Vorarlberg state in western Austria is home to a thriving Muslim community that counts for 10% of the local population, constituting the second largest religious group after the Catholic faith. This Muslim community came to the industrialised state of Vorarlberg for a variety of reasons: in the 1960s, Turkish migrant workers being the predominant group; in the 1990s, Bosnian Muslims who sought refuge in Austria during the Yugoslav wars; and in the last two decades, immigrants from Chechnya, from various North African countries and from South-East Asia. In 2012, Austria celebrated the 100th jubilee who sought refuge in Austria during the Yugoslav wars; and in the last

The initial idea for an Islamic cemetery was born in autumn 2003, then followed by years of participatory discussions between Islamic communities and immigrant associations in Vorarlberg on the one hand and the Vorarlberg Association of Municipalities on the other (since cemeteries fall under the jurisdiction of local authorities), culminating in 2008 with the Association buying an 8500-square-metre plot of land that the municipality of Altach had voluntarily proposed for the construction of an Islamic cemetery. The site

Local architect Bernardo Bader was selected after an invited competition to design the building and the site. He was assisted by a community group knowledgeable about the construction of Islamic cemeteries, and by Vorarlberg imams on matters of ritual. Inspired by notions of the primordial garden, a lattice-like system of red concrete walls of varying heights and patterned by formwork delineates five distinct, staggered, grave fields oriented towards Mecca and a rectangular one-storey building in a simple but monumental design. The overall concept features an ingeniously laid out, open plan: towards the road, higher walls provide a feeling of enclosure; towards the mountains, walls are lower and embedded in the ground; everywhere, though, they are broken and interrupted, encouraging a continuous flow of space and dialogue with the surrounding landscape.

The tripartite division, visible on the monumentally “plain” entrance elevation of the Cemetery, gives little indication of the functional spaces within: in the “blind” entrance section, a top-lit mortuary and washroom for the dead and other less used service areas; a covered, half-open gathering area for larger numbers at the centre of the structure – signalled on the exterior by a wooden latticework screen of strong geometric patterns (an abstract reference to both Islamic design and traditional local woodcraft) – that leads directly onto an open patio connecting with the grave fields outside; and a prayer hall in the other “blind” end that has a large window on the short side facing Mecca. In the prayer hall, faced in white-stained wood, Azra Akšamija, a Bosnian-born Austrian Muslim architect and artist, working in close collaboration with Bader, designed the qibla wall of three stainless-steel mesh curtains that hang parallel at different distances to the end wall. Hung with an array of wooden shingles, placed more or less densely with some bearing Kufic calligraphic script that spell out the words “Allah” and “Mohammed”, these curtains act as screens breaking up the light in dramatic patterns while also referencing the wood shingle walls of local architectural tradition. Throughout, the work was executed by local craftsmen.

The subtle simplicity of the Cemetery’s design and its interaction with its natural surroundings provide a calm and dignified place for spiritual contemplation, burial and mourning. Architecturally, it offers a new, culturally sensitive aesthetic that is both Islamic and Alpine. This pioneering project has successfully responded to an immigrant community’s desire to find a final resting place in its adopted homeland, triggering interest in other Austrian states to create similar facilities.
JURY CITATION

The Islamic Cemetery, in its restrained and measured expression, belies a complex cultural negotiation. In the context of its host environment, it presents a symbolically charged site as a place of resolve. The project brought together a multi-faith, multi-ethnic group of actors to realise the wish of an immigrant community seeking to create a space that fulfils their spiritual aspirations and, at the same time, responds to the context of their adopted country with a culturally sensitive design and aesthetic.

Simple in expression and poetic in form, it not only engages the natural landscape in an intelligent manner but also suspends any notion of declaration. While emphasising spiritual pluralism, the Cemetery also provides the final destination for a minority group in a dominant society.
ISLAMIC CEMETERY
Altach, Austria

CLIENT
Municipality of Altach, Altach, Austria: Gottfried Brändle, Mayor of Altach, Austria

ARCHITECT
Bernardo Bader, Dornbirn, Austria

CONSULTANTS
Eva Grabherr, director of Okay.zusammen leben/Advice Centre for Immigration and Integration, Dornbirn, Austria
Vorarlberg Association of Municipalities, Dornbirn, Austria
Attila Dincer, leader of the initiatory group “Islamic Cemetery”, Dornbirn, Austria

ARTIST
Azra Akšamija, Boston, USA

STRUCTURAL ENGINEER
Merz Kley Partner ZT GmbH, Dornbirn, Austria: Gordian Kley, partner

SITE SUPERVISOR
Thomas Marte, Dornbirn, Austria

CRAFTSMEN
Association for the Preservation of the Bosnian Kilim, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina

PROJECT DATA
Site area: 8415 m²
Built area: 468 m²
Cost: 2,383,000 USD
Commission: June 2008
Design: January 2008–December 2011
Construction: March 2010–December 2011
Occupancy: December 2011

BERNARDO BADER
Bernardo Bader is an architect from Krumbach, the Austrian region of Bregenzerwald, currently with an office in Dornbirn, Austria. He studied architecture at the Innsbruck Technical University and, after receiving his engineering degree (Dipl. Ing.) in 2001, he founded his own architectural office. His work investigates how architecture can be embedded in regional building culture, based on local architectural grammar. His projects bear witness to the excellence of handcraft, deep attention to tectonic detail and sensitivity to the local context. Bader is a member of the Advisory Design Commissions as well as the Advisory Committee for Urban Contemplation in the Vorarlberg region. Since 2012, he has held a lecturing position at the University of Liechtenstein in Vaduz. He has received a number of prestigious awards, including the Weissenhof Architectural Furtherance Prize 2007 for young architects in Stuttgart, Germany, the Constructive – Liechtenstein Prize for sustainable building in 2011, the Piranesi Award 2013, and numerous local timber construction awards, as well as clients’ awards. His work was nominated for the DETAIL Prize 2012 and the Mies van der Rohe Award 2013.

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