

Venice Biennale

from Church to Mosque (for just 230 days)



In the name of art a former beautiful Italian church with an icing sugar white baroque facade was converted into Venice city center's first mosque. The church of Santa Maria della Misericordia in Venice, stretches back to the 10th century, but the last mass was celebrated in 1967, since when, deconsecrated and in private hands, it has stood silent and unused., was transformed into a mosque as part of the Venice Biennale, the world's most high-profile showcase of contemporary art.

Designed by Swiss artist Christoph Büchel, Iceland's entry to the art exhibition, "The Mosque", seeks to promote dialogue and communion among cultures. Büchel is known for such projects, transforming art spaces and other public institutions with hyper-realistic, walk-in installations that skewer the hypocrisies and political contradictions of the art world and the world in general. He transformed the church visibly and boldly into a mosque, adorning its Baroque walls with Arabic script, covering the floor with a prayer rug angled toward Mecca and hiding centuries-old crucifix motifs behind a towering mihrab, or prayer niche.



On 9 May 2015, as the 56th Venice Biennale opened, Santa Maria della Misericordia became a religious and public space once more: reborn as a mosque, the first in the city's long history. Venetian Muslims, as well as Muslim visitors to the city, were able to walk to Friday prayers instead of taking an hour-long trip to the nearest mosque, in the industrial heartlands of the Veneto mainland.

One of the most controversial and highly anticipated national presentations at the biennale, the project was anchored in Venice's historic connections with the east. It was in this city, for example, that the first printed edition of the Qur'an was made in the 16th century; and the Fondaco dei Turchi, an elegant palazzo on the Grand Canal, was once the city's ghetto for Ottoman traders.

The project was an invitation to other people and cultures, to exchange positive ideas as a place of interfaith dialogue.