

A Plan for Istanbul's Sultanahmet–Ayasofya Area

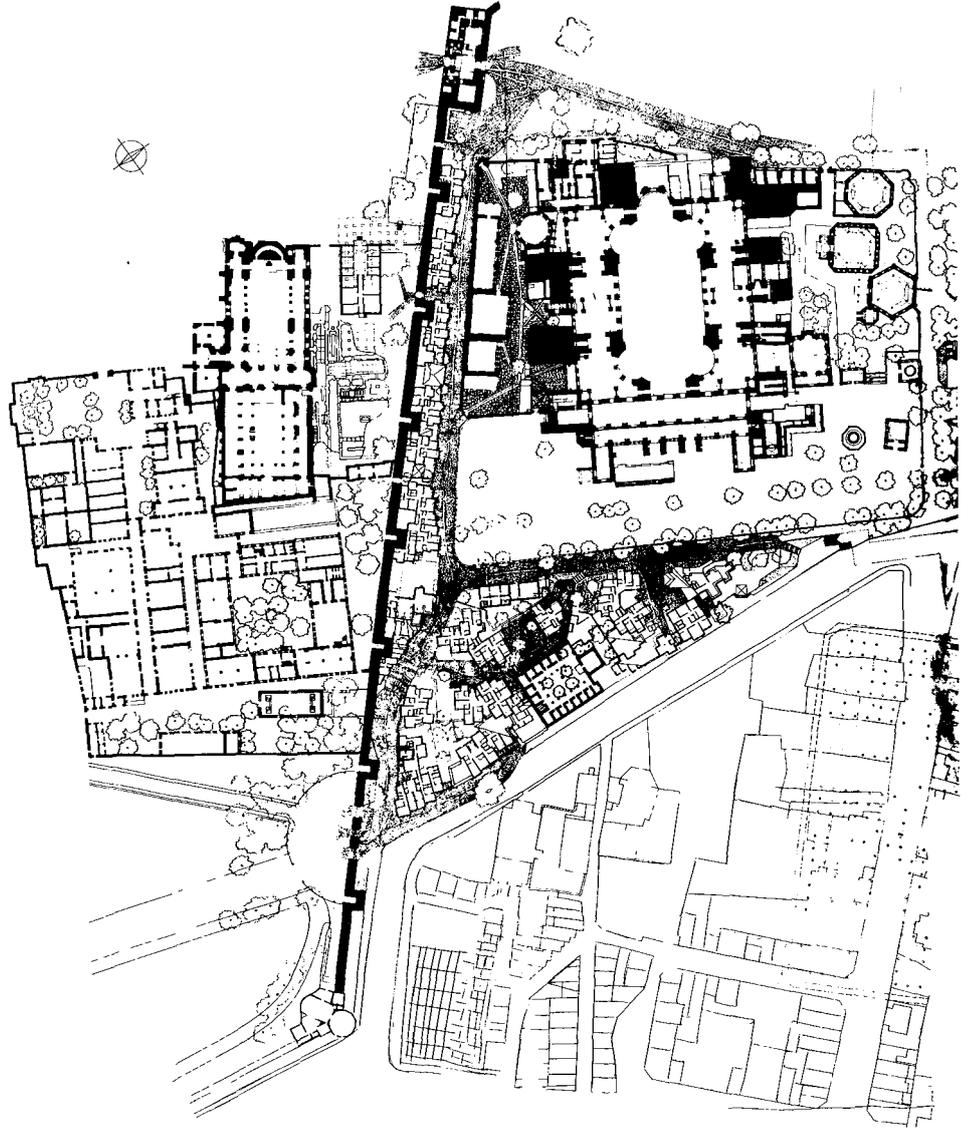
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The proposal to rehabilitate the old houses around Soğuk Çeşme Street and the Soğukkuyu madrasa in Istanbul by adapting them for tourist use was approved in principle by the Council of Monuments and Sites in 1977.¹ Rehabilitation solutions were required to be in harmony with the environment and to incorporate a series of careful decisions regarding every aspect of the scheme, from the characteristics of the buildings themselves to the anticipated transportation system. It was decided that the area would be restricted to public institutions; any property that was not already *vakf*-owned would be nationalized.

It was decided to keep the study rather broad before attempting to agree on specific physical solutions. This necessitated a comprehensive evaluation of the archeological, spatial and functional characteristics of the area, including a general survey and inventory of the buildings and their utilization, transportation and infrastructure systems and other connections with the rest of the city. This constituted the first phase of the study; the principles of future development could be determined from these data.

Along with the general study of Soğuk Çeşme Street and the area west of Sta. Sophia, including Soğukkuyu madrasa, other surveys providing more detailed information on historical, architectural and archeological data and on ownership and use were compiled. Both surveys were then analyzed to form the framework for the preservation and adaptive reuse solutions we hoped to develop. Clearly, the next step for both the Ministry and the University is to develop a more comprehensive programme in Istanbul, one that will include not only plans for construction and design but also models for operation and organization which allow a realistic implementation.

Soğuk Çeşme is a street completely isolated from the other residential areas of Istanbul. It is a poor area, crowded and overshadowed by warehouses and workshops. Its social structure has changed radically in recent years, though a few wooden houses still stand in defiance of encroaching industry. They constitute some of the few



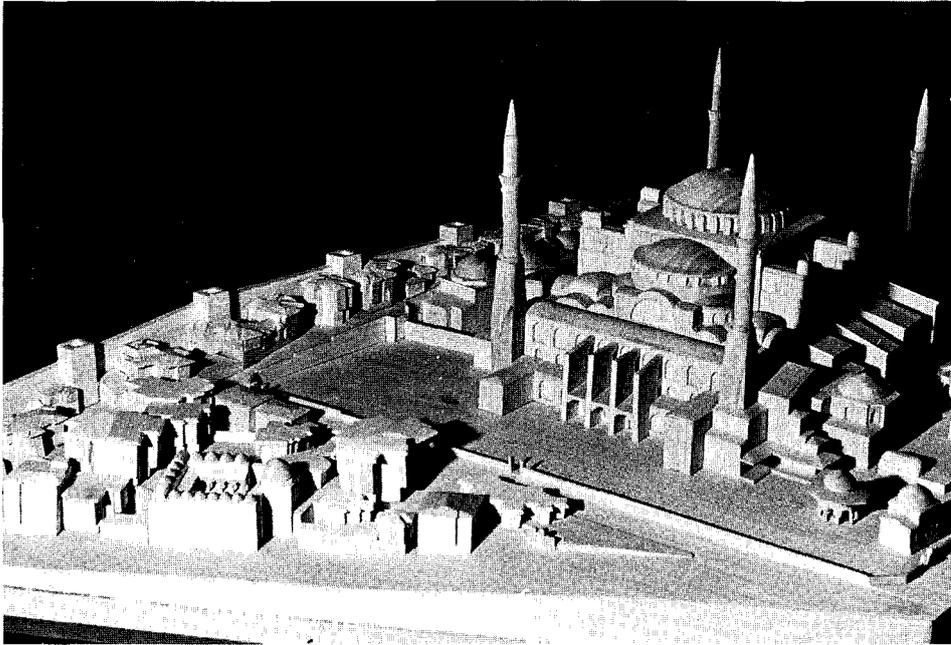
General layout of Sultanahmet–Ayasofya rehabilitation area

Plan: N. Eldem, et al

remaining examples of traditional domestic architecture in the city. Despite the ravages of time and industrialization, the unity of a typical Istanbul street may still be observed here.

Different cultures and civilizations come together in Sultanahmet. It has always been

an area where the most significant institutions, monuments and symbols were located. Soğuk Çeşme Street and the Soğuk Çeşme madrasa complex unite to form a small block within an area containing a considerable portion of Istanbul's historical and architectural heritage. The most significant



Volumetric study model of the site around Sta. Sophia

Photo Birol and Pehlivanoğlu, Fotoğraf Atölyesi

monumental buildings are all in this area: museums, palaces, temples, wells, the city walls—and the tourist traffic is heavy as a result. The street containing Soğukkuyu madrasa performs a similar function—all the buildings, aside from a few poor or unsuitable houses, have touristic appeal and provide tourist accommodations. Our conservation and development project plans to encourage these uses, while preserving the original architectural space.

Soğuk Çeşme Street is located between the Imperial Gate (Bab-ı Hümayun) and the Parade Pavilion (Alay Köşkü) where the Topkapı Palace walls follow a straight line. The houses form a single row of very narrow lots opposite the palace wall. The street looks like an open-ended passageway, with the houses forming one side and the high windowless wall of the Sta. Sophia public kitchen the other.

Since tourist accommodations constitute a nocturnal use for this neighbourhood, we must also provide a daytime use to en-

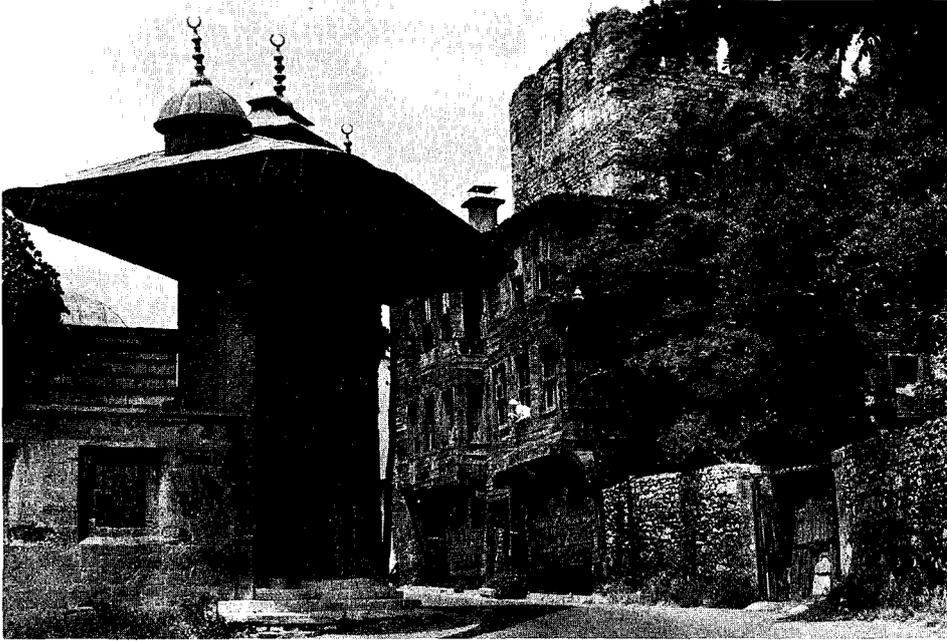
courage complete integration into the surroundings. The buildings of the Sta. Sophia complex that form the windowless side of the street and the spaces between them are in particular need of efficient reuse; the same can be said about the excavation area between Sta. Eirene and the palace walls. One possibility for adaptive reuse would be to employ the open space between Sta. Sophia and its buttresses, the public kitchen, the Baptistry, and other surrounding walls and buildings, as open and closed exhibition areas for modern art. This would serve to juxtapose the contemporary world with the Roman, Christian and Muslim worlds whose presence is so apparent in the architectural surroundings. The two handsome doors that connect these open spaces to Soğuk Çeşme Street would also acquire a suitable contemporary function: between these portals and in front of the blank wall that borders one side of the street, art shows could take place. A third door connects the proposed exhibition area to the garden of Sta. Sophia, which is now desolate and

empty. It could easily be turned into a beautiful garden arranged as an archeological park, and the portals, now closed, would be returned to their original function.

One characteristic of an old Istanbul street is still amply visible in the Sultanahmet area: while religious, cultural and public buildings were monuments of stone and lead symbolizing permanence and eternity, private houses were almost invariably small and wooden. In the renovation project, care must be taken to maintain this relative scale. While some unsafe buildings should indeed be cleared from the area, additions to the remaining old buildings must be few. Renovations should be limited to those necessary for turning these old wooden houses into accommodations suitable for tourists. Special common spaces that are less visible from the street will be created on some of the suitable lower floors and in the old cisterns. Only minimal new construction is planned.

The madrasa complex will be adapted into a hostel. A feeling of open space will be formed by small plazas between the building blocks, repeating the pattern of the inner court. The units will be designed to give the feeling of a private house, with enclosed and inward-looking ground floors, and living areas around small courtyards oriented away from the street. In this way, cultural and environmental continuity can be established in the new conservation project. Functional suitability, rather than direct stylistic imitation, is to be stressed in any new construction.

Integration of the proposed Sultanahmet rehabilitation with the planimetric characteristics of the existing environmental patterns is imperative. The problem is to organize this important historical area using an approach that is realistic and not speculative. We believe that the creation of a livable environment and the preservation of cultural and historical values are not contradictory or mutually exclusive demands. On the contrary, they are both prerequisites to making a city meaningful, and the importance of both is sufficient impetus for our efforts at Sultanahmet.

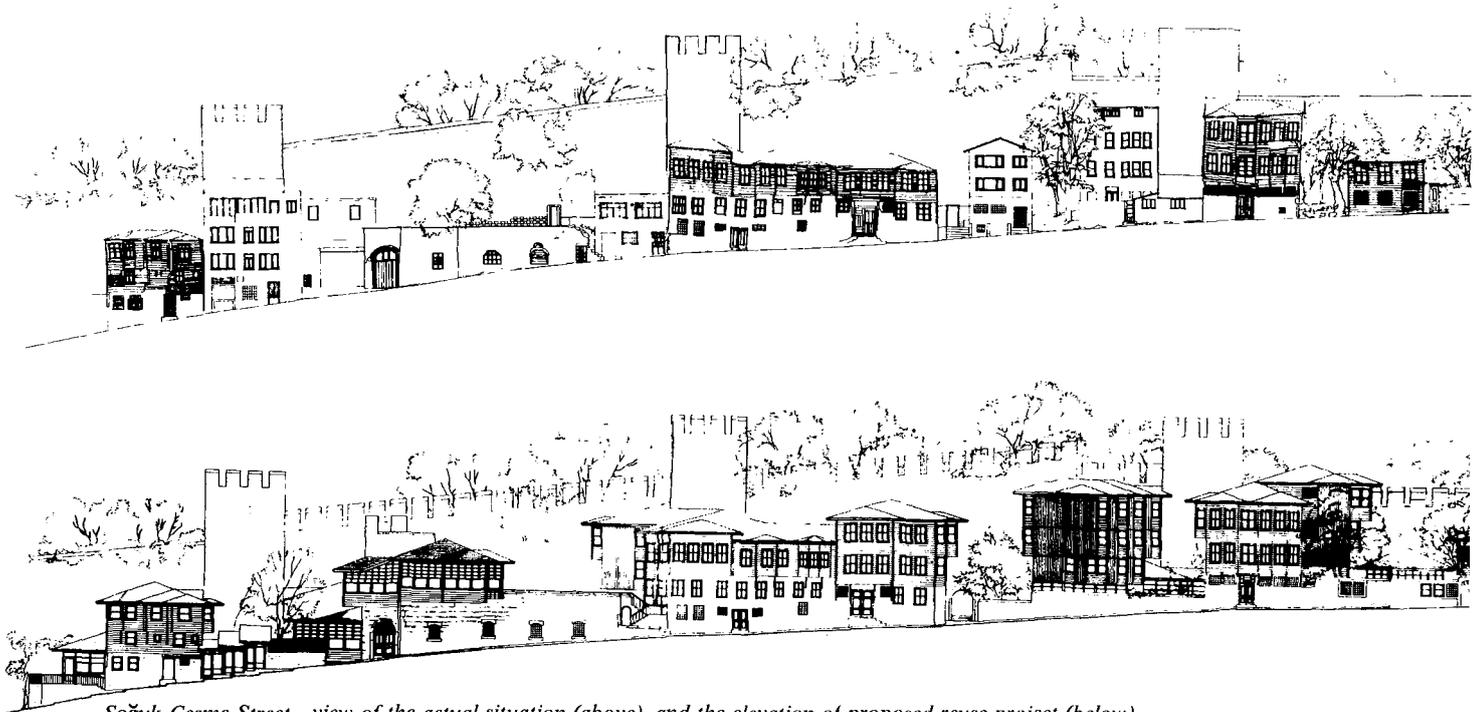


Entrance to Soğuk Çeşme Street, with a gate to the Ayasofya complex

Photo: N Eldem, et al

Reference Note

¹ The study presented here was initiated by the Istanbul Technical University's Faculty of Architecture and sponsored by the Ministry of Tourism and Information. The Ministry directed the University to develop conservation and rehabilitation plans for the Sultanahmet Plaza and Soğuk Çeşme Street. The idea of rehabilitating this historic area, by giving it new functions related to the tourist industry and to other cultural activities appropriate to its importance, has long been a project encouraged by the Ministry. The ITU faculty working on the project have been involved for several years in similar projects aimed at retaining the area's historical and architectural unity. With the aid of architectural design students, ideas are being transformed into practice using the accumulated data and experience gained from these earlier projects. The University received the Sultanahmet commission from the Ministry in 1977.



Soğuk Çeşme Street—view of the actual situation (above), and the elevation of proposed reuse project (below)

Drawing by N Eldem, et al

