

Seeing Islam in Global Cities: A Spatial Semiotic Analysis

Jerome Krase & Timothy Shortell, Department of Sociology, Brooklyn College CUNY

As noted by Krase and colleagues (Krase & Hum 2007; Krase & Shortell 2009, 2011; Shortell & Krase 2011, 2012), visual sociology of changing urban neighborhoods is not merely an aesthetic exercise of finding images to illustrate sociological concepts. Rather, it is an increasingly important way to investigate social change. Cities on every continent have been deluged by the rapid influx of large numbers of people and products from cultures different from native-born residents. Because of globalization, “cultural strangers” share common urban environments. Although these “strangers” frequently live within the same large-scale political boundaries, the real test of community takes place during the course of everyday life on the streets, in the shops, and public spaces of neighborhoods. At present, examination of the visual semiotics of difference is especially important as American and European cultures interact with Islamic cultures. Visual representations of Islam are common in the US and EU; these are generally negative and often derogatory, as a quick *Google* image search reveals. Local political talk about Islam tends to be critical and often panicked. Nativist politics are on the rise throughout the West and the central point of contention seems to be visibility. The “burqa controversy” in France and the conflict over a Muslim community center in lower Manhattan (the so-called “WTC mosque”) are recent examples of the disputes over urban public space involving representations of collective identity. Public space becomes the locus of the public sphere, where visibility conflicts—who is seen in public space—become disputes about who ought to be included in the national “public.” Using a spatial semiotic analysis, we investigate how the presence of expressive, conative, phatic, and poetic signs of recent Muslim inhabitants change the meaning of vernacular neighborhoods in global cities. Visual data from urban neighborhoods in the US and Europe will be presented as examples of different functions of semiotic markers, and exemplars of the data we collect using a neighborhood photographic survey technique. We discuss how these different functions interact with local policy to create interpretive landscapes, which can lead to dramatically different outcomes in terms of social conflict.

Below is a small sample photographs that cover a tiny fraction of Islamic representations, these taken by Jerome Krase, that are part of our archive of galleries at:<http://brooklynsoc.tumblr.com/>



New York City Turkish Day Parade



Bayridge, Brooklyn, New York



Coney Island Avenue, Brooklyn, New York



Belmont, The Bronx, New York



Astoria, Queens, New York



London, England



L'Esquilino, Rome, Italy



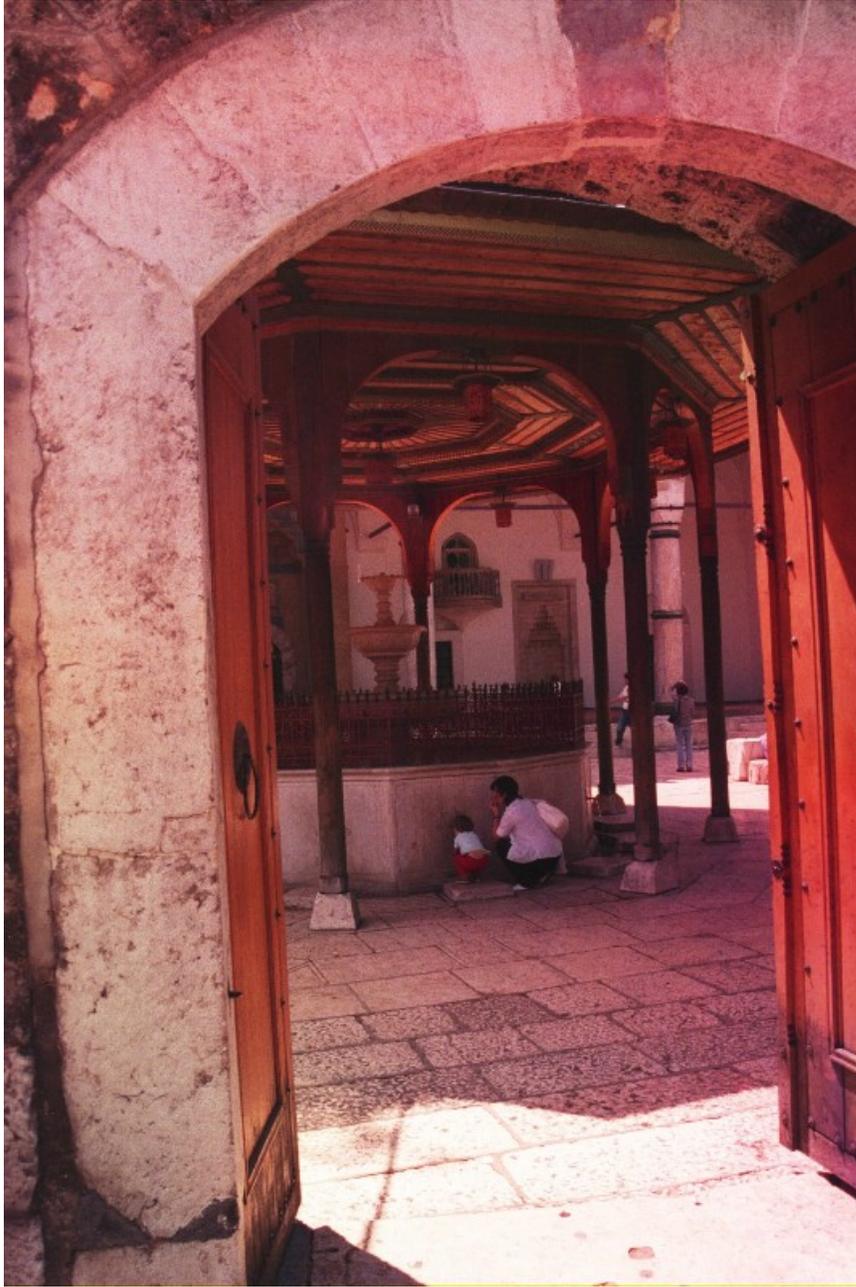
Kreuzberg, Berlin, Germany



Frankfurt am Main, Germany



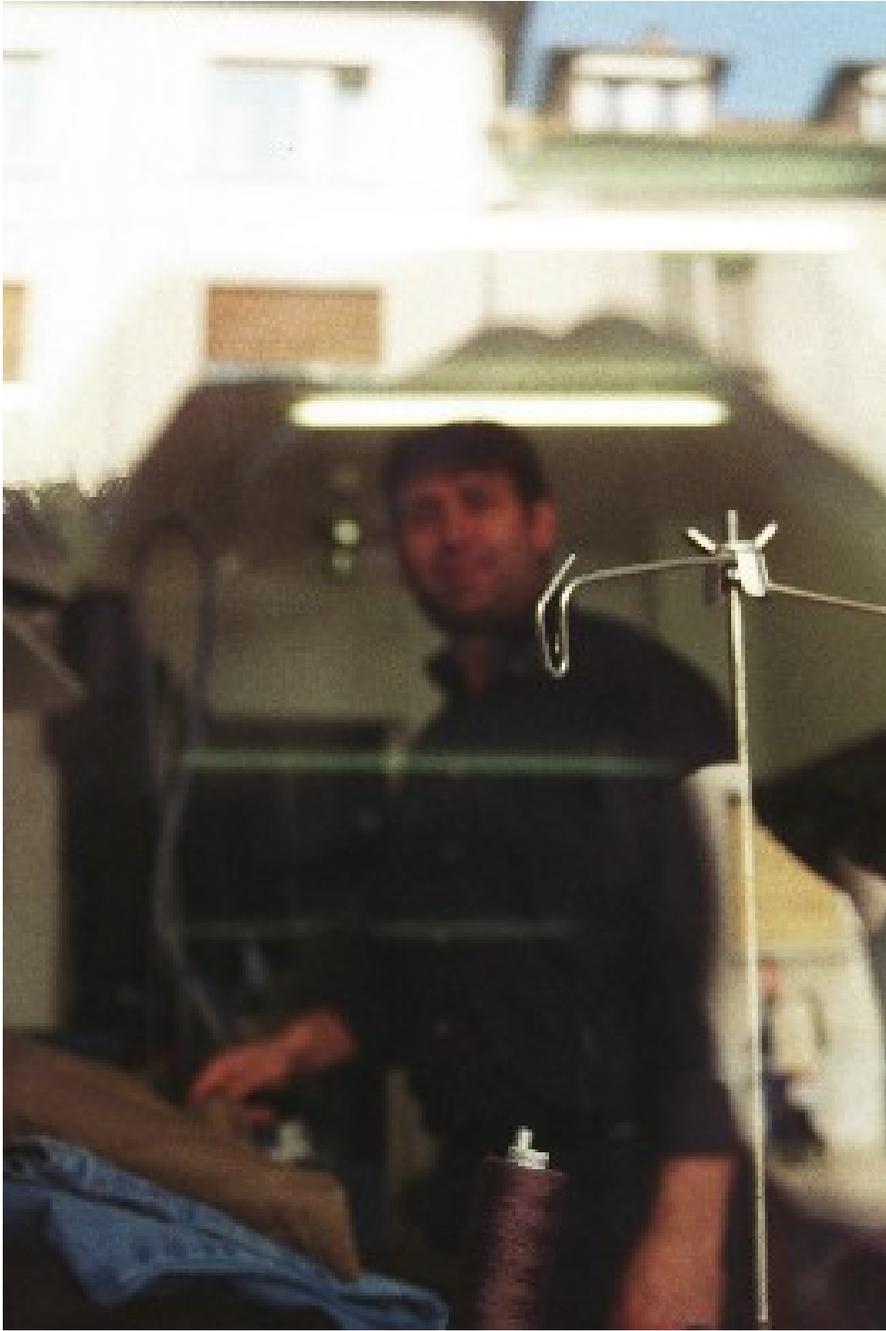
Athens, Greece



Sarajevo, Bosnia/Herzegovina



Konjic, Bosnia/Herzegovina



Darmstadt, Germany

References

Krase, Jerome & Tarry Hum. 2007. "Ethnic Crossroads: Toward a Theory of Immigrant Global Neighborhoods," Pp 97-119 in *Ethnic Landscapes in an Urban World*, edited by Ray Hutchinson & Jerome Krase. Elsevier/JAI Press.

Krase, Jerome & Timothy Shortell. 2009. "Visualizing Glocalization: Semiotics of Ethnic and Class Differences in Global Cities." Annual meeting of the Eastern Sociological Society. Baltimore.

Krase, Jerome & Timothy Shortell. 2011. "On the Spatial Semiotics of Vernacular Landscapes in Global Cities." *Visual Communication* 10(3): 371-404.

Shortell, Timothy & Jerome Krase. 2011. "Immigrant Islam: Politics of Representation and the Challenge of Seeing Collective Identity in Global Cities." 10th conference of the European Sociological Association. Geneva.

Shortell, Timothy & Jerome Krase. 2012. "On the Visual Semiotics of Collective Identity in Urban Vernacular Spaces." Pp in *Sociology of the Visual Sphere*, edited by Regev Nathansohn & Dennis Zuev. Routledge.