qualified structure and an association for mediation. Our first task thus was to help

the partners in their thought process by providing them with concrete support structures. This is the reason why, during January and February 2003, we wrote two short reports entitled “the modalities of long lease in French law” (10 pages.) and “To what degree can public bodies influence a question of faith?” (5 pages.). These documents used a cross section of legal and sociological approaches, aimed at giving an idea of the freedom of action granted to each entity – The municipality and the religious organization – in the assumption of financial responsibilities related to the setting up of the future mosque.

Association 2AI laid down two objectives. The first was quickly achieved: after having met with the vice-president on January 21, 2003, we contacted the president of the architect who had studied at the school of architecture in Villeneuve d'Ascq and his study programme was based on the idea of a big mosque in Roubaix, precisely located in the waste land where the future mosque of the district would be set up. He responded positively to the request made by the association, and began work on an architectural blueprint in keeping with the requirements of the district – this demand was compulsory and was insisted on by the Municipality from the outset. The second objective was to do with the presentation of the complete dossier containing the whole project and the architectural blueprints, and this document would serve as a concrete base during later negotiations with the persons in charge at the municipality.

“*From one World to Another*” completed the file during several work sessions held in May and June 2003, with the architect and the members of the bureau of the association. That contributed to alleviate the tensions within the association which delayed the realization of the document. At the same time, the Municipality decided to entrust the follow-up of the mosque dossier to the Directorate-General of the “Ville Renouvelée”, which supervises all rehabilitation projects in the city districts. They wanted to meet all the parties involved in the project, and we met with them on April 4, 2003 in order to provide them with precise information on the background and the current state of the project.

The involvement of each partner and the provision of technical skills made available by the resource centre of the association “*From one World to Another*” contributed to alleviate visible tensions that were felt at the beginning of the year. That led to the organization of a meeting at the premises of the Management for

the Renewed City on May 20, 2003, called by the chargé de mission where the following were present: the mayor of district, the city council representative in charge of religious questions, two architects from the town planning department, the director for the Renewed City, members of the executive committee of association 2AI accompanied by the architect, and the person responsible for surveys from "*From one World to Another*". The abstract discussions which were the norm from the beginning of 2003 now gave place to a formal dialogue during which several decisions were taken:

- The Municipality reiterated its formal commitment to grant a place for the new mosque inside the future landscape park; and at the same time, reiterated the stipulations related to the surface area, namely 600 m² for a neighbourhood mosque, with small possible differences that might be made according to the project to be presented.

- The nature of the project, drawn up on land that fell in the public domain, would mean a stricter control of the architectural project by the State, but the granting of the building permit would be quicker as long as requirements were adhered to; a schedule complete with the dates of future meetings was to be worked out for the handing-over of the complete file describing the project for the future mosque, with the architectural scale model and technical advice of "*From one World to Another*."

- The association's architect would be in direct contact with the town hall's planning department to facilitate and exchange information.

To overcome these concerns, a decision was taken to circulate a maximum of information and to maintain contact with all the people involved in the project. The Municipality had made a firm contract which was drawn up in explicit terms, but the questions posed by the elected district official on the appropriateness of the cultural component of the project raised fears once again concerning the possible postponement of the file. In fact, Association 2AI had made it known that it intended to continue with the teaching of arab-Muslim culture in an adjacent area not connected with religious matters. This modified the architectural plan, which presented a frame where the spaces devoted to worship and cultural activities were quite distinct. Apparently, the municipal majority seemed largely favourable to the updated project, which was in excess of the initial surface area of 200 m², but new reactions

would be made known at the end of the town council debates in December 2002.

2.2. Progress of the project during the period 2003-2004:

An extended negotiation period

These debates are significant with regard to “time of negotiation” which was prolonged over the period 2003-2004. The challenge here, both for the Municipality and for the Muslim association, was to have a whole set of conditions accepted, as they were considered to be fundamental for the finality of the project on the future mosque. A few key moments marked the second half of the year 2003.

Following the drawing up of the dossier with the complete project concerning the establishment of the future mosque, a meeting was called on July 8, 2003, at the request of the mayor of district, where, apart from the persons in charge of association 2AI and the architect for the project, there were also the director of the Renewed City and members of the town planning department from the town hall. The goal was to evaluate the contents of the project on the basis of the written documents produced by the association. The meeting went ahead on the appointed date, but in the absence of the district mayor and the person in charge of the Renewed City project, the latter had sent in his apologies in advance. This absence was upsetting for the associative partners. The elected official for the western districts stated that the meeting had not been called at his initiative and that he was waiting for a written confirmation from the association concerned. The first consequence of this failure was to postpone the initial debate on the fundamentals of the architectural project for the future mosque and the feeling of uneasiness among persons in charge of the Muslim association, who received an informal notice stating that the mayor of the district would veto any increase in the initial surface area of 600 m² and would like to have all cultural aspects deleted from the project, which, if retained, according to him, would contradict the significance of a mosque.

With the return to normal after the summer vacations in September, several telephone contacts were made between the persons in charge of the 2AI association, the chargé de mission of the Management of the Renewed City project and ourselves in order to calm the tense atmosphere and to propose elements for the drafting of the next municipal debate which would be voted on at the

end of the year. In fact two deliberations were decided upon by the town council:

- On October 16, 2003, a first decision resulting from the framework discussions of December 19, 2002 was voted. It related to the granting of a subsidy for the repair work of the Protestant temple in Roubaix, the granting of a plot on long lease to the Buddhist association of the city and also for the 2AI association. The part concerning the mosque would be written up in a specific way: *“It is proposed that association 2AI will have to constitute a new association in keeping with the law of 1905 (compulsory) bringing together the various components of the Muslim community in the district. Its influence will currently correspond to the needs of the project being examined.”* Two points resulted from this text. First of all the need to create a new religious organization (same condition stipulated in the text concerning the Buddhist association), to bring together the Muslim populations in the district and their different sensitivities. The town hall thus made an implied reference to the Algerian r patriates who had cobbled together an informal place of worship in the district and now felt slighted by the fact that an association with dominant “Morrocan” elements was given entire responsibility for the project of the future mosque. Then, the text stipulating a maximum area of m² 600 agreed at the beginning, left wide open the possibility of over shooting this surface area if the promoters of the project used the right arguments. But this wording was the source of disagreement between the district mayor and the Muslim association, which has not been resolved to date.

- On December 18, 2003, during a second deliberation the modalities for acquisition of the industrial waste land, property of the urban community in Lille were stipulated clearly. The plot would thus be integrated in the communal domain, in order to be able to proceed with the second phase of the extension of the current landscape park of Brondeloire, but the text of the deliberation stipulates that acquisition would be *“subject to the realization of soil analysis and absence of pollution.”*

At the beginning of January 2004, more than six months after their last meeting and the vote taken during the two deliberations, the persons in charge of association 2AI and the mayor of district renewed contacts to discuss the basis of the architectural project. Having observed that no effective action had taken place on the site of the industrial waste land, the vice-president of the Muslim association addressed a letter to the Mayor of Roubaix, on Decem-

ber 10, 2003, to question him on the progress of the dossier. The district mayor rapidly responded and proposed a meeting for the end of January 2004, in order to adhere more precisely to the dates fixed for demolition and the consequent availability of the waste land. Meanwhile, the same elected official invited the lady technician of the town planning cabinet, the chargé de mission of the Renewed City project and ourselves for a technical discussion on January 6, during which the recent progress would be discussed with regard to the estimated dates for clearing the waste land and the question of compliance of the association with the provisions of the law of 1905.

During this meeting, just like at the meeting with the persons in charge of association 2AI, on 24 January, the district mayor was intransigent with respect to the surface area initially agreed upon, and questioned the relevance of the cultural part of the project. According to him, it would be more than what the Muslim community the district required. The members of the bureau did not wait to address a letter of to the city mayor, and in a letter dated January 26, 2004, they directly requested his intervention in the matter to resolve the disagreement they had with the district mayor.

How can we interpret this hesitation concerning the increased surface area when compared to what was initially envisaged? Apart from the question of principle, and the differences of interpretation on this subject during the municipal deliberation of October 16, 2003, this attitude was perhaps exacerbated to a certain extent, by the convergence of several factors making it so that he wanted to avoid hurting the different sensitivities in the district:

- During the last quarter of the year 2003, the district mayor was the subject of several attacks from political and association leaders blaming him for his political work and his moral uprightness as a person. For the first time since the beginning of his mandate, he was obliged to publish a response to these attacks in the press.

- During the month of December, it was the turn of the district committee to make an allusion, in its small newspaper, to the mosque project, announcing that the inhabitants were impatient to see their "Muslim Arts centre" built. The district mayor was immediately challenged on the question of the Muslim arts centre, and certain persons in charge of associations and policies thought that they had detected in this wording, a potential or real competition

with the *Arts centre of the Arab world*, a secular association present in the district which did not have any link with the question of worship.

- A third attack was made directly on the entire municipal team. During October 2003, the local press took up the theme of the public discussion following the vote after the initial deliberation, and this was due to a petition launched by the National Front in several districts of the city and the meaning was very clear: “*Must our taxes be used to finance a mosque and a Buddhist temple in Roubaix⁶?*”

During the first six-month period of 2004, the industrial waste land was cleared, and the plot of land on which the future mosque was to be set up was prepared for construction. Preparations are under way to hold a new meeting, and the persons in charge at the municipal level were trying to lay the foundations for a dispassionate debate, by taking note of all the elements related to the needs expressed by the association and by proposing a concrete evaluation of the relevance of the architectural project.

2.3. A project with multi-faceted repercussions

The key words “uncertainty” and “repercussions” are completely in line with the realities concerning the evaluation of the situation in Roubaix: uncertainty related to the interpretation and the political goodwill displayed with regard to the project pre-

⁶ The Far Right party even threatened to attack the debate on the long lease at the level of the ‘prefecture’ and the administrative court. The vice-president of 2AI drafted a letter to respond to the allegations of the extremist party which was published in the local press on 29 October. The local press judged it opportune to bring out a dossier on the framework rules governing the exercise of worship in France and we were called upon to give our opinion. Meanwhile, the Extremist party had already, on 24 October, informed the ‘Prefect of these happenings so that he could put an end to the municipal debate on the grounds that it violated the articles on the Separation law. Since the Far Right party received no response whatsoever to its request, it then used the same arguments and took its case to the Administrative Court on 1 March 2004. With regard to the two written documents successively sent in to the Municipality by the Roubaix Extremists stating their case, the Municipality responded by drawing up two dossiers which stipulated the procedure and the legal clauses to be respected on the question of long leases. At the end of August 2004, the administrative court of Lille had not yet rendered its verdict, but the Far Right party will probably be non-suited.

sented by the Muslim association. On the one hand, the municipal consent came with several conditions, which have been mentioned previously, opening up the possibility of divergent interpretations on the part of the members of the municipal team and the promoters of the future mosque. Viewed from another angle, the members of Muslim association follow each decision making phase with a certain degree of scepticism, the administrative delays appeared to them to be very long and the coherence of the political action quite unfathomable.

Also relations between the various participants changed with the events that occurred in local political life, some details of which have been mentioned. The combination of these various factors makes the methods of this research-action very complex insofar as the negotiation progressed, each new repercussion, not specifically related to this mosque project could cause strained relations between one or several actors and this resulted in the project being delayed yet again.

In this context we could describe the simple case of the depollution survey discussed during the deliberations in December 2003, which aroused a whole series of suspicions on the state of the industrial waste land and the company dealing in energy matters that set up on this plot of waste land. The residents recently circulated a petition asking to know the exact state of soil pollution, and the extremist party in the city could see the possibility of putting an end to the mosque project while hoping at the same time to see the plot classified as being unsuitable for construction because of its supposed state of unsalubrity.

It is also appropriate, at this stage of our study, to place this mosque project in the context of more global challenges related to local life where at least two other challenges were added to the list to make the analysis a little more complex:

- First of all the park itself, the importance of which we had underestimated at the beginning of the project. While we are on this subject it should be said that the existing park is closed, and only opened to accommodate sporting events held on the playground located in its centre. Apart from these event slots, the park is almost inaccessible to people from the district, who feel hurt about this, in particular during the summer season. At the beginning, the district committee managed the opening of the park, with daily opening hours that was generally considered by the inhabitants as satisfactory. But then the town hall took over the manage-

ment of the opening hours, which were reduced to the extreme. The result, for the inhabitants, is that it is practically impossible to walk in the park in good weather. Moreover, certain people living on the edge of the district were accustomed to crossing the park to get to the railway station and to take the train to their place of work. Today, they have to take the long way around. The district committee would like to manage the park again, and the mosque project once again raises the question of having an open park and not a closed one in the district.

- Then there is the question of the leadership, internal in this case to the Muslim population in the district. There is indeed another informal place of prayer in the district, attended by whole families of Algerian repatriates, who have very close relations with each other. Until recently, these Muslims had not created an association for the purposes of worship, but after having been informed of the project concerning the new mosque presented by the 2AI association which was perceived as having a dominant Moroccan component, they contacted the Municipality in order to be directly associated with this project. The deliberations in December put forward the idea of constituting a "representative" association for the Muslims in the district. But does the next question ask about who can legitimately address the Muslims? The repatriates feel they have been slighted because, until now, they are not represented in the 2AI project, but the persons in charge of the association reply that there are already people of Algerian extraction in its leadership, and that it does not have the intention of turning into an ethno-Community association. They respond to the municipal injunction by insisting on their French identity, for those which have the nationality, as well as their religious identity, thus making the repatriates' argument devoid of all legitimacy.

The debates on this multiplicity of factors are far from being closed, and they give rise to questions concerning the uncovering of possible religious discrimination. From this point of view, it is not easy to isolate the elements that are specific to this relocalization project to find a place for Muslim worship nor to explain this to those who participated in the negotiation. Very often, the simple fact of using in-depth analysis to understand one local situation makes it possible to see other angles, certain standpoints or decisions taken by the political and institutional actors which could have been based on discrimination. Moreover, it sometimes takes a long while to understand the role of the various actors and the coherence of interactions between the various protagonists a-

gaged in the project, which is also another dimension of mature interpretation.

3. Contributions made by the research-action

Before detailing the elements that are highlighted in this research, it is advisable to state that discrimination whether, effective or potential, which the Muslim communities at the local level can be victims of, can be curbed only if concrete work is achieved at two levels:

- The first level concerns the legal aspects and demands precise knowledge of the parameters of the action entrusted to the local communities and the requests in matters pertaining to worship. Many municipalities think they are not covered by the legal framework of the law on Separation dating back to 1905, and that they could, in fact, benefit from real possibilities that should be taken into account.

- The second level relates to work on mentalities, both with regard to the authorities, who sometimes have a pejorative image of the Muslims because the latter have difficulties in formulating their requests in an understandable language, and the Muslims who sometimes tend to pose as victims whereas their project is quite simply incomplete and this works against them.

The research-action describes a starting situation where one can detect the weaknesses of the project bearers in the case of the construction of a new mosque, with regard to the design of the project and the incapability of being able to develop it so as to convince the municipal team. The current situation leads us to state that the optimum conditions for good results in projects that are presented by Muslim associations must include at least five parameters:

- A peaceful local situation, favourable to consultation. On this point, it is clear that the extreme right wing parties generally seek, at the local level, to imbibe all the projects presented by Muslim associations with shades of meaning related to an invasive Islam. But more generally speaking, we understand the term “peaceful situation” to be one where a local councillor does not seek to manipulate a Community project in any way, either to have it controlled by a person close to him or someone known to him, or on a “scratch my back and I’ll scratch yours” basis which makes all the associative actors including the mayor and persons in charge, be-

come involved in this perverse game that is conditioned by prerogatives. The Municipality of Roubaix has in this context, managed the situation very well, as we have already mentioned, by disseminating clear information to all the municipal partners, even those in the opposition, and by having a vote on the framework debate supposed to refer to all faiths concerned by any public action.

- Obvious political good-will supported by openness with regard to the provisions contained in the law of 1905 on separation of the Church and the State. During the time of our research for information on the legal provisions resulting from the law of 1905, we were surprised by the low level of knowledge of the majority of the Muslim associative participants and many municipal elected officials. We are here in a real system of representation where every one has his own idea of the concepts involved which is very important: public and private domains, secularity,, prohibition of granting subsidies to religious entities, etc Many elected officials still think that a faith can be practised only by an association that is in compliance with the provisions of the law on Separation, and conversely, many Muslims are persuaded that being a member of a religious association according to the law of 1905, means being subjected to police control and stricter financial inspections. In the present research-action, we compiled several documents that include these different questions and we also organized explanatory meetings so that all the participants could discuss these points on the basis of the same information ⁷.

- A coherent project, presented by a Muslim association which was given credibility through work done through public relations. When they approach the local authorities, Muslims are not always easily understood by their interlocutors, and two principal reasons

⁷ In this context, "From one world to another" had, during this period made an analysis of Muslim places of worship in the north of France, which gave rise to a publication entitled "French law on Cults applied to Islam" published by the association in September 2002. The association was requested by the town hall in Roubaix to obtain legal information pertaining to the margin of manoeuvre that the municipality would have when it came to the possibilities for aid in the area of renovation or relocation of a place of worship. As regards the project presented by Association 2AI, several meetings took place with the Director of the Mayor's cabinet, the Director General of the Renewed City of Roubaix and the Municipal Councillor in charge of Cults with a view to setting out a thought process that would lead to the basis of the framework debate.

are responsible for this confusion⁸: gaps in the definition of the project, and in the technical and urban planning area.⁹

- Technical supervision for the purpose of negotiation because despite the rather serene atmosphere in which it takes place, it could easily have degenerated as the hopes and expectations of the party concerned could easily be interpreted in a negative or pejorative manner.

- And, finally the “nonspecific” treatment of the question of Islam, by considering the requests formulated by the Muslims on the same basis as any other request received from any other association on the question of religion. The Muslims feel slighted, and rightly so, when a local councillor tells them that their request is not admissible whereas, at the same time, it is favourable towards requests asking it to intervene in religious matters that are not in its area of competence.. On the other hand, these same Muslims make a mistake by making certain demands with regard to build-

⁸ In fact, apart from the language difficulties that arose in the case of certain Muslim officials responsible for the associations, the latter often tended, despite the distinction made in the different activity areas mentioned in their statutes, to utilise terms such as “mosque” or “Islam” to designate a whole series of actions launched in the premises that they occupied, even when speaking about the premises themselves, whereas in the minds of the local community representatives to whom they were speaking, these terms referred to an area where the intervention of public authorities was not possible. In this context, it is therefore necessary for these persons to ask for pertinent explanations so that, apart from the vocabulary used, the precise contents of the demands would also be clarified, and they should also consult the various texts in force to understand the extent of the margin of manoeuvre that the local community has when it intervenes in these matters.

⁹ Apart from these stumbling blocks that arise when requests are made for the construction of a minaret or specific architecture for an exterior façade, which may not be in keeping with the existing urban framework, certain projects presented by Muslim associations might have inherent weaknesses with regard to security norms, ground occupancy plans, stipulations linked to the architecture of the building, modification of the utilisation of the existing building, access for handicapped persons, or the question of parking close to these premises. However, the reverse could also be true, when, for example, a Municipality is favourable towards a given project, the dossier presented by the Muslim association officials could meet with difficulties later on, if the stipulations made by the town hall are not accompanied by the explanations that are necessary, in clear, simple language, so that the Muslim dialogue partners understand the finer points of the project.

ings owned by the local community that will be used for the practice of religious rites. Explanations are still necessary in many cases to avoid injustices on both sides.

If it is not always possible to combine all these factors, the work of mediation and technical support will help to achieve progress in the files dealing with the establishment of places of worship. It can help to raise basic questions which are very often overlooked by the persons in charge of these places of worship, like the town halls which do not always give the required attention to these matters. For example, how can a mosque, or a Muslim arts centre represent a qualifying element in a district? Indeed, the creation of a place of worship is not an end in itself. Regarded as equipment of general interest within the meaning of the French legislation on town planning, the place of worship, for Muslims, can be likened to a true arts centre as, apart from canonical prayers that are recited, it offers several types of cultural activities from conferences that are open to the general public, to topics of interest to society, courses on the Arabic language and arab-Muslim culture, while at the same time being involved in the organization of religious festivals or other festive activities. This aspect constitutes one of the factors of suspicion against the mosques, which are generally perceived, wrongly, as being a kind of hiding place open to all kinds of wrong doings. But in order to work on the question of representation, the Muslim associative persons in charge must be encouraged to clarify the functionality of spaces in the development of their projects, and to use a language that will be understood by their non Muslim interlocutors.

3.1. Locating the actors of change

In what we describe as “a game involving several partners and several dimensions”, we could try to offer advice on what is considered to be the “actors of change”, i.e. the key people who have a direct influence on the progress and especially on the results of the project.

A short typology on the sphere of activities gives us several types of actors:

- Political actors;
- Administrative and technical or expert actors, generally agents in administrations concerned with the project;

- The economic actors, who can weigh in on the choice of policies;
- Muslim associative actors;
- Associative actors who are non-Muslims.

In this range of actors who, at a given point in time, exert a certain influence, directly or indirectly on the project, two transversal categories are of particular interest to us: they are the “qualified actors” and the “legitimate actors”.

By qualified actor, we mean any person having a specific skill allowing him to express a relevant opinion at certain key moments in the negotiation or to make a decision influencing the project directly. By legitimate actor, we mean any person who, because of the position he occupies in one of the areas quoted above, is recognized by the other partners in the project as being entitled to deliver an opinion or to make a decision. It is clear that, in this case, as in any negotiation process, the two categories do not inevitably overlap, and there are very perceptible conflicts of legitimacy. We can quote at least four of them:

- as regards policies, the legitimacy of the district mayor was challenged several times on the pretext that he was only an elected official of the district and that only the mayor of the city was entitled to take the important decisions;
- as regards the agents who play a technical role and have the required expertise, the arrival of a chargé de mission to examine questions on discrimination at the Renewed City of Roubaix throughout the year 2003 and who was elected, *inter alia*, to work on this file, meant that more meetings were held and relevant information was given to the politicians¹⁰;
- within association 2AI, it will also be noted that the vice-president was at the heart of all the initiatives taken at the level of

¹⁰ However, at the same time, this agent had been a key player in the drawing up of the October debate, which was a prerequisite to the granting of a long lease, as well as the setting up of an association that included representatives of the immigrant population, and despite our reticence in view of the clauses contained in the Separation law, expressly forbidding State representatives to interfere in the internal organisation of religious associations. One question persists: why do political representatives appear, at certain times, to prefer the opinion of one “expert” rather than another.

the town hall and the municipal services. He was the person responsible for arranging almost all the work meetings with the leaders of association, the architect or ourselves. He was also an actor who was very involved in local community life. He was thus considered by the Municipality as the most credible interlocutor on this project, second only to the president. That was the cause of great tension between the two men, the second accusing the first of wanting to replace him;

- in more general terms, within the Muslim population of the district, the action of the repatriates, on the pretext that access to the new place of worship might perhaps be denied to them, impelled certain municipal actors to have recourse to “ethnic” logic whereas the town hall was simply dealing with a religious organization, knowing full well that any public building used for worship, in France, managed by an association in compliance with the law of 1905, is in fact open to all the public belonging to the faith concerned¹¹.

This general table would however be incomplete if we omitted to mention certain much more positive aspects of collaboration between qualified and legitimate persons. One can quote for example, the collaboration between the architect of the association, the town planning services of the Municipality and the architect for France. This latter gave a favourable opinion together with some observations on the architectural project for the new mosque, on the basis of the preliminary document provided by the architect and discussed with the town planning cabinet.

3.2. Which strategy/strategies can mobilize the actors?

At this stage of our research-action, it is perfectly clear that the result of the discussions and the negotiation itself is played out on the medium term and with many subtleties in the attitudes of all concerned. One of the central aspects of the research-action remains to be defined - that of the positioning of an intermediate association, and the person qualified to lead the study relating to the project on the relocalization of the mosque.

¹¹ Once again, the question is to know who is authorised to give the correct interpretation of a fact or a legal clause, and what is the meaning of a “representative” association when it comes to the diversity of a population as specified in the debate?

Let us say right away that sticking to a strictly neutral position is not only perceived as a challenge, but could prove counter-productive in the spirit of a research-action that is supposed to initiate good practices, or at any rate, practices for change. In our opinion, the intermediate association must play a triple role: - information-supervision; - awareness building.

In this case, we were able to initiate a mobilization strategy for the various actors. In order to do this, we had to use our legitimacy as sociologists and, then through our knowledge of the problems relating to Islam, and finally by making a concrete contribution to the thought process of the associative and institutional actors by providing them with relevant documents on the legal provisions governing the practice of the religious worship in France. Two elements particularly helped us in this task. The first was the approaching celebration of the centenary of the law on separation, which created a climate of discussion on the institutionalization of Islam. The second was the positive way in which the majority of the French political community considers the question of visibility to be given to the places of Muslim worship.

However, it was necessary to avoid falling into the trap of instrumentalisation by the various actors involved in the project, regardless of who they are, and how they perceive the questions of legal integration of Muslim worship and the facilitation of the construction of mosques, in order to avoid biases in the relation.

As far as we are concerned, our work took us in two directions, which is relevant in view of the results obtained. The first was the setting up of a network of associative actors in the field. Our interventions at the level of Roubaix-Hope, several meetings held within the district and our insistent attitude with regard to the persons in charge of 2AI so that they include an existing associative network made for a dispassionate debate on the question of the mosque. The second direction is to do with methodology. Coherence needed to be injected in the requests formulated by the Muslim association, by linking them to the "mosque" project, and then translating them into language that would be understood by the town hall, i.e. by using vocabulary familiar to the laity.

The skill in doing this work lay in the capacity of the dossier to emphasize the Community dimension of the project while placing it at the same time in the context of existing reality. From this point of view, it seems that the general content of the project is no longer called into question by the Municipality, but the results of this

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research-action will ultimately reside in the capacity of the project bearers to secure their credibility and the intermediate association should not interfere but allow them a free hand in the process of negotiation. It is thus necessary to take account of the time factor and to let the persons in charge of the Muslim association take charge of their destiny.