



WWJMRD 2025; 11(09): 5-9
www.wwjmr.com
International Journal
Peer Reviewed Journal
Refereed Journal
Indexed Journal
Impact Factor SJIF 2017:
5.182 2018: 5.51, (ISI) 2020-
2021: 1.361
E-ISSN: 2454-6615

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The Influence of Ottoman and Islamic Architectural Heritage on Contemporary Urban Development in Istanbul, Turkey.

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Abstract

This research looks at the impact of Ottoman and Islamic architectural heritage on present-day urban development in Istanbul, Turkey. Istanbul, which is shaped by many centuries of Islamic and imperial rule, is built on a unique foundation where the permanence of history meets the temporality of modern development. This research assesses how contemporary architectural and urban projects have interpreted important aspects of heritage architecture including, but not limited to, domes, courtyards, and the integrated planning of a külliye (complex). The methodological approach undertaken here is qualitative involving case studies, policy analysis, and architectural evaluation methods of a selection of projects including mosques, public spaces, hospitals, and housing. The analysis identifies how heritage is selectively mobilized to serve political agendas, urban branding, and identity construction. Although the contemporary projects contribute to the cultural visibility of urban heritage, the projects are oftentimes ceremonial and symbolic in nature versus authentic, functional enactments of heritage. The research recognizes the need for heritage-informed, site-informed urban practices that acknowledge the philosophical and spatial logics of historical urbanism to ensure that Istanbul's architectural heritage is not only preserved as architectural forms but also in meaning and use.

Keywords: Ottoman Architecture, Islamic Urbanism, Contemporary Urban Development, Heritage and Identity, Istanbul City Planning.

1. Introduction

Istanbul, also formerly known as Byzantium and Constantinople, presents a fascinating connectivity point between Europe and Asia. Istanbul, as the capital of the Byzantine Empire, then the Ottoman Empire, has an amazing architectural legacy representing multiple religious, cultural, and political perspectives¹. The primary aim of this paper is to simply investigate the influence of Ottoman, and Islamic architecture, on modern-day urban development practices in Istanbul under the accelerated context of urban transformation and globalization during the past decades since the late 20th century.



Fig. 1: Istanbul in Ottoman Maps.

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The goal of this paper is to examine how much of the architecture, space, and concepts inherent to Ottoman-Islamic traditions remain in contemporary Istanbul in the planning and construction of new developments². The research will take place in the context of the discourse of heritage conservation, preservation of cultural continuities, and the socio-political-economic contexts of urbanism.

The study focuses on crucial case studies from Istanbul that exemplify the intersection of development and heritage in relation to projects conducted under large-scale urban transformation schemes. The crucial instances are the projects that took place during the time of the Justice and Development Party (AKP). It investigates municipal policies, architectural interventions and urban regeneration activities located within a municipal policy framework with respect to whether these policies align or differ from traditional Islamic and Ottoman practices. By assessing how contemporary Istanbul negotiates its architectural past in the context of current development threats, this article contributes to a body of work on heritage urbanism, cultural identity and ideas around space as political in the global South.

2. Background

Istanbul's urban and architectural character has been thoroughly informed by centuries of Ottoman, and more

broadly, Islamic history. Following the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the Ottomans turned the former Byzantine capital into an Islamic imperial capital; hence a shift not just from imperial capital to imperial capital, but a marked change of types of urbanism, architecture, and public space³. The construction of mosques, madrasas, caravanserais, hammams, and bazaars under the direction of Ottoman sultans from Mehmed II to Suleiman I, introduced Islamic urban and architectural forms, and allowed Islamic architectural grammar to be understood, not only in the ideological and symbolic landscape, but now also in the physical landscape of the urban space.

Ottoman architecture in Istanbul can be understood as having a dialect influenced by Persian, Byzantine, as well as a preceding Seljuk influence. Master architects with workshop assistants, such as Mimar Sinan, developed a canon that expressed dimensional sequence in parallel, spatial hierarchy, and axial symmetry of arrangement, with public life centralized around the religious complex (külliye)⁴. A külliye, which combined a mosque with social institutions, worked in two ways, providing a public and spiritual centre or institutional urban marker in the city helping to direct its layout and the life of the civic.

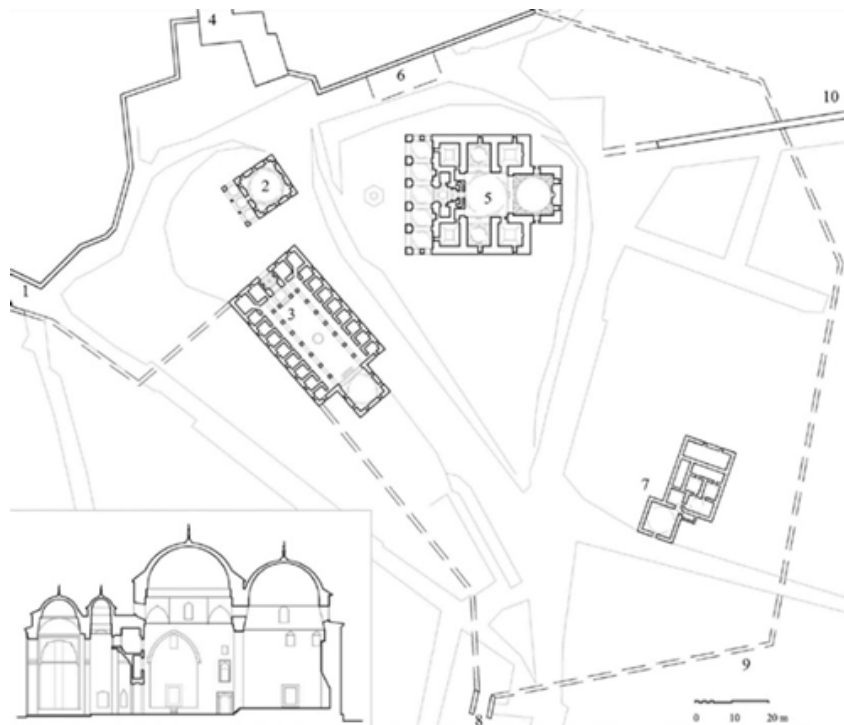


Fig. 2: Traditional Ottoman külliye

The Islamic philosophy that informed Ottoman cities emphasized harmony with the environment, human-scale, and integrated religious, residential, and commercial spaces. These ideas resulted in narrow streets that lacked direction, organic neighbourhood units (mahalles), and complex multi-functional public spaces to support social interaction⁵. The silhouette of the city of Istanbul was defined by domes and minarets that represented not only Islam's religious authority but the broad socio-political paradigm of the Ottoman elite.

The early 20th century modernization of Turkey particularly, the early Republican phase represented a

rupture in the continuity of architectural and urban traditions defined by Islamic principles. Republican urbanism, drawing from Western rationalist models embedded in a secular nationalist ideology, advocated for urbanism embodied as geographically linear, architecturally geometric housing at an industrial scale, and a visual disconnection from its Islamic heritage⁶. The shift was not merely an aesthetic detachment from the past but ideological, which collectively made explicit the intent to sever the new Turkish Republic from its Ottoman - Islamic past.

This disjunction persisted into the later part of the twentieth

century, although some vernacular architecture forms endured in remote locales and informal settlements. Since the 1980s, Istanbul has entered a period of swift globalization and neoliberal urban redevelopment, characterized by widespread real estate development, infrastructure enhancement, and gentrification⁷. In the process of those developments, Ottoman and Islamic styles have resurfaced in many interpretations, and have been filtered primarily through political, religious, and economic avenues.

The contemporary re-engagement with Ottoman-Islamic styles has thus developed in a rather convoluted space of identity politics, economic aspiration, and urban spectacle⁸. Thus, in order to think through, we must look critically at the history of all Ottoman and Islamic architecture in the current transitional moment in Istanbul by assembling the discontinuous continuity of histories and appropriation of heritage within current urban agendas.

3. Methods

A qualitative, interdisciplinary methodological approach to research is employed in this study, drawing from the fields of architectural analysis, urban studies and cultural heritage. Architectural plans, reports related to urban development, and visual information of selected case study sites in Istanbul have been used here. Secondary data includes peer-reviewed academic literature related to the topics explored, policy and planning documents, and planning regulations from Turkish municipal and national authorities. Analysis looks critically at comprehending spatial, aesthetic and symbolic continuities between traditional timeless classical Ottoman-Islamic architecture and modern built forms.

Case studies were selected for their visibility within present-day Istanbul and their explicit reference to some element of Ottoman or Islamic design. The analysis compares their contemporary interpretation of traditional architectural practice and considers whether they carefully reinterpret or are radical departures from traditional

architectural practice. The models selected demonstrate a range of approaches to designing spaces effectively for the contemporary experience of residents of Istanbul, at various scales like regional, site-specific spaces. The methodology is based on an interpretation of heritage urbanism and critical spatial theory, which furthers interest in responding to the ideological and socio-political meanings associated with the built forms and urban planning processes.

4. Case Studies

Istanbul has witnessed a number of well-publicized engagements with its Ottoman-Islamic architectural legacy in contemporary urban development over the past twenty years. This section presents three case studies that illustrate the contemporary use of Ottoman and Islamic motifs, Taksim Mosque, Başakşehir Çam and Sakura City Hospital, and Külliye-style public spaces in Başakşehir and Üsküdar. Each case depicts selective contemporizing of Ottoman and Islamic motifs for different political, social and spatial purposes.

4.1 Taksim Mosque

Taksim Mosque (2021) is a prominent and polarising case of the reassertion of Islamic signification in a secular urban context. Built in Taksim Square, a public space long associated with the secular modernist identity of the Republic, the mosque's western model includes key references to classical Ottoman architecture that includes a central dome, pencil minarets, ornate detailing, and so on⁹. While it can be argued that the mosque's aesthetic sensibility is contemporarily aligned with Ottoman models, many have critiqued its location and scale are politically symbolic rather than aesthetic considerations, especially given the mosque's proximity, and formal visual reference, to the Atatürk Cultural Centre¹⁰. Its construction was a spatial remapping of the square toward a more overtly Islamic-nationalist context and legitimizes the state's broader political objective to re-centre Islamic identity in urban Turkey's consciousness.



Fig. 3: Taksim Mosque.

4.2 Başakşehir Çam and Sakura City Hospital

Although it seemingly represents an institutional health care site, Başakşehir Çam and Sakura City Hospital has architectural features derived from Ottoman architecture

including domes, geometric tiles and landscaped courtyards. Opened in 2020, the complex represents a new trend toward monumental public multi-use institutions drawing on the model of the külliye, the Ottoman urbanistic

way of integrating mosques with educational, healthcare and charitable services¹¹. While the scale and complexity are representative of modern engineering and today's global and corporate public health systems, the incorporation of elements of Islamic architecture serves as a device of

cultural legitimacy and spatial identity. Through design, a meaningful connection of public health infrastructure with cultural heritage is established, even while it operates under a secular and technocratic framework.



Fig. 4: Başakşehir Çam and Sakura City Hospital.

4.3 Külliye-like Public Realm in Üsküdar and Başakşehir

The Külliye-inspired design has been revived by the transformation of Üsküdar Square and the development of urban centres in Başakşehir. Organized around central mosques, these public spaces have adjacent libraries, exhibition halls, family counselling centres, and open plazas. The integrative social vision of Ottoman urbanism is prominent in the spatial configuration, which sought to create self-sufficient neighbourhoods centred around religious and communal life¹². Historical külliyes were organically embedded within neighbourhoods, but these contemporary adaptations are well-planned and are often seen as cultural flagships for political messaging. Architectural vocabulary like domes, courtyards, arches, calligraphy, present at both sites, have been deployed to evoke tradition. On the other hand, the broader planning logic ensures a consolidation of the political and administrative control over urban space.

These case studies as a whole demonstrate how Ottoman-Islamic architectural characteristics are being activated within modern development as not only a vehicle for nostalgia but as tools to construct spatial identity, public memory, and political representation within the shifting spatial context of Istanbul.

5. Other Cases

In addition to the key flagship developments, the various developments across Istanbul illustrate how different developers have evoked Ottoman and Islamic architectural ideas. In residential architecture, especially in new suburban neighbourhoods like Kayaşehir and Bahçeşehir, developers are increasingly employing façade treatments. This feature pointed arches, ornamental tilework, and domed entrances to appeal to an expanding and conservative middle class¹³. These people are looking for an urban symbolic basis with which to construct cultural identities. Here, aesthetic performances can signify moral-religious values in an increasingly commercialized housing sector.

At the same time, urban complexes such as the Venezia Mega Outlet and Mall of Istanbul are also using pseudo-historic elements like colonnaded walkways, internal courtyards, and Islamic designs. However, these are not for utilitarian purposes but for branding, commercial aesthetic, and consumerism purposes. These developments indicate a movement away from utilitarian Ottoman urbanism to symbolic representation, often with the former social or spiritual meanings entirely stripped away.

Municipal programs to restore historic fountains, tombs and sebils (public water dispensers) also reflect an institutional interest in re-inserting Islamic (historical) elements into the urban fabric. However, these restorations, although visually important, are commonly criticized for lacking contextual consideration. They operate more as visual heritage elements rather than sites of urban continuity or community involvement.

6. Discussions

A complex intersection of cultural symbolism, political strategy, and spatial transformation is represented by the incorporation of Ottoman and Islamic architectural heritage into Istanbul's contemporary urban development¹⁴. Certain major projects bear successful references to historical forms that enhance public identity and spatial continuity. However, multiple adaptations merely serve as an instrument for expression of ideology, rather than as authentic extensions of heritage principles. There is a selective appropriation of Ottoman motifs, domes, arches, and tilework in general, which often privileges visual symbolism over functional or philosophical fidelity to historical urbanism.

A broader trend of heritage instrumentalization in urban governance is reflected by this phenomenon. Architecture has become a tool to reinforce national narratives, assert political dominance, and appeal to religious sensibilities. Critical questions regarding authenticity, inclusivity, and the role of memory in shaping urban futures is raised by such practices. This application of historical forms in isolated, monumental developments are often disconnected

from existing social and spatial networks. It undermines the traditional Ottoman urban planning, which was integrative and had a community-oriented logic associated with itself. The revival of Ottoman-Islamic elements have enriched Istanbul's visual and cultural landscapes, but there are risks of commodifying heritage and diluting the historical essence associated with the same.

7. Conclusion

The effect of Ottoman and Islamic architectural heritage is visible in public, residential, and commercial settings in Istanbul today. While these features can provide a sense of cultural continuity, their selective and symbolic use frequently fails to denote substantive incorporation into urban space and is ultimately more representative of political orientation. The challenge is to embrace heritage with development in a way that is inclusive and contextual through the planning process. Without this, these culturally rich architectural traditions could become mere aesthetics that mask their social, cultural, and functional meanings within Istanbul's reconstructed urban landscape.

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