

A Study of Ottoman Narratives on Architecture: Text, Context and Hermeneutics

By *Selen B. Morkoç*

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Ottoman architectural history has generally remained within the bounds of empirical scholarship, its monuments being the subject of description, formal analysis, and taxonomic studies. However, over the last decade or so, the number of interpretative studies has increased. As examples, one may refer to Gülru Necipoğlu's work on the life and work of Sinan,¹ or Shirine Hamadeh's publications on 18th-century architecture.² With the exception of Jale Erzen's work on the aesthetics of Ottoman art,³ these and other interpretative studies look to the patron as generator and consumer of meaning. A reception history about the experiences of the monuments' users (or even the architect's perception of his own creations) is still a major *lacuna*. It is this gap that Selen Morkoç attempts to fill, by conducting a hermeneutic analysis of several narratives: five 16th-century autobiographical treatises written by Mustafa Sa'i and Sinan, Cafer Efendi's early 17th-century *Risale-i Mimariyye*, and Dayezade's 18th-century *Selimiye Risalesi*.

In the Introduction, Morkoç justifies her selection of texts. Although historians have long perused Sinan's autobiographical memoirs (including the inventories of his buildings), she argues that they also have been "discounted as historical evidence due to their metaphoric expressions of so-called poetic clichés" (p. 4). Cafer Efendi's treatise presents the life and work of the chief imperial architect Sedefkar Mehmed, builder of the Sultanahmet Mosque, together with

an architectural glossary. (Sinan's building inventories and this glossary are not discussed since Morkoç focuses on the perception of architecture as expressed in "narrative"; however, as substantial and integral parts of the texts, these lists nevertheless would have deserved some discussion, given that they equally tell us about mentality.) The third text, the previously published Dayezade's *Selimiye Risalesi*, can be found in translation in the appendix.

"Part I: Ottoman Narratives on Architecture" introduces the Ottoman social and cultural context, as well as the literary genre of the biographical memoir (*tezkere*). Then, Morkoç describes the different narratives together with their authors and their specific historical contexts. (Her discussion of the 18th century would have profited from including more recent literature by Dana Sajdi and Shirine Hamadeh;⁴ as is, it perpetrates the decline paradigm that Ottomanists are working so hard to combat.)

"Part II: Approaches" aims to "identify assumptions inherent in the modern historiography of Ottoman architecture and the influences these assumptions have had on the evaluation of Ottoman narratives of architecture..." (p. 99). Morkoç discusses Sinan scholars in four different groups: Early Republican historians, very much influenced by nationalist ideology; historians who emphasize the rationality of Sinan's architecture; those wanting to secure him a place in world architecture; and scholars favoring interpretative approaches. Hav-

ing thus surveyed the scholarship and situated herself, the author situates her texts in respect to orality and literacy, authority/legitimation, and Ottoman literature and suggests a new theoretical framework: hermeneutics, as proposed by Hans-Georg Gadamer and elaborated by Lindsay Jones. Since an interpretation of architecture also includes the interpretation of the experience of architecture (as brought to paper with the narratives, as much as reception histories and early scholarship), the treatises present different ways in which contemporaries should experience the monuments—in Morkoç's words, they are "reception protocols" (p. 193).

"Part III: The Context: Interpreting Ottoman Narratives" peels away the different layers of meaning that the texts imposed on Ottoman architecture. For instance, in the texts the monuments were inextricably linked to the events, legends and rituals surrounding them. As examples, Morkoç mentions the gathering of marble columns for the Süleymaniye Mosque, Sinan's relationship to the Hagia Sophia, and the use of body and cosmological metaphors. A particularly valuable contribution is the section on "Spatial Sensibility." Based on the foregoing as well as the texts' structure, it posits that "Ottoman" narratives, like miniatures, render space in an inter-subjective relationship between the audience and the represented phenomena rather than in an object-subject distinction" (p. 266) and that "the experiential is prioritised over the abstracted" (p. 268). However, instead of concluding on this strong note, Morkoç at this point adds a discussion of the *Selimiye Risalesi*, thereby diffusing its impact.

In conclusion, the author reiterates that "a hermeneutical approach helps interpretation to be outlined freed from sepa-

rate categories of ideology and aesthetics, which are the prevalent interpretive strategies of architectural historiography" (p. 308). Indeed, her case studies convincingly advance this claim. However, given the disparate nature of the texts in terms of period as well as content—resulting in the need to jump back and forth not only between centuries, but also different bodies of scholarly literature (Sinan scholarship vs. 18th-century studies)—one wonders whether concentrating on one text might not have provided a sharper focus.

Another point of criticism one may raise is that, even though the foreword states that Morkoç revised every single sentence, many passages still very much resemble a dissertation, with long stretches of summaries of others' work. Here, the book could have gained much from an experienced editor. Moreover, for an architecture book, the figures in the middle of the volume are too small and of inadequate quality.

In spite of these shortcomings, Ottoman architectural historians may profit much from this book: it points to a fresh and promising direction of research and study—that is, the reception history of monuments. While there may not exist a large number of Ottoman narrative sources in addition to the ones already discussed here, even these may still yield more when approached from a different angle, and new ones may emerge from archives and manuscript libraries. Moreover, there is an abundance of poetry and architecture-related documents that at first sight do not lend themselves to a phenomenological study of architectural experience, but that will help us understand how Ottomans perceived their built environment, if we follow Morkoç's example.

Nina Ergin, Koç University

Endnotes

1. Gülru Necipoğlu-Kafadar, "The Süleymaniye Complex: An Interpretation," *Muqarnas* 3 (1985): 92-117; idem, *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

2. Shirineh Hamadeh, "Splash and Spectacle: The Obsession with Fountains in Eighteenth-Century Istanbul," *Muqarnas* 19 (2002): 123-148; idem, "Ottoman Expressions of Early Modernity and the 'Inevi-

table' Question of Westernization," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 63 (2004): 32-51; idem, *The City's Pleasures: Istanbul in the Eighteenth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).

3. See, for example, Jale Nejdert Erzen, "Aesthetics and Aisthesis in Ottoman Art and Architecture," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 2 (1991): 1-24.

4. Dana Sajdi (ed.), *Ottoman Tulips, Ottoman Coffee: Leisure and Lifestyle in the Eighteenth Century* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), especially 1-40. For Hamadeh, see note 3.

Streets of Memory: Landscape, Tolerance and National Identity in Istanbul

By Amy Mills

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Recent neoliberal/post-Kemalist shifts in Turkish culture and politics have ushered in, among other things, a rekindled interest in Istanbul's cosmopolitan past and in the remaining vestiges of its historical urban fabric. While an increasingly sophisticated culture industry is mobilized to recast the former as an object of nostalgia for popular consumption, gentrification projects are transforming the social landscape of historical neighborhoods in new and often controversial ways. Amy Mills's ethnographic study of Kuzguncuk offers a compelling account of these processes at work in a picturesque neighborhood on the Asian shores of the Bosphorus, widely accepted to be the paradigm of multi-ethnic coexistence, neighborliness and aesthetic charm in a city that has lost most of these qualities to republican urban/social modernization during the latter half of the 20th century. As Mills uncovers in six thematic chapters, this image of Kuzguncuk as the idealized *mahalle*—as the embodiment of belonging and familiarity as well as ethnic/religious

harmony and tolerance—in fact obscures deeper histories of discrimination, conflict and violence that went hand in hand with nationalism, "Turkification" and successive episodes of migration. "Nostalgia constitutes the flip side of silence", writes Mills (p. 210), and *Streets of Memory* makes a convincing case of how cosmopolitan nostalgia, along with its silences, ultimately bolsters the very same Turkish nationalist narrative that it claims to contest.

The first chapter opens with a historical overview of the shifts in Kuzguncuk's ethnic, religious, and class composition, especially the departure of non-Muslim residents in the aftermath of the "wealth tax" imposed on minorities in the 1940s and the pogroms of 1955, and coinciding with these, the arrival of Muslim-Turkish migrants from rural Anatolia. Chapter 2 addresses how these social fragmentations and painful memories are suppressed in the more recent "re-constructions" of an idealized Kuzguncuk, both in the popular media (as a stage-set for television series