When the works of Sinan are evaluated, they generally are considered as single buildings: such as mosques of Selimiye, Suleymaniye, Kilic Ali Pasa, Sokollu Mehmet Pasa and so on. But these works belong to a whole in which many different buildings together create a complex which is called a külliye. These complexes are a combination of different buildings: cami (mosque), medrese (schools and colleges), tabhane (guesthouse), bimarhane (hospital), han (shops), hamam (bath) and türbe (tomb). These complexes, created by various combinations of buildings with different functions define the important centres — the focal points — of the city, which are places of cultural, religious, commercial, and educational activities. In short they are the social centres of the city.

To research into Sinan’s methodology in designing his urban spaces, it is useful to refer to the well known contemporary Japans architect Fumuhiki Maki’s explanation. Maki calls this kind of agglomeration of buildings “Collective Form”; in the structure of a city three types of collective forms can be observed: 1) Compositional Form; 2) Megastucture Form; 3) Group Form.

Sinan’s complexes can be placed in the first and second categories.

When an aerial photograph of the Suleymaniye complex (1150-57) is examined its characteristic features can be observed. There are two different orders in the city fabric; one is the existing city pattern which has been formed in a free and organic way, and the other is the complex of Sinan which is designed on a right angled rational-geometric pattern. These two different and contrasting patterns hit the eye immediately. Sinan did not follow the organic and free pattern of the city but introduced a new rational-geometric one. This sharp contrast can be seen also in the form, scale, material of his “foreground” buildings.

The most important building in the complex is the mosque. All the mosques of Islam have a main axis directed toward Mecca. This is a strict principle. Le Corbusier comments on this phenomena, “Istanbul: The fervour of minarets, the calm of flattened domes. Allah watching over all, but orientally immutable.” Therefore the mosque takes its direction according to this rule and the other buildings follow the same orientation.

In the Suleymaniye complex, Sinan wanted to create a straightforward, geometric rectangular square surrounded by the other buildings and he placed the mosque right in the centre.

In terms of urban space it seems that the buildings of the complex have two main functions: 1) To determine a huge private garden where the mosque — as an aesthetic object stands; 2) To protect the mosque from the rest of the city.

In addition the mosque also has its own gardenwall. The sense of protection is obvious.

Sinan designed several complexes like this. Sometimes all the buildings of the complex are separated, (e.g. Istanbul, Kilic Ahmet Pasa complex, 1580) and sometimes in one complex some of the buildings are separate and some are attached to each other (e.g. Istanbul, Suleymaniye 1557).

In other works of Sinan, such as in the Luleburgaz Sokollu Mehmet Pasha complex (1564) a quite different attitude can be observed. Here all the buildings of the complex — mosque, caravanseray, shops, colleges, etc., are not independent, separate buildings; but tied to each other, heterogenous organic entity: together they create a mat laid on the earth.

This kind of building complex has been defined by Alison Smithson as “mat building”.

Here again the Mecca axis is essential; becomes the symmetrical axis of the whole system.

The complex is horizontally spread like a huge integrated system. In this large “mat building” various functions are blended. According to Reyner Banham’s definition this complex shows the characteristics of a of low-rise megastructure: a big building which includes many different functions in it can be called a megastructure.

In a complex it is impossible to determine where one building ends and another begins. They are all part of the complex.

Even today, many university campus designs display this kind of design principle. This complex of Sinan grows not vertically but horizontally as a “mat-building” and includes various and heterogenous functions such as the mosque, colleges, caravansary, shops and public baths: it is a megastructure. Some other complexes of Sinan such as the Zal Mahmut Pasha complex in Eyüp, Istanbul (1580) and the Selim II complex in Payas (1574) are typical examples of this kind of typology.

In the complex of Pertev Pasha (1579) in Izmit, Sinan has introduced a different concept in urban design method. In this complex all the buildings — the mosque, caravansarai,
shops, public baths, and school are individual buildings that is to say independent of each other. Every building has its own direction and their disposition is decided rather free as a conglomeration of buildings. The complex of Semsi Ahmet Pasha (1580) in Üsküdar, Istanbul exhibits different features of the composition concept of Sinan. This complex is located on the seacoast — the lowest point in the city. The complex includes a mosque, a school (medrese) and a tomb (türkė). A small complex with a few kinds of buildings.

But the college is not parallel to the mosque, its plan is not typical. The L-shape of walls does not follow the mosque but the shore line. Sinan during his last years took into account the characteristics of the environment, and introduced a functionalist approach instead of a predetermined, right-angled formalist one. He knew the concept of “genius loci”.

A well known contemporary building designed along this same principle is Johann Otto Spreckelson’s “Arch of Humanity” at La Defense in Paris.

Spreckelson did not locate his building, which is a hollow rational-geometric cube, parallel to the existing order of La Defense; but turned it slightly in order to alleviate the rigid geometric order of the existing man-made environment.

In the context of the city macroform, Sinan located some of his works at the top of hills, the natural dominating elements of the city, and others even on the seacoast. That means he did not have a strict preconceived idea about selecting a site. But when he located his buildings on a particular site, he was highly conscious of its characteristics.

In Edirne, (1569-71) complex, he located the Selimiye on the top of a gently sloped hill, in the heart of the city, so that it could be seen from every angle of the city as an esthetical object. He also put four minarets very close to the main body, thus creating a conceptual space and unity. Bruno Taut explains that Sinan wanted to create a “crown” of the main body and four minarets — a unity — and he aimed to decorate the city with that monumental crown.
The same concept can be seen in the Süleymaniye Mosque. (1550-57) Sinan selected as a site one of the hills overlooking the Golden Horn; the mosque sits there grand and dominating: another crown for Istanbul: raising its head majestically symbolizing the greatness of Süleyman the Magnificent. Over the city silhouette the mosque and its complex rest very successfully. The building rises from the ground in a gentle sloped pyramidal form, at the pinnacle is the main dome, then it descends with the same slope; it thus maintains a continuum with its environment.

The main body of the mosque consists of soft feminine forms, of different sized domes and among them thin, slender masculine minarets spring toward the sky, in crescendo. All these sharp contrasts and varied forms create a tension and a vigorous harmony.

Le Corbusier comments on this, “The spreading red roofs of Istanbul are like a sea from which the mosques rise up serenely in their sculptural whiteness”. And he also states, “In Istanbul a clear distinction can be observed: all the mortal’s houses are made of wood and Allah’s (God’s) houses are made of stone. There are two kinds of architecture: the houses which have shallowed roofs with wide eaves covered with grooved red tiles; and the mosques which have jetting minarets and domes.”

These two different types of architecture, which Le Corbusier observed, may be called “background” and “foreground”. Houses which make up 95 percent of the city fall in the first category.

Sinan’s buildings changed the natural silhouette of the city and added new values to it. These important buildings differ from the rest of the city in terms of scale, material, form and expression. According to Le Corbusier’s definition these buildings are of the “foreground” variety.

These “foreground buildings” are dynamic and create violent contrast in the existing homogeneous city fabric but make it a heteromorphic conglomeration. The minarets define the significant landmarks of Istanbul, their slender, sharp cylindrical or conical
forms create the unique silhouette of the "city of minarets": Sinan's and his students masterpiece of architecture.

Enis Kortan

3 Alison Smithson, "How to recognise and read Mat-Building", *Architectural Design*, No. 9, 1974, pp. 573-590.