

Architect Sinan: An Intellectual Design in 16th century Ottoman Capital

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Abstract: In this paper, an intellectual approach in rebuilding the social and cultural life in a religion based society by an architect in a capital city like Istanbul will be discussed. Architect Sinan, whom we see the nature of classical Ottoman society, its institutions, its creative atmosphere and its dynamic structure in his works, is a historical figure in Turkish culture today as much as in his times of 1550's. His universality can best be explained by the synthesis and tolerance: the two features of the Ottoman inheritance. It enlightened the Ottoman cultural background and put out a new Mediterranean rationalism; where nomad and Islamic figures met Rome and Byzantium. Sinan's art was based on change, search and discovery and can be described as creative and regenerative. On one side, he brought out a scientific attitude that combines the relation between mathematics and building construction; on the other side he designed places which became the centers of daily life in a religion based society. Beyond his architectural and engineering abilities, he played a catalytic role in art and aesthetics. Architect Sinan stood against the tradition and sectarian in such a way that he shaped the Istanbul's silhouette with his buildings and their effects on social life.

Key Words: Architect Sinan, Ottoman, Architecture, Social Institutions, Süleymaniye, Public Figure

1. Introduction

The prosperity level of Ottomans in 16th century has shown itself in various areas such as political, social and economic. After the conquest of Istanbul, Anatolian culture had met western civilization. The new comers of the city brought their cultural back demand and traditions of hundred years to their new home where the marks of an empire still existed. As a head architect of the capital during such an important period; beside his architectural career, Sinan has achieved social expectations of a religion based community with physical means. The social institutions and economic power of the Ottomans have influenced that continuum. However; written and visual resources are insufficient, it can be read with a clear expression that Architect Sinan, who stood further from his era with his architectural and engineering intelligence, shaped his works under theoretical principals. This contribution which is made due to the various researches and the conceptual background of Sinan's design, presents the architectural/engineering/city planner approaches of an intellectual.

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2. Ability of Being a Sensorium / Changeability in Time and Space

An intellectual can be defined as a person who is particularly educated by somehow in varied subsections of science, technique and culture.¹ Like the resource for Sinan's architectural education, this was a non-institutional evolution but based on practice. In other words; an intellectual is questioning the ideas as for the requirements of his profession and curiosity. From a sociologic point of view, an original thinker and searcher for the truth was an intellectual in traditional times. In simple societies, they were priests or shamans. The architects of the developed culture in Europe from Renaissance till 19th century, philosophers and scientific reformists, came out from the intellectuals of their era.² For all the varied approaches to the concept; time and environment become a matter for the problem for an intellectual.

Architect Sinan was an intellectual when his creative mind evaluated in the time and environment he was living. The reason for espoused as a public figure and surrounded by a myth before actually knowing him is a result of a social perception continues even today which is more than the objective situation of the past. 16th century was the most productive period for the Ottoman history with its political and economic strenght. The most important names that gave that time its meaning were; Suleiman the Magnificent, Istanbul and Sinan who turned those two names into a visual representation.³ Even though, all of his works were a presentation of a genius mind, the lack of written sources is a result of Ottomans pragmatic philosophy and world view. They had no interest in materialistic world with its scientific or philosophic dimensions. What is expected from someone who shapes the culture and searches for the new one is a written permanent doctrin as a result of his anxiety for the future. The culture of his time hadn't developed a sense to emphasize that kind of observation and thought and to show as a world view of the society as a cultural activity. The lack of satisfactory source written in his times about his personality, thoughts and evaluations, has necessitate producing knowledge by recovering about his buildings. An important information source about Architect Sinan, was written by one of his friends as a biographic work with an elegant way of describing his life and buildings named, *Tezkiretü'l Bünyan* and a book with a list of his buildings, named *Tezküretü'l Ebniye* are a long way off dissertation with regard to its phrase and content.⁴ In this book, there were

¹ Turkish Dictionary, Turkish Language Institution, Ankara, 2005.

² G Marshall, *Dictionary of Sociology*, Publications of Science and Art, Ankara, 1999.

³ D Kuban, *İstanbul Writings*. YEM, İstanbul, 1998, p.79.

⁴ S M Çelebi, 'Building Book: Tezkiretü'l Bünyan and Tezkiret Ebniye', in H Develi (eds), *Memories of Architect Sinan*. Koçbank, İstanbul, 2002.

Sinan's own descriptions for his works but the language remained same and can be described as a story more than a scientific source. For that reason, even we knew about his life, there is not certain knowledge about his identity, artistic behavior and style. Today, there are hundreds of works dedicated to the architect but from a few words of himself in his biography; one can slightly identify his personality.

An unfair inference it would be to say if such a great architecture in formation and mean was based on just practice. Even if there isn't a theoretical text, a dense preliminary design work can be read from his works. The truth is Sinan had gained his knowledge about architecture from practice but not bringing out a theoretical text is the result of Ottoman characteristics. His architecture was the result of his observations and experiments at the time of information like new construction techniques and material use was hard to reach. With his conceptual approaches and works stood in front of his time, Architect Sinan became a milestone of a universal culture in a closed Islamic world.

3. His Life and Proceedings

Architect Sinan's birth date is estimated as between 1494/99. He was born as a peasant Christian family child, living in Central Anatolian city Kayseri. Until the age of consent, he lived in his village and worked as an apprentice of a carpenter. He was recruited at the age of 15 and joined the Ottoman army. He was sent to a school nearby İstanbul, where he gained the first knowledge about culture, social life and religion. After completing the education, he went to the *Acemi Ocağı* - beginner seedbed, which was a kind of a palace school. While he was continuing his education about language, religion and general items, he also worked as a construction worker in various types of buildings. In a short period he completed his education and joined the Janissary army. Actually, his years in the military were the development period with observation opportunities for his architectural career. He had the opportunities to visit different lands and learn about their culture and different structures during the campaigns with the army. On one side; he saw the unique beauties of Persia, Egypt and Bagdad, he also had times to learn about Roman art in Rodos and the contemporary structure in Italian cities.⁵ Originally, Sinan was an architect and building master more than a soldier with war tools.

His construction service in the army made him develop and improve his creative genius and architectural skills. Sinan started his architectural career with military structures which brought the quick movement abilities to the army. He designed different scaled structures such as bridges, towers and

⁵ A Refik, *Turkish Architects According to the Records of Treasury Documents*. Hilmi Bookstore, İstanbul, 1937, p.38.

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also ships. His success was so well known that he left the army in the age of 40 and called to construct real structures in the capital.⁶ He became the head architect and responsible for all the construction works in the empire.

He mentioned about his military profession as a period of a dense education and practice.⁷ Everything he saw during this period in both urban and structural scale was set to his mind and turned into rich visual representations in İstanbul.

4. Sinan with His Architectural Identity

The profession of architecture has a lot of inputs and multi dimensional structure. The processes that influence the architecture could depend on the society and the era, a superior idea of a placeless architecture can be developed beside them. Displaying an intellectual attitude in architecture, which is an open area for development and change, makes the process easier to put out a product with its creative extent. As a matter of fact, an architect affects and shapes the life with every decision he makes in different scales.

Architect Sinan, compared his architectural development to a pair of compasses. At the beginning of his education, like the constant side of compasses, he stood still and determined, observed the center and environment. After that period, he mentioned about his military profession and the wars. Like the touring side of the compasses, meaning the times he took part with the army in the foreign countries, Sinan marked each building to his mind.⁸

After the successful results Sinan showed in the army, at the age of 40, he became the chief architect of the institution which was responsible from all the building works around the imperial. From that time, he charged both as a designer or a responsible architect for 477 building construction or restoration. About 300 of those structures were in İstanbul or nearby. As a trustworthy of the entire sultan's building, Sinan had said the last word including all construction and restoration works in any scale, the workmen and their salaries, the building material and techniques, town planning and substructural services and suchlike.⁹ In other words, beside his architecture, he worked as a minister of public works, town planner and a building police. Within this time, he improved the Imperial Body of Architects and gave the institution a structural contribution.¹⁰

⁶ *ibid.*, p.43.

⁷ Çelebi, *op.cit.*, p.52.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 53.

⁹ D Kuban, *op.cit.*, p.81-82.

¹⁰ R Günay, *Sinan: The Architect and His Work*. YEM, İstanbul, 1998, p.9.

5. The Social Structure of Ottomans in 16th century

Being the head architect of a city like Istanbul needs to develop an extraordinary philosophy. The conquest of Istanbul was a turning point in Ottoman history as well as in the world, too. That case opened new perspectives of history and civilization to the Ottoman Sultans and administrators and gave opportunities to know about Renaissance idea.¹¹ Before the second half of the 15th century, Ottoman architectural tradition had already developed its techniques and style from the Anatolian land.¹² Many art historians accept the idea of a traditional architecture that Ottomans had before Istanbul was taken. Like the Renaissance is the revival of the Roman forms; Saint Sophia with the meaning given to it by the Christians, was an inspiration for the Ottoman architecture to take its unique style. It is probably not wrong to suppose that Sinan must have visited and studied Saint Sophia very often.¹³ But the Byzantine architectural heritage, except Saint Sophia, didn't make structural changes to the Ottoman architecture even most of the building workmen were Greek or recruited.¹⁴

Ottoman state system supported a development around the capital city. As a result of that, no other city could be compared with Istanbul and the second capital city *Edirne* which had spectacular economic potentials and activities.¹⁵ However, limitations could cause negative results for culture history, Istanbul had gained its extraordinary monumental density and Sinan became the artist who shaped the Ottoman capital. The mosque compositions and complex of buildings adjacent to the mosque which form Istanbul's unique silhouette were the magnificent cultural symbols. On one side, they referred to the effort which sultans made to exaltate the religion that came from pagan tradition to the Islamic contents. On the other side, they were representations of a politic language whose origin was based on nomad tradition.¹⁶ Actually, building a structure in Istanbul, nearby Saint Sophia should be evaluated as a show of a political power, an effort for leaving evidence from an Islamic tradition. The marks of the city should be designed in such a way that they should reflect a universal sense and the Ottomans arrival to the city. The purposed sense was to respect the power, not to be depressed under it. Sinan's buildings, in this context, combined the Sasanian, Roman and Early Islamic traditions in a universal sense.

¹¹ D Kuban, *Sinan's Art and Selimiye*. Foundation of Turkish Economic and Social History, Istanbul, 1997, p.49.

¹² *ibid.* p.51.

¹³ Günay, *op.cit.*, p.22.

¹⁴ *ibid.* p.52.

¹⁵ *ibid.* p.57.

¹⁶ *ibid.* p.58.

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6. An Architectural Approach of an Intellectual

Architect Sinan designed his works usually in relation with its environment and urban topography. He aimed to design a cultural and social space that forms a living environment surrounding his buildings. Designing the substructures adjacent to a mosque with different social functions; like bazaar, medresseh, library, soup kitchen and so on shows us the concern about shaping social life and giving a cultural identity. Definetely, the Ottoman attitude and traditions made meaningful contributions to the architect.

In an architectural view, Sinan's progressive approach improved the existing material and techniques and came out with the new one. Even tough, the construction technique and materials remained same; Sinan used them in various different areas. For example, before him iron was just be used as a strainer in the vault but in Sinan's buildings iron was used in plain ceilings, domes and vaults, too.¹⁷ The anxiety he carried as an intellectual in his era can be seen in broad view as from material to the building scale. Sinan's works are important sources in order to gain knowledge about the installation of the structure. The new aesthetic look he brought to the domed structure which was the most important building type of preindustry period, had carried his architecture to a universal dimension. What a groin of a vault means to the Gothic architecture, the domed structure represents the same importance in Sinan's buildings.¹⁸ The development of the structure with a groin of a vault took hundreds of years where all the variations of domed structures were experimented along architect's life period. But that can be defined with the economic sources, the goals of the Ottoman, too. It is believed that beside his benefits to the building art, with his research methods he had considerable contributions to the science.

The ornamentation in his buildings was based on the common field of his era. All the little crafts were raised to the superior level of art style which was named as Ottoman classicals in Sinan's buildings in where the unreachable examples of Turkish tile art with its pattern, technique and colour can be seen. Architect Sinan's extraordinary tradition of development, played an innovator role in forming the subsidiary art works for architecture. Sinan's buildings enlightened the Ottoman cultural background and put out a new mediterranean rationalism where nomad and Islamic figures met Roman and Byzantium.¹⁹ The doctrin of Sinan's art is based on change, search and invent. Sinan's architectural style brought aesthetic tendencies in branches of Ottoman art like textile, carpet and ceramic where the interpretation between architecture and art appeared. But the same development could not be seen in

¹⁷ Kuban, *İstanbul Writings*, p.83.

¹⁸ *ibid.* p.83.

¹⁹ *ibid.* p.83.

Ottoman thought and literature fields. His aim in producing a rational approach couldn't extend to all cultural areas of the Ottomans. Ottoman culture couldn't produce a relation between physical environment and literature. By this means, the rationalism of Sinan's architecture can mostly match with the Ottoman state organization and administration where in the course of time that system demolished itself in its rigidity.

16th century Ottoman culture hadn't produced a theory of aesthetic, urban or structural when compared with the western of the time. In an environment where the marks from the middle age remained, Architect Sinan's works were forward of his time with their form, function, size and organization of space. Like Young Sangallo, the architect of Santa Maria di Loreto, Sinan worked with his hands.²⁰ As Viollet-le-Duc called, Sinan was an *artiste-constructeur*.²¹ In a sense, what Shakespeare is to the English, Sinan is to the Turks.²² Sinan didn't embrace the symbolic quality of churches in Renaissance. The program of his architecture was fronted by functionalism, based on regular geometric forms, pure and rational in shape and the ornamentation was secondary. The concepts of modern architecture were the basic elements of Sinan's art.

The most important contribution Sinan had made to the world architecture was to generate all the degrees where domed structure could reach. After thousand years Hagia Sofia was built by I. Iustinianos's physicist and mathematicians, Architect Sinan was known to be the Euclid and the most successful engineer of his era.²³ The monumental architecture explaining the richness of Anatolian culture with its extensions in size and universal peculiarities was the product of multicultural Ottoman ruling system. The physical structure of the biggest cities of the empire was shaped with the sultan buildings, except the civil architecture.²⁴ The reason of his greatness in the public where technology and science didn't have equivalents, was his great buildings pertaining to religion, puzzled the minds with their constructions.

Sinan had produced his works in such a culture that the traditional one was the only truth, the new was described as a curse and repeating early examples was a common attitude. It must have been difficult to talk about concepts of *new* and *change* against the sectarians. Meanwhile, most of his buildings were examples of religion architecture and sultan buildings.

²⁰ *ibid.* p.84.

²¹ *ibid.* p.84.

²² M Sözen, *Architect of Ages*, Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Istanbul, 1998, p.10.

²³ Çelebi, *op.cit.*, p.61.

²⁴ D Kuban, *Ottoman Architecture*. YEM, Istanbul, 2007, p.255.

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7. Architect Sinan as a Public Figure

Sinan had created a fascinating and connective symbol in memories beyond his works. He did his designer profession at the most powerful times of Ottomans; furthermore, he shaped the physical structure of İstanbul in where we are still living. At the same time, the environment he created was the background of daily life in terms of cultural and social.

Ottoman world was as much a religion based society with its cultural structure as its political expression. The most distinctive characteristic of this organization was the mosques which were situated in the center of the complexes. Actually, the spiritual meaning of the mosque runs with the simplicity of the function, the plainness and monotonous of praying. Architecture got its power from the variation and evaluation of mosque designs. Islamic culture based on a principle where the rich and poor, the powerful and weak, living together. The divine place of the ruler was known as a destiny and the political power was the gift.²⁵ Cooperation of the community and the social donation instruments were the resources of foundations. The most beautiful examples of the complexes were the monuments of Sinan's conceptual architecture. They also became the backbone of social structure of the public.

Süleymaniye was known as an artistic and aesthetic work that affects the daily life and cultural environment beyond Sinan's architectural genius. Sinan's architecture had given all the solutions to the public desires. Süleymaniye Complex brought together all the representative signs of the religion and the world, just like San Pietro, Notre Dame and San Marco.²⁶ Sinan had shaped social, political, economic and cultural changes. The building with all the specialities of social, aesthetic, religious and organizational life beyond its physical characteristics was a social idea, a historical vision. It was an urban identity by itself with many buildings for different functions such as a medicine school, hospital, library, soup kitchen, caravanserai, shops, baths and tombs. It is an important historical evidence to gain knowledge about 16th century urban life with its economic, social and definitely emotional extents. The perfect relation between the physical existence of the urban and the social life of an ordinary person was the result of Sinan's intellectual genius.

8. Conclusion

Speaking of Architect Sinan with such a quiet way by the artists of his time was the reflection of an important characteristic of Ottoman culture. Beside the place, status, function and symbolic meanings of an architect, this case gives lot information about understandings of art and artists of 16th

²⁵ Kuban, *Sinan's Art and Selimiye*, p.58.

²⁶ *ibid.* p.75.

century. Society generally experienced architectural work according to its religious function. With an intellectual approach beyond his time to the architectural work and its effects on the social environment, Sinan turned the traditional acceptances into questions.

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