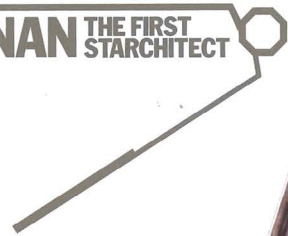




**SINAN** THE FIRST  
STARARCHITECT



DSDHA

## Deconstructing Sinan's townscape: The picturesque in Istanbul

Istanbul owes much to Mimar Sinan. The city's elegantly curated skyline of hills, domes and minarets, along with the Bosphorus that divides it, has become synonymous with its identity



'... One thing remains the same: the place the Bosphorus holds in our collective heart ... [it] sustains the city and all those who dwell in it.'<sup>1</sup>  
Orhan Pamuk

Arriving in Istanbul it is the relationship of the Old Town, Pera and the 'Asian Side' with the glittering waterways that helps you orientate in a city that spans many shores. The vast Bosphorus sea channel, which divides east from west and links the Mediterranean to the Black Sea, is indeed the artery that has sustained Istanbul since it was founded in 660BC.

The view of the historic peninsula from Pera, capturing in the foreground the Golden Horn (the primary inlet to the Bosphorus, a natural harbour overlooked by the hills all around), has over time become synonymous with the identity of the city. Its dramatic vista offer an elegantly curated skyline of hills, domes and minarets, one which owes much to the endeavours of Mimar Sinan nearly 500 years ago.

A network of elegant minarets – structures whose origins lie as illuminated watchtowers – dominates the horizon and marks Istanbul's important nodal points. Sometimes described as gateways between heaven and earth, their size and character denote, together with the domes, the status of the mosques they serve.

When looking at the city from the river, or from one of the many vantage points of the city, these prominent urban landmarks act as a divine foil to the unruly character of the urban flesh upon which they rest.

'No one monument dominates the Istanbul skyline; it owes its magnificence not just to Süleymaniye but also to Hagia Sophia, Beyazit and Yavuz Sultan Selim and the other great mosques in the heart of the city, together with the many little ones built by wives and children of sultans, and all the other stately old buildings that still reflect the aesthetic ideals its architects intended.'<sup>2</sup>  
Orhan Pamuk

However, as you venture into the congested streets of this 20 million-strong city, that coherence, which was so clearly recognisable, vanishes. Once you enter the steep and winding warren of routes, you lose sight of the whole, and those vertical landmarks, the contours of which were so clear to you until just a moment ago, become sparse fragments in the urban landscape, just glances of white stone minarets and lead domes topped with glittering golden crescent moons. As the city unfolds before you, variegated views of

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Deborah Saunt, (left) and Ellen Hadden (right)



each mosque open up unexpectedly from a gap in the street or down an alley lined with fig trees, to guide you towards their portals and reveal the beauty of the picturesque.

'...the spreading red roofs of Stambul are like a sea from which the mosques rise up serenely in their sculptural whiteness.'<sup>3</sup>  
Le Corbusier

The old maps of Istanbul provide further evidence of this sense of a city governed by two distinct logics. On the one hand there is the organic pattern that has formed and accumulated freely over time, a closely-knit agglomeration of winding lanes, crooked wooden homes and dense bazaars hugging the contours; while on the other is the rigorous network of stone buildings, which seem to respond to a different rule, designed as they are according to a rational pattern that is aligned not to the metropolis or its waterways but to Mecca.

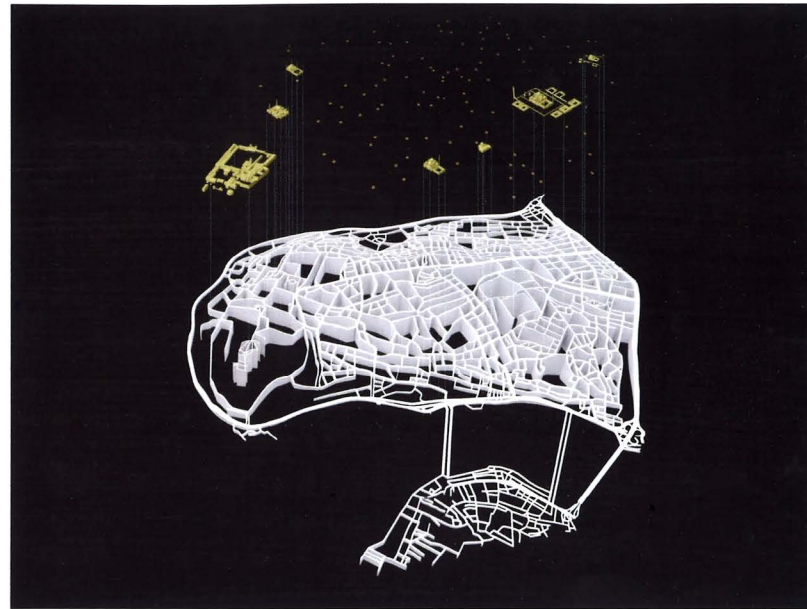
When Sinan's mosques are read against this disorderly background, it becomes apparent how their precision echoes the abstract geometry of Islamic art; drawing patterns of circles within squares that are so alien from the lace-like texture of the rest of the city.

The edges of each of Sinan's mosques – Rüstem Pasha, Şehzade Mehmed and Süleymaniye – entertain an incredibly complex relationship with the maze around and sometimes even underneath, now enhancing and completing it and negating or even heavily transfiguring it.

In our brief visit we were taken by the dichotomous nature of Istanbul, by the irreconcilable distance between the urban experience at ground level and the views one might see when approaching the city from the water or even when looking at it from above, when navigating its topography via new mapping technologies, drone photography and satellite views. We were struck by the way in which Sinan's mosques 'touch the ground', negotiating their relationship with the rest of the city; not only skilfully controlling different languages and forms but also masterfully conciliating the aforementioned contrasting perspectives from which Istanbul townscape can be appreciated. They are buildings to be viewed in the round, at every scale.

Our study aims to investigate the specific conditions that one may encounter when exploring the city under the 'guidance' of Sinan's architecture. We have analysed these paths in a visual way, using an approach very similar to that championed by the English Townscape movement in the years following the Second World War (when the principles elaborated by the Modern Movement were beginning to be integrated within historical cities), while also exploiting the potential of new mapping technologies and digital tools to fully appreciate the effect of Sinan's work on the city as a whole.

Throughout the 1940s the *Architectural Review* (AR) mounted one of the longest-lasting architectural campaigns of the 20th century. Its aim was to free planning from the cold embrace of Beaux-Arts Moderne and to devise new ways of generating cities. Under the banner of 'Townscape' it championed a new concept of urban design, central to which was a kinetic

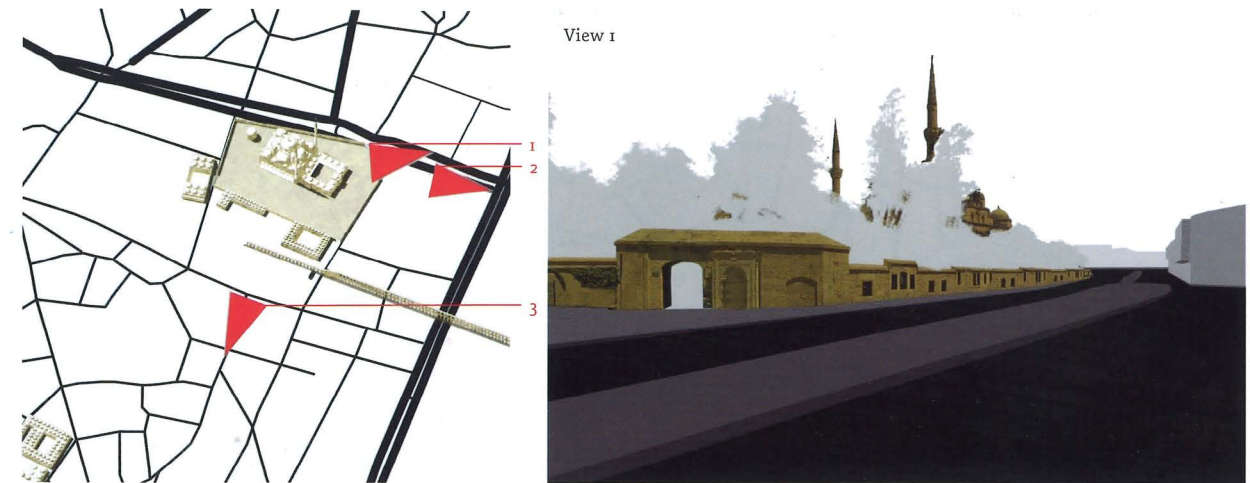


Dense street network of old Istanbul modelled as an extrusion with landmark buildings isolated from plan

and multi-scaled appreciation of how urban experience and composition unfolds on the ground, as well as a sensibility akin to the picturesque within art. Its approach to the built environment was essentially seeking to adapt modern architecture in a more informal way to deal with the concrete problems of reconstruction. Nikolaus Pevsner and Hubert de Cronin Hastings (the AR's chief editor) were looking at the messy vitality of the urban scene and seeing how an artistic view of it could be brought back within the realm of design and art. In a sense they were trying to 'humanise' Modernism, forcing those principles into the reality of historic cities.

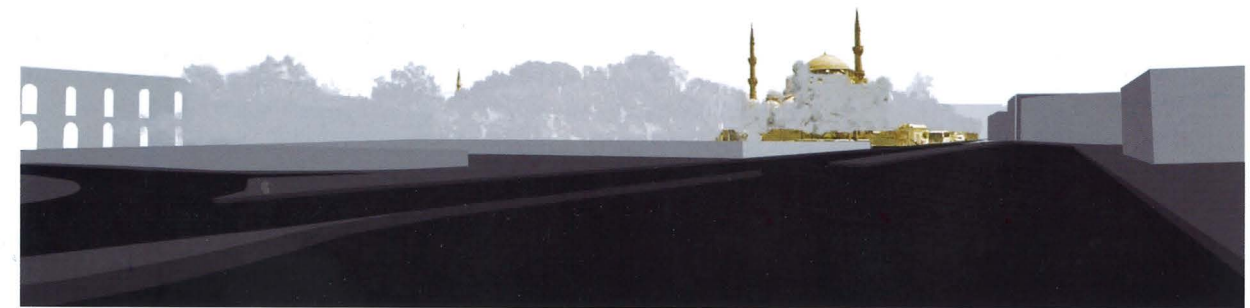
There is relevance today in reviewing Sinan's work through the lens of the picturesque. At this point in history new technologies have imposed and accustomed us to a set of sophisticated yet bewildering new and evolving visual paradigms, which seem to have more to do with a God's-eye view perspective: a sort of detached all-knowing observant gaze, which goes in tandem with the astonishing capability to simultaneously experience more places than ever before via virtual means.

Sinan's mosques present an interesting case study to see what we can learn from a timeless architecture that has been located within the urban realm, to then be carefully nested, stitched to the temporal grain of the city. His apparent ability to simultaneously govern the human scale at ground level and the grand, superhuman view, is a virtue that has become essential for architecture. The built environment nowadays seems indeed to have acquired some uncanny connotations, being as it is the archetypal human undertaking and the familiar domain that sustains our everyday existence, yet one whose complexity increasingly escapes our comprehension without a necessary level of abstraction or technological aid. Architecture is now more than ever faced with the difficult task of giving coherence to the split nature of our urban experience.



View 1

View 2



#### Şehzade Mehmed: 1544

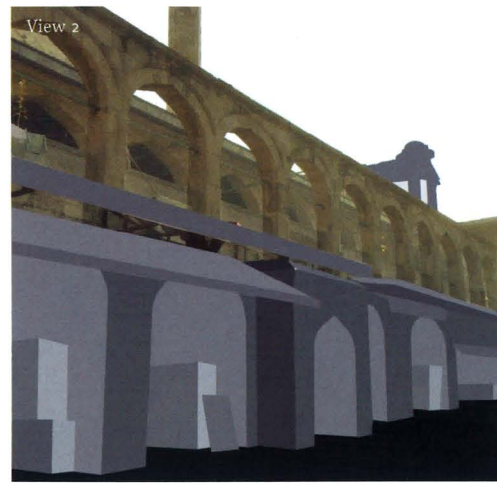
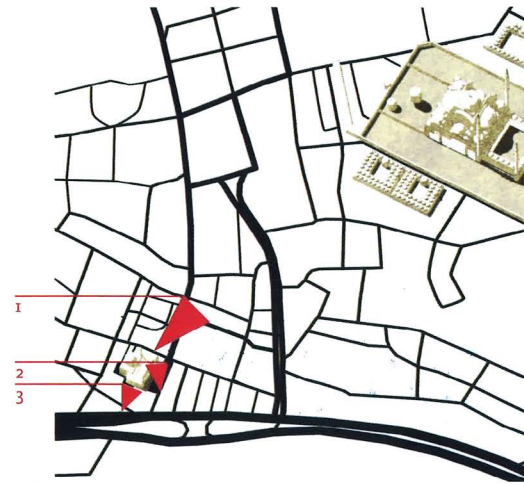
This pyramidal domed mosque with twin minarets was built in memory of Süleyman's favourite son who died in his early 20s. Less prominent on the skyline than others, this mosque marks an important city node; the intersection of the Byzantine ceremonial avenue Divanyolu and the Roman Valen's aqueduct. Legend has it that Sinan dismantled part of the aqueduct, replacing it with a syphon so that Şehzade Mosque's twin minarets maintained a privileged position on the skyline, unencumbered by infrastructure, ensuring an urban legacy.

The mosque sits asymmetrically to Divanyolu Street, a special moment on this critical artery, which provides an ideal view of elaborate facade through a paradise-like walled garden, a place designed to alleviate the sorrow of the mourning sultan. Historically this mosque appears to have been surrounded by the camp of the Janissaries (the sultan's household troops and bodyguards) and would have been a place of sanctuary in a busy military area; a lush garden glimpsed through the windows in the mosque wall.

The mosque today sits in a series of open plazas which provide an unusual sense of lateral space in the density of the old city, offering an horizontal counterpoint to the slender minarets emerging from the complex.<sup>4</sup>



View 3



### Rüstem Pasha Mosque: 1561

The smallest of the three mosques is dedicated to Rüstem Pasha<sup>5</sup>, one of the Ottoman Empire's most pious, yet commercially minded, grand viziers.

In the view from the waterfront the broad dome and single minaret are key features of the foreground, acting as visual gateway marker to the pinnacle of the Sultan's Süleymaniye Mosque that dominates the skyline beyond. Its presence leads your eye from the scale of the foreshore, over the cluttered markets of the city.

Located in the centre of commerce on the edge of the port, Rüstem Pasha is perched on a plinth of busy shops and market stalls. Instead of drawing attention to itself with an overly refined articulation, it lets its form speak tectonically to the Süleymaniye above, by sharing with it a compositional dialogue of domes and minarets merging on the horizon. By contrast its interiors are surprisingly decorated – a triumph of brightly coloured ceramics.

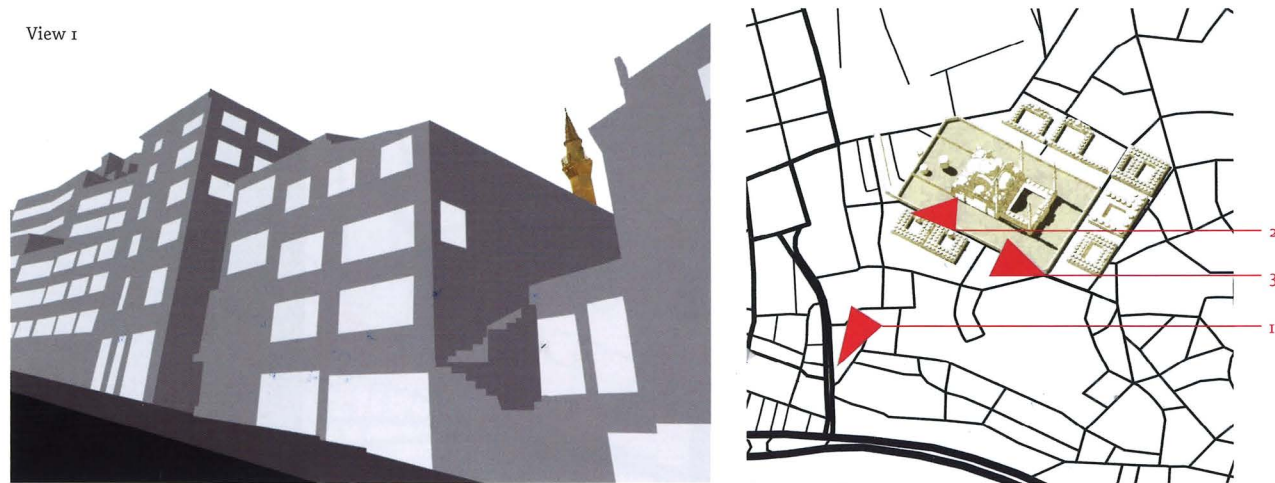
Elevating the mosque above a massive substructure filled with bustling markets, Sinan not only managed to fully exploit the commercial potential of the site but also succeeded in enhancing its visibility, turning Rüstem Pasha into a prominent landmark that dominates a key point in the metropolis. While not claiming the highest hill, the mosque subtly exploits a more everyday vista, and in a way makes the nature of the close relationship between the sultan and his grand vizier abundantly clear.

This colourful sanctuary watches over the bustling city, barely interrupting the tightly knit urban grain but for a slight widening of public realm created by the inflection to Mecca and the unassuming stairwells leading to the colonnaded courtyard on the first floor.

In order to accommodate the angled orientation of the mosque towards Mecca, one of the neighbouring streets was widened to form a small triangular piazza, which provides an ideal perspective of the building as one approaches it. Unlike the other mosques we have studied, here no attempt was made to redefine the urban tissue with a garden enclosure that would have clearly separated the domain of sacred from that of the profane. Four enclosed staircases act instead as transitional spaces leading to the serene sanctuary above the market, and further embedding the mosque in the city.<sup>6</sup>



View 1



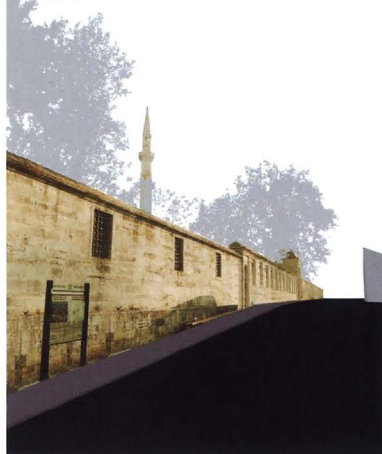
**Süleymaniye Mosque: 1550**

Süleymaniye Mosque is a huge complex designed by Sinan to celebrate the status of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent at the heart of state and religion in the Ottoman Empire. The pyramidal domes and two pairs of minarets, of purposely differing heights, crown the skyline, highlighting this centre of learning and sharia law. Sitting atop one of the peninsula's highest hills, the layered domes and terraced landscape appear to become part of the natural topography of the city. 'Sinan reshaped the sloping terrain with terracing and retaining walls in such a way that the mosque complex seems to grow organically from the third hill of the city.'<sup>7</sup>

Uniquely among the mosques we visited, Süleymaniye has a reciprocal relationship with the city, not only contributing the key visual highlight of its skyline but also providing a panoramic view back towards the temporal city and Golden Horn below from divine garden within its precinct.

The sultan's complex is removed from the hustle and bustle of the commercial city, lying at the heart of a quiet residential neighbourhood. The approach is via the corners of the complex, up steep, narrow streets gaining diagonal perspectival views that hint at a building so large as to be impossible to see in a single frame. There are no formal axis without these imposing walls, screening the mosque. Arriving at the top of the hill, small eye-level perforations through the marble provide inviting glimpsed vistas of the gardens and golden light within, which are especially captivating in the evening. It is only when you pass through the portal gates into the sacred space that you see the composition as a whole in its ideal geometry, to then enter a further cinematic sequence that culminates in the view back across the city from which you have come, offering reflection and transcendent tranquillity.

View 2



View 3



1 Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, 2005, p54  
 2 Pamuk, *ibid*, p230  
 3 Le Corbusier, *Urbanisme* (Eng. translation: *The City of Tomorrow and its Planning*) the

Architectural Press: London, 1929-71, p79  
 4 Necipoğlu, *ibid*, pp191-206  
 5 Rüstem Pasha (1500-1561), a Bosnian by birth, was the son-in-law and a grand vezir

of Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent (1520-1566)  
 6 See Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan*, Reaktion Books: London, 2005, pp314-321  
 7 Necipoğlu, *ibid*, p212