Ottoman Expressions of Early Modernity and the “Inevitable” Question of Westernization

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The conspicuous appearance, in 1793, of the princely pavilion of Neşatabad on the shores of the Bosphorus in Istanbul captured the attention of many contemporary observers (Figure 1). Commissioned by Selim III and designed by the German architect and Istanbul resident Antoine-Ignace Melling, Neşatabad was intended as an extension of the eighty-year-old waterfront palace of the ruler’s sister, Hatice Sultan. The following verse by Enderunlu Fazil Bey was among hundreds of others composed by poets in celebration of the new structure:

Come and enjoy the heavenly view from this pavilion of Neşatabad,
From this building created deliberately with an innovative design!
No colors on its walls; in its monochrome garment, it is simply perfect.
Compared to this new edifice, the older palace looks coarse.
It is a pretty young beauty, full of harmony,
Whose symmetrical form is more delightful than a boy’s graceful stature.
Its ornamented form is as though cast out of a mold
It is beyond the reach of the most talented master
Never [before] has such a design been seen among the older masters!

Neither its design nor its new colors and novel ornaments have ever been witnessed by either Mani or even Behzad.

Conceived as an inscription to commemorate Neşatabad and honor its founding patron, Fazil’s ode sounds, above all, like a tribute to the building’s novel aesthetics and the creative imagination that gave birth to it. Overflowing with praise for the pavilion’s singular character, the poem alludes to its design “of new invention,” its unique proportions, the symmetrical layout of its façade, and its novel decorative repertoire. Fazil also noted the immaculate white color of its walls, doubtless a reference to the building’s marble revetment, which must have stood out among the dark-red wooden walls of contemporary princely palaces. Although he did not point specifically to the bulky central pediment, the Ionic capitals, or the garland motifs, his observations clearly convey Melling’s distinctively new façade treatment of the familiar type of waterfront palace, one that had matured in the course of the eighteenth century.

Fazil’s poem may be regarded as one of the last manifestations of the Ottoman architectural discourse of the eighteenth century, one of whose central motifs was the celebration of novelty. In comparison with earlier periods, the constant recurrence of the notions of innovation, inventiveness, originality, and creativity in eighteenth-century Ottoman writings on architecture is striking. These references consist principally of building descriptions and
accounts of architectural achievements recorded by historians and chroniclers, as well as court poets who created rhymed building chronograms, a genre largely overlooked today that gained in popularity from the turn of the eighteenth century onward. Like Fazıl’s ode to Neşatabad, rhymed chronograms were composed in celebration of architectural events and often appeared as inscriptions on the buildings they celebrated. Besides serving as documentation of a largely lost architectural world, they offer rare insights into the understanding and reception of architecture at the time, a subject that has not been sufficiently addressed in Ottoman architectural history and in the field of Islamic art in general.

Although Ottoman writings on the subject of novelty did not amount to the kind of philosophical debate that emerged in contemporary Europe, they constituted, in their own way, a distinctive form of discourse during a period when novelty and originality were invoked as measures of architectural appreciation. In poetry and prose alike, terms and idioms like nev (new), cedid (new), nev-icad (new invention), tāze (fresh), ilgitrâʿ (invention), ḥayâl (imagination), bedîʿ and ibdâʿ (original, to create from scratch), and vaguer allusions to novelty such as ḥîṣn-ʾi dîğer (a different sort of beauty) and ʿîslûb-ʾi ferâd (a unique style), were all repeatedly used in connection with a building’s overall form, façades, plan, layout, and design. They also appeared in relation to specific elements including pillars, cornices, windows, colors, other decorative features, and style (tarz, ʿîslûb), the latter occasionally contrasted with the “old or ancient style” (tarz-ʾi miṭakaddimin) of earlier monuments.

To a large extent, the Ottomans’ emphasis on novelty mirrored the rapidly changing landscape of Istanbul in the eighteenth century. By all accounts, this had been an extraordinary moment in the architectural culture of the city. In the hundred years that followed the decisive return of the court of Ahmed III to the capital in the summer of 1703, new forms, expressions, colors, designs, and aesthetics continued to appear. An unusually ornate and flamboyant decorative vocabulary took shape, incorporating new and familiar elements and drawing on earlier Ottoman repertoires and foreign visual cultures. For the first time, architecture flourished outside the confines of the classical imperial canon that had been formulated around the middle of the sixteenth century, during the period of state centralization and imperial expansion under Sultan Süleyman.

While the Ottomans’ insistence on conveying visual expressions of novelty in their writings was a reflection of these developments, it also reflected a new attitude toward change, novelty, and a long-established architectural tradition. This was a significant turning point in the Ottomans’ interpretation of their built environment, and one that has not been given its due in modern scholarship. While a recent surge of interest in the artistic and architectural production of the eighteenth century has rescued this period
from its earlier characterization as an era of decline, the emphasis placed on the influence of European culture and aesthetics and on the role of the Ottomans' westernizing aspirations in informing architectural change has considerably eclipsed the extensive and multifarious nature of the century's developments. Because Ottoman westernization remains the dominant rhetoric in interpretations of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, any assessment of Ottoman architecture in the postclassical and the late period must address the question. While in the context of the nineteenth century this concept is identified with the state-led Ottoman architecture in the postclassical and the late period eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, any assessment of Vienna in 1683. It has even been argued, in keeping with modernizing reforms that started under Mahmud II,10 in the eighteenth century, westernization, understood as the chief vehicle of architectural and cultural change, is more broadly circumscribed in the rise of European military supremacy vis-à-vis the Ottomans after the latter's defeat at Vienna in 1683. It has even been argued, in keeping with the largely dated paradigm of the "rise and decline" of the empire, that it was the "faltering of [Ottoman] self-confidence"11 that lay at the crux of the new westernizing outlook, which was to shape the architectural and, indeed, the cultural horizon for the next two hundred years.

In the dominant narrative of Ottoman history, the eighteenth century inaugurates a new era of peace and diplomacy with Europe, whose military superiority was at this point widely acknowledged. It is against this backdrop that the image of Istanbul emerges, its architectural culture transformed by the energy of a ruling elite engaged in the cultivation of a new interest in European culture. The increasing incorporation of western aesthetics in the Ottoman vocabulary is thus commonly understood as one of myriad symptoms of an overarching cultural aspiration. By and large, architecture is seldom invoked except as a response or a reaction to the West.12

In seeking to redress the scholarly tendency to regard eighteenth-century innovation as synonymous with westernization, I do not mean to suggest that the Ottomans' changing attitude toward Europe was inconsequential to some of the developments that occurred in the capital. There is no doubt that the intensification of diplomatic exchange with European powers brought about greater exposure to western artistic knowledge and techniques, literary ideas, sartorial fashions, and material culture.13 In architecture, certain Neoclassical, Baroque, and Rococo elements gradually permeated the architecture of Istanbul, especially from the 1750s on. Toward the close of the century, it became a commonplace for the court entourage to commission their private residences from European architects.

However, these trends were not necessarily indicative of a sudden inclination toward westernization, in the charged sense of a deliberate emulation of western ways. In fact, they were hardly exceptional to the history of Ottoman architecture.14 To regard the eighteenth century as a turning point in Ottoman interaction with Europe is to ignore over two centuries of virtually continuous cultural and artistic contact. It is also to accept the fallacy of a fundamental polarity between the two geocultural entities, whereby cultural encounter can occur only in situations of unequal power and in the form of "influence," "without a choice by the allegedly passive receiver."15

While there is no doubt that in the eighteenth century western details infiltrated the architectural idiom of Istanbul more pervasively than they had before, it is crucial to reevaluate the significance of this current against visual and architectural evidence, and against the two often diverging discourses that emerged among contemporary European and Ottoman observers of change. Modern scholars' characterization of change in the eighteenth century as the beginning of a long and unilinear march toward westernization reflects only one facet of two centuries of reformation of Ottoman architectural and indeed, sovereign identity. While this search for a new image was, in part, a response to the military blow the empire had just suffered at the hands of European powers, it also answered to the pressure of internal transformations. By the eighteenth century, the system of hierarchies that had exemplified the Ottoman world order was eroding. While many contemporary critics saw these changes as signs of the breakdown of social order and the decline of the empire, they can also be viewed as symptomatic of what, in the distant context of Europe, is now known as the early modern period.16 Greater mobility among social and professional groups led to new social and financial aspirations, increasing material wealth, changing habits of consumption and of recreational and cultural practices, and the wearing out of stable marks of distinction. These patterns became integral to the social landscape of the city and began to crystallize in its physical fabric.

This climate of change was accompanied by a wider receptiveness to novelty that was equally inclusive of western and eastern, and early and classical Ottoman traditions. A new architectural idiom, profoundly hybrid in aesthetics and outlook, grew out of the dynamic that was played out in Istanbul between an urban society in flux and a state anxious to reassert its presence in the capital and revamp the image of sovereignty. Eighteenth-century developments did not constitute a sharp break with the past. Rather, they matured in the context of emerging practices and aspirations that started consolidating in the fabric of the city. Nor were they halted by the modernizing reforms of the following cen-
tury. To a certain extent, they informed the course of later change.

Returning to Fazil’s depiction of the pavilion, it is curious that for all his expressed admiration for the building’s innovativeness, the poet’s verse does not describe what seems to a modern eye to be its most flagrant characteristic, namely, the western decorative style. Fazil’s allusion to Mani and Behzad (a traditional trope in Ottoman poetry) may be read as a discreet reference to this feature: “Neither its design nor its new colors and novel ornaments/have ever been witnessed by either Mani or even Behzad.” In this context, invocation of these two archetypal artists of the “eastern” Persian tradition could be interpreted as the poet’s defiant championing of the western novelty of Neşatabad, perhaps even suggesting that by its sheer inventiveness western art had outdone its eastern counterpart.

However, it should be noted that Fazil makes no direct reference to the pavilion’s European flavor, unlike fifteenth-century commentators such as Tursun Beg or Kemalpaşazade. In their observations of the Topkapi Palace, for example, both historians identified Mehmed Fatih’s gate towers, which were modeled after the Byzantine gate of Sta. Barbara and may have involved some European artists, as “European towers” (frengi-burgâz) (Figure 2).

It seems inappropriate to conclude that Fazil’s failure to overtly recognize western elements stemmed from insufficient visual cognition or from the lack of a priori knowledge that would allow him to perceive such stylistic references. The very title of his ode, “Chronogram on the New Pavilion Which Is a European Construction, in the Felicitous Waterfront Residence of Neşatabad,” testifies to his awareness of the fact that the pavilion was designed by a European architect. One could argue that regardless of how well-informed he was, Fazil may have deemed any verbalization of things western conceptually or ideologically outside the canon of the court poetic tradition. He once temporarily held similarly conservative views on the representation of women in court poetry. However, this argument is countered by the elaborate descriptions of European men and women in his two narrative poems “Hâbânnâme” and “Zênnânâme” (The book of men and The book of women), and in any case, terms like Frengistan (for Europe) and other western references had been introduced in court poetry more than half a century earlier.

What is perhaps most frustrating about Fazil’s choice not to acknowledge the origin of the features of Neşatabad he so appreciated is that it upsets our modern expectations that by virtue of their nature as western, hence foreign, these features would have been clearly distinguishable from the rest. But it is important to recall here that western aesthetics had long been part of the architectural landscape of Istanbul. Moreover, the religious and ethnic diversity of the empire (unlike the homogeneity of European societies) meant that men and women in the capital did not have to relate to things European through a process of cultural Othering. (Hardly ever did the spectacle of westerners in Istanbul provoke the mixture of awe and curiosity that Ottoman [and Persian] ambassadors evoked in westerners.) That Fazil’s architectural universe was not neatly divided between an East and a West should not be surprising. It was, after all,
the same poet who once declared, in “Hübanname,” that “Now, the most beautiful of all/the cities of the continent of Europe/Is the one [and only], the noble city of Istanbul.”

The elusive treatment of western formal and decorative elements is not peculiar to Fazil’s poem about Neşatabad. Historical accounts of the imperial mosque of Nurosmaniye are remarkable in this respect. Founded by Mahmud I in 1749 and completed by his successor Osman III, in 1755, the Nurosmaniye was the first Ottoman religious building to exhibit a panoply of western, particularly, French Baroque and Neoclassical, details like scrolls, shells, cable and round moldings, undulating and heavily molded cornices, concave and convex façades, round arches, engaged pillars, and fluted capitals (Figures 3, 4). In addition to incorporating such elements, it was also the first mosque in Istanbul to introduce generously fenestrated and relatively transparent façades, a horseshoe-shaped courtyard, and an imposing royal ramp and loggia (Figure 5), the epitome of an idea developed at the beginning of the seventeenth century at the mosque of Ahmed I (1609–17).

While all Ottoman observers addressed, in greater or less detail, the innovative character of the mosque, their accounts and descriptions seem incommensurate with the image of the mosque conveyed by modern historians as the archetypal illustration of the westernizing inclinations of the Ottoman ruling elite. Eighteenth-century commentators remarked on the new style of the Nurosmaniye, pointing to the many features they recognized as novel to the mosque idiom of their city: the engaged pillars, whose capitals merged with a molded cornice, the excessive number of windows, their round and multilobed arches, the imperial ramp and lodge, and the somewhat Baroque fountain at the outer gate of the complex (Figure 6).

In his Tarihi Câmi-i Şerif-i Nûr-i ‘Osmâni (History of the mosque of Nurosmaniye), Ahmed Efendi, assistant comptroller of the mosque’s construction, referred to the building as “the honorable mosque in the new style” (câmi-i şerif-i nev-tarz) and characterized its profusely ornamented fountain-sebil as “a skillfully crafted fountain of unique beauty.” Later in the century, the Armenian chronicler Inci-
cyan praised the style of the Nurosmaniye as superior to that of all the other mosques in Istanbul. He mentioned its windows, its marble pillars, columns, and capitals as its most appealing features.27 In a brief entry on the mosque in his Hadikat ul-Cevâmi’ (The garden of the mosques), Ayvansarayi pointed to its grandiose ramp and loggia (biünkâr mahfili), construing it correctly as a symbol of royalty.28

The Ottomans’ reluctance to single out features of western origin becomes all the more interesting when compared to the accounts of their European counterparts. Full of praise for Mahmud I for his “good taste in architecture,” James Dallaway, an English visitor who traveled to Istanbul some thirty years after the mosque was completed, explained that the founder of the Nurosmaniye had “pro\-cured designs of the most celebrated European churches, [and] wished to have adopted the plan of one of them [as a model for his mosque], but was dissuaded by the ulemâh [the learned and religious elite].”29 This curious tale was recounted in more detail by the Reverend Robert Walsh, a compatriot of Dallaway who visited the city in the nineteenth century: “In order to make [the Nurosmaniye] more splendid than that of any of his predecessors, Mahmud I sent architects to collect the models of the Christian cathedrals in Europe, that his mosque might be constructed from the perfections of them all. This heterodox intention, however, was opposed by the Ulemah, who denounced it as a desecration of a temple dedicated to the Prophet; and while he hesitated in his plans, and before he had matured the
whole design, death overtook him, and he left the mosque unfinished.\textsuperscript{30}

Whether or not the travelers fabricated the story in its entirety, or based their accounts on hearsay about the unusual character or the new style of the mosque, is a question that is impossible to resolve at this point. But it is odd that not even a hint of such intentions on the part of Mahmut I should be dropped by the usually well informed court chroniclers, or by Ayvansarayi in his meticulous and encyclopedic chronicle of the mosques of Istanbul. This silence is all the more perplexing in the case of Ahmed Efendi, who by virtue of his job and his obvious interest in the mosque's history (testified to by his initiative in recording it in writing) should have been, in all likelihood, aware of such a significant fact. If we suppose that all these commentators thought it better to hush the ruler's presumably heterodox intentions, other conservative and more acerbic critics, like the self-appointed historian Şemdanizade, should have been delighted to expose a purported act of profanity. Given the ease with which he unleashed his sharp tongue against all echelons of society, on issues ranging from women's unseemly décolletés to the debauchery of one of the most influential men of his time, Grand-Vizier Nevşehirli Ibrahim Pasha, the cursory remarks he offered on the Nurosmaniye and its patron seem surprising, if not incongruous.\textsuperscript{31}

The discrepancy between Ottoman and European reports is interesting not only not only because it calls into question the ultimate motives of the building patron, but also because it casts doubt on the conspicuousness of western stylistic references and their significance to the mosque's unmistakably new idiom. Compared with the commentaries of European travelers, the Ottomans' accounts reflected a horizon of innovations beyond western details, including such notable features as the horseshoe-shaped court, the monumental royal ramp, and the abundant fenestration. While they recognized western imports as part of the new vocabulary, the role of westernization as an avowed stylistic or cultural aspiration seems to have been, to their eyes, rather inconsequential.

Speculations similar to those offered by European observers in connection with the Nurosmaniye have surrounded the innovations of the imperial palace of Sa‘dabad, built in Istanbul for Ahmed III by his grand-vizier, Nevşehirli, and in modern historiography another celebrated monument of the Ottomans' western ideals. Written and visual representations of the palace precinct, summarized in the reconstruction plans of the notable early-twentieth-century Turkish architect Sedad Hakki Eldem (Figure 7), show that its central area comprised the imperial palace, which consisted of a harem, a selamlık (the male quarters), a mosque, a garden pavilion, a small fountain, and a large pool that was fed from the nearby Kağıthane stream by means of a canal and a complex system of conduits, dykes, and cascades (Figures 8, 9). To the south and northeast of the main palace, 170 residences and gardens for state officials, “built in a hitherto unseen style [tarzlari nā-dide] and according to a beautiful and admirable layout [tarhlari mathu‘ u pesendide]” were erected on either side of the canal and the river.\textsuperscript{32}

According to numerous European travelers and residents, Sa‘dabad was supposedly modeled after a contemporary French palace, a set of whose plans had been brought back from France by Yirmisekiz Mehmed Çelebi, Ottoman ambassador to the court of Louis XV, in October 1721, that is, nine months before the construction of Sa‘dabad began. The Marquis de Bonnac, French ambassador at the Ottoman court at the time, and a number of later European

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**Figure 7** Sedad Hakki Eldem, plan of Sa‘dabad, Istanbul, 1720-21
Figure 8  Anonymous painted illustration of the garden of Sa‘dabad at Kağthane, Istanbul, ca. 1720s

Figure 9  L’Espinasse, engraving showing the palace of Sa‘dabad and the garden of Kağthane, ca. 1770s
travelers, including Dallaway, Rev. Walsh, the Baron de Tott, Charles Pertusier, and the Comtesse de Ferté-Meun, offered, each in turn, a French model for the palace, whether Versailles, Fontainebleau, or Marly.\(^3\)

Despite the lack of consensus on the specific source of inspiration, in the absence of more revealing evidence we cannot completely discredit their accounts; nor can we exclude the possibility that some of the architectural and landscape features of the palace may have been inspired by a French precedent. We could certainly establish a correspondence, for instance, between the one-kilometer-long canal at Sa’dabad and another, equally long and twice as imposing, at Fontainebleau. We could also suggest that Küçük Çelebi’s reference to the “hitherto unseen style” of the residences and gardens of state officials may have been an allusion to a new western style.\(^4\) But given the lack of visual evidence and the scarcity of written descriptions of the canal and river sections of the palatial precinct (which were destroyed some ten years after they were built, in 1730, in the wake of the Patrona Halil revolt), the suggestion cannot be substantiated at this point.

What is certain is that neither in design nor in style, size, or scale can any of the proposed models compare with the central, better documented part of the palace. Nor can the view advanced by some European observers and recent scholars that Sa’dabad’s waterworks (see Figure 8) were based on drawings of the cascades at Marly be verified.\(^5\) At best, the feature could have been inspired by the lengthy but vague description of the French palace and garden Yirmisekiz supplied in his embassy report to the court on his return from France or, more generally, by his enthusiastic depictions of the sophisticated jeux d’eau he had observed at every French garden he visited.\(^6\) For it is only much later that visual documentation of Marly became available to the Ottomans, in the form of a book titled *Architecture française*, published in 1738, more than fifteen years after Sa’dabad was completed.\(^7\)

In any case, neither poets nor court historians, who devoted more space in their writings to Sa’dabad than to any other building of their time, offer any clue that the planning of the imperial palace may have been informed by a western model or that it may have been related in some way to the architectural knowledge Yirmisekiz brought from his embassy to France. Rather, it was in the “East” that Ottoman observers sought to identify architectural models for the palace. I am not referring to symbolic allusions to legendary monuments of the eastern world, such as the famed pavilion of Havernak (an old trope of Ottoman literature) but to real architectural achievements that were invoked by poets and chroniclers to better illustrate the challenge confronted by their own accomplishments.

Consider, for instance, this vengeful-sounding depreciation of Isfahan’s Chaharbagh (1596), the famed public promenade built by the Safavid Shah Abbas I in his new capital, Isfahan (Figure 10)\(^8\). “With blots and scores, it scarred Isfahan’s Chaharbagh/Sa’dabad has now become a garden upon a hill, my love.”\(^9\) The verse, written by the court poet Nedim, was evidently meant to exalt the beauty of his beloved garden of Sa’dabad, and to affirm its glaring superiority to the Chaharbagh promenade. Composed in 1722, at a time when the Safavid capital was badly struggling against an Afghan occupation, Nedim’s poem was, without any doubt, a reference to the bygone glory of Isfahan. Yet at the same time, it also testified to the continuing significance, in Ottoman architectural consciousness, of Shah Abbas’s magnificent achievement. It is in the same vindictive spirit that Nedim described, a few years later, the Ottoman palatial garden of Şevkabad, built around 1728 by Saliba Sultan, the mother of Mahmud I, in Beylerbeyi\(^10\) as a smashing triumph over a contemporary Safavid masterpiece, the palace garden of Ferahabad, which was constructed in 1700 by Shah Husayn in Isfahan: “How wonderful! How wonderful, may it be blessed!/Every one of its shaded avenues is a sinecure for gay life and pleasure/From envy of its abundant pure breeze/Isfahan’s Ferahabad crumbled in ruins.”\(^11\)

Similar analogies between Ottoman and Safavid monuments appear in chroniclers’ accounts of architectural
events. In his account of Mahmud I’s renovation of the Arab Iskelesi Mosque in Istanbul, in 1748, the historian Şemdanizade alluded to a new imperial pavilion at the nearby palace of Beşiktaş, identifying it as cebel sütün (forty, or many, pillars): “Following the construction of the cebel sütün, a mosque located in the [nearby quarter of] Arab Iskelesi was enlarged and [re]built.” The pavilion, erected by Mahmud I and known as Iftariye Köşkü or Bayildim, was a two-story building fronted by a porch with twenty-two pillars and a large reflecting pool (Figure 11). Şemdanizade may have used the term cebel sütün as a loose reference to the pavilion’s many pillars. But he may also have meant to allude to his perception (or knowledge) of a visual analogy between Mahmud I’s Bayildim and the Safavid pavilion of Chihil Sutun, which had been constructed in the middle of the seventeenth century by Shah Abbas II around Abbas I’s famous Meydan-i Shah in Isfahan. The Chihil Sutun was fronted by eighteen pillars, which were reflected in a large pool, and it had been freshly restored by Shah Husayn at the beginning of the eighteenth century (Figure 11).

It may be far-fetched to intimate from these allusions alone that in the mind of Mahmud I the pavilion of Iftariye was meant to outdo Abbas II’s Chihil Sutun (at least by four pillars) or that the Chaharbagh served as a model in Ahmed III and Nevşehirli’s conceptions of Sa’dabad. We must nonetheless bear in mind that such monuments of the Persian world were known to the Ottomans, at least to those close to palace culture, not only through Persian poems and histories, but also from accounts of Safavid, Ottoman, and European diplomats, travelers, and merchants. In their reports of diplomatic visits by Persian envoys, Ottoman court chroniclers often recorded oral exchanges on the architecture and overall beauty of the two imperial capitals. The conversations were part of an entertainment ceremonial in which the two parties also exchanged poetic, musical, and calligraphic skills through various displays of talent seemingly highly competitive in spirit. In the context of these cultural contests, the Chaharbagh of Shah Abbas enjoyed particular prominence. As early as 1699, the Ottoman envoy to the Safavid court, Mehmed Pasha, mentioned the promenade in his report to the Ottoman court, describing it as “a place of fame.” Six year later, the Ottoman grand-vizier Dizdarzade Ahmed Pasha, anxious to demonstrate the splendor of his city to Murtaza Kulu Han, the Persian ambassador on a mission in Istanbul, launched a conversation by declaring “[You] might have a garden called Chaharbagh in your city of Isfahan, [but] we too [in Istanbul] have a heavenly pleasure [garden].” The fact that the century-old promenade was so alive in eighteenth-century Ottoman minds may suggest that poets’ repeated allusions to it in relation to Sa’dabad was not fortuitous, and that in the eyes of contemporary viewers the Ottoman palace did evoke connections with its
assigned Persian counterpart. Indeed, it is difficult to dis-
count the “conceptual,” if not formal, link between, on the
one hand, Isfahan’s Chaharbagh, a long avenue bisected by
a canal and bordering the royal precinct and the gardens
and residences of Safavid court dignitaries (Figure 13; see
Figure 10) and, on the other hand, the stretch of residences
of Ottoman grandees at Sa‘dabad, located on both sides of
the canal farther down the Kağıthane stream (see Figure 7).
Neither in concept nor in planning did Sa‘dabad have a
precedent in Ottoman imperial palatine architecture.

Equally relevant in this regard is the absence of a solid
enclosure around the imperial compound of Sa‘dabad.
Unlike its sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century proto-
types secluded behind walls of cypresses and masonry, such
as Süleyman’s suburban palaces at Beykoz and Üsküdar,
Sa‘dabad was only partly enclosed by wooden screens and
a pierced masonry wall (see Figures 8, 9). Its visual expo-
sure to the surrounding public grounds, notably the adja-
cent promenade of Kağıthane, was noted by contemporary
observers. Unprecedented in the Ottoman palatial tradi-
tion, this setting echoed rather the visual relation between
the Chaharbagh and the palatial gardens alongside it.
Fenced off by lattice screens, the private gardens were par-
tially visible from the public promenade (see Figure 10).

Such a connection would be particularly significant, as
it bears not only on the planning of Sa‘dabad but, more
generally, on the development of imperial and grandees’
palaces, pavilions, and gardens in the eighteenth century.
For unlike earlier suburban palaces, which were situated
inland and surrounded by walled gardens, or the imperial
palace of Topkapi, which was perched on its peninsula and
isolated from the rest of the city behind fortification walls
(Figure 14), eighteenth-century palaces and pavilions were

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Figure 13 Plan of Isfahan showing the Chaharbagh promenade, Isfahan

Figure 14 Guillaume Joseph Grelot, engraving, ca. 1672. Detail from
a panoramic view showing the Topkapi Palace, Istanbul
built mostly along the open shores of the Bosphorus and the Golden Horn. Their generous fenestration, their airy wooden structures, and the lightness of their garden enclosures lent them a remarkable transparency that was clearly conveyed in contemporary pictorial representations (Figure 15; see Figure 1). Their partial exposure to public view comes across wonderfully in two painted garden scenes from the 1720s: in the first, two peeping toms sneak a look at a group of women entertaining themselves in the garden, and in the second an exhibitionist exposes himself through the fence of a private garden (Figures 16, 17).

We must also note the curious kinship of the newly acquired names of Ottoman imperial and grandees’ palaces and gardens with those of the Safavid, like Sa’ad-abad with Sa’adet-abad, one of Shah Abbas’s private gardens in Isfahan, both meaning the Abode of Happiness. In an entry in his personal diary dated 10 August 1722, the bureaucrat Mustafa Efendi reported that in the wake of the construction of Ahmed III’s palace the place previously known as Kağıthane was increasingly referred to as Sa’dabad. These eponymous associations with Safavid monuments and, more generally, the trend of ascribing garden palaces of the imperial and ruling elite with poetic names in the manner of their Persian counterparts, as with Feyzabad, Hurremabad, and Neşatabad, dated only to the reign of Ahmed III (r. 1703–30). With a handful of exceptions like the Kule Bahçesi, a waterfront garden built in Çengelköy by Sultan Süleyman, and the palace of Tokat, erected by Mehmed Fatih in Beykoz and so named in commemoration of the conqueror’s victory over the citadel of Tokat, imperial palatial gardens were, until the beginning of the eighteenth century, plainly called hâs bagfe (imperial garden) and identified by their location. The fifteenth-century garden of Tokat, we learn from the poet Nevres, was renamed Hümâyûnabad (the Imperial Abode) only upon its restoration by Mahmud I: “Cruel fortune had made it such ruins / That the architect had to envision [even] its minutest details / By making the necessary restorations, he built it such / That the mind of the creator gave it the name of Hümâyûnabad.”

Limited as the evidence may be, it suggests that the emblematic power of Safavid Persia as a model to measure up to strongly resonated in eighteenth-century Ottoman consciousness. The same could be argued in connection with the development of a new Ottoman imperial image and the increasingly public nature of court ceremonial that paralleled the formal evolution of imperial palaces and gardens. Indeed, in contrast with the ideal of the ruler’s seclusion and invisibility, which had governed Ottoman court etiquette since its codification in the second half of the fifteenth century, the new imperial image thrived on visibility and public display. Surely, the change in behavioral code was first and foremost a response to the social and political environment of the time, a reflection of the state’s anxiety to reaffirm its legit-
imacy in the wake of defeat and reassert its physical presence in the capital city. As the veiled symbolism of traditional forms of imperial representation no longer seemed suitable, it is not surprising that models for the new imperial image were sought in other imperial traditions. And while it has been suggested that this shift reflected an attempt to emulate the image of contemporary French kings, we could also argue that the change may have been inspired by the famed public image that the Safavid Shah had cultivated for himself more than a century earlier. Other evidence points to an active interest in the universe of this charismatic figure and once-powerful rival to the Ottoman empire. For the first time, in the 1720s, an Ottoman translation of the most important history of the reign of Shah Abbas, Tārīkh-i ʿālam-ārā-yi ʿAbbāsī, written by one of his chief secretaries, Iskander Beg Munshi, was requested. That it was commissioned by Nevşehirli Ibrahim Pasha, the grand-vizier reputed for his interest in western culture, is all the more significant.

While the idiomatic link between Ottoman and Safavid architectural cultures established by the sources may have been, ultimately, more symbolic than stylistic or iconographic, it clearly indicates that architectural exemplars of Safavid Persia must have been alive in the Ottoman architectural and literary discourse, until at least around the middle of the century. Gradually, after the disastrous Ottoman campaign in Persia in 1730 and the rapid downfall of the Safavid dynasty, vivid architectural images such as those we encountered in the poetry of Nedim, or in Şemdanizade’s history, began to lose both their interest and immediacy. In the latter part of the century, while Isfahan (and Mani and Behzad) maintained their symbolic role of witnesses to the
architectural magnificence of the Ottomans, specific architectural connections to Persia slowly disappeared.

The discussion of the predominance of the Persian model is not intended to suggest an East-West polarity. But in view of the tendency in scholarship to overplay the role of westernization in interpretations of change in this period, it is important to bear in mind that innovations existed within a much broader discourse, in which Persia, for example, remained a potent challenge to, as well as a cultural universe in continuous contact with, the Ottoman empire. As stated earlier, western imports were one element in a wide search for a new and independent aesthetic that drew as much on Safavid Persian, Mughal Indian, and Ottoman preclassical and classical visual repertoires. By their appropriation and integration in this stylistically uncommitted visual environment, they defied any attempt by observers to single them out, let alone invest them with a particular cultural signification.

With this in mind, it is important to reconsider our understanding of the concept of “influence,” which is often assumed by art and architectural historians to be hegemonic and unidirectional, especially in contexts characterized by an imbalance of power. Suffice it to recall here the trend of turqueries that swept the spheres of architecture, landscape, painting, and sartorial fashion in eighteenth-century Europe, which was largely construed as a fad for exotic stuff that expressed an urge to reassess the parameters of the seventeenth-century classical ideal. While it may be too soon (and ultimately, impossible) to argue for a comparable Ottoman inclination for the exotic, there is little doubt that the sensibility for novelty and originality was shared by Ottomans and Europeans. Notwithstanding the specifics of each of the two cultural and intellectual milieus, one cannot but wonder what makes a cartouche on a fountain in Istanbul an index of westernization, and a Turkish pavilion in Vienna merely an Oriental folly.

If the architectural idiom of the eighteenth century was far more hybrid than the notion of westernization implies, it was also a vocabulary in which novelty was sought independently or regardless of stylistic genealogies. In this respect, the aesthetic judgments of Ottoman contemporaries closely mirrored the built environment of their time. They bespeak a notion of architectural beauty and excellence that upheld innovation, not a particular aesthetic inclination, as its operative criterion. This bears not only on the nature of architectural change during the period under discussion, but also on a more general transformation in the nature of Ottoman cultural sensibility. The high regard for innovation as an essentially hybrid appropriation and reinterpretation of various new and familiar idioms can be noted in other cultural spheres, including painting, clothing fashion, court music, and poetry. As in architecture, some of the novelties that were introduced in court poetry in the eighteenth century, such as folk forms and genres and colloquial idioms, were not entirely new to the Ottoman tradition. Earlier attempts at breaking away from the classical canon, however, as with the movement known as tiirik-i basit (simple Turkish) adopted by some late-fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century poets, met with negative reception. By contrast, experimentation with new themes, genres, and diction by such court poets as Nedim or Enderululu Fazil was widely acclaimed. More important, it became institutionalized in the mainstream culture. Novelty and originality became subjects of an open debate among court poets throughout the eighteenth century.

While the innovations that occurred within the realm of architecture were remarkable, what really distinguished this era was that architecture, like painting, music, and poetry, reflected a changing disposition toward tradition and innovation, and this new disposition ensured the survival and appreciation of attempts to redefine Ottoman architectural identity beyond the classical idiom. We can better appreciate this development by looking at the way the notion of novelty was construed in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries: as the emulation and refinement of admired models. As Gürür Necipoğlu has demonstrated, while Sinan, the chief architect at the court of Süleyman, represented himself as an innovator, his buildings remained “self-referential exercises within the confines of the canonical imperial idiom which he codified,” and it is in relation to the parameters of this canon that his innovations, or refinements, were assessed and appreciated by his contemporaries. By the eighteenth century, the concept of refinement (nezâket) had vanished from the architectural discourse. Along with it, deferential allusions to classical monuments of the glorious past and to the idiom to which they subscribed slowly disappeared.

To a certain extent, this aesthetic and cultural opening was occasioned by a wider exposure to foreign ideas and material culture. But the greater receptiveness to innovation grew primarily out of a long process of transformation in the Ottoman social order that had begun to crystallize in the architectural and cultural landscape of Istanbul in the eighteenth century. New arenas for the dissemination of culture—notably painting and poetry—emerged, targeting new groups and tastes. With the growing involvement of men and women across the social spectrum in the sphere of patronage, a broader and more diverse range of tastes, practices, and aspirations gradually infused Ottoman architec-
cultural culture. In this environment, in which the size and lavishness of a building and the practice of architectural patronage became viable manifestations of social distinction for more than a few men in the ruling elite, the imperial state attempted to reassert itself, and new modes of representation and a display-conscious image of Ottoman sovereignty were sought. This climate of social change bred the wider receptivity toward innovation and the hybrid aesthetic sensibility that characterized architecture at the time.

The question that remains concerns the extent to which these changes can alter our understanding of the concept of “early modern period” as pertinent only to Europe and, to quote Craig Clunas, “as the inevitable, if implicit, prelude to modernity proper.” To invoke the concept in the Ottoman context is not only to suggest that changing attitudes, tastes, and practices resonated with some of the transformations that unfolded in contemporary European cities. It is also to stress that the changes were not thwarted by the lack of the advent of modernity, nor were they completely superseded by the modernizing programs of the following century.

Greater efforts toward redrawing the boundaries between the two centuries might help us reconsider whether, as is generally perceived, westernization was the only form of continuity between them. The evidence so far points in another direction. As has recently been shown, by the 1860s and 1870s the Ottomans consciously and manifestly harked back to the rich hybridity of the decorative vocabulary of the eighteenth century in their quest for a new architectural identity.

It is clear that some of the developments that unfolded in the decades of architectural modernization and westernization under Mahmud II and Abdülmecid, from the 1820s to the 1860s, were rooted in changes that cannot be squarely identified with western influences but rather grew for the most part out of their own social climate. While considerable work has been done by social historians in recent years to uncover...
patterns that echo, in many ways, what in European historiography has been characterized as a process within early modernity, architectural history lags behind. With parallel developments surfacing in various spheres of nonwestern cultures, comparative studies with eighteenth-century Japan, Ming China, or Russia, for example, are likely to yield new perspectives on the nature and significance of change during this time, as they might also lead us eventually to redefine the notion of “early modern period” beyond the western context.

Notes

I extend special thanks to Peter Parshall, whose insightful comments on an early version of this paper gave it shape as an article. For quotations from chronograms and for publication dates given in the Muslim calendar, I have provided the A.H. (anno heجري) dates of the Muslim calendar with corresponding c.E. dates in parentheses. All translations of Turkish verse are mine.


2. Fazıl himself wrote seven odes to Neşatâbâd. See Divan-i Fazıl Enderun (Anthology of poems by Fazıl Enderun), MS Topkapı Sarayl Muzeesi Kütriphanesi (Topkapı Palace Museum Library; hereafter TSMK), H. 906, fols. 66a–68a; H. 893, fols. 89a–b.

3. “Gel temâşa-ýi cinât et bu Neşatâbâd’dan / Ba huşuş-i iðdas olan bu tarh-i nev-içâddan / Bi televvun bâk bu kim ol câm-i yekrend ile / Eskî tâvûmi ûbá gördük bu nev bunâyâddan / Sâde-rüs bir dil-rubûdûm kim tenasûb ưuzerdir / Hey’et-i mevzânı ûşdar kâmet-i ûşândan . . . / Geldi tarh etti ämi ûşline bu içâdi kim / Resmini görmüş değil üstâdlar eceâddan / Resmi dursun ânda elvân-ï cendid ü naq’-î nev / Hiç ne Mân’î’den görülümdür ne ûd Behzâd’dan.”


6. In eighteenth-century Europe, novelty and originality were beginning to be viewed as positive qualities and entered the aesthetic discourse. See Luc Ferry, Homo Aestheticus: The Invention of Taste in the Democratic Age,


8. For much of the latter half of the seventeenth century, the Ottoman court was involved in war campaigns and resided mainly in the city of Edirne, in Thrace.


15. Cemal Kafadar, Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1995), 24. Roger Chartier’s and Carlo Ginzburg’s alternative paradigms of “appropriation” and “circularity,” respectively, are extremely useful here, as they productively circumvent polarities and help rethink the notion of unilateral influence. See Roger Chartier, “Culture as Appropriation: Popular Cultural Uses in Early Modern France,” in Steven Kaplan, ed., Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the Nineteenth Century (Berlin, New York, and Amsterdam, 1984), 229-53; Carlo Ginzburg’s second preface to The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller, trans. John and Anne


19. Hâfiçânâmâ ve Zennâmânâ (MS İstanbul Üniversitesi Külliyesi, İstanbul University Library; hereafter İUK), Tş 5502, fol. 76. Such contentions were also expressed by the late-eighteenth-century poet Siinbiilzade Vehbi, line Zilfi, The Politics of Piety: The Ottoman Ulema in the Post-Classical Age (1600–1800) (Minneapolis, 1988).


22. “Cümeleni elçi şahsi ânimı/Semti-i iiflîm-i bilad-i Urfâ/Andad���� �� Şîn’nâmâ (Book of men) (İstanbul, 1253 [1837–38]).


25. See, for example, Goodwin, Ottoman Architecture, 383; Denel, Batîlîgâmâ Sûreîncêde İstanbul’dâ Ta’sârim, 28 (see n. 12); Güneyi, Batîlîgâmâ Dönmûndê Türk Resim Sanât, 1700–1850 (Turkish painting in the period of westernization, 1700–1850) (Ankara, 1977), 19 n. 13; Yenilehigüloğlu, “Western Influences,” 158 (see n. 12); Artan, “Architecture as a Theatre of Life,” 59 (see n. 9); Bates, “European Influence,” 178 (see n. 12); Kuban, İstanbul, 351 (see n. 10).


32. “Çeşîl sûütün binâsûndan sonra... Arab-isekelesi’nde vâki‘ câmî tevis’ ve binâ olundu.” Tarîh-i Isma‘îlî ‘Ommâyî Efendi, 42 (see n. 4). Lengthy descriptions of the palace are offered in Tarîh-i ‘Izâmî, 5 vols. (İstanbul, 1867), 5: 443–49; and Tarîh-i ‘Izâmî in ‘Ommâyî Efendi, 41–45; see also the informative, albeit brief depictions by Ýnciçyan, 18. Aârûd Istanbul, 95; Gölpinarlı, Nûmû Dicâns, 52–53 (see n. 20); and the monograph by Sedad Hakî Eldem, Sa’dâbûd (İstanbul, 1977), which brings together a vast number of visual and textual sources of documentation on the palace.

33. Marquis de Bonnac, Mémoire sur l’ambassade de France à Constantinople (Paris, 1894), 84–85; Dallaway, Constantinople Ancient and Modern, 118; Alom and Walsh, Scenery of the Seven Churches, 1: 58; Baron de Tott, Mémoires du Baron de Tott sur les turcs et les tartares, 2 vols. (Amsterdam, 1785), 2: 4 (the reference to a French model could be an editorial note from 1785); Pertouss, Promenades pittoresques, 1: 337 (see n. 4); Fârî-Meun, Lettres sur le Bosphore (Paris, 1821), 62–63. These accounts are often cited in modern scholarship; see Eyice, “XVIII Yüzyüla Türk Sanati,” 168 (see n. 33) and Eldem, Sa’dabad, 6. Visual representations of Louis XIV’s palace, described in Târit -i Radîd, 5 vols. (İstanbul, 1907), 2: 12.


35. This suggestion has been repeated by several architectural historians; see n. 33 and Eldem, Sa’dâbûd, 6. Visual representations of Louis XIV’s palace, gardens, and cascades at Marly (1679–85) are included in Bernt H. Dams and Andrew Zega, Pleasure Pavilions and Follies in the Gardens of the Ancien Régime (Paris and New York, 1995), 56; and Eleanor P. Delorme, Garden Pavilions and the 18th Century French Court (Suffolk, England, 1996), 61. His account was recorded by the court chronicler Raiîd in Tari -i Raçîd, 5: 443–49; and Tarîh-i ‘Izâmî in ‘Ommâyî Efendi, 41–45; see also the informative, albeit brief depictions by Ýnciçyan, 18. Aârûd Istanbul, 95; Gölpinarlı, Nûmû Dicâns, 52–53 (see n. 20); and the monograph by Sedad Hakî Eldem, Sa’dâbûd (İstanbul, 1977), which brings together a vast number of visual and textual sources of documentation on the palace.

37. Architectura françois (Paris, 1738). This book, a collection of plans and drawings by Jules Hardouin Mansart of, among other projects, the palaces of Chantilly, Marly, Meudon, and Versailles, is now located at the Topkapi Museum Library, H. 2607. See Gül Irepoğlu, “Topkapi Sarayi Müzesi Hazine Kıtitphanesindeki Batılı Kaynaklar Üzerine Değerlendirmeler” (Thoughts on western documents in the Topkapi Palace Museum Treasury Library) Topkapı Sarayi Müzesi Yıllığı (Topkapi Palace Museum annual) 1 (1986), 68. Marly, built by Mansart in 1679–85, was initially conceived by Louis XIV as a pleasure retreat after Versailles became the seat of his government in 1682. It followed a fate similar to that of Sa’dabad, as it was eventually looted and destroyed during the French Revolution.


42. Murût-i-Tevârîh, 1: 133, 143 (see n. 31). In an anecdote related to the name of this pavilion, a group of women exclaimed on seeing it, “Bayîldim!”


45. “Sîzîn bêlî-i İsfâhânî da Çarşâbî nâm gûlzârîm var ise bîzim danh bûsîr gibi cûy-i beheçet-âszâm varîd.” “Târih-i Rûyâh, 3: 186 (see n. 32). It is difficult to determine which garden is alluded to here. The term bûsîr in “bûsîr gibi cûy-i beheçet-âszâm” means both “heaven/a garden like heaven” and “enclosed/fortress-like.” The reference could be to any enclosed suburban garden from earlier periods or, specifically, to the only Chahar-bagh (quadrupartite enclosed garden) in Istanbul, namely, the Karablî garden in Kabataş. However, the absence of references to this garden in contemporary accounts may suggest that it was no longer extant by the beginning of the eighteenth century. On the Karablî garden, see Gülü Necipoğlu, “The Suburban Landscape of Sixteenth-Century Istanbul as a Mirror of Classical Ottoman Garden Culture,” in Petruccioi, Gardens in the Time of the Great Muslim Empires, 32–33. References to Abbas I’s Chaharbagh also appear in the context of the embassy of Durri Efendi to the court of Shah Huseyn in 1721 (A.H. 1134) and that of his counterpart in Istanbul in an audience with grand-vizier Nevşehirli that same year; Târih-i Rûyâh, 5: 372–98, 466.


48. Sixteenth-century suburban palaces of Istanbul are examined in detail in Necipoğlu, “Suburban Landscape,” 32–71. On the Topkapi Palace, see Necipoğlu, Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power (see n. 17). On eighteenth-century palaces, pavilions, and gardens, see Artan, “Architecture as a Theatre of Life,” ch. 3 (see n. 9); and Hamadeh, “City’s Pleasures,” 56–70, 85–93, 163–212 (see n. 7).

49. “Bir Osmanî Efendi’nin Günlüğü: Selâeddinâzâde Têlîhî Mustafa Efendi ve Ceridise” (The diary of an Ottoman Efendi: Selâeddinâzâde Têlîhî Mustafa Efendi and his journal), excerpted in Ismail Erâsun, Kaynaklâr (Sources) 2 (winter 1984), 81 (entry dated 27 Sevval 1134 [22 August 1720]).


52. Necipoğlu, “Framing the Gaze,” 306.

53. Shah Abbas’s lack of ceremony was frequently observed and noted by his contemporaries. See Iskandar Munshi, Tadrîkh-i ‘alam-ara-yî ‘abbâsi (His-


See Craig Clunas, Superfluous Things: Material Culture and Social Status in Early Modern China (Urbana and Chicago, 1991); James McClain, Status in Early Modern China (Urbana and Chicago, 1994); and J. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskij, The Semiotics of Russian Culture (Ann Arbor, 1984).

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Figure 7. Eldem, Sa’dabad, 20–21
Figure 8. Hâkimname ve Zanânâme, MS İÜK, Tj 5502, fol. 78
Figures 9, 11. D’Ohsson, Tableau général de l’empire ottoman, 3
Figure 10. Cornelius de Bryn, Cornelis de Brouns reizen over Moscouie door Persie en Indie (Amsterdam, 1711)
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Figure 14. Grelot, Relation nouvelle d’un voyage de Constantinople (Paris, 1680)
Figure 15. Melling, Voyage pittoresque de Constantinople et des rives du Bosphore (Paris, 1819), pl. 29
Figure 16. Collection of Prince and Princess Sadrudin Aga Khan; reproduced from Sheila Canby, Princes, Poets, Paladins: Islamic and Indian Paintings from the Collection of Prince and Princess Sadrudin Aga Khan (London, 1998), 102
Figure 17. Hamse-i ‘Atâyî, MS Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, W.666, fol. 91a
Figure 18. Allom and Walsh, Scenery of the Seven Churches, vol. 1
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