



JALE NEJDET ERZEN

SINAN, OTTOMAN ARCHITECT: AN AESTHETIC ANALYSIS

This is a splendid book. It's the fruit of thirty years of a devoted study of the architectural achievement of Sinan, the greatest of Ottoman architects, the subtle innovative mind responsible for the grand royal mosques of Istanbul, Chief Royal Architect of the Ottoman Empire from 1538 to 1588, whose remarkable productivity falls chiefly in the reign of Süleyman (Suleiman the Magnificent). The author, Jale Nejdert Erzen, is a specialist on Ottoman architecture and a member of the faculty at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara. She speaks, among many other things, of the details of each of the approximately twenty mosques in a way that provides a clear sense of the historical niche each building occupies, Sinan's innovative treatment of the religious function of the royal mosques in the light of their political import and, even at times of the architectural meaning of visual proximity of one royal mosque to another. She permits herself a tactful speculation here and there about the poetic implications of the interior space and actual presence of the choicest buildings, but always in the context of a very precise sense of Sinan's technical solutions and innovations, both small

and large, within the developing history of the Turkish mosque and of Sinan's immense authority and professional responsibility for nearly every aspect of the architecturally grounded needs of the city and the empire. Sinan had no peer; had effective authority for nearly all aspects of the planning, execution, and maintenance of all public (and even much private) building throughout the empire. For instance, he placed selected mosques and palaces on hilltops along the sea, with an eye to their ordered visibility from passing ships.

Erzen's treatment of the entire matter of introducing Sinan's *oeuvre* in the accessible and straightforward manner she elects poses a nice question about how architecture should be discussed aesthetically – as a fine art. Certainly, the single most striking general fact about Sinan's career is the absolutely unprecedented range of his authority in all matters – I do mean all matters – touching on the unified vision of the function and beauty and upkeep and service of the central life of the physical city itself. But reading Erzen's account often takes the form of our being permitted to share the personal formation of her own mas-

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tery of all the discoverable elements in the sprawling labors of this indefatigable artist. We gradually grasp the unifying significance of the recorded fact that Sinan is said to have been responsible for 377 designs for buildings of all kinds in the city of Istanbul alone. His administration is marked by a completely disciplined re-conciliation among the religious, political, functional, and artistic aspects of the imperial city. But the entire account is rendered under the executive interest in Sinan's architectural feats.

In a brief chapter, Erzen identifies the essential nerve of Ottoman (and Islamic) sensibility as contrasted with a Western aesthetic. Her judgment emphasizes the characteristic theme of what (following her distinctions) may be called the interiorization of inhabited space – the space of individual buildings, complexes of buildings (külliye), the urban environment, and the cosmos itself. The distinction to be grasped is that the “interi-



or” perspective of the viewer is itself (already) organically incorporated into the perceivable architecture of the mosque; so that Western notions of the individual viewer's contingent point of view in moving through a building or a space are never featured. This yields an unusual sense of the unity and concentrated purity of the entire space of Sinan's world. It's an internalized, ultimately dedicated space that we inhabit; but it does not privilege any viewer's

vision.

The rest of the book – its principal part – is occupied, thereafter, with a close inspection of all aspects of this architectural aesthetic. Erzen speculates very briefly on the idea of treating architecture as participating in the evolving formation of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which she offers in countering Western misconceptions of the closure, the seeming rigidity and static pressure of the mosque. She speaks here of “the aesthetic of the ‘lived’ of Ottoman architecture” (p. 46).

She turns systematically to the analysis of the evolution of the mosque form under Sinan's direction. The major themes include at least the following: the centrality of the “cover” (that is, the dome and the roofing system of the mosque), the obviously evolving form of the dome in Sinan's work, the increasing integration of the dome with the other elements that, in the past, had been distinctly separate, the “organic” ramification of such changes through the rest of the detailed structures of particular mosques, the need for detailed plans (largely missing) for Sinan's monumental buildings (particularly under continual change), and the like. Erzen's emphasis follows Sinan's own written statements on his perception of his own work. She offers very suggestive observations here – though the book is filled with similar insights: one, to the effect that Ottoman architecture is particularly pressed to solve (for its evolving forms) the difficult problem of the relationship between dome and interior walls; and, second, that the variety of exterior ornament is not characteristically a separate or equally important feature of Ottoman architecture but rather more of a subordinate system of decisions made necessary by the first. In the same breath, links these issues to Sinan's attention to “the opposing ideologies... of the empire and... of Islam, which denied hierarchy” (p. 55).

This should give you a fair sense of a very fine account.

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