

On the Aesthetics of Space in the Ottoman House: tracing the eternal in the ephemeral¹

Kıvanç Kılıç

“I had the curiosity to view all the apartments destined for the ladies of his court. They were in the midst of a thick grove of trees, made fresh by fountains, but I was surprised to see the walls almost covered with little distiches of Turkish verse writ with pencils. I made my interpreter explain them to me and I found several of them very well turned, though I easily believed him that they lost much of their beauty in translation. One runs literally thus in English: ‘we come into this world, we lodge, and we depart; he never goes that’s lodged within my heart’”²

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Constantinople, May 1717

“The need to emphasize the transitory character of human life,” writes Stephane Yerasimos, “in every undertaking related thereto, became a fundamental principle of Ottoman civilisation, especially in the synthesis it effected between architectural creation and its materials.”³ Because every human being is a tenant and having a limited period on earth, he is ready to depart in silence and quietude when the time comes. The problem is to be conscious of this inevitable process, the cycle of life.

Eastern cultures, or “spiritual cultures” as stated in some sources, are based on the idea of this impermanency of human being.⁴ By means of this temporality, one is to witness the eternal and enduring power of the creator, for whom all the created born into this world, obeying his rules and for gratitude, that we have the chance to breathe and share the beauty that he created for all.

How we could define the borders between the east and the west? Where east begins or in what point the west ends? It is not indeed an issue that could be sorted out at ease, for the ones who live on the edge from where it is possible to catch sight of the

¹ This paper was written as the final work of Aesthetics and Criticism I (AH 513) lectured by Prof. Dr. Jale. N. Erzen in the Department of Architecture, at the Middle East Technical University.

² Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Constantinople, May 1717, in *Turkish Style* (Italy: Archipelago Press, 1992), photographs by Ara Güler and Samih Rifat, illustrations by Kaya Dinçer, translation from the French by Daniel Wheeler, design by Louise Brod, p. 19

³ Stéphane Yerasimos, *Turkish Style* (Italy: Archipelago Press, 1992), p. 29

⁴ For further discussions on the distinction between spiritual and materialist cultures, please see Murat Soygeniş, 19. Yüzyılda İstanbul Evi (Arredamento Dekorasyon, 1995/12), s. 94-98

both. The relevant question is whether to understand the former, could open the ways to grasp the latter.

To evaluate the differences between all the philosophical discourses, all the aesthetic considerations or their reflections to architecture in the eastern part of the world, for sure, is far beyond the limits and expectations of this study. But generally, it would not be wrong I believe, to confirm that a common sense exists between all the cultures called eastern, even if differences would be explored.

The curtain between interior and the exterior:

Privacy and intimacy, as in many other eastern civilisations, were the key words of Ottoman culture, the culture which, once became the melting plot of distinct nations, regions and religions who lived together for centuries. Private and public spaces were strongly separated from each other, having their own rituals.

The house, certainly, was the core of this multi-coloured structure. For years and years, tradition generated the unique way of living, which we still find both beautiful and spiritual today. From the proportions of windows or beautifully embroidered cupboards, to meticulously detailed wooden work, they appear as artworks rather than mere houses.

‘The whole ensemble’ says Yerasimos, “appears to arise from a subtle rapport between interior and exterior, from solid, blank walls rendered immaterial by a curtain of foliage, from grilles that make exclusion intolerable by the very image they offer of the inaccessible, from windows high enough to embrace the landscape while simultaneously frustrating indiscretion, which would also have to contend with the protective wooden screens called kafes.”⁵

Ottoman Houses, therefore, were the representatives of the transitory character of the Ottoman civilisation, reflecting the very nature of eastern way of living, harmonious with the environment, respectful to God’s all creations, and the inhabitants being aware of the majesty of the life they have been gifted with and eager to keep the order they have inherited from their predecessors. That is to say, the new beings born into life were to experience the same circuit which had been experienced by all the men that had come and passed away once before.⁶ Interior spaces were shaped according to this spirituality.

“Tradition,” writes Günkut Akın, “is repetition that occurs between beginnings and ends. In such long period all the background and ideological context become less recognisable and the form, turns into a traditional typos.”⁷ (translation mine) While there is development and change in Western centralised spaces, in a progressive mean, he states that Ottoman space has to be interpreted in a quite different way.

⁵ Stéphane Yerasimos, *Turkish Style* (Italy: Archipelago Press, 1992), p. 25

⁶ Please see Stéphane Yerasimos, *Turkish Style* (Italy: Archipelago Press, 1992), p. 31

⁷ Günkut Akın, “Gelenek ve Merkez”, *Asya Merkezi Mekan Geleneği* (Ankara: Başbakanlık Basımevi, Kültür Bakanlığı Tanıtma Eserleri/38, 1990), s. 8

Because rather than history, tradition is the key word for the eastern way of understanding, thinking and building processes.⁸

David Talbot Rice designates in *Islamic Art* that, “Islamic art is, in this respect, quite distinct from Christian, where diversity rather than uniformity was the characteristic. In the Islamic world, on the other hand, there was much greater uniformity, both with regard with time and space. In the first place, the artists did not seek the new and unfamiliar in the way that the Renaissance artists did, but rather remained attached to the model whose merit had been sanctioned by time and convention, seeking to renew its appeal, rejuvenate its character, by subtle variations of detail.”⁹

Ottoman house: the aesthetics of the spiritual

Islamic thinking possesses “few but the main” principle.¹⁰ Things that are ephemeral are experienced to grasp the idea of the eternal. In the house, as if part of a divine order, daily used objects are placed harmoniously with each other. The materials are cleverly fitted and used, each of which composed in such simplicity and refinement. Repetitiveness in the patterns of their surfaces is the main character of all the things placed in the interior spaces.

This “divine” order and the beauty and harmony of simple forms determine the life within the spaces where sophisticated work on carpentry dresses the whole space without emptiness. Emptiness means death, but the house is an organic thing and as alive as the men inhabits its voids. Furniture is always arranged close to the floor. The inhabitants place themselves either on *sedirs* (which mostly clad by *yanlık*, cushions or other coverings and usually not higher than 45 centimetres than the floor) or directly onto the floor covered by rugs or carpets.¹¹

Modesty and pliancy are the characteristics of the householder. One, as soon as he comes in a room, finds a place and sits down, without strolling around. He does not arise unless he is ready to leave the space.¹² This sort of life and movement, behaving as if being shy to have an existence on earth or as if guilty to occupy a space within the house, is totally different from the Western way of behaving in public.

Yerasimos narrates that a tradesman or merchant, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, had examined Ottoman gardens and noticed that, “these (gardens) contained none of the footpaths characteristic of Western gardens, for the simple reason that Orientals did not stroll there, but instead sought a shaded spot as soon as they arrived and settled

⁸ Günkut Akın, “Gelenek ve Merkez”, *Asya Merkezi Mekan Geleneği* (Ankara: Başbakanlık Basımevi, Kültür Bakanlığı Tanıtma Eserleri/38, 1990), s. 8

⁹ David Talbot Rice, *Islamic Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, repr. in 1993) revised edition, p. 7

¹⁰ Please see Candan Sezgin, *Traditional Furniture in Turkish Houses* (Internet: WWW), address: <http://interactive.m2.org/Architecture/compsezgin1.html>, p.1

¹¹ Please see Reha Günay, *Türk Evi Geleneği ve Safranbolu Evleri* (Istanbul: YEM Yayınları, 1998), s. 229-249

¹² Please see, Stéphane Yerasimos, narrating Jean Thévenot’s words, *the 17th Century French traveller in Turkish Style* (Italy: Archipelago Press, 1992), p. 34

down, remaining until it was time to leave.”¹³ This “oriental mode of existence”, or “the opposition between the movement of active life and the quietude of private spaces” is for Yerasimos “the sign par excellence of wisdom and social distinction.”¹⁴

Therefore, as he underlined again, “despite the dazzling mastery, the intrinsic modesty of the material brings us back to the essential issue: simplicity of forms as a support for the permanence – the enduring nature – of daily pursuits. Constructed spaces are reproduced endlessly but always based on the same principle.”¹⁵

This way of construction is also emphasized by David Yeomans, in his article, *Des Ilots de Bois*. “Where there is such an all-pervading vernacular form of construction” he writes, “in which buildings designed by architects are constructed in the same way as simpler middle- and working-class houses, the result is a consistency of style, a common architectural language seen across a wide range of building types. The different types and classes of building are then distinguished by their size and by the richness of their decoration rather than by radical differences in style or construction materials.”¹⁶

Sofa was the heart of the house and this whole spiritual way of dwelling. It was both a space, which used for circulation, and also for everyday activities and was located usually in the middle of the upper floor and between the rooms. It could also be positioned to be directly open to the courtyard (*avlu, taşlık*) or would be t-shaped as well.¹⁷ If sofa was to be located in the middle of the rooms, then in order to make the light come into the space, subspaces were used that were separated from the main area by a step (*seki*) and a railing, which called *eyvan*.¹⁸ There was a rigid hierarchy of rooms in the typical Ottoman house. The master stayed in *başoda*, the room that opened to the most precious sight with the windows on its two sides, and was located on the top floor, whereas ground floor used often for the domestic use.

Spaces utilized for daily activities, also functioned for having meals, sleeping and even for cooking facilities. The staff stored behind the cupboards, were spread onto the floor since they were wrapped again and put in the *dolap* with the beginning of a new day.¹⁹ Within the composition of the furniture, objects and daily used materials, which determined the characteristics of the spaces of the Ottoman house, such as *sedir, yanlık, sandık, sehpa, rahle, kavukluk, ocak, yüklük, dolap, çiçeklik, oyma,*

¹³ Stéphane Yerasimos, *Turkish Style* (Italy: Archipelago Press, 1992), p. 34

¹⁴ Stéphane Yerasimos, *Turkish Style* (Italy: Archipelago Press, 1992), p. 34

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 31

¹⁶ David Yeomans, “*Des Ilots de Bois*” (Clusters of Wooden Houses) in *Istanbul, numéro special de Connaissance des Arts*, (Paris, 1999), p. 49

¹⁷ For wider information, please see Ibid. p. 38, 39

¹⁸ Please see Stéphane Yerasimos, *Turkish Style* (Italy: Archipelago Press, 1992), p. 38-39,45 and Reha Günay, *Türk Evi Geleneği ve Safranbolu Evleri* (Istanbul: YEM Yayınları, 1998), s. 46-64, 136-146

¹⁹ Ibid.

sergen, kilim, halı, yastık and *minder*, every single surface in the house treated separately.²⁰ Walls decorated with cupboards, the floor dressed with rugs, carpets and other traditional coverings, the ceiling often gave the magnificent examples of wooden handicraft; windows made sunlight pass through colourful glasses, creating shades and play of lights, while doors, shelves, beautifully organised furniture and every other detail moulded perfectly.

Therefore more than perspective, miniature could represent or reflect the spirit of the spaces of the Ottoman house. When walking in them, one may feel as if he is part of a miniature, being in such place that belongs to a different notion of existing, seeing and living.

“The way we perceive pictorially represented space today is dominated by the visual logic of linear perspective,” writes İffet Orbay-Grignon, in *Pictorial Space in Islamic Painting*, “or in other words, by the close relation it has established between pictorial space and our visual perception. Space itself being nothing else but a void that surrounds the objects, its illusionistic representation depends on the pictorial replication of the precise geometrical relations of objects in reference to viewer’s eye, so that they can be identified with a direct experience and knowledge of spatial relations.”²¹ The writer continues that, “the single viewpoint has a very important symbolic implication: It is an absolute point of reference that establishes the vision of a unique viewer as a representational priority.”²²

Unlike linear perspective, miniature does not contain such a single viewpoint that determines the point from which the other observers will see the whole when they are viewing the picture. On the contrary, they are represented as if to be viewed from all points and angles. Therefore space is not represented “as an illusion of depth” in Islamic miniature and as she underlines in the essay, “the spatiality of these surfaces is transformed into a flatness on which all the other solids appear to be floating.”²³

Conclusion: the space of eternity

It is almost impossible to penetrate into the atmosphere created by the Ottoman house and the spaces within them by means of Western discourses since they do not fit any Western stereotypes.

They are centralised, but also centrifugal; stable but also flexible; thoroughly detailed and crafted but also simple, refine and plain; having western influences, but also melted them within the eastern tradition; intimate, isolated and protective, but also friendly and hospitable. They witness the search for the eternal, divine and beautiful

²⁰ Please see Reha Günay, *Türk Evi Geleneği ve Safranbolu Evleri* (Istanbul: YEM Yayınları, 1998), s. 229-249 and Candan Sezgin, *Traditional Furniture in Turkish Houses* (Internet: WWW), address: interactive.m2.org/Architecture/compsezgin1.html, p.1

²¹ İffet Orbay-Grignon, “Remarks on the Concept of Pictorial Space in Islamic Painting”, *METU Journal of the Faculty of Architecture* (Ankara: METU, 1996), Vol: 16, Number: 1-2, p.46

²² *Ibid.* p. 46

²³ *Ibid.* p. 51

through the lives, which rather seem ordinary, pliant or commonplace. This quietude in fact stems from their will to attain at the consciousness of the ageless and everlasting power of the heavenly and magnificent order of the cosmos, wherein they have a little to live, but much to pray for. The beauty or spirituality felt in those spaces is therefore nothing more than the reflection of this will and consciousness.

The words of Mica Erteğün, may well have been written as the conclusion of this short essay, since they delineate beautifully how the “eternal” is captured within the “finite” and “concrete” spaces of the Ottoman House. “The excitement of restoring an old, characterful house set fire to my imagination,” writes Mica Erteğün, “filling me with a great desire to re-create so many of the things I had admired in the special order of Ottoman architecture. Most particularly, I wanted to recover, as much as possible, the unique refinement that the Ottomans had captured throughout hundred of years of designing and building. The simplicity and purity of their domestic structures, the grandeur and proportion that prevailed even on a private scale, the romantic light filtering through shuttered windows, the sound of water accompanying the hush of quiet voices, the scented, beautifully overgrown gardens. All this filled my dreams! While my house may be finished, it will never be complete, as was ever the state of the classic Ottoman residence. It is a living object that changes as the lives about it change.”²⁴

²⁴ Mica Erteğün, foreword, in *Turkish Style* (Italy: Archipelago Press, 1992), photographs by Ara Güler and Samih Rifat, illustrations by Kaya Dinçer, translation from the French by Daniel Wheeler, design by Louise Brodey, p. 11