As the great master of major monuments of the 16th-century Ottoman Empire, responsible for public works for 50 years, designer, engineer of bridges and of a vast system of water supply for Istanbul, architect without rival in Turkish history, Sinan had a conscious approach to city planning. Can we find any indications of thoughts of larger space organization than his architectural compositions offer? It is difficult to discern systematic approach to city design in Sinan’s time, if we understand the term in its current sense. But should we assume that the city of Istanbul developed for about five centuries without an inherent mechanism which helped her to survive? What kind of mechanism guided, consciously or unconsciously, the growth of a city pattern? If such a mechanism ever existed, do Sinan’s buildings reveal its nature?

As far as written documents are concerned we cannot say that there are any specific allusions to the shaping of the city, or part of it, above architectural scale. Sinan is singularly silent about his art. The so-called “Monographs” do not expose his ideas and his genius, but simply enumerate his buildings and relate his life story. Unless we find other documents we can only say that he was interested in doing, rather than thinking about his doing.

On the other hand it is evident that his buildings reveal certain urban concepts by their placement, by their functional distribution in the city, by their relative massing and their specific role in the cityscape, and by their function in patterning of the city structure. The planned city does not belong to any one culture. And on whatever historical perspective we would place 16th-century Ottoman culture, be it Central Asian, Islamic, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, all these backgrounds have in their tradition the idea of regular city pattern. Yet, the immediate predecessors of the Ottoman city, the medieval Islamic and Byzantine cities, seem to have forgotten or superseded these phases. Neither in the time of Sinan, which is the most glorious period of Ottoman history, nor afterwards, do we see planning efforts in Istanbul comparable to those of the early Baghdad of Abbasids or to the cities of Renaissance Europe. We have to forget the planned city.

Before analyzing Sinan’s time we have to recall fifteenth-century Istanbul. The last decades of the Byzantine capital and the early development of the city after 1453 have been well recorded in documents and personal memoirs. The Spanish ambassador to Timur’s court in Central Asia, Clavijo, who saw Constantinople in 1403, says that the space within the walls consisted of a number of hamlets separated by orchards and fields. Palaces and churches were in ruins. Only the quarters on the coast had a certain density of population. The capital of the Eastern Roman Empire was reduced to a ruined city of less than 50,000 souls before the Turkish conquest.

Immediately after the conquest, old monasteries and habitable buildings were given to the newcomers. A mixed population from various parts of the Empire were settled in Istanbul. Hagia Sophia was converted into a mosque. The city walls were repaired. A new castle was built against the western Imperial gate. A palace was built near or on the Forum Tauri. And a second palace was started on the promontory dominating the entrance of the Golden Horn over the site of the first Greek city. During the reign of Mehmet II the number of public constructions reached 300; the capital’s population at the end of his reign was about 120,000. The most important and symbolic urban act was the foundation of Mehmet’s mosque and tomb over the destroyed church of the Holy Apostles where originally the martyrdom of Constantine was. The great Turkish-Muslim feature of the new capital was the implantation of the conquerors’ signature on the image of the city. The major element in the Istanbul landscape, bringing a different sense of urban organization, was the series of the great imperial mosque complexes which shaped the form of the Turkish Istanbul.

At the end of the 15th century the German traveller Arnold von Harff found Istanbul a grand city of 200,000 people. A large part of this population was settled around the coastline looking the Golden Horn and surrounding the new monumental axis of the city. Beyazit II built his mosque near his palace on the old Forum Tauri. Thus before the age of Sinan and Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent the functional division of the city was already laid out and the base lines for its visual development partly shaped around the great socio-religious complexes.

The image of the city before Sinan’s great works is best conveyed by the famous miniature plan by the painter Nasuh (called al-Matraki), dated 1532. It is a clear statement of an urban concept of his time. Here the city is not conceived as a mesh of streets and squares. It is directionless. Only prominent
buildings and complexes are represented within partly comprehensible spatial relationships. The basic unifying element of Istanbul is a socio-religious complex the külliye. It is the focus of social life and backbone of the city pattern. It may be taken as a basic explanatory tool for the analysis of the Turkish capital. The monument presented here is the Süleymaniye. The famous traveller of the 17th century Evliya Çelebi describes it as follows: ‘Süleyman Han built the Mosque of Süleymaniye and its dependencies with the war booty of Beograd, the Islands of Malta and Rhodes. ‘He built over a hilltop looking to the sea a peerless mosque. From all over the empire thousands of architects, builders, stonecutters, workers were collected. ‘The mosque is surrounded by an outer courtyard as large as two race corses. Tall plane trees, cypresses, and linden trees decorate the courtyard surrounded by walls pierced with windows. All the people who come to prayer can see the palaces: Üsküdar on the Anatolian side, the castles and many sites on the Bosphorus and the Golden Horn. It is a courtyard to watch the world. ‘On the left and right of the mosque there are four great madrasas for four different rites which are full of scholars, and students. Then there is a school of hadis, a school of kuran, a school of medicine, a school for young children, a hospital, a public kitchen, a hospice, a caravanserail for the visitors, a palace for the commander of the janissaries, markets for jewelers, metal workers, and shoemakers, a well illuminated bath and buildings for the employees of the complex. Around the mosque a thousand(!) domes can be counted. When seen from Galata the whole is like a complex of gigantic blue shapes. Three thousand employees serve this complex. And all the incomes of the Mediterranean islands, including Rhodes and Chios, are endowed for the upkepp of it. All knowledgeable people, engineers and architects of the world agree that there is no stronger building in the world’. Though not especially talented when Çelebi speaks about architecture, one can catch from his description the prominent role this
complex played in the life of the capital city.
Until Sinan, the great complexes of Istanbul did not include in their architectural organization a commercial component. Although both the mosque of Mehmed II and that of Beyazit II had bazaars in the vicinity, a commercial function was not part of their architectural design. In the Süleymaniye Sinan included a line of shops in the plan as an extention of the nearby market area. By adding this final activity he emphasized the all embracing nature of this foundation, which became a common feature afterwards for even lesser buildings.
As an institution, the Süleymaniye practically corresponded to all the basic functions of society: daily prayer, education, health, social aid, social gathering and commerce — a complete social organization. The symbolic “charge” of such a complex is extremely high. It has always been a symbol of the might of the Ottoman empire as well as a symbol of Turkish culture.
A work of such breadth of scope usually was the major concern of the sultan and the state. It was even more important than a holy war, the main preoccupation of that time. We have to remember that the work force constituted by free workers, young novices recruited for the janissary corps and slaves averaged 1,400,000 workdays between 1550 and 1557. As mentioned above, the complex was served by 3,000 men and it served the Empire as an educational center. Süleyman and his wife had their mausolea in its precinct. The memory of Süleyman the Lawgiver survives today in the majestic silhouette of the Süleymaniye, more than in any other image or document.
When formally analyzed there are some striking characteristics in the Süleymanye. It does not occupy a central point in the city and it is off the main throughfares. But it magnanimously creates its own centrality. Like the mosque of the Conqueror, it does not follow a natural line of urban growth. It cuts its share out of it and dictates a direction. The site was selected in the precinct of the old palace which was still in use. Thus the palace was partly destroyed and reduced by the Sultan’s orders. The development of the palace of Topkapi during the reign of Süleyman and his successors, again by
Sinan's hand, must be the result of this reduction. The act of partial destruction of the first imperial palace for the construction of the mosque needed, obviously, the Sultan's approval. To understand this rather radical decision we should examine the likely reasons behind it.

Evliya relates that in the time of Süleyman the Magnificent the walls and gates of the old palace were rebuilt. This must have happened after the partial demolition of the palace and appropriation of the space thus obtained for the new complex. Two arguments may be forwarded about the original choice of this site. One is the suggestion of the architect; the other the desire of the Sultan. It is difficult to think that Sinan, although Chief Architect, would dare to demand the demolition of some part of the Sultan's palace for the mosque. It is probable that this part of the palace overlooking the Golden Horn was then only a garden. But for a building complex the site was too steep and uneven: great foundation works were needed. The choice of the site therefore cannot easily be attributed to Sinan.

A more acceptable hypothesis is that the Sultan wished his mosque close to the palace. We know that at that period the main palace was still the old one; the development of the Topkapi Palace took place in the reign of Murad III. We do not have any written document to confirm this argument, but the combination of the palace with the main mosque is an old Islamic tradition. It is improbable that the only reason for the selection of this site was its future possibility of silhouette. It is also interesting that only seven years before the beginning of the construction of Süleymaniye, one of the best possible sites for a large complex was assigned to the mosque of his son, Sehzade Mehmet, which was built in 1543-47. It is difficult to imagine after a reign of more than twenty years (Mehmet was enthroned in 1520), the Sultan did not consider the construction of his mosque the most symbolic act of a great sovereign. All his predecessors had built their own great mosques. Thus the selection of the site of Süleymaniye was already decided before the erection of the complex of Sehzade, Sinan's first grand complex.

The construction of the complex of Sultan Beyazit II also underlines the hypothesis that
he too built his mosque adjacent to the palace. Beyazit's son Selim I did not have time to build his mosque in his short reign full of wars. It was built by his son Süleyman, far from the center of the city. The most plausible hypothesis for the siting of the Süleymaniye is the traditional Islamic relationship between the palace rulers and the main mosque. This was not the case with the Conqueror. Here we find an obviously symbolic act. Mahmet II always considered himself as the successor of Caesars, but his pious son Beyazit II did not. He could reassert the Islamic tradition, and Süleyman, his grandson, followed his example. It was Sinan's genius however which masterfully organized the space on the uneven area towards the Golden Horn. His buildings imposed their form on the city.

This planning of an imposition of a new set of functional and visual values on the city is not felt when we come down to the street. Although overwhelming the silhouette of the city, the Süleymaniye is not even seen from the neighboring streets. No street around the complex gives even a partial vista of the great monument. No street was specifically opened or directed towards this central feature, the mosque. No axis was created. This is another characteristic of the design of Süleymaniye, of all complexes of the Ottoman period. When we compare this with examples from the Renaissance and Baroque periods, or with Shah Abbas's Isfahan, the introverted concept of Ottoman design is striking.

The large complex is not an organic extension of the city, it is a semi-detached area. This approach to design is the basis of the originality of Istanbul's urban fabric. If we observe an old plan of the city, Istanbul seems to be a web of irregular veins and self-centered nodes of different sizes. Most of these nodes (several hundreds) are single mosques often linked to a fountain, a Koran school, and perhaps a small garden-like graveyard. The small nodes are the masjid of the quarters (a sort of parochia, but not charged with similar ecclesiastical connotations). Then there are larger nodes which serve bigger areas and consist of a mosque, a madrasa, a school, the tomb of the founder perhaps, a fountain and a sabil, sometimes also a hammam. On a much larger scale the
great imperial complexes serve the entire city, even the Empire. Overwhelming in size, they dominate the urban landscape. In the hierarchical structure of the city silhouette they even dominate the Sultan's palace. And they occupy the prominent points of the peninsula. Thus this familiar plan of Istanbul is like a nerve system with nodal points which constitute the functional "nerve centers" of the city in closed, self-centred entities. Süleymaniye is surrounded by madrasa, schools, a hospice, hospital, caravanserai, bath and shops. But even these secondary elements do not have welcoming, inviting façades or entrances toward the surrounding quarters. They encircle the mosque and they face it. From one of the side streets we enter first a circumambulating inner street surrounded on its outer side by the buildings of the complex. The mosque has an outer precinct, a garden, as a matter of fact. We pass another boundary to reach the outer courtyard. The unfolding of the monumental focus inside these concentric boundaries creates a tension of expectations which culminates when we enter the mosque itself. This may be called the "sequential revelation" of architecture through an urban experience because the surrounding street pattern does not reveal but screens the whole: it is not part of it but adjacent to it. There is no conceived physical continuity between the Süleymaniye and its surroundings. The basic structure of the town is constituted by similar nuclei. The urban fabric remains the same although continuously changing in details: a formless background on which these structures are superimposed. This approach may change from place to place depending on the site.

If we seek in Sinan the qualities and relationships that existed in Western traditions we will not find them: this is not the concept of a city in Muslim realms. The texture is anonymous. It is the people, the community of believers and the community of subjects that form, though none of them is strong enough to impose a structure on the overall texture of the city. Even the sultan cannot change this pattern. But each component, whether it is the palace, the market, the han, the caravanserai, a small mosque or larger complexes, may carve out a place for itself. The amorphous city texture is flexible enough to accommodate these components without changing its character. Each large building is like a large stone placed in a pool; the water immediately surrounds it. No formal criticism based on Western concepts is possible.

Neither Sinan nor any other Ottoman architect imposed on urban form. Though architecture is the essence of Istanbul's form there is no such thing as urbanism. Today it is fashionable to speak of Islamic city planning: Western cliché imposed on the Muslim élite who consider the Ummayad qasrs as cities, which they are not. Only Baghdad can perhaps be called such. Neither should the grandiose palatial schemes of Samarra be considered as cities; they are gigantic architectural complexes. City planning in Antiquity, Eastern or Western, is an enlargement of architecture for several thousand people; these centers were engulfed when the real cities with larger populations developed in the Middle Ages. The Renaissance city, whether on paper or actually built, was extremely limited in size, and was nothing but an expression of nostalgia for the Antique city which never returned. Renaissance and Baroque city planning imposes geometrical schemes on medieval cities, or royal residences.

Seen from this perspective, the only difference between Istanbul in the 16th century and Rome, is that the Turks did not have a cultural nostalgia for Antiquity. So the Sultan did not create grandiose axes like Renaissance princes, popes and later European kings.

It is only by an intellectual tour de force, and by transferring present concepts to the past that we can superficially call part of those architectural concepts urbanism. Vitruvius does not write about urban patterns, he only tells us about architecture. The ancients spoke about the city as a social and political unit, as does Plato. Muslims, like Ibn Haldun, do speak of the city in the same way, but not as a physical concept. As Lewis Mumford put it long ago, "If one uses the term precisely, there is no Renaissance city. But there are patches of Renaissance order, openings and clarifications, that beautifully modify the structure of the medieval city." If we follow his argument we see that all the new elements are architectural in scale. Only the straight street and piazza connected with it is a proper urban pattern. But the terminology is architectural; straight lines did not exist in Istanbul.

Thus if we accept that the Turk of the 16th century conceived the city only in architectural terms, what we can expect from Sinan is architectural composition and use of the site in a city's topographical structure. Sinan
was a master of the architectural use of terrain, which in Istanbul is particularly challenging and calls for ingenious solutions. In the 16th century around the monuments such as these and palaces of grandees and large commercial buildings, some of them still in timber, residential areas were constituted by small houses of no more than two stories. Only the palaces were higher and surrounded by gardens and walls. Houses were constructed with stone and wood, quite similar to what we find in many parts of Anatolia today. According to contemporary travellers, they were painted in bright shades of red, yellow and blue.

There is an overwhelming dimensional differentiation between the permanent complex of Süleyman, and tiny, coloured dwellings of his subjects. Even his palaces were not considered symbols of eternal significance; they were but a richer example of common dwellings.

Sixteenth-century Istanbul was a molecular structure, in which small, medium sized and larger functional nodules were independently conceived: their relationship was sequential in character. Developed under various organic constraints, and in the case of large complexes, following perhaps the visions of grandeur and power of their makers, they were not conceived according to some ruling principle of organization of urban space. This “molecularization” results from the socio-political structure of that society. The townsmen of Istanbul had barely any allegiance to the city. The ruling class, formed from the ranks of the Sultan’s former slaves, was not rooted in the city, especially in the 15th and 16th centuries. It was not their homeland nor did they have any long-standing family traditions there. Possibly no vizier or grandvizier had any single memory of childhood in the city. The lower classes had their allegiances to their kinsmen, to their sects, at the most a certain community spirit in their quarters. There is no concept or physical image of a city without a ruling-class consciousness of it.

These characteristics have their impact on the shaping of urban texture and space. Other than within the great mosque compounds or in the interior of covered markets or in the courtyards of great city hans and caravanserais, open, organized urban space did not exist in Istanbul. The only exception was Atmeydanı, the old Hippodrome of Septimus Severus.

Urban perspective, design of urban space, as it is understood in the West, is not found in Istanbul. It is replaced by functional urban enclaves in which all the architectural paraphernalia of urban space is contained closed to the outside. Passing along insignificant paths between houses and walls we suddenly discover, with a certain awe, the monumental form and enclosed monumental space.

Modern urban planning imposes upon us categories of thought concerning the city which, perhaps, never existed in the past. The city as a social, economical and political phenomenon is often confused in its globalization, with the physical city. But the city’s physical aspect is architectural; its primary models were enlarged architecture; and probably should and will remain so.

Dogan Kuban

---