PLACE AND PERSPECTIVE IN SINAN’S TOWNSCAPE

Ottoman culture has paid sincere homage but also much lip service to Sinan and his architecture since the 17th-century. Much more than Palladio’s relationship to European classical architecture, Sinan’s contribution to later town form has not yet been precisely defined.

It would take too long and be too tedious to list all the elements of the Ottoman townscape owed to Sinan’s architectural and typological inventions and his idiosyncrasies: window composition, well-knit organic symmetric space plan, the dome’s absolute predominance and rondo-like perfect circularity. The immense formal and typological influence he exerted on later Ottoman architecture derives not only from his genial individuality but also from the structure of precedent Ottoman town form. This he had in part assumed and in part rejected, crystallizing (not inventing) the imperial Ottoman idea of the town image as we know it. A man of his times, how much did he deviate from past experience and how much did a later epoch accept his example? Understanding Sinan involves comprehending the peculiar structural and formal rules of Ottoman town image. But we must not forget that he also deviated from past experience and that the 18th-century brought much that was authentically Ottoman and yet opposed to some of Sinan’s contributions. For example, his complex imperial style volume-composition supplanted the simple cubism of the Bursa and Edirne schools; and yet in the provinces, especially in the Balkans, there was often a reversion to the older schools. He put an end to Byzantine influence in subtle facade composition (after all this was the typical Anatolian heritage of classicism opposed to Byzantine anticlassicism) but the 18th-century brought a revival of Byzantine techniques.

How and how much did the Ottoman town change with Sinan? In what way was Sinan’s architecture conditioned by the Ottoman town’s preceding character? Which of Sinan’s innovations were rejected by later Ottoman urban culture?

The answers might require a very long and complex essay. I will dwell here on only two aspects of Sinan’s architecture — his sense of place and perspective — as a paradigm of his attitude to the contemporary urban form and city building mentality and of his influence on the later Ottoman town’s. The first — sense of place — is significant as a definition the specific architectural form of each urban space and element and gives us an insight into a specific hierarchy of cultural values. The second — perspective — defines the mutual relationship of spaces and forms. To demonstrate the problem of understanding or not Sinan’s, and the Ottoman town’s, form I would like to recall an etching of Melchior Lorich (illustrator of Istanbul, townscape, Sinan and forerunner of Fischer von Erlach’s historicism). Lorich compares the Western and Ottoman in a sort of historical catalogue. He certainly understands Ottoman perspective and its peculiar dissociation of directions, axes and objects, but he cannot quite catch its spacial character. He sees single buildings within a Renaissance conception of space: walls enclose abstract space; buildings are individual; the subtle spacial links are lost. Sinan kept a firm foothold in those subtle links and yet possessed capacity for abstraction which was part of Renaissance and 16th-century concept of space.

Ottoman architecture before and after Sinan defined centrality and emerging points in towns mainly through hierarchy of architectural types and a self-centred spatial organization of the main elements and spaces which built up the more complex form of buildings or ensembles. This gave a very strong feeling of place to certain points of the town or building. Sinan refined this technique mainly by accentuating the lexicon of hierarchy and of self-centred space inherent to Ottoman building techniques and typology and, on the whole, to Ottoman cultural mentality. Perhaps he even put to good use some sympathetic Renaissance and Mannerist concepts. He also clarified the earlier ambiguity of the Ottoman urban concept — what a town should look like and how its architecture differs from rural areas, and which of its parts should assume representative value. Whether consciously or because of the Ottoman town’s spontaneous trends, he contributed to a sense and structure of urbanity which deeply differed from Western, and even from Arab and Persian, towns. The ambition to represent the centre of a town or the very idea of centrality by means of architecture, quite evident in more than one Renaissance or Safavid design, is wholly absent in the classical age of Ottoman architecture even more so than in earlier Turkish towns, both Ottoman and Seljuq.

Hierarchy

The Ottoman townscape has no strong overall form, because it has no city walls to
define its margin, no clearcut radial or cross road system and, above all, because the Ottoman mentality has no concept of town unity which could call up a material, cultural or religious idea of the city as a whole — no conception of polis, civitas or communal town. A sense of order and propriety did not, however, pertain exclusively to monuments as in pre-Ottoman towns.

Towns were assembled with building types and elements, each deduced from its own structural and semantic logic. Their reciprocal relations were fixed in an almost changeless hierarchy. Each element — defined not only by its position but also by the form assigned to it and by a sense of hierarchy — has a definite place in the townscape. Technology and linguistic elements were aggregated into “modes” (the central cupola pyramid, the functional standard combination of masonry vault or dome cells, wooden-framed residential architecture) that were each more than a technical or functional option, a compound of technological and semantic conventions. Much as a musical instrument suggests a makam and channels artistic expression in a given direction, the building-technology-language complex chosen by the architect suggests specific solutions.

This typological and conventional mentality allowed town or single building, although varied and articulate, to be conceived as a combination of definite, cognate elements and types.

As a rule, the analytical and deductive attitude of Ottoman architects seemed comforted by the manyfold functional and typological distinctions of Ottoman town construction. Differentiations inbred within that mentality became semantically appropriate distinctions, that is: elements of style.

Sinan was no exception; he accepted and developed the sense of hierarchy within his külliye defining with different scales and complexity a diversity of elements. But the different “modes” of Ottoman architecture were softened by him; he assumed a more Renaissance and functional outlook which rendered each building or complex an autonomous organism. For example: the contrast between mosque and house was, paradoxically, not so definite in Sinan’s time.
— as we can see from 16th- and 17th-century etchings where large roofed palaces not unlike some of Sinan’s caravansarais are extant.

Urban centrality and emergent points

Much has been written on Sinan’s concept of a city skyline dominated by domed and emergent points. Does the sense of place determined by these dominating architectural structures link to the definition of the centre of the Ottoman town? I do not think so. The vakif donators, and above all the sultans and their near of kin, did seem to create a new centrality rather than strengthen the existing hub of the city; but they were rarely successful as the Valide mosque was. The Fatih, Bursa and Edirne sultanate mosques were, after all, simply the centres of large residential quarters. Sinan’s külliye, even the largest, were no exception. A sense of central place in the Ottoman context signifies a wholly different relationship than a Western cathedral’s to its town. We should rather refer it to the psychology of the imaret: the founding clan, seyh or sultan builds or rebuilds or converts to Islam — the word imar is used on the epigraphy in all cases — a settlement whose point of covenant is the mosque and the tomb of the founding figurehead (not always the effective founder but that of any person important for community, clan or dynasty). This establishes a bond with the land. The sense of place is loosely expressed in relation to the overall city-form and concept, but is very strong in relation to the site. As far back as 14th-century Bursa, the Ottoman town always was been a loose assembly of imarets, the carsi having a very strong functional attraction but slight symbolical weight, except in the small towns where it was associated to the Friday mosque — the main urban monument. Istanbul’s rich skyline somehow distracts us from the individual isolation and self-sufficiency of each külliye. It is this self-sufficiency which explains the self-centred form of the domed külliye: it underlines the aula of the mosque as the largest collective space of the town. It has no directional links, nor facade because it does not refer to other complex urban elements but only to its own centrality. The Selimiyé is not the centre of Edirne; it is the metaphorical fountainhead of a settlement which has no clearcut boundaries. In Western architecture only non-urban con-

vents and villas have a similar formal link to their environment.

Whether influenced by Renaissance concepts or through intuitive processes, Sinan gradually understood that the single dome was the form best suited for an Ottoman town’s very peculiar feeling of centrality.

Sense of place in minor building elements

Of course Sinan did not express a sense of place only by underlining emergent points in townscape; he also paid attention to smaller scale urban places by using self-centred spaces as focal points in larger compositions (as is the case of the dome across the Lüleburgaz arasta), by placing small ornate elements on his bridges, with a sense of symmetrical form (see his well-knit window compositions). What is common to all these forms is that they express static situations: they are places where people sit or stand, where the movement along a path — across a bridge or through the arasta — comes to a halt. The Ottomans — according to Pietro della Valle — are surprisingly sedentary

THE FATIH KÜLLİYE
when they are not frenetically active in warfare or equestrian games. A common feature of most contemporary drawings of Ottoman everyday life is that of dignitaries or ordinary people sitting aligned along the walls or margins of a space leaving the centre (orta) empty. Most Ottoman architectural space can be explained by this distinction between a functional margin structurally rendered elaborate and complex through seats, niches, window composition and a central symbolically tense void.

Stone benches linked to monumental entablatures (on bridges), windows symmetrically arranged and forming niche seats (in mosques) were taken up by Sinan from earlier Ottoman and Persian architecture were they were auxiliary features, and converting them to definite primary figures.

**Domes and self-centred space**

The development of absolute bi-axial symmetry of domed spaces in Ottoman architecture in the 16th-century had no structural or functional rationality but arose from taste and perhaps deeply felt cultural trends. Any living place — cells in the medrese, main rooms in houses — would be made self-centred and domed or to look domed and self-centred through the design of the ceiling even when it was flat and by a symmetry obtained in spaces without windows and niches.

Self-centred forms were made externally explicit in monumental compositions. The auxiliary elements of the later Sinan külliye (medrese, revak courtyards) were knit together and kept in a horizontal profile so as to form a basement for the single-domed space of the mosque which thereby was forcefully pushed out of the building complex. I might mention the square tibrium (Mihirimah) taken up almost two centuries later in Nur-u-Osmaniye and even in 19th-century examples. When Sinan incorporated the medrese in the mosque-court in the Sokullu complexes in Istanbul he pushed things to an extreme which had little to do with the search for the monumentality that the Imperial mosques demanded. This involved a skyline quite different from the classical layout of pre-Sinan külliye and even from the Sehzade and Sülleymaniye mosques.

In Sinan’s last important work, the Selimiye mosque at Edirne, the design of the dome is the design of the whole structure. With its absolute predominance and rondo-like perfect circularity, with its octagon of pinnacles and buttresses this was a further step. Basically it is unlike his earlier dome leit-motifs. It produced an all-encompassing centrifugal movement which relates the dome to the four cardinal points (not only towards Mecca) and therefore dominates all the surrounding urban context whatever its scale. Here the concept of complete symmetry — emphasized by the radical formal unity of the dome and its substructures, by the clarity of the structure and of interplaying static forces (these last usually suggested by Ottoman architects but here ostentated) — is carried very far. Evidently the dome is meant as an element dominating the total urban landscape and not only its profile.

This concept of extreme symmetry and of the domination of surrounding space was taken up later as an archetype and abstracted from Sinan’s language. Circular or elliptical schemes with no dominating axis recur in the meydàn (ceremonial halls) of dervish tekke; they are not always associated to circular plans but are carried through by inserting a circular colonnade as in paleochristian central plan churches, or through the roof’s or-
namental design. They also occur in the perfectly symmetrical octagonal cupola-buttress profiles of late 18th-century mosques (Mehmet Tahir's Beylerbeyi mosque, Sumru, Nevşehir, Yozgat mosques). Frequentiy combined with rococo or baroque archetypes, it is difficult to distinguish how much was due to Western influence and how much to Sinan's heritage. These central schemes of Sinan were successful because they somehow represented the very idea of Ottoman urbanity (which needs a monumental reference to distinguish itself from the rural areas house types do not differ much between town and country) and because they pin-point emerging elements in space rather than extend them to vast radial or perspective based axial systems.

However, in Sinan's mature work, this ideal representation of urban civilization in a central place visible also externally was not a mere monumentalist townscape stratagem; the whole building concept was imbued with it. It is as if Sinan, who had no opportunity to express civic culture in public open space as Renaissance and Mannerist architects could, tried to distill what he could out of a külliye in order to express in all its elements large or small, inner or external, one single concept which could symbolize urbanity. The well-knit organic symmetrical space plan and tense composition of volumes and structural elements which ensued, needed an intellectual approach to architecture which Sinan may or may not have had, but which he probably substituted with his forceful intuition and his immense experience. Later generations lacked both. No other Ottoman building possesses the same conceptual intensity. When a perfectly symmetrical and balanced plan did come about in the late 18th and in the 19th centuries, as in the Filibe type symmetrical house, it was more the product of Westernising influences than of a firmly felt inborn necessity.

Symmetry versus episodic composition

Sinan accepted — not very willingly I am tempted to think — the Turkish-Ottoman tradition of narrative sequences. The Ottoman town scene and its single units were each heterogeneous assembly of typological elements of different shape and size. Early Turkish architecture in Anatolia — as we can see in Konya, Sivas, Nigde, Divrik — had already experimented linking portals, mosque and medrese entrances, their walls, minarets etc., all of different heights along a facade; no overall axis symmetry was perceivable; form developed linearly and not on a plane to the observer. Edirne and Istanbul highly refined this approach. The typological elements were now more varied: fountains, cemeteries, pierced enclosing walls, repeated small cupolas, revak porticoes were added to the list of elements in Seljuq ensembles. Elements were linked through the subtle interplay of architectural (and not merely ornamental) mouldings such as the topping walls running through the whole ensemble; the rhythm of walled and transparent surfaces was kept or changed with calculated effect. There is a definite method in all this; it is no mere picturesque and casual "bricolage". Sequence composition, narration of episodes are today considered techniques as recognisable as symmetry, triangular composition, proportional harmony (It is no mere coincidence that this "disorderly order" of Ottoman architecture had to reach the age of Fauvel, Fossati,
D'Aronco and Le Corbusier, children of romanticism and post-romanticism, to be fully understood.
Perhaps because of "the spirit of the times" which seeped through the Western frontier of the Empire, and of the native classicism of his alleged homeland, Anatolia, Sinan aspired to unity of composition. One could dwell on its extreme knot window composition, triangular or with layered horizontal lines, quite new the Ottoman feeling for form and which, even in individual housing, had an influence for the next three centuries.
He could not, or would not, however undermine the narrative-episodic principle of Ottoman urban architecture. But he distinguished between symmetry and harmony in the main elements (main place) and the narrative-episodic approach minor connective elements (contextual place). He added many refinements to episode composition: the fine play of transparency and shadows of enclosing walls on near by main volumes (as in the Agia Sofia mausoleums or in own Süleymaniye sebil) are of his invention; the elegant transition from a given wall height to a lower one with the help of bordering modanatures is a characteristic Sinan expedient. An extreme case is that of the outer wall of the Sehzade complex where the piers between some of the windows are not massive, but built with two parallel slabs no wider than one meter leaving a sort of narrow corridor space connecting the windows. No matter if this bears Sinan's or some humber craftsman's mark: the effect of lightness and the differentiation of main elements and auxiliary forms, typical of Sinan's outlook is there. It is important that the principle of symmetrical composition was not extended to urban composition. Townscape for Sinan does not seem to be the realm of symmetry if not in a very limited way. In underlining the mutual relationship of urban elements he neglected symmetry. We might say that his single architectures were static and his urban compositions were dynamic; but this would be a very superficial and anachronistic way of analyzing his architecture.
Indeed, he even took a step back from the sometimes splendid and sometimes arid symmetry of some 15th- and early 16th-century large scale külliye compositions towards which Ottoman architecture seemed to be developing.
It is true however that even in the 15th-century külliye of Fatih despite the almost perfect symmetry of its layout, the gates are placed off the monumental axis; the principal paths do not coincide with the axis; the mosques side entrances are just as and perhaps more important. This means that symmetry was a formal device rather than a deeply felt method of relationship to the urban context.

Perspective

Sinan takes up this attitude and pushes it to a more coherent conclusion introducing what I would call "transposed axiality"; that is, a perspective perceived tangentially or removed sideways from the main axis of the complex: the nearest classical Ottoman architecture would come to perpectivism.
The frontal perception of the mosque is never privileged; it sometimes even looks awkward. Symmetry does not extend from the single piece of architecture to the whole complex (if it does it is merely accidental or occasional) or to the urban context. The entrance is not through the main axis, but parallel to it and inverse to the main facade. Note the many stategems aimed at avoiding a brutally frontal perception in the Süleymaniye külliye.
In the first place, the basic axis coincides with the axes of the central and most important volumes (the mosque and the mausoleum of Süleyman); it is perceivable in plan and is implicit in the profile skyline but not in frontal perspective.
In the second place, the very interesting display of the auxiliary buildings (medrese, dar-üs-sifa etc., which help define the margins and the feeling of space of the outer courtyards and channel views towards the mosque) is always perpendicular to the main axis; as a matter of fact the space between the northwestern buildings (imaret and tabhane) which could easily have coincided with the central entrances of mosque and inner courtyard is some 10 m. further west; we feel that Sinan or his helpers deliberately avoided underlining the main gateways although they are conventionally designed, heavily decorated but — and this is no mere coincidence — rarely used.
Thirdly, all conceptual prejudices or principles which have armed classicists since the Hellenistic outlays — clarity through repetition, symmetry, regularity in the height and size of each class of elements within the building complex seen as an organism — are dropped by Sinan, who is certainly no anticlassist and no adept of picturesque composition — when he places an arasta of
shops under the terraced esplanade of the outer court, a small but wedge-cornered sebil opposite it to the north and designs the stepped down section of the Salis and Rabii medrese on the north-eastern slopes of the site. His aim is clearly to open a view to the strong profile of the complex from the Golden Horn, building up a massive basement not with a single architectural statement but with a constellation of urban elements.

To put it in other words, Sinan’s design contains effectively perceivable paths and recurs to perspective only if we admit these terms in a quite different context than that used in Renaissance and Baroque architecture. They are conceived with great psychological subtlety because they are not woven into the geometrical scheme of the design, but can be discovered only from a frontal approach or in a casual coincidence of walk-path and vision. Paths through and across the complex “narrate” the sequence of buildings and spaces as beads of different colours and forms can be combined without conditioning each other.

The lack of a perspective aligned on a clearly dominating entrance axis and the lack of an architecturally expressed path running through the composition cannot be explained in terms of Western perspective drawing behind contemporary Western techniques. They are the expression of an attitude which is part of an Ottoman approach to urban form. Sinan’s non-axial and fragmented perspective, much as in later Ottoman architecture up to the 19th-century reflects a perception and use of urban space structured more by the feeling of initiation (discovery of single elements and spaces) and by techniques of transition (between urban parts identified in their hierarchical differences but not geometrically linked into an organisal unit as in Western, Safavid and, sometimes, Mughal towns) built by the logic of heroic or ceremonial procession. These are only the cultural and artistic overtones; after all Ottoman public life was enriched by many well-attended ceremonies and processions but these were never associated to architectural monumental. Neither the “at meydani” of Istanbul (the Hippodrome, bordered by the Sultan Ahmet mosque and the Ibrahim Pasha Saray) nor the Divan Yolu running from the Topkapı Palace to Beyazıt mosque and lined haphazardly by many mausoleums and mosques, had a definite monumental layout although they were both the main spaces for the frequent and rich ceremonies of a very powerful empire.

This then, is urban space without formal perspective. Which does not mean that perspective — the art of referring objects and forms in space to each other — was unknown. I would not like to trespass into fields not mine but some comparison with Ottoman miniature painting might point to the attitude of that culture when dealing with architectural and urban space.

It is widely admitted that Ottoman perspective was influenced by Renaissance and Mannerist perspective; the Imperial libraries and collections included some Western paintings and many etching albums. But also other influences were at work. The lyrical saz or saz qalami style bears witness to direct or Persian and Türkmen-mediated Chinese influences. Although it shows no trace of perspective, its flowing naturalistic and almost “romantic” lines did much to shape Ottoman feeling for space and its influence occasionally reappeared in the eclectic melting-pot that was Ottoman art until the 18th-century.

The “historical” Ottoman miniature style, with its gradual absorption of Western techniques, can not be considered simply a naive version of Western perspective drawing. It suggested depth of space by reducing the scale of distant objects, by breaking the boundaries of the image through the miniature frame, exploding the scene depicted into multiple spaces each of which has a different focus and horizon. Although it is hazardous to read a parallel development in different art techniques in any culture, and even more so in Ottoman culture — eclectic by vocation and geographical position — there does seem to be a common heritage and a common mentality behind late 16th-and early 17th-century architecture and some miniatures of the same period. They all explode urban or figural space into sub-units each possessing depth and linkages. All sub-units are forged into a single aesthetic unit, but this last is not merged to the common denominator of one flowing, all-encompassing and three-dimensional space. The three dimensions of each element in a Sinan külliye or in a miniature by Ahmed Naksi are not the three dimensions of its other elements. I mention Naksi because his miniatures, though some decades later than Sinan, possess comparable characteristics.

In an enthronement scene the focus is not in the centre of the image; the perspective of each arch runs to the left and each has its own focus; the drawing of the throne is axonometrical and turns right; in other words,
just as in Sinan’s külliye, axially is admitted but transposed sideways out of the central axis. In the miniature showing the house of Seyhülislam Mustafa Efendi (Divan-i Nadirî, circa 1620), each part of the house — the chiosk, the bower room, the porch, the garden — has an individual and peculiar scale and depth.

Even the Selimiye dome, though wonderfully unified does not stand in space as a Renaissance dome would, plastically, all-embracing of light and natural space: it dominates the surrounding scene because it refers with its eight buttresses and eight facades to the four cardinal points and the four intermediate directions (of Turkic-Asiatic Buddhist memory?). Its plasticity is not sculptural but stems from the fine proportions and reciprocal coherence of the single building elements much as in Gothic architecture.

All this does not point to the explosion and dissociation of the elements in an urban scene or in a depicted scenes it does not imply lack of relationship between the parts as some would hold. It means that the Ottoman feeling for space, which was also Sinan’s, establishes a relationship between urban elements which partake both of the cohering narrative techniques of Turkic-Asiatic and Turkish Islamic origin and, to a certain degree, of the perspective and plastic techniques of Mediterranean and Western cultures. This brings us back to what may seem a paradox in Sinan’s architectural language: on the one hand, the capability — unequalled in all of Ottoman and perhaps Islamic architecture — to instill overall geometric control on single buildings, linking and giving reciprocal proportions and references to all elements while the whole building acquires organic unity (which does sometimes recall the master craftsmen of the early Renaissance) and, on the other hand, a treatment of the urban scene and of building complexes which is, to use an expression fit only for some trends of Western art, “informal”, much more “informal” because more flexible and subtle, than in earlier periods of Ottoman architecture.

I hold that this is no paradox at all. It embodies two facets (or what appears as two distinct facets when viewed from the point where the course of Western art history has placed us) both deeply rooted in the nature of Ottoman formal and urban culture. It is the terms of the analysis that can annul the apparent paradox and only then, when the analysis uses methods appropriate to Ottoman art’s structure and mentality, that Sinan’s art can be fully understood.

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For further references see my recent book: La città del Levante. Civiltà urbana e architettura sotto gli Ottomani nei sec. XVIII-XIX, Milano, Jaca Book, 1986.