In Sinan's architectural work, three aspects seem especially noteworthy: the typology, the stylistics and the composition. After a short note on the first two of these, we will deal with the third aspect at greater length. Concerning first the typology of the buildings, we will refer to the most important: mosques. Looking at all the mosques built by Sinan, one has the impression that he systematically sought every possible combination of dome and half-dome, using models already known, or if necessary inventing types of vaulting not tried out by his predecessors. Exhausting the architectural combinations, Sinan brought to a definite end the typological evolution of Ottoman mosque architecture. After him, no great invention occurred in this field. The great imperial mosques went back to the quatrefoil plan invented at the Sehzade. The late mosques from Nuruosmaniye up to those of the Bayyans, went back to the single dome system (or a central dome without half-domes) of the Mihrimah of Edirnekapı, surmounting highly perforated tympanums. Even modern concrete mosques recently built are to a small extent based on the system used by Sinan in his Rüstem Pasha, perching a mosque with an octagonal drum on a base of shops. It might cause surprise that Sinan made use in this way, for the vaulting of his mosques, of an extraordinary variety of solutions. It is difficult to state what, in each case, actually guided the architect’s choice. But it is out of place to suppose, concerning number of buildings, that the urban situation of the mosque, to a certain extent, determined the architectural solution. Thus mosques with a hexagonal drum are almost all mosque-madrasa, or mosques connected to a courtyard, with non-existent or very few side entrances. The particular geometry of the hexagon enables the longitudinal axis to be reinforced and, on the contrary, prevents any transversal axes from occurring inside the sanctuary. Thus mosques with an octagonal drum are isolated, without a courtyard. The multiaxial nature of the octagon well corresponds to the directional equivalence of the approaches or viewpoints of the sanctuary (Rüstem Pasha, Azap Kapı). Likewise, in spite of the presence of a courtyard, the dominant situation, identically free on all sides, of the Selimiye of Edirne, well corresponds to the same multiaxial spatial scheme.

Thus the truncated plan of the Mihrimah of Üsküdar, with only three half-domes, clearly shows a strong opposition between the front and the rear of the building, which well corresponds to its situation: backing on one side onto the hill, and on the other facing the Bosphorus. Thus again the axial extension of the Süleymaniye by means of two half-domes tends to privilege the side view of the building, both from the Golden Horn and from the main accesses located laterally to the south-west.

With regard to stylistics, or the “writing” of the buildings, as it could be called, the way of treating the outward appearance, Sinan’s contribution is not wholly evident at first sight: the architect takes up the entire Ottoman architectural vocabulary was already established well before him from the time of Bursa, practically from Yıldırım Beyazıt. In Sinan one recognizes the same precision in stone dressing, same domes, same perforations and arcatures, an identical proportion and outline. But while he takes over the same components, Sinan does not assemble them in the same manner: it is at the level of syntax that he evolves Ottoman architecture. For instance, as certain components, such as the muqarna, take on importance and acquire different functions in the internal arrangements, the external outline develops and expresses new, unexpected relationships, and whole façades break with the austerity and bareness of earlier centuries. Finally, concerning architectural composition, I do not intend to deal with the internal composition of buildings, but the external composition, that is, the external form and their disposition in relation to that of other ones.

The merits of the great master are not apparent at first sight. It really seems, that the original acquisitions were made before Sinan. In the Üç Serefeli at Edirne one notes the brusque reappearance of the arcaded courtyard in front, in a formalized, geometricized external space. In the Fatih külliye in Istanbul one notes the sudden appearance and always poorly explained, of regular, symmetrical composition, after centuries of free composition, and of an agreeable “disorder” in the layout of buildings. The great Ottoman külliye, with all its components and perfectly geometrical, thus exists well before Sinan. In the sphere of composition he did not innovate abruptly, but
brought about an in-depth change of outlook which translates into a series of small apparently very innocuous processes. More than in forms, it is in conception that change is radical. The decisive point is that the effort of composition is not made so much in the buildings themselves as on the relation between the various buildings.

With Sinan, the building is no longer viewed just as a type in itself, isolated as a finished object for which inner perfection is sought, nor is the overall composition seen as a collection of autonomous types. Each building in the külliye is designed as a function of its compositional role in the ensemble; its typology might deviate and become transformed markedly as a function of its setting within this ensemble. Likewise, the külliye as a whole is no longer the result of the projection of a model on the ground, as a sort of “parachute drop”, so to speak, but is an interaction — each time renewed — between an idea of organization and the context in which it occupies a place.

It is on these two points that Sinan’s spirit of synthesis, his vision — at once more global and more pragmatic — of architecture and of the overall plan, is revealed. Even the most elaborate earlier composition, such as the külliye of Beyazit in Edirne or the Fatih in Istanbul, in spite of their geometrical rigour, in spite of their formal perfection, still share a conception that is at once more rudimentary and more abstract, broken up into separate segments, each independent of the others.

How does this work of bringing things into relation, this work of synthesizing that we can glimpse in Sinan, take shape?

Sinan constitutes and formalizes the external space situated between the buildings.

It is in particular through the external space that the relation between the different buildings of the külliye is spelt out. With Sinan, we no longer have buildings in a space, but buildings around a space, and therefore constituting this space.

In his very first külliye of Istanbul, however, Sinan moves away from the great examples preceding him, conserving a composition not only fragmentary but hardly geometrical. In
the Haseki Hurrem külliye, the geometrical harshness is particularly sharp because of the exiguousness of the land, which causes the various buildings to be extremely close together. The geometrical residues that ensue seem all the more detached as the interior geometry of the buildings is particularly elaborate, and even sophisticated as far as the hospital is concerned. In the Mihrimah of Uskudar we find — but to a lesser degree — the same geometrical layout. Undoubtedly, here, too, Sinan’s “compositional space” must be put down to the constraints of the context.

For very soon the architect was to set about making the exterior space. In the Shezade complex, he tackled the külliye in a quite original way. Just as the mosque impresses by its mass and by its isolation within the enclosure wall, so the külliye remains discreet (which made certain writers think it did not exist!). It is relegated, in part, behind the enclosing wall, outside of the enclosure, forming a continuous backdrop against which the mosque stands out when it is approached from the main entrances. The madrasa, the tabana, the caravansaray, all elements of different form, are all aligned, as though “glued” to the enclosing wall which links them. Everything seems designed to enhance the individuality of the buildings, reduced to silhouettes, in the exclusive service of the void that envelops the mosque: no symmetry here, but a desire to unify by means of alignment.

Moreover, it should be noted that Sinan does not hesitate to inflict, for requirements of the overall plan, a first distortion on the classical type of madrasah: he places the entrance perpendicularly to the main longitudinal axis which goes by way of the dershane (reading room).

In the Tekkiye of Süleyman in Damascus, we find in a far more refined manner this intention to create a strong, dominant external space: this is all the more striking as the buildings are here small, especially the mosque.

The procedure is always the same: linking the different buildings of the külliye by walls, so as to wholly encompass a larger central space, the ensemble itself being, naturally, surrounded by an outside wall that is partly supported by the two caravansaries. Between
these two enclosures (internal and external) are arranged the buildings of varied type and proportions, as well as a new element: an interstitial space. This space, broken in several points, forms a sort of in-between hidden by the walls and it incidentally enables the cells of the tabana to have light, or the traffic serving the imaret so be accommodated. But its essential function is that of resolving (and absorbing) the contradictions between the outer urban area (here a simple rectangle) and the broken contour of the buildings. This work of grading and forming a hierarchy of the external spaces, distributed between the main space and the interstitial spaces, is so successful that one could almost forget to mention the perfect symmetry of the ensemble, all the less perceptible to the eye because the main way is transversal and not axial.

The külliye of Çoban Mustapha Pasha at Gebze has this same quality in the differentiation of its external spaces by means of aligning the various buildings around a main space and in a simple enclosure. Although not always attributed to Sinan, it shows analogies with the külliye of Süleyman, this would make it appear that Sinan had a hand in it, or at the very least that he partly remodelled it.

In the Süleymaniye of Istanbul, the idea of constituting the external space is again seen both at the level of the ensemble and in detail. The külliye is here treated as a continuous belt, basically on the two sides of the west forming a right angle. Here again the idea dominates of aligning even dissimilar buildings in a simple urban layout: to do this, the architect does not hesitate, in certain places, to set a totally independent masking wall, in front of the façade of the tabana, for instance, or in front of the imaret which is only partly attached there.

But Sinan's art is revealed even better in the big madrasa. Thus, in the first two, over and above the central court and hidden by walls, he creates a whole series of peripheral spaces, strange long, narrow courtyards hugging the cells, rear spaces for recreational purposes. In so doing, he plays on the contradiction between the multiple breaks of the building and the urban context of the madrasa, perfectly rectangular. The resulting ease of composition enables him to fairly ex-
tensively transgress conventional type, adding to it or taking away from it all the elements he feels like. The will to constitute differentiated external spaces is thus accompanied by a certain disruption of the typology.

Sinan uses combined types and not only isolated types

When an architect wants to combine two (or more) functions in one and the same ensemble, he does not just afterwards join two previously designed and typified buildings. Instead he constructs a fresh ensemble in which the two elements are indissociable. In the appearance of these combined types we again find the great master's spirit of integration, his spirit of synthesis.

This calls to mind the extraordinary series of mosques-madrasa in which Sinan exploited to the utmost the combination of these two types, which, with the exception of a number of isolated attempts, were formalized in an independent manner. The first attempts at integration, at Sinan Pasha and at Kara Ahmet Pasha, which are almost contemporary, clearly show the procedure adopted: this is the courtyard which acts as a link between the mosque and the madrasa. This trial at joining together is not without certain oddities, without certain elements of awkwardness, perhaps. In the Kara Ahmet, for example, the court of the mosque seems sliced in two and placed end-to-end with one half of the madrasa. The intercolumniation of the porticoes is subjected to ceaseless changes and the integration of the elements is not really finished despite the unity of the space. Further examples will present more satisfactory and definitely more sophisticated solutions.

In other cases, Sinan combines other types of buildings together. Thus, in the Atik Valide of Usküdar, a much later külliye, there is a combination of two caravansaries with an imaret and a tabana, the whole forming a fine, symmetrical, unitary composition. We should note above all the originality, different from any typological convention, of the two courtyards forming a T, matching each other symmetrically, to guarantee more certainly the unity of the complex.

To properly understand the work accomplished by Sinan in this respect, it should be compared with earlier examples in which the functions were combined by merely being placed together: the tabana, for example, so important in the days of Beyazit, are always in juxtaposition to the mosque, without being integrated with it in layout — and even less so in volume. They are treated as related elements. It is the same with all the külliye of Beyazit (even in Istanbul where their large opening over the space of the mosque is without doubt of later date), and also the mosque of Selim I in Istanbul.

Another example of integration: when the site permitted, Sinan took advantage of its unevenness to arrange special commercial functions. In the Süleymaniye, for instance, he places the shops under the first two madrasa, and caravansaries under tabana.

Sinan constitutes an articulated architectural language

With this urge to express the exact relationship among various buildings or among the different architectural components, Sinan interposed elements of articulation materializing the connection or, on the contrary, the separation between two components. Here it is a question of real "punctuation" of his "writing", which helps to spell out and therefore to clarify his architectural language.

These elements could be "solid" volumes. For example — keeping to the series mosques-madrasa — Sokollu in the Kadırga district of Istanbul makes use of two porch-towers on each side of the courtyard, which, apart from their function as passages, gracefully resolve the articulation between the portico of the madrasa and the far more important portico of the mosque. The dershane itself punctuates the main alignment of the composition, divided into two by a sort of canopy, half protruding into the courtyard, which covers the entry to the main stairway. One recognizes here the refined workmanship of an architect who no longer seeks to achieve an artificial merging of the various elements, but on the contrary a certain individualization of the different architectural components, and an apposite liaison between them.

By this correct proportion between the whole and the parts, Sinan here attained a certain balance, a certain classicism of expression. Of formal perfection, this delicate work nevertheless conceals (at the level of the courtyard) numerous shifts of rhythm, impossible alignments which give the impression of a much "corrected" composition in which no regular ground plan can possibly be
established, undoubtedly because of the severe constraint of the site. Absolutely identical articulation processes are again found in the same Sokollu at Lüleburgaz: the same porch-towers inside the courtyard, and, this time on the exterior, a lavish porch which, straddling the commercial road, powerfully articulates the two parts (commercial and religious) of the külliye. Like a sort of monumental keystone, this porch sets the seal on the unity of the composition at its nodal point. This calls to mind (as at Havsı, where one finds a similar porch) the ancient tetrapyra marking the intersection of main roads, as can still be seen at Palmyra. Situated in a less constraining context than in Istanbul, this urban composition is without doubt the most perfect one in its regularity. But the flatness of the land has not permitted here the coexistence of the dershane and the axial entrance as at Kadirga: Sinan dodges the problem by placing this dershane in a lateral position, taking advantage of the additional depth obtained by the courtyard, fashioned, here again, behind the cells of the madrasa. Exceptionally here, this element thus does not play a composition-forming role. Note that the in-between space makes it possible, here as elsewhere, to absorb the privies and other services.

In the Atık Valide of Üsküdar, we again find compositional processes linked with the dershane. Sinan visibly seeks to resolve the problem of the disconnection of this volume in relation to the far less extensive cells of the madrasa: taking advantage, there too, of the difference of level, he does not hesitate to place the main room beneath the road, thereby forming a vigorous axial punctuation for the madrasa.

But these elements of articulation can be constituted by "voids", that is, by separations or breaks between the volumes. For example, in the madrasa of the Mihrimah of Üsküdar, or in that of the Kara Ahmet Pasha, there are passages forming veritable breaks on both sides of the dershane, and here they express the independance of this volume vis-à-vis the succession of cells.

In the Mihrimah of Edirne Kapi this process brought to perfection. Again Sinan does not seek an artificial merging of mosque and madrasa, but expresses their complementary nature by conceiving a sort of assembly-

THE ATİK VALIDE IMARET, TOPTASI (FROM KURAN)
scheme between these two: the mosque is fitted into the court of the madrasa something like the tendon of a mortise joint. But he takes good care to retain some play between them, creating an interstice corresponding to an arcade bay. He takes advantage of the transparence thus fashioned to place the main access to the madrasa which, unexpectedly, is situated like a reverse shot in relation to the façade of the mosque. One is taken aback by the opposite effect of this architectural solution, which makes a sort of counter movement of the space of the madrasa towards the city, whereas the mosque turns its back on it! Here, there is no axial entrance to the courtyard: it would come up against the ramparts.

One sees in this example (as in many others) Sinan’s exceptional awareness of the urban situation.

Note moreover — again with respect to the organization of “voids” — the almost anecdotal use of transparencies in the majority of Sinan’s compositions. He clearly takes a certain pleasure in revealing, from the main courts, the famous interstitial spaces that he had previously carefully concealed. In the majority of the examples already given, we can notice these axial gaps or spaces fashioned in the succession of porticoes, focalizing interest and creating surprise effects (Lileburgaz, Kara Ahmet Pasha, etc.).

Sinan destabilizes certain architectural types to enhance the coherence of overall composition

As we have already indicated, Sinan is often induced to modify certain architectural types, although already well established, so as to blend them more vigorously into the overall composition. This urge to adapt typology explains the variety of architectural solutions used for a single type of building.

One of the types most considerably transformed by Sinan is clearly the madrasa. He not only started by moving the dershane away from the main axis, but also he made amputations to shorten the wings of the madrasa on the basis of the original U-layout. Already at Edirnekapi the row of cells that should have faced the mosque is absent, because of the presence of the rampart which bounds the extension of the land in this direction. But Sinan goes much further in the last mosques: madrasa of the series. In the Zal Mahmut Pasha, all symmetry is blurred: the upper madrasa takes on an L-shape and its dershane is offset, as if to prevent any axiality vis-à-vis the mosque from being noted. The dershane of the lower madrasa is situated in such a way as to respond to the succession of the upper entrance and of the stairway linking the two courtyards. The külliye seems to be composed wholly as a function of the transversal circulation which connects the lower entrance to the upper one by a very picturesque walkway, with pleasingly arranged open positions, centring, emergences and dominances. It clearly seems that this work obeys a visual logic, a logic of parcours, than any logic of ground plan. Whatever the circumstances which explain this particularity, we here certainly see a freer composition, one unfettered by any convention, a composition that one can no longer really call classical, since it lacks all regularity and symmetry. Note that the mosque itself is of bizarre type: based on a plan similar to that of the Edirnekapi, Sinan has in effect enormously raised the side aisles right up to the springer of the dome, and this heightens the significance of the enveloping wall, to the detriment of the outline of the building, which is rather clumsy. Everything seems calculated to make the mosque appear visually reduced to a screen wall of unusual flatness and severity.

In one of his last works, at the Shemsi Pasha of Üsküdar, Sinan is far more audacious. In this tiny külliye he again uses a madrasa with an L-shape, but this time without seeking to orient it towards the mosque. He thus achieves a strong geometrical dissonance of which he takes advantage to enrich — using only a few means — the view of the courtyard. In fact, from the entrance from Üsküdar, the view embraces simultaneously the line of the mosque portico, that of the portico of the madrasa and the opening out of the courtyard itself. Then, by a series of restrictions and expansions of the space, he comes to the final opening to the Bosphorus, poetically framed through the enclosure wall. The little mosque gaily transgresses all models: its portico also turns at right angles on both sides of the corner minaret, and the turbah is added laterally, opening directly onto the sanctuary, contrary to all usage. Perfectly mastered, this composition no longer possesses any relation to Sinan’s first compositions (or to the early Ottoman külliye) in which geometrical residues are tolerated and constitute a passive space which encases the directional divergences of very geometrical and strongly typified buildings. The situation is the reverse: in spite of its
deformation, external space becomes preeminent, to the detriment of the typological purity of the buildings themselves.

These two late works give the impression that the visual effect is no longer the mere outcome of the composition, but that the composition as a whole is subjected to the visual effect planned and calculated by an architect who has totally dominated his savoir-faire and fully mastered his techniques of formalization.

To a lesser extent, Sinan also modified the typology of the porticoed courtyard of Ottoman mosques. One notes, in this respect, a certain evolution in his work. Since the days of Beyazit II there had been a trend towards standardizing the porticoed courtyard on all four sides, with the exception of the axial bay, which is always slightly raised on the side of the mosque.

In his first monumental courtyard, in the Sehzade, Sinan followed this principle. But as from the Süleymaniye, and in all the later mosques, he deliberately broke away from this idea and definitively raised the whole part of the portico pertaining to the façade of the mosque. As a result, there is quite a rakish angle connection between the arcades situated at different levels. Rather than the clumsiness which was thought to result, this corresponds to Sinan’s decision to differentiate around the same courtyard, the façade of the mosque on the one hand (since the time of Bursa this had always been preceded by a portico), and on the other, the three other sides of the courtyard which form a U, inserted in an almost independent manner.

Sinan thus again adopts the system of the Uç Serefeli, not so much for archaism as express volition. The position of the side entrances to the courtyard, at a tangent along the frontal portico of the mosque, helps moreover to form a spatial break and to express this independence.

Sinan actively integrated the külliye in site and urban setting

To say that Sinan’s architecture is “integrated” in the site does not mean very much. The whole question is to know in what way it is integrated there. For a building has hundreds of ways of fitting into the environment.

Thus, at the time of Bursa, the first Ottoman monuments occur in a rather passive manner on the ground, at least with respect to their direction. The contours decide the layout of the various buildings forming a külliye. But the passiveness of the architecture vis-à-vis the setting goes much further when the geometry of the buildings is deformed, as is the case with numerous caravansaries, especially in Istanbul. Thus, on the contrary, certain Ottoman complexes are imposed on the site, and make a very imperative integration, imposing a geometry on it without making any concessions. One naturally has in mind here the great Fatih Külliye.

To regulate this sort of relation of force established between architecture and the surrounds, Sinan took up a rather nuanced and quite opportunistic position, varied according to the programmes and the types of building in question. He was not bound by the exigencies of the site except insofar as these could serve the overall composition or generate a special effect. All the examples examined prove this: Sinan admirably made the most — both as to plan and as to section — of the constraints of the plot at his disposal.

The example of Süleymaniye in Istanbul itself provides an idea of exploiting an especially noteworthy site. As opposed to the Fatih Külliye, of quite similar size, Sinan did not conceive an abstract model of geometrical organization divorced from the site, but worked in a far more pragmatic way.

In this ensemble, Sinan seemed very aware of the contradiction between the obligatory axiality (between the mosque, the courtyard and the entrance to the enclosure) and the asymmetry inherent in the situation of the mosque in the site. He understood that it was the side views (and not the axial ones) that would be automatically favoured. This explains the asymmetrical, differentiated layout of the külliye:

— almost absent or ensconced on the slope lower down, on the northeast, on the Golden Horn side, to make the silhouette of the mosque stand out;
— raised, on the contrary, on the southwestern side, to conceal the mosque and make an almost brusque opening in the line of the minarets and of the side entrance, framed by the symmetry of the first two madrasa;
— almost flush on the northwestern side but, significantly, without taking up the axiality of the mosque in the disposition of the buildings.
It should be noted that Sinan, contrary to what he did on the Golden Horn side, kept the whole of this part (tabana, imaret, hospital) at a horizontal level at the price of colossal support works, which well proves that he did not want the view of the mosque to stand out axially. It is therefore clear in Süleymaniye that Sinan did not use the site everywhere in the same manner, but according to what effects he wanted to obtain.

At the Atik Valide in Üsküdar, there is an equally active use of the constraints of the context, not only in section but also in plan. The külliye is separated into two main blocks as at Lüleburgaz, but this time arranged perpendicularly to each other and not axially, since here the site does not permit a sufficient development of the mass plan on the axis of the qibla. The relatively complex composition reveals in fact a very strict hierarchy of the various components. The mosque and its cloistered courtyard on the one hand, and the complex of the caravansary, imaret and tabana, on the other, make up two most formalized entities by their rigorous geometry. But the madrasa (with amputated return wings) is separate and offset in relation to the first ensemble, just as the hospital seems simply up against the second one. The court of the tekke, for its part, is clearly deformed by its trapezoidal geometry.

One can understand that the increasingly passive submission of the different buildings to the constraints of the environment corresponds here to a decreasing hierarchy of the institutions.

This broad survey of Sinan’s compositional procedures enables us, without any doubt, to discern with greater precision the particularities of his architecture, and to place his work more correctly in the evolution of Ottoman architecture.

To conclude Sinan’s architecture is eminently dialectical, each building being thought out in interaction with the ensemble, and each ensemble being conceived in interaction with the environment. This explains why Sinan’s forms in their extreme diversity, often deviate from any strict typological orthodoxy, becoming at times purely circumstantial. Sinan’s architecture is often more one of opportunity than of principle.

Such being the case, one cannot merely define the composition, in Sinan, in terms of
regularity, of symmetry, in a word, of what is usually called “classicism”. There are two reasons for this:
— Because the idea of classicism does not enable us to characterize the whole of his work. We have seen that a number of his compositions have irregularities, partly or wholly neglecting symmetry and going beyond any conventional arrangement, although it cannot be imagined that this is due to clumsiness or to ignorance.
— Classicism is not a feature characteristic of Sinan. He shares it with certain Ottoman architects before him, and, quite definitely, with Hayreddin the greatest of them. To a certain extent, we can see that architecture in the time of Beyazit II, especially in the Edirne külliye, is perhaps of more serene and more limpid classicism.9 In fact Sinan opens up other perspectives: exploiting in a far more sophisticated way a language that he did not invent, freely transgressing the rules of composition, he often attains — as did the great Italian masters of the 16th century — a certain mannerism.

Alain Borie


7 “À Bursa... les divers édifices sont disposés de manière arbitraire. Ils s’adaptent à la configuration du terrain”,” Ulya Vogt-Göknil, op. cit., p. 54.
8 For the plans of the hans (caravanserais) of Istanbul, Ceyhan Güran, Türk Hanlarının gelişimi ve İstanbul hanları mimarisi, Vakıflar genel müdürlüğü yayınları, p. 208 ff.
9 For the architecture of this period: I. Aydın Yüksel, Osmanlı mimarisiinde il Bayezid Yavuz Selim devri, Istanbul, 1983.