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LATE-OTTOMAN ARCHITECTS AND MASTER BUILDERS

In the last three decades a fair amount of scholarly research on the architects and master builders of the Ottoman period has been published, but unfortunately it has been forced into the mold of "national" boundaries as they are perceived today, and this has played havoc with the reality of the fundamentally homogeneous Ottoman urban culture, multiethnic though it may have been. In addition, Ottoman registers, statements by the architects themselves, and the structure of the corporations, however meticulously analyzed, throw little or no light on how Ottoman designers and builders worked and conceived their work. As a result the monographic and certainly valuable scholarship that has developed in various countries on the Ottomans needs interpretation, a change of emphasis, and ultimately confrontation with the structural and linguistic analysis of the architectural works themselves.

In Ottoman urban culture two distinct crafts—that of the architect and that of the master builder (maistores in Macedonia and Epirus, kalfa in Anatolia and sometimes in Bulgaria)—shared the responsibilities for the design and construction of all kinds of structures. Of the two, the architect was apt to be the more cultured and better integrated into official institutions; the master builder belonged to a socially broader sphere. But it was not so much their tasks as their participation in well-defined organizations (the architects in the state’s or the sultan’s institutions and the master builders in the corporations) that established their affiliation.

The evolution of social and political conditions in towns brought about a change in the definition and relationship between the two professions beginning in the sixteenth century. In the classical period kalfa (from kalfi or in Arab khalfi, “vicar,” “helper”) referred simply to an artisan who helped the architect, but by the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries master builders were often called upon to assume full responsibility for public buildings, though their works for private clients continued to outnumber their public projects.

The architect was a technician involved in the design of military and hydraulic-engineering devices. Although he was no mere artisan, he was also not the Ottoman intellectual described by Mantran,2 who attained the rank of qadi or gained some other state employment at the age of forty or more after long medrese schooling; nor does he seem to have belonged to the elite that furnished the state with high officials and intellectuals. He seems to have come from the army or from the building guilds; either could provide him with practical schooling that furnished a flexible mind and few career ties. His links with power were there, but they were tenuous and subtle, and not so dangerously involved as those in the intellectual and bureaucratic categories.3 The lower his social standing, the less his dependence on others. At the lowest level, no longer architect but master builder, he could join a free itinerant guild.

THE HAS MIMAR SYSTEM AND ITS DECLINE

The centralized has or hassa (sultan’s property and service) system of recruitment and organization and the design methods used by it up to the end of the seventeenth century had allowed a small number of architects to control all the important imperial and most vakif building sites over the vast territories of the empire. During Sinan’s reign as chief imperial architect through the second half of the sixteenth century, the has workshop of architects attained an articulate and surprisingly efficient degree of organization. Between forty and seventy architects produced designs for a very large labor force, directed the construction of military and civil buildings, water and road facilities, and ephemeral constructions for feasts and ceremonies from Budapest to Cairo. All these works bore the trademark of the new imperial style, though not all were of the same high caliber. Sinan’s prestige
was such that all projects were attributed directly to him, but he could certainly not have been everywhere. To the very end of the has system in the nineteenth century, it was common practice in the sultan’s workshop for the head architect to take all the credit or blame.

The workshop was organized as an ocaik (literally “hearth,” but variously translated as “club,” “college,” or, when it was part of the imperial Janissary troops, as in this case, “corps”). In military campaigns, the has architects built forts, earthworks, and light bridges. Its main body was probably quartered in or near the imperial palace, but some workshops, such as that of the apprentices, were stationed elsewhere. Much has been written on that organization.\(^4\) We can infer that it had a strong hierarchy (not exempt from intrigue and court politics) with a centralized structure and a professional esprit d’atelier rather than a military esprit de corps. Even under Süleyman the Magnificent, it could not rely on unlimited financial resources, but it could put pressure on the other levels of state structure to obtain materials and manpower. Christians were members—and not as Islamicized devşirme. At first they were few, but later the number increased, proving that it was somehow an open institution and not a strictly military one.

In the eighteenth century the empire was opened to Western influence. In 1796 Selim II had inaugurated an engineering school, but it did not have a section for the teaching of architecture before 1882.\(^5\) His and his successors’ reforms touched the has system only indirectly, though their particular brand of Ottoman reformism affected the architect’s social position and his cultural role. Intellectuals had been free to question the causes of Ottoman decline since classical times, but they had to deduce their conclusions from authorized and orthodox sources. In that respect, the Ottoman court and the circles around the Phanarion Greek patriarchate were fairly similar. No utopian or revolutionary thought was conceivable in that milieu. The cellular conception\(^6\) of the town structure, the dependence on the vakıf system, and the spiritual and cultural basis of monumental architecture—in other words, all that determined the Ottoman town’s specificity—were never questioned. On the other hand, architecture as a practical activity, as building in and of itself, was not constrained, because its methods were not deductive and did not need theoretical justification.

To the contrary, the general awareness that technological reform was to be desired but that the social, ideological, and political bases of the Ottoman system could not be questioned allowed architectural style to change all too freely, to the point of losing its roots. In the last decades of Ottoman urban culture, mosque and church types remained almost unchanged, but style and ornament and the rules of composition underwent profound changes. Unlike military, political, and educational activities, architecture, along with the crafts and the minor arts, was not regarded as worth reforming, despite its past prestige, nor, on the other hand, was it maintained within the bounds of tradition, as were music, literature, and theology. The reforming Sultan Selim III and many modernist intellectuals, not least the Greek intellectuals of Constantinople,\(^7\) in private remained deeply dedicated to the Oriental aesthetic and emotional ideals in literature and music, but hardly in architecture. This explains why the proposal to reform the has school of architecture submitted by the last chief architect was ignored. The government preferred to establish the Imperial Intendency for Building when the has atelier was abolished, giving free hand to foreign and foreign-trained Ottoman architects.

We must look elsewhere than the Ottoman architectural elite to find works that preserve Balkan-Ottoman space and typology, even under the heterogeneous influences that dominated the post-eighteenth-century scene. Creative functions had been transferred, not only to foreign architects, but also to the master builders. Bernard Lewis\(^8\) holds that the decline of Ottoman culture at the beginning of the nineteenth century was restricted to court culture; popular culture continued to retain its vitality for many decades. In the towns the master builders were the symbol of that vitality.

It is significant that a profession intermediate between imperial architect and master mason existed and was officially recognized beginning in late classical times. This was the “town architect,” nominated by the chief has architect to oversee imperial building sites and to supervise all construction activity whether private, vakıf or imperial, in provincial towns. The town architect’s first appearance signaled a change in the relations between the centralized system and local culture.\(^9\) Town growth had been constant from the second half of the sixteenth century to the end of the seventeenth, and the increased building that resulted from commerce and a rising standard of living of the middle class, could no longer be directly overseen by