

From Bursa to Istanbul: The Old Fatih Mosque as a Bridge in Ottoman Architectural Heritage

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Abstract

Despite its significance as a transitional monument in Ottoman architecture, the Old Fatih Mosque in Istanbul has received no dedicated modern study commensurate with its importance. This study offers the first focused, contemporary re-examination of the mosque as a pivotal milestone between the early Bursa and Edirne traditions and the monumental ambitions of classical Ottoman architecture. Employing a descriptive-analytical methodology supported by comparative quantitative metrics, the research integrates plan analysis, historical contextualization, and systematic comparison with precedent Ottoman mosques and Hagia Sophia. The findings reveal that the mosque achieved a distinctive spatial model through the interconnection of square and semi-square domed units, producing a centralized interior that departed from earlier hypostyle arrangements. Its roof composition — a large central dome flanked by semi-domes and lateral domes — established a formal language that would become canonical in subsequent Ottoman design. The study further demonstrates that the mosque's erection on the site of the Church of the Holy Apostles constituted a deliberate act of sacred-political geography, and situates the building within the broader Mediterranean context of fifteenth-century cross-cultural architectural exchange. The study concludes that the Old Fatih Mosque functioned as a formative architectural laboratory, directly informing the trajectory that culminated in the masterworks of architect Sinan.

Keywords: Old Fatih Mosque, Ottoman Imperial Architecture, Hagia Sophia, Sacred Topography, Mediterranean Architectural Exchange

Introduction

This research explores the architectural development of Ottoman mosques during the fifteenth century, focusing on three key monuments: the Green Mosque in Bursa, the Uc Sherefli Mosque in Edirne, and the Old Fatih Mosque in Istanbul, which serves as the central subject of this study. The study seeks to examine how these mosques reflect structural innovations in dome design, spatial organization, and the symbolic expression of imperial power. In addition to their architectural significance, these monuments also represent timeless symbols of heritage that shape the historical identity of Ottoman cities and continue to attract lovers of classical architecture from around the world.

Ottoman mosques are not only places of worship but also living testimonies of cultural memory that embody the artistic, social, and spiritual aspirations of their time. From the early structures in Bursa to the monumental complexes in Istanbul, these mosques reveal an evolving architectural language that sought harmony between function, symbolism, and aesthetic beauty. Their domes, courtyards, and minarets reflect the empire's political power and artistic ambition, while at the same time offering a contemplative setting for daily prayer.

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The Old Fatih Mosque, constructed between 1463 and 1470 in Istanbul, stands as a significant example of early Ottoman architecture. Commissioned by Sultan Mehmed II, it was intended to symbolize the grandeur of the newly established empire. The mosque's design reflects a synthesis of Byzantine and Islamic architectural elements, incorporating a large central dome surrounded by smaller domes and semi-domes. This arrangement exemplifies the Ottoman approach to spatial organization, emphasizing unity and grandeur. Despite undergoing several restorations due to earthquake damage, the mosque retains its historical and architectural significance. Today, the Old Fatih Mosque continues to serve not only as a place of worship but also as a symbol of Istanbul's layered history and Ottoman cultural identity.¹

The architectural origins of the original Fatih Mosque in Istanbul, commissioned by Sultan Mehmed II in the late 15th century, have long been the subject of scholarly debate. Two main perspectives dominate this discourse. One school of thought argues that the mosque's design was significantly influenced by the Byzantine architectural tradition, particularly the structural model of Hagia Sophia, emphasizing the central dome and semi-domed spaces that echo Justinian's masterpiece.^{2,3,4} According to this view, the Ottomans deliberately emulated the grandeur of Byzantine architecture to legitimize their imperial identity. Conversely, another group of scholars contends that the Old Fatih Mosque represents an organic development within the Ottoman architectural continuum. They argue that its layout evolved naturally from earlier Ottoman models, particularly the Uc Sherefli Mosque in Edirne, which introduced key innovations such as the centralized dome plan and multiple minarets.⁵ This divergence in scholarly interpretation highlights the need for a more nuanced re-examination of the architectural genealogy of the Old Fatih Mosque, situated within both the legacy of Byzantine influence and the trajectory of indigenous Ottoman evolution.

Despite the acknowledged importance of the Old Fatih Mosque in the broader narrative of Ottoman architecture, no modern study has placed it at the center of sustained analytical attention. In the existing literature, the mosque appears predominantly as a secondary reference point within larger surveys: Kuran (1968) devotes a single chapter to it within a comprehensive study spanning two centuries of early Ottoman mosques; Goodwin (2013) addresses it in a few pages within a five-hundred-year panorama; Necipoğlu (2005) focuses principally on the post-1539 era of Mimar Sinan and treats the Fatih Mosque as a precursor rather than a subject in its own right; and the only dedicated article, by Aga-Oglu (1930), is now nearly a century old. The present study seeks to address this gap by offering the first focused, contemporary re-examination of the Old Fatih Mosque as a pivotal — rather than incidental — moment in the evolution of Ottoman imperial architecture.

This research aims to examine the architectural features of the original Old Fatih Mosque prior to its 18th-century reconstruction, while analyzing the extent to which Byzantine architecture, particularly Hagia Sophia, influenced its design. The study explores the architectural continuity between early Ottoman mosques—especially the Uc Sherefli Mosque—and the Old Fatih Mosque,

¹ Gülru Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan: Architectural Culture in the Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 77–103.

² Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan*, 77–103.

³ M. Ahunbay and Z. Ahunbay, "Structural Influence of Hagia Sophia on Ottoman Mosque Architecture," in *Hagia Sophia from the Age of Justinian to the Present*, ed. R. Mark and A. Ş. Çakmak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 179–194.

⁴ Doğan Kuban, *Hagia Sophia: The Architecture, Structure and Liturgy of Justinian's Great Church* (Istanbul: Eren Yayincılık, 1985).

⁵ Aptullah Kuran, *The Mosque in Early Ottoman Architecture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

tracing developmental patterns and stylistic evolution. Furthermore, it critically assesses the historiographical perspectives on the mosque's architectural origins, evaluating diverse scholarly interpretations and debates surrounding its conceptual framework. Ultimately, this research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on Ottoman identity formation through architectural expression, demonstrating how monumental structures served as vehicles for cultural and political self-definition during the early Ottoman period.

This research addresses a central question: What were the defining architectural characteristics of the original Old Fatih Mosque constructed under Sultan Mehmed II, and how do they reflect the evolution of early Ottoman imperial architecture? The study examines the extent to which the mosque reflects Byzantine architectural elements, particularly those of Hagia Sophia, and investigates how its design relates to the development of Ottoman Mosque architecture, especially the innovations introduced in the Uc Sherefli Mosque. Furthermore, it critically evaluates the key arguments presented by scholars who support either the Byzantine-influence thesis or the organic-Ottoman development model, assessing each interpretive framework. Ultimately, the research explores how the architectural analysis of the Old Fatih Mosque informs our understanding of cultural and political symbolism in early Ottoman imperial architecture, revealing how monumental structures served as instruments of legitimacy, identity formation, and imperial ambition.

This study employs a qualitative, historical-analytical approach that combines architectural analysis with a critical review of secondary sources. Primary architectural features of the Old Fatih Mosque—based on archival descriptions, visual reconstructions, and comparisons with similar structures—are analyzed in relation to both Hagia Sophia and the Uc Sherefli Mosque. Key scholarly works by Necipoğlu, Kuran, and Goodwin,^{6,7,8} are critically examined to uncover the historiographical development of the debate, while comparative architectural diagrams, site plans, and stylistic typologies support the study's arguments. Early Ottoman archival sources and historical travelogues are consulted to contextualize the mosque's architectural and cultural setting.

It should be noted that certain contemporary analytical methods—such as space syntax analysis, computational structural modelling, and acoustic simulation—were deliberately excluded from the scope of this study. The complete destruction of the original Old Fatih Mosque in the earthquake of 1766, followed by its reconstruction in an entirely different architectural style, means that no physical fabric of the fifteenth-century structure survives for direct instrumental analysis.⁹ The architectural evidence available to scholars consists exclusively of secondary reconstructions derived from historical descriptions, travelers' accounts, and comparative typological analysis. Applying quantitative spatial or structural tools to such reconstructed data would risk producing results of limited reliability, as the margin of interpretive uncertainty inherent in the source material would be compounded rather than reduced by computational precision. Furthermore, archival documentation pertaining to the architect Atik Sinan and the original construction process remains extremely scarce within the corpus of early Ottoman records, a limitation widely acknowledged in the field.¹⁰ The descriptive-analytical and comparative methodology adopted

⁶ Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan*, 77–103.

⁷ Kuran, *Mosque in Early Ottoman Architecture*.

⁸ Godfrey Goodwin, *A History of Ottoman Architecture* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2013), 121–131.

⁹ Kuran, *The Mosque in Early Ottoman Architecture*, 169–185.

¹⁰ Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan*, 37–55. Necipoğlu observes that the systematic archival documentation of Ottoman architectural practice—including construction accounts, building contracts, and design records—becomes available

here is therefore the most appropriate and rigorous approach available for a monument that exists only in the historical record. Nevertheless, to support the comparative dimension of this study, a quantitative summary of key architectural metrics—including dome diameters, building heights, interior areas, and structural support configurations—is provided in Table 1, enabling a more precise evaluation of the developmental progression across the mosques examined.

This research contributes to a deeper understanding of early Ottoman imperial architecture by revisiting the architectural origins of the original Fatih Mosque—a pivotal yet often overlooked monument in the transition from early to classical Ottoman Mosque design. By situating the mosque within the ongoing scholarly debate between Byzantine influence and organic Ottoman development, the study addresses broader questions of cultural identity, political symbolism, and architectural continuity in the 15th-century Ottoman Empire, serving as a valuable resource for scholars of Islamic architecture, Ottoman studies, and heritage conservation.

Ottoman Architectural Traditions Before the Conquest of Istanbul

Before the Ottomans arrived in Istanbul, the most significant architectural works were constructed in two key cities: Bursa, the first capital of the Ottoman Empire (1326-1402) and Edirne (1413-1453).¹¹ Among the most important architectural landmarks in Bursa was the Green Mosque (early 15th century), while in Edirne, the Uc Sherefli Mosque (mid-15th century) stood as the city's most notable architectural achievement.

Bursa: Foundations of the Ottoman Architectural Tradition

Located on the slopes of Uludağ Mountain, Bursa represented the creation of an urban and rural system establishing the first capital city of the Ottoman Empire and the Sultan's seat in the early 14th century. The Green Mosque complex exemplified early Ottoman architectural innovation, particularly in its sophisticated tile work and spatial organization.

The Green Mosque

One of the most famous examples of early Ottoman architecture in this period is the Mosque of Sultan Mehmed I, commonly known as the Green Mosque of Bursa. Fashioned in the distinctive Bursa style, it follows an **Ewan plan** as shown in Figure 1, in which several vaulted Ewans enclose a spacious central hall. This central space is surmounted by a large dome, reflecting the early Ottoman approach to spatial hierarchy and symmetry. The design exemplifies the integration of both functional and aesthetic considerations, demonstrating how the Ottomans adapted traditional Islamic architectural elements to create a cohesive and monumental urban religious complex.¹² The Green Mosque stands out not only as a key monument in the evolution of Ottoman architecture but also for its structural innovation: it was among the first to feature a prominent use of hemispherical domes atop the roof, enriching the spatial rhythm and visual unity of the design. This blend of functional layout and technical advancement marked a meaningful step toward the architectural achievements that emerged later in the Ottoman classical era.¹³

principally from the tenure of Mimar Sinan (post-1539), underscoring the relative paucity of comparable records for the pre-classical period.

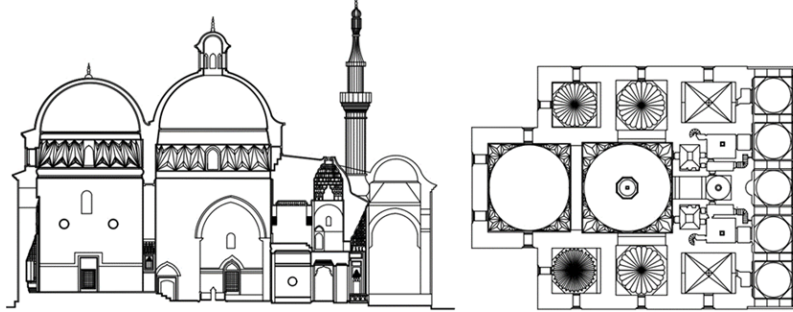
¹¹ Amy Singer, "In Search of Early Ottoman Edirne," in *The Heritage of Edirne in Ottoman and Turkish Times*, ed. Birgit Krawietz and Florian Riedler (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), 25–43.

¹² Faisal A. Mustafa and Azizi Bahaiddin Hassan, "Mosque Layout Design: An Analytical Study of Mosque Layouts in the Early Ottoman Period," *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 2, no. 4 (2013): 445–456.

¹³ Kazım Baykal, *Bursa ve Anıtları* (Istanbul: Türkiye Anıt Çevre Turizm Değerlerini Koruma Vakfı, 1982; orig. 1950), 137–139.

Constructed in 1423 as a part of a larger complex (külliye) on the east side of Bursa, Turkey, the first capital of the Ottoman state, the Green Mosque — known in Turkish as Yeşil Cami — stands as a structural and spatial milestone in the formative phase of Ottoman architecture. Figure 1 shows that its design reveals a sophisticated understanding of geometry and proportion: every significant space is crowned by hemispherical domes, carefully placed on structural supports such as octagonal bases or opposing triangular pendentives.¹⁴ This architectural choice created a harmonious dialogue between the circular form of the dome and the square or cubic base beneath, a feature that not only solved structural challenges but also elevated the building's aesthetic dimension. In this way, the Green Mosque does more than shelter worshippers; it embodies an artistic statement of balance, order, and transcendence. Scholars have noted that such innovations in roof design endowed Ottoman mosques with a new sense of architectural and expressive importance, establishing a visual language that linked the heavens to the earthly ground.¹⁵ As a result, large Ottoman mosques gradually developed greater interior and exterior beauty, becoming distinguished landmarks that reflected both spiritual aspirations and imperial ambitions. This precise stage of development marked a turning point, laying the foundation for the more monumental expressions of Ottoman Mosque architecture that followed.¹⁶

Figure 1: The Green Mosque of Bursa, Plan and Section



Source: Kuran

The presence of multipurpose areas in mosque buildings, as demonstrated by the Green Mosque, does not imply that the prayer hall's interior space has grown to a size suitable for gathering large numbers of worshippers. Additionally, it appears that the mosque's layout, which arranges various small spaces in close proximity to one another around the central courtyard, lacks the expressive value necessary to adequately convey the might of the Ottoman Sultan as well as the scope and stature of the great Ottoman state, which grew to resemble an eagle spreading its wings to span the continents of Asia and Europe. Furthermore, the mosque's architectural design might not accurately capture the technological advancements that the Ottoman Empire saw in a number of other creative and scientific domains in the first half of the fifteenth century in the prosperous capital, Edirne. It was therefore necessary to drastically alter the Ottoman Mosque's form and layout in order to give it an impressive external appearance, as well as to completely redesign its internal spatial planning style in order to give it the right expressive value for the Ottoman Empire's position as one of the world's great powers.¹⁷

¹⁴ Naser Al-Mughrabi, Ahmad Masoud, Yazan Almomani, and Alaa Issa, "Architectural Pilgrimage: Geometric Harmony in Early Ottoman Mosque Interiors," *GeoJournal of Tourism and Geosites* 64, no. 1 (2026): 14-28. <https://doi.org/10.30892/gtg.64102-1652>.

¹⁵ S. Akboy-Ilk, "The Architectural Pedigree of İznik's 14th-Century Green Mosque in Turkey," *Architectural Histories* 12 (2024): Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.16995/ah.8270>.

¹⁶ Ekrem Hakki Ayverdi, *Osmanlı Mi'mârîsinde Çelebi ve II. Sultan Murad Devri 806–855 (1403–1451)* (Istanbul: Baha Matbaası, 1972), 806–855.

¹⁷ Gülru Necipoğlu, "From International Timurid to Ottoman: A Change of Taste in Sixteenth-Century Ceramic Tiles," *Muqarnas* 7 (1990): 136–170.

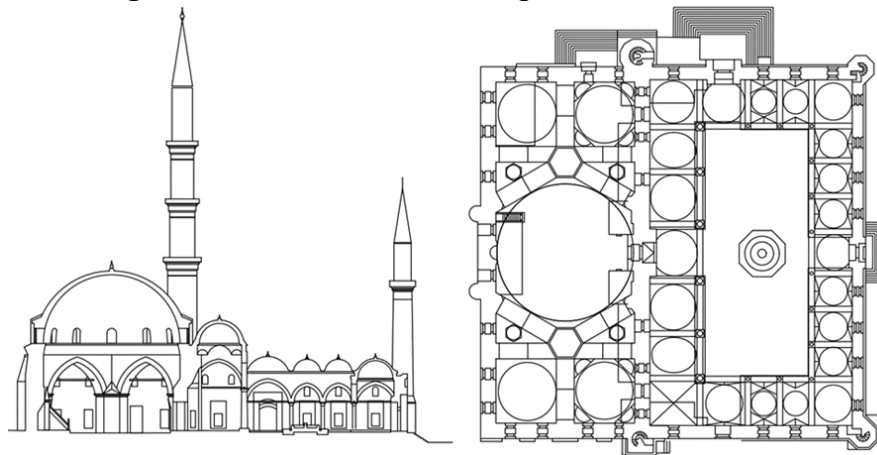
Edirne: Transitional Phase Toward Classical Ottoman Architecture

Edirne functioned as a pivotal transitional capital of the Ottoman Empire, bridging the early phase centered in Bursa with the later imperial consolidation in Istanbul. As the seat of the court and administration before 1453, it provided the stage for key architectural experiments and ceremonial practices that foreshadowed the grandeur of the imperial capital to come. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Edirne's evolving built environment reflected the empire's growing architectural ambitions, most prominently expressed in the Uc Sherefeli Mosque — a monument that would directly shape the trajectory of Ottoman Mosque design for generations.¹⁸

The Uc Sherefli Mosque

Without a doubt, the most prominent example of Ottoman architecture before the conquest of Istanbul is the Mosque of Sultan Murad II, commonly known as the Uc Sherefli Mosque (The Three Balconies Mosque), which was constructed between 1437 and 1448 in the central market of Edirne—the second westernmost capital of the Ottoman Empire—it was the first major mosque to achieve this significant architectural development. The mosque's unique design was its large **central dome**, which at 24 meters in diameter was the largest Ottoman dome to that point. It rested on a hexagonal base with pointed arches connecting six enormous pillars, only two of which were positioned in the center of the prayer hall area on either side of the dome, the remaining pillars merging with the mosque's front and back walls. The mosque's layout appears to be rectangular, transverse, and parallel to the Qibla wall thanks to the addition of two domes, each reaching a diameter of 10.5 meters, on either side of the central dome of the prayer hall.¹⁹

Figure 2: The Uc Sherefli Mosque, Plan and Section



Source: Kuran

The wide dome, with its central location and large size, dominated the shape of the mosque from the outside and the amount of space it covered from the inside. The total interior space of the mosque consists of eight adjacent spatial units in two rows, four in length parallel to the qibla wall and two in depth. The space under the central dome is equivalent to four units, two in length and two in depth, which is equivalent to approximately half of the total interior space. At this early time in the history of the Ottoman Empire, this mosque seemed closer to being the pinnacle of brilliance of early Ottoman architecture with its domed interior spaces. As seen in Figure 2, the

¹⁸ G. Karagedikli, "An Ottoman Imperial City in Transition: Transformation of Urban Governance in Edirne (18th–19th Centuries)," *Kadim: Journal of History Studies* 4, no. 1 (2022): 27–38. <https://doi.org/10.48120/kadim.2022.2203>.

¹⁹ Faisal A. Mustafa and Azizi Bahaiddin Hassan, "Mosque Layout Design: An Analytical Study of Mosque Layouts in the Early Ottoman Period," *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 2, no. 4 (2013): 445–456.

mosque was built according to a new central plan, and it had a spacious prayer hall whose interior space was only interrupted by two pillars, and was covered by five domes, including the large central dome that is unprecedented in shape and size.

As demonstrated in Figure 2, the Uc Sherefli mosque is distinguished by its open courtyard, echoing the design of central courtyards found in Seljuk madrasas. At each corner of the courtyard stands a cylindrical minaret, contributing to the mosque's harmonious and balanced composition. The tallest of these minarets rises to an impressive height of 67.75 meters and features three balconies, a unique characteristic that inspired the mosque's name. This structure represents the highest point reached by Ottoman architecture in minaret construction during that period. Behind the prayer hall is the rectangular courtyard, believed to be inspired by the architectural style of the Great Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. Together, the mosque and its open courtyards form a nearly square layout, measuring approximately 66.5 x 64.5 meters.²⁰

The grandeur of the Uc Sherefli Mosque's interior space is a testament to the power of the architectural form and its great expressive value. Even while there is a noticeable balance in the amount of daylighting, it was insufficient, and it's possible that the architect gave the order to keep the walls strong because they were obviously crucial to supporting the vaulted ceiling structurally. The mosque's interior space needs to either vary the forms and levels of the walls to let in more light from above, or it has to create more apertures in the walls to let in more light.

The mosque's central dome, with its imposing size and striking design, has grown to be a standout aspect of the enormous building. However, the authority of the main dome was diminished and its expressive qualities were weakened by the design of the horizontal roof of the Uc Sherefli Mosque and the placement of the bases of the five domes on the same level. Building a mosque roof of different heights is the most logical solution to this problem. Since the central space is naturally the largest and most visible, this represents an excellent opportunity to build vertical walls on the edges of the central dome that face the sun and allow its rays to pass through to illuminate the center of the interior space below the main dome.

The central core of the prayer hall, which occupies approximately half of the mosque's interior, takes on a somewhat rectangular form due to the four triangular spaces surrounding the central dome. The remaining half of the interior is composed of four lateral sections, each covered by a dome, creating a balanced yet segmented spatial arrangement. Departing from the traditional architectural approach that emphasizes spatial continuity, the inclusion of two large hexagonal pillars at the center of the prayer hall introduces a structural barrier, limiting the visual openness and interrupting the expansive flow typically associated with Ottoman Mosque interiors.

The aforementioned makes it evident that Ottoman engineers and architects exercised more sophisticated building methods in order to construct mosques with roomier interiors that were covered with broad domes. It is highly likely that the architectural accomplishments of the Uc Sherefli Mosque will positively influence the design of future Ottoman mosques and improve the appearance of its interior spaces.

²⁰ Naser Thabet Al-Mughrabi, "Ottoman Architecture: Spatial Planning and Ideal Geometric Proportions (Case Study: Sultan Bayezid II Mosque)," *Journal of Islamic Architecture* 8, no. 4 (2025): 983-997. <https://doi.org/10.18860/jia.v8i4.26446>.

Hagia Sophia: Architectural Grandeur and Its Influence on Ottoman Design

The Hagia Sophia, or Ayasofya, stands as one of the most contested and symbolically charged religious sites in the world. Originally constructed between 532 and 537 CE under the direction of Byzantine Emperor Justinian I, it was intended to embody the power and glory of Orthodox Christianity in the Byzantine Empire.²¹ Designed by the Byzantine architects Isidore of Miletus and Anthemius of Tralles, its massive dome and intricate mosaics signaled an architectural revolution that would influence both Eastern and Western traditions.²² Its unparalleled spatial achievement would later serve as both an inspiration and a benchmark against which Ottoman imperial mosque design was measured — most notably in the construction of the Old Fatih Mosque in Istanbul.

Following the Latin occupation of Constantinople in 1204, Hagia Sophia was briefly converted into a Roman Catholic cathedral before being restored to Orthodox control in 1261. The building's function shifted again in 1453 after the Ottoman conquest, when Sultan Mehmed II ordered its conversion into a mosque. Islamic elements, such as minarets, a mihrab, and minbar, were added, while many Christian features were preserved beneath plaster.²³

In 1935, Turkey's secularist leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk repurposed Hagia Sophia as a museum—framing it as a neutral space symbolic of Turkey's modern identity.²⁴ However, in July 2020, a Turkish court annulled the 1934 decree, and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan signed an order restoring its status as a mosque. This decision drew mixed reactions globally and within Turkey, sparking debates on nationalism, secularism, and cultural heritage.^{25,26}

Scholars interpret this reconversion as part of a broader ideological project that seeks to reinforce Ottoman-Islamic identity and reassert Turkish sovereignty in cultural terms.²⁷ The Hagia Sophia thus continues to function not only as a place of worship and tourism but also as a potent symbol of the intersection between politics, religion, and history.

Hagia Sophia stands as one of the most significant architectural achievements of late antiquity, blending innovative structural engineering with expansive interior design. One of its most iconic features is the massive central dome, which spans approximately 31 meters in diameter and rises about 55 meters above the ground. This considerable height and width create a pronounced sense

²¹ Rowland J. Mainstone, *Hagia Sophia: Architecture, Structure, and Liturgy of Justinian's Great Church* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 13–22.

²² Rowland J. Mainstone, *Hagia Sophia: Architecture, Structure, and Liturgy of Justinian's Great Church* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 59–95.

²³ M. Danalı, "Restoring the Gap between Rhetoric and Reality: The Remaking of the Eastern End of Hagia Sophia (1346–1355)," *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 8, no. 1 (2021): [125–144]. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jottturstuassoci.8.1.09>.

²⁴ M. P. Goodyear, "Heaven or Earth: The Hagia Sophia Reconversion, Turkish and International Law, and the Special Case of Universal Religious Sites," *UCLA Journal of Islamic and Near Eastern Law* 20, no. 1 (2021): 1–38. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/47g3x937>.

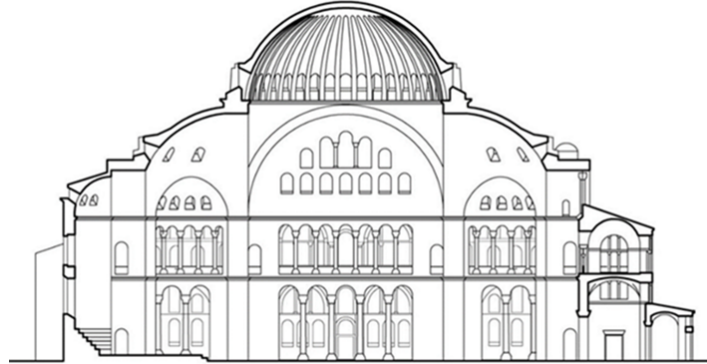
²⁵ P. Blessing and A. Yayıoğlu, "Reflecting on Reactions to Hagia Sophia's Reopening as a Mosque," *Journal of the Ottoman and Turkish Studies Association* 8, no. 1 (2021): [197–200]. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jottturstuassoci.8.1.22>.

²⁶ U. C. Adisönmez Oztig and L. I. Oztig, "Sovereignty, Power, and Authority: Understanding the Conversion of Hagia Sophia from a Performative Perspective," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies* 25, no. 3 (2023): [289–307]. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2023.2177550>.

²⁷ M. Bileydı Koç, "Reflections on Turkish Press of the Decision to Convert Hagia Sophia from Museum into Mosque," *SSD Journal* 8, no. 41 (2023): [71–80]. <https://ssdjournals.org/index.php/pub/article/view/546>.

of verticality interior space within the central nave.²⁸ The dome is supported by four colossal arches and stabilized by pendentives—triangular curving sections that transition the circular base of the dome to the square floor plan beneath. This was a groundbreaking innovation in Byzantine architecture, allowing for the placement of a circular dome atop a square base.²⁹

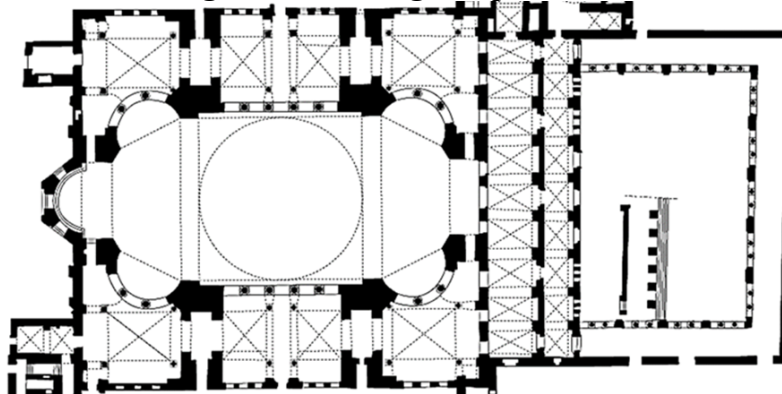
Figure 3: The Hagia Sophia, Section



Source: www.HagiaSophia.com

Figure 4 outlines the conceptual framework of Hagia Sophia's schematic plan. The central dome is flanked by two semi-domes and side aisles, creating a spacious and dominant central space beneath the main domed roof. The building also features an upper gallery that was traditionally used for public attendance during religious services.³⁰ The interior surfaces are lavishly decorated with gold mosaics depicting religious scenes and ornamental motifs; however, many of these were plastered over or damaged during the Ottoman period, when the building was converted into a mosque.³¹

Figure 4: The Hagia Sophia, Plan



Source: www.HagiaSophia.com

²⁸ Naser Al-Mughrabi, "Historical Factors and Their Impact on the Formation of Architect Sinan's Mosques," *Jordanian Journal of Arts* 15, no. 4 (2022): [775–794].

²⁹ Naser Al-Mughrabi, Josef Prijotomo, and Mohammad Faqih, "Suleymaniye Mosque: Space Construction and Technical Challenges," *International Journal of Education and Research* 3, no. 6 (2015): 348–349.

³⁰ Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 146.

³¹ Robert G. Ousterhout, *Eastern Medieval Architecture: The Building Traditions of Byzantium and Neighboring Lands* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

Through its architectural innovations and decorative richness, Hagia Sophia embodies both the spiritual aspirations of the Byzantine Empire and the historical layers of transformation it has undergone—from church to mosque, to museum, and again to mosque—making it a living monument of religious, political, and artistic significance.

The Old Fatih Mosque: Sultan Mehmed II's Vision and Atik Sinan's Design

Fatih Sultan Mehmet, the Conqueror (30 March 1432 – 3 May 1481), was an Ottoman sultan who ruled from August 1444 to September 1446, and later from February 1451 to May 1481. At the age of 21, he conquered Constantinople and brought an end to the Byzantine Empire, establishing Ottoman dominance across Asia Minor, the eastern Mediterranean, and southeastern Europe. To realize his imperial architectural vision, Sultan Mehmed II entrusted the design of the Old Fatih Mosque to Atik Sinan, whose design would become the first major expression of Ottoman imperial architecture in the new capital.³²

On the eve of its conquest in 1453, Constantinople remained a city of immense symbolic and strategic importance. For over a millennium it had served as the heart of the Byzantine Empire, guarding the Bosphorus and controlling the trade routes that linked the Mediterranean with Asia. Its skyline, crowned by the Hagia Sophia, testified to the city's religious and artistic achievements, while its formidable Theodosian Walls had long secured its reputation as an impregnable stronghold. Yet, by the fifteenth century, Constantinople had become a shadow of its former self. Its population had dwindled, its economy weakened, and its political influence diminished. Despite its rich cultural heritage and enduring role as a guardian of classical knowledge, the city faced the Ottoman armies in a state of decline, setting the stage for one of history's most decisive conquests.^{33,34,35}

Sultan Mehmet II made the decision to construct a number of major mosques, educational facilities, and social complexes throughout the new capital after the capture of Constantinople in an effort to restore the historical and social standing of this historically significant city. The Great Fatih Mosque was one of them; because of its Turkish name, "Fatih Camii," it is also referred to as the "Conqueror's Mosque" in English. The Sultan Fatih Mehmet's mosque was finished in December 1470, having been started on February 21, 1463. It was a "worthy" mosque with an impressive social, educational, and religious complex that was larger and more intricate than any other complex in the Ottoman Empire. That is why it is called "the Conqueror's complex." It was built in part to commemorate the capture of Constantinople (later renamed Istanbul) in 1453. The complex marked the shift from state to empire and from regional to worldwide dominance, and it defined the new imperial architectural style of Ottoman architecture.³⁶

Known for its elaborate decoration and extravagance, the Fatih Mosque is a notable example of Ottoman architecture and construction. The mosque was designed by architect Atik Sinan within a large architectural complex. Atik Sinan created one of the most harmonious religious and social mosque complexes that Istanbul has ever seen. It contains two minarets, a large central dome, and

³² Gábor Ágoston and Bruce Masters, eds., *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Facts on File, 2009), 367–363.

³³ Jonathan Harris, *Constantinople: Capital of Byzantium* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007), 185.

³⁴ Stephen Reinert, "Fragmentation (1204–1453)," in *The Oxford History of Byzantium*, ed. Cyril Mango (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 248–268.

³⁵ John Julius Norwich, *A Short History of Byzantium* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 380–395.

³⁶ N. Avcioglu, "The Külliye as Hypotext: A New Reading of Ottoman Imperial Mosques and Tombs," *Journal of Material Cultures in the Muslim World* 4, no. 2 (2024): 230–251. <https://doi.org/10.1163/26666286-12340048>.

a prayer hall for worshippers. According to Yilmaz, this ambitious project is regarded as the first extensive example of Ottoman imperial architecture to prominently feature aspects of Turkish, Italian, and Byzantine building styles. The Fatih Mosque complex revived and enhanced the former Ottoman architectural heritage of the Ottoman capitals, which included the great buildings of Bursa and Edirne. The Fatih Complex in Istanbul established an example for placing the complex's numerous structures in a logical, geometric, and well-organized layout around an enormous mosque.³⁷

Perched atop the fourth of Istanbul's seven hills, Fatih Mosque and its environs occupy a strategically significant position. Its monumental scale, with its dome and minarets, hilltop location, and view overlooking the city skyline give it a characteristically Islamic appearance. Although the Great Mosque, with its beautiful courtyard and cemetery garden, is located in its center, the Fatih Complex was not limited to religious functions only; It was an integral part of the social, political and educational activities of the new Ottoman capital. The Fatih complex consisted of eight medreses and their annexes, a tabhane, or hospice, a huge imaret, a hospital, a caravansarai, a primary school, a library and the largest bathhouse (hammam) ever constructed, all of which belonged to the waqf, or pious endowment, that founded the complex. The city's first Muslim residents were encouraged to settle in the Fatih district that grew up around the complex, which also served these newcomers.³⁸

The choice of the fourth hill was itself a deliberate act of sacred and political geography. Until its demolition in 1462, this site had been occupied by the Church of the Holy Apostles (Hagioi Apostoloi)—the second most important ecclesiastical foundation in Constantinople after Hagia Sophia, and the principal burial place of Byzantine emperors from Constantine I to the eleventh century. By erecting his imperial mosque complex on this precise location, Sultan Mehmed II effected a symbolic *translatio imperii*: the sacred topography of the Byzantine capital was absorbed and reinterpreted within an Ottoman Islamic framework. The gesture paralleled, on a monumental scale, his earlier conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque; yet whereas Hagia Sophia was retained and transformed, the Holy Apostles was replaced entirely, making the Fatih complex an assertion of new sovereign authority inscribed directly into the city's most symbolically charged ground. This topographic dimension—often overlooked in purely formal analyses of the mosque's architecture—underscores that the building's significance extended well beyond its structural and spatial innovations to encompass a comprehensive programme of imperial legitimation through urban geography.³⁹

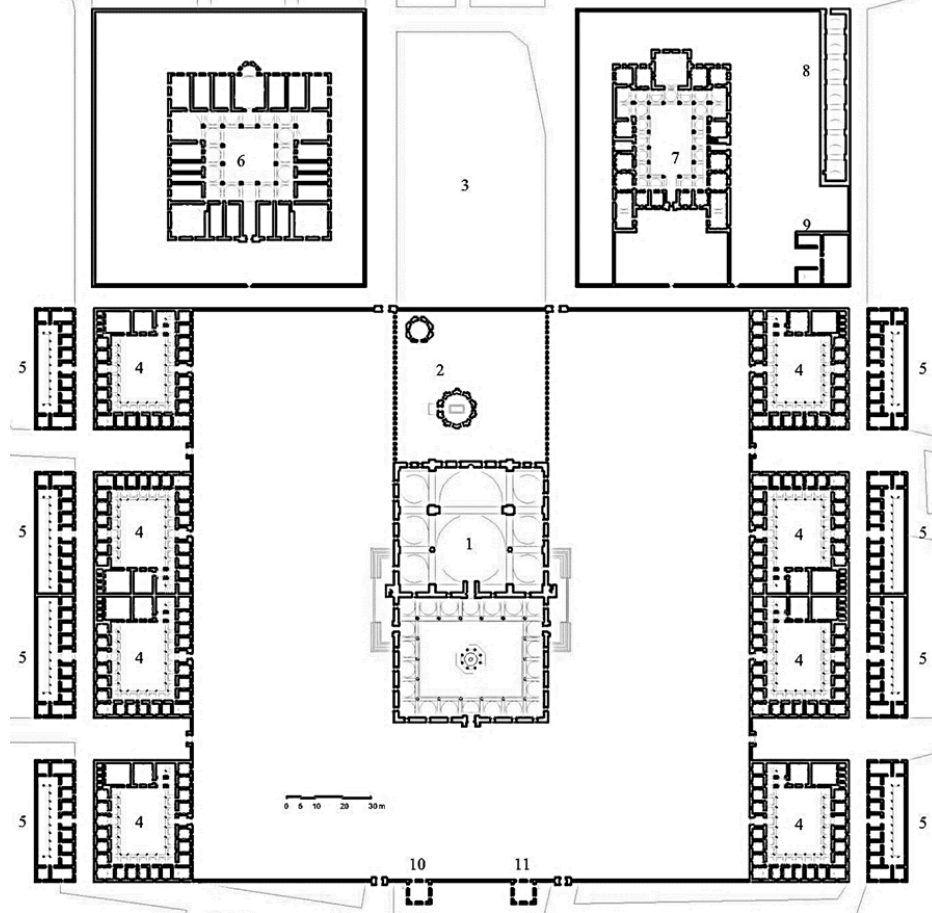
As illustrated in Figure 5, the mosque structure is situated in the center of a large, open space within the symmetrically designed complex, which is all angled 32 degrees from east to south in accordance with the qibla. Walls encircle the mosque's northwest and southeast faces, while a row of madrasas along its northeast and southwest corners. Access to the region is provided by several gates situated between the madrasas as well as two gates located in the north-west and south-east walls.

³⁷ N. Yilmaz, "Fatih Mosque," in *Encyclopedia of the Ottoman Empire*, ed. Bruce Masters and Gábor Ágoston (New York: Facts on File, 2009), 216–217.

³⁸ Mehmet Aga-Oglu, "The Fatih Mosque at Constantinople," *The Art Bulletin* 12, no. 2 (1930): 182.

³⁹ Ken Dark and Ferudun Özgümüş, "New Evidence for the Byzantine Church of the Holy Apostles from Fatih Camii, Istanbul," *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 21, no. 4 (2002): 393–413. On the symbolic significance of the site, see also Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan*, 55–60.

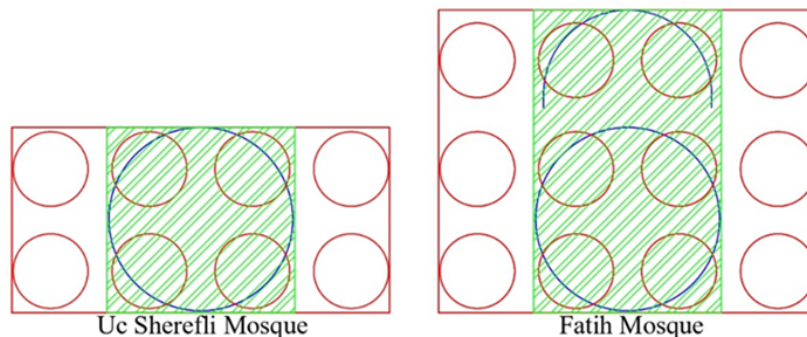
Figure 5: The Fatih Complex, Plan (<http://archnet.org>) 1- Mosque 2-Mausoleum of Mehmet II 3- Formal Garden 4- Madrasas 5- Preparatory Madrasas 6- Hospital 7- Guesthouse 8- Caravansaray 9- Hospice 10- Elementary School 11- Library



Source: Gülrü

In terms of the mosque's design and spatial layout at ground level, the Old Fatih Mosque's plan appears to be so strongly influenced by the plan of the Uc Sherefli Mosque that it is considered a logical development of the Uc Sherifli Mosque's plan, aiming to horizontally expand the interior space of the prayer hall. The Fatih Mosque adds one spatial unit of depth to the rectangular transverse plan of the Uc Sherifli Mosque, which was constructed with a ratio of two units of depth to four units of length. This results in a transverse spatial plan of the prayer hall constructed with a ratio of three units of depth to four units of length (Figure 6).

Figure 6: The spatial layout of the Old Fatih Mosque and the Uc Sherefli Mosque

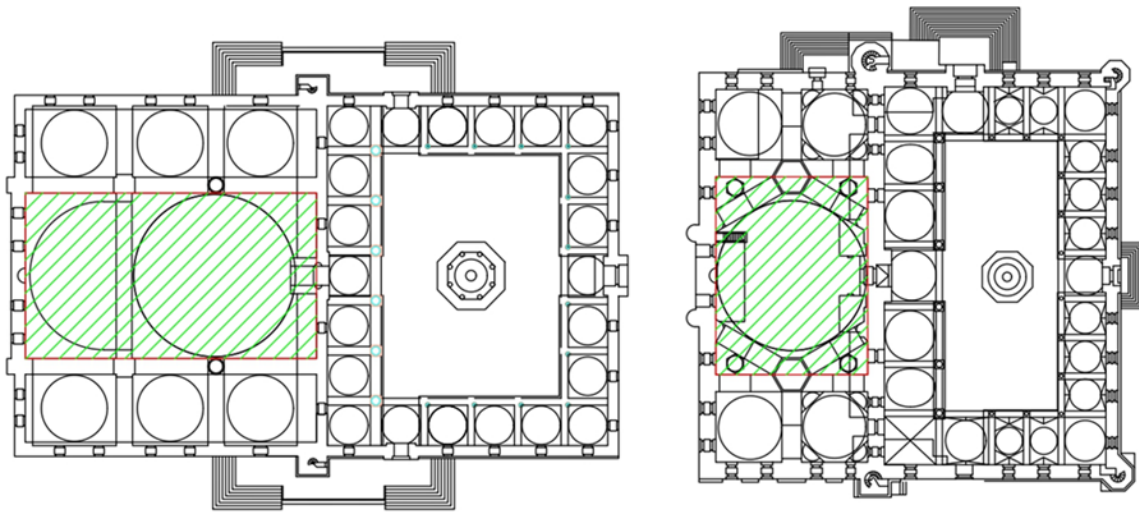


Source: Author

An architectural and structural analysis of the Fatih Mosque compared to the Uc Sherefli Mosque reveals the evolution of construction thought in classical Ottoman architecture, particularly in shaping the interior spaces of major mosques. The Fatih Mosque in Istanbul stands as a prominent example of balance between structural solutions and both aesthetic and functional considerations. This is clearly evident in the design of the two pillars supporting the central dome, which were built to moderate proportions that did not obstruct visual communication or spatial unity between the central rectangular space beneath the central dome and semi-dome and the lateral spaces, as shown in Figure 6. As a result, the interior space is characterized by openness and cohesion, enhancing the visual presence and spiritual experience of the central dome.

In stark contrast to the design of the Uc Sherefli Mosque, which used two massive buttresses to support its central dome, making the interior feel heavy and cramped, the interior of the Old Fatih Mosque was characterized by elegance and spaciousness. These buttresses, while a significant structural experiment at the time, created a visual barrier on either side of the dome, limiting the feeling of spaciousness and disrupting the flow of the space, as illustrated in the following figure.

Figure 7: The Old Fatih Mosque and the Uc Sherefli Mosque



Source: Author

This comparison highlights key phases in the maturation of Ottoman architectural thinking—from the monumental experimentation seen in Uc Sherefli, to the well-balanced solutions of the Old Fatih Mosque, culminating in the structural and visual perfection achieved in the works of architect Sinan, such as the Suleymaniye and Selimiye Mosques.

By transforming Hagia Sophia into the main mosque of Istanbul, the mosques that were subsequently built in the Ottoman capital established a formal architectural dialogue with Hagia Sophia, emphasizing the shared imperial form of religious buildings. The Old Fatih Mosque initiated this conversation and served as an architectural model that would inspire Ottoman architects and designers for centuries.⁴⁰ The Sultan personally selected a prominent site in the city center, comparable in size and splendor to the largest pre-existing temples. The mosque represented the first monumental, large-scale Ottoman architectural project in Istanbul, intended to match the grandeur of the city's most luxurious buildings. Although the original structure was entirely destroyed in the great earthquake of 1766, Sultan Mustafa III immediately commissioned

⁴⁰ “Fatih Camii.” Archnet Digital Library. Accessed 2024. https://www.archnet.org/sites/1982?media_content_id=7664.

its reconstruction, which was completed in 1771 with a design reflecting contemporary Ottoman architectural trends rather than the original plan.^{41,42}

The influence of Byzantine architecture—particularly that of Hagia Sophia—is clearly evident in the central design of the Old Fatih Mosque, especially in the composition of its upper structure comprising the main dome, the frontal semi-dome, and the perforated tympanums. This connection highlights how Byzantine forms helped shape the early Ottoman imperial mosque typology, as exemplified here in this Mosque. Rather than direct imitation, the architects of the Mosque engaged in a bold reinterpretation of Byzantine spatial strategies while taking into account their rich architectural heritage, represented by the great Uc Sherefli Mosque, to establish a new and imposing architectural language appropriate to the emerging Ottoman Empire.

One of the most striking achievements of the Old Fatih Mosque is its central dome, measuring 26 meters in diameter and rising to a height of 44 meters. At the time, it was second in scale only to the 31-meter dome of Hagia Sophia, yet it stood as the largest dome built by the Ottomans for nearly a century until surpassed by the Suleymaniye Mosque. Beyond its architectural scale, the complex carried profound symbolic meaning: the eight surrounding madrasahs were designed to represent the eight gates of heaven, reflecting the spiritual vision that shaped the mosque as both a monumental and a deeply human space.⁴³ This substantial increase in scale was not merely a feat of engineering; it was a deliberate symbolic gesture. By adopting and expanding upon the structural language of the Hagia Sophia's iconic Byzantine dome, the Ottomans asserted their imperial dominance and projected their role as heirs to both political and spiritual authority—what might be termed a cultural caliphate—through the architectural expression of the Old Fatih Mosque.⁴⁴

The dome of the Old Fatih Mosque marked a turning point in Ottoman architecture as presented in Figures 7 and 8. For the first time, the builders used four massive triangular arches that rose above the pillars, creating a circular base strong enough to carry the central dome. This innovative solution allowed the dome to rise higher than ever before, reaching nearly a quarter of the building's total interior height. Light streamed in through windows set into three of the arches, while a semi-dome at the front guided the visitor's eye toward the qibla. In contrast, the side spaces remained lower, covered by three smaller domes on each side, so that anyone entering the mosque would immediately feel the central hall opening up above them, bright and expansive. Later studies confirm that this original design was both ambitious and fragile, collapsing in the 1766 earthquake but leaving behind a clear testimony to the architect's vision.⁴⁵ Compared with the darker and more compact Uc Sherefli Mosque, the Fatih Mosque offered a lighter, more open spatial experience—showing how Ottoman builders were beginning to experiment with space, light, and height in ways that deeply shaped the future of mosque design.

⁴¹ Ü. Demir, "A Comparative Look at the Columns in 18th Century Mosques: Display and Impression from the Courtyard to the Lodge," *Journal of Art History* 33 (2024): 49–87.

⁴² T. Akyüz, "Elemental and Spectroscopic Characterization of Plasters and Bricks of the Fatih Mosque (Istanbul, Turkey)," *Spectrochimica Acta Part A: Molecular and Biomolecular Spectroscopy* 149 (2015): 715.

⁴³ E. Turan, "The Fatih Mosque in Istanbul: Construction History and Architectural Analysis," *Istanbul University Journal of Architecture and Engineering* 9, no. 2 (2009): [103–120].

⁴⁴ M. Parks, "Hagia Sophia's Continuing Legacy," *Stanford Report*, August 5, 2020, <https://news.stanford.edu/stories/2020/08/hagia-sophias-continuing-legacy>.

⁴⁵ İhsan E. Bal, F. Gülten Gülay, Meltem Vatan, and Eleni Smyrou, "Historical Earthquake Damages to Domed Structures in Istanbul," in *Handbook of Research on Seismic Assessment and Rehabilitation of Historic Structures*, ed. Panagiotis G. Asteris and Vagelis Plevris (Hershey: IGI Global, 2015), 665–667.

Hagia Sophia, which has a single central dome and two semi-domes on either side of the same diameter above the central space as shown in Figure 3, is noteworthy, but the Fatih Mosque, as noted, has a single central dome covering the central square supported by a single semi-dome of the same diameter above the mihrab.

Figure 8: The Old Fatih Mosque and the Uc Sherefli Mosque, Section



Source: Author

The original Fatih Mosque was among the most significant achievements of early Ottoman architecture in Istanbul. Its design featured a broad central dome rising approximately 45 meters, complemented by a semi-dome of equal diameter to the south. Structural support was provided by two free-standing rectangular piers to the south, two piers integrated into the northern wall of the prayer hall, and two massive porphyry columns to the north. The east and west side aisles were each covered by six domes, measuring about 10 meters in diameter. For nearly a century, the mosque's central dome remained the largest in Ottoman architecture, until it was surpassed by the dome of the Süleymaniye Mosque. Flanking the northern wall of the prayer hall, two minarets stood on the east and west sides, their bases seamlessly merging with the structure's walls.^{46,47,48}

The Old Fatih Mosque marks an important step in Ottoman architecture towards space unification. The chief element of which the broad space of this mosque is formed are the dome square. The second space form which makes its appearance in this mosque is the half-square, the roofing of which consists of a half-dome. This is a structural element which was unknown in Ottoman architecture before the construction of this mosque. It was first employed in this building. Two side aisles composite of equal square space units connected by arch openings with each other as well as with the central space. This meant an important step towards centralizing the entire space. The continuation of the logical development of the space formation has already occurred in Uc Sherefli mosque in Edirne. The overall plan of the mosque highlights the longitudinal form of the Ottoman Mosque scheme which was adopted by the architect Sinan later in his Sultanic mosques. Despite considerable efforts to make the Old Fatih Mosque a strong rival to the architecture of Hagia Sophia, its final design did not fully achieve Sultan Mehmet II's ambitious vision. The presence of only a single half-dome at the front of the mosque prevented the interior from attaining a fully mature central composition. The spatial sequence was less logically articulated, as visitors did not experience a gradual movement toward the central dome. This aspect was later refined in

⁴⁶ Goodwin, *History of Ottoman Architecture*, 121–131.

⁴⁷ Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan*, 77–103.

⁴⁸ Doğan Kuban, *Ottoman Architecture*, trans. Adair Mill (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors' Club, 2010), 130–165.

the Beyazit II Mosque, where the addition of a rear half-dome enhanced the interior's sense of cohesion and centrality. Nevertheless, these limitations do not diminish the value and significance of the Fatih Mosque, particularly given its early position in the history of the Renaissance, especially in Eastern Europe.

The design of the mosque led to the formation of a new architectural style based on the design of Hagia Sophia, and the plan of the Uc Sherefli Mosque led to the formation of modern features and a new architectural language of unparalleled beauty. In the Fatih Mosque, the architect skillfully organized the spatial mass, creating a harmonious relationship between the upper section, influenced by the complex structural elements of Hagia Sophia, and the lower section, influenced by the geometric layout of the Uc Sherefli Mosque. The design emphasizes geometric clarity rather than decorative elements or curvilinear plans. At the core of the mosque lies the central dome, set within a square layout, which unifies the entire interior space. This arrangement results in a cohesive and formal composition, characteristic of the Ottoman architectural style. Externally, the mosque is marked by its monumental presence, reflecting the vision of the early modern Ottoman Mosque and influencing subsequent mosque designs throughout the empire.

The complex and religious college, built atop one of Istanbul's hills, served as a "symbol of victory," commemorating the historic conquest and reign of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror. These mosques have special specifications, such that only a sultan who personally conquered lands and cities from Christians was allowed to build such a monumental mosque in Istanbul.⁴⁹

Compared to the relatively dim interior of Hagia Sophia, the Fatih Mosque welcomed sunlight through numerous tall windows — an architectural choice that reflected the evolving Ottoman approach to interior illumination, as observed through comparative analysis of both structures. The minarets, positioned on the eastern and western sides of the northern wall, rise organically from the structure, creating a sense of verticality without overwhelming the space.⁵⁰

Although the mosque expanded far beyond the scale of the earlier Uc Sherefli Mosque, both horizontally and vertically, it was not primarily intended to rival Hagia Sophia in sheer size. The short marble columns supporting the lateral arches subtly lowered the overall height of the dome, reflecting the early stage of technical and engineering mastery in Atik Sinan's team.⁵¹ This produced a striking contrast between the solid cubic walls and the hemispherical dome above.

Yet, despite these limitations, the space conveys a sense of grandeur and purpose, laying the foundation for the refined harmony and proportion that would later be fully realized by the master architect Sinan. The combination of light, scale, and structural ingenuity transforms the mosque into more than a place of worship; it becomes a monumental expression of early Ottoman architectural ambition and cultural vision.

As Spiro Kostof suggests, the grandeur of Constantinople in its early Ottoman moment is vividly reflected in the monumental scale and splendor of the Fatih Mosque and its surrounding complex. The vast interior spaces and the imposing dome, together with the harmonious arrangement of the madrasahs, convey a sense of majesty that evokes a symbolic parallel with Renaissance Western

⁴⁹ Necipoğlu, *The Age of Sinan*, 77–103.

⁵⁰ "Fatih Camii," Archnet.

⁵¹ Çiğdem Kafescioğlu, "Early Ottoman Architecture in Istanbul," *History of Istanbul*, 2009, accessed 2025, <https://istanbultarihi.ist/691-early-ottoman-architecture-in-istanbul>.

capitals. This underscores the city's role as a living continuation of Roman imperial heritage⁵² and highlights how architectural ambition and symbolic meaning converge to create an environment that conveys both spatial authority and contemplative depth.

Discussion

As the preceding architectural analysis has demonstrated, the original design of the Fatih Mosque was not merely a product of Byzantine architectural influences in Istanbul, but rather an organic continuation of the Ottoman architectural thought that had originated in Bursa. Its 3×4 spatial configuration, the introduction of the semi-dome as a new structural element, and the innovative use of windowed tympanums to flood the interior with natural light all point to a deliberate programme of spatial experimentation rooted in the Ottoman tradition, even as specific upper-structure elements were adapted from the Byzantine vocabulary.⁵³

Table 1 below presents a comparative quantitative summary of the key architectural metrics across the four structures examined in this study, enabling a more precise assessment of the developmental progression from the early Ottoman mosques of Bursa and Edirne to the monumental achievement of the Old Fatih Mosque in Istanbul, measured against the benchmark of Hagia Sophia.

Table 1: Comparative Architectural Metrics of the Mosques Examined

Feature	Green Mosque (Bursa)	Uc Sherefli Mosque (Edirne)	Old Fatih Mosque (Istanbul)	Hagia Sophia
Date of Construction	1419–1424	1437–1448	1463–1470	532–537
Central Dome Diameter (m)	~11	24	26	31
Dome Height (m)	~20	~30	~44–45	~55
Number of Spatial Units	Multiple Ewans	8 units (2×4)	12 units (3×4)	Hierarchical nave
Free-standing Interior Supports	None	2 massive hexagonal pillars	2 piers + 2 porphyry columns	4 massive piers + columns
Semi-dome Usage	None	None	1 frontal semi-dome	2 axial semi-domes
Plan Configuration	Ewan (inverted-T)	Rectangular transverse	Longitudinal centralized	Longitudinal basilical
Interior Lighting Strategy	Wall windows	Limited wall openings	Windowed tympanums + drum windows	40 base windows + dome ring

Source: Author

By contrast, the traditional geometric layout characteristic of Ottoman mosques — defined by adjacent spatial units arranged both longitudinally and transversely — was notably absent from

⁵² Spiro Kostof and Greg Castillo, *A History of Architecture: Settings and Rituals*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 454–462.

⁵³ Rowland J. Mainstone, *Hagia Sophia: Architecture, Structure, and Liturgy of Justinian's Great Church* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 65–100.

the plan of Hagia Sophia. Instead, the design of Hagia Sophia embraced a clear spatial hierarchy in which the eye is naturally drawn toward the central dome, flanked by semi-domes on either side, before gradually moving toward the two-story side and rear galleries. This spatial arrangement not only establishes the relative importance of each zone within the composition, but also creates a harmonious progression that guides visitors through the interior, conveying a simultaneous sense of grandeur and order.

It is well established that during the Ottoman conquests of western Anatolia, Ottoman architecture was partially influenced in its external appearance by the local traditions of the Byzantine regions and cities annexed to the expanding Turkish state. Following the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, this process of architectural transformation intensified considerably, particularly with the conversion of Hagia Sophia into the principal mosque of the Ottoman capital, Istanbul. This influence is clearly evident in the upper section of the Old Fatih Mosque — the first building erected under the royal patronage of Sultan Mehmed the Conqueror — where key architectural elements from Hagia Sophia were consciously adopted. These included large arches filled with windowed tympanums, a prominent semi-dome, corner pendentives, and the grand solitary dome crowning the structure at its highest point.

Yet the architectural dialogue surrounding the Old Fatih Mosque was not confined to the binary of Byzantine heritage and Ottoman invention. Recent scholarship has drawn attention to a broader Mediterranean dimension that merits consideration. Sultan Mehmed II's well-documented interest in Italian Renaissance art and culture—evidenced by his commissioning of portrait medals from Italian artists, his invitation of the Venetian painter Gentile Bellini to his court, and his active engagement with humanist learning⁵⁴—suggests an intellectual milieu open to cross-cultural architectural exchange. Significantly, during the very years in which the Old Fatih Mosque was under construction (1463–1470), the Florentine architect and theorist Antonio Averlino, known as Filarete, was completing the Ospedale Maggiore in Milan (begun c. 1456) and composing his influential *Libro architetonico* (c. 1460–1464), a treatise that advocated rational geometric planning and the organisation of monumental complexes around symmetrical axes. In 1465, the humanist Francesco Filelfo recommended Filarete to George Amirutzes, tutor to Sultan Mehmed II, indicating that the architect may have intended to relocate to Constantinople.⁵⁵ While no direct formal influence of the Ospedale Maggiore on the Fatih complex can be demonstrated on the basis of current evidence, the chronological coincidence and the documented channels of artistic and intellectual contact between the Ottoman court and the Italian city-states point to a shared fifteenth-century Mediterranean culture of monumental architectural ambition—one in which geometric order, spatial grandeur, and the expression of sovereign authority through architecture were common aspirations across political and religious boundaries. Acknowledging this wider Mediterranean context does not diminish the Ottoman character of the Fatih Mosque; rather, it situates the building within the richer and more interconnected world in which it was conceived. The Old Fatih Mosque was, however, not merely a result of Byzantine architectural influences in Istanbul, but rather an organic continuation of the development of Ottoman architectural thought rooted in Bursa. In doing so, it opened new possibilities for expanding the interior space of Ottoman mosques. The geometric repetition of the elements developed in this mosque — most notably the semi-dome flanked by smaller side domes on either side of the central dome — directly

⁵⁴ Gülru Necipoğlu, “Visual Cosmopolitanism and Creative Translation: Artistic Conversations with Renaissance Italy in Mehmed II's Constantinople,” *Muqarnas* 29 (2012): 1–81.

⁵⁵ Julian Raby, “Pride and Prejudice: Mehmed the Conqueror and the Italian Portrait Medal,” *Studies in the History of Art* 21 (1987): 171–194. On Filarete's connection to the Ottoman court and the letter of recommendation from Francesco Filelfo to George Amirutzes, see Kenneth Hayes, “Filarete's Journey to the East,” in *ACSA International Conference Proceedings* (2001).

informed the floor plan that the celebrated architect Hayreddin would later apply in the construction of the Sultan Beyazit Mosque in Istanbul, completed between 1501 and 1507.

On the basis of the foregoing analysis, it cannot be disputed that the half-dome was borrowed from the design of Hagia Sophia. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to conclude that the underlying intention was not to replicate the basic form of Hagia Sophia through imitation alone. Rather, it reflected a movement driven by the Ottoman architectural spirit and creative determination — a spirit that arose from the particular conditions of a state established deep in the heart of Anatolia, and which reached its full expression in the new capital only gradually, through a sustained process of Ottoman architectural development.

Only one further step remained necessary to achieve a truly spacious and unified mosque interior. This decisive addition was realized through the masterwork of the architect Sinan, builder of the Shehzade Mosque in Istanbul, completed in 1548.⁵⁶ This mosque continued the central spatial idea through the addition of two lateral semi-domes, so that the central dome came to rest upon four semi-domes simultaneously. In doing so, Sinan effectively surpassed the spatial formula of Hagia Sophia, achieving an open and fully integrated architectural composition — both horizontally and vertically. This represented the final and most coherent expression of the long-standing Ottoman quest to expand and unify the interior space of the mosque, an ambition that had defined Ottoman architecture since its earliest monuments, as demonstrated through the numerous examples examined throughout this study.

It is certain that Ottoman architects drew extensively upon the same structural elements employed in Byzantine architecture — among them columns, pendentives, and half-domes. Yet these elements functioned merely as instruments in the service of original architectural goals that the Ottoman architect independently conceived and pursued. While the structural ambition of expanding and unifying interior space may have existed within Byzantine architectural tradition as well, there is equally no doubt that the Ottoman conception of space was born independently and followed its own distinct trajectory. The clearest evidence of this independence lies in the architectural monuments briefly examined in the course of this study.

As discussed in the architectural analysis above, the reliance on a single frontal half-dome left the mosque's spatial scheme incompletely resolved. Historical accounts suggest that Sultan Mehmed II himself was not entirely satisfied with the outcome, having envisioned a structure that more directly rivalled the spatial grandeur of Hagia Sophia. Yet this perceived shortcoming proved to be a productive constraint: the compositional gap identified in the Old Fatih Mosque served as a catalyst for subsequent innovation, prompting the rear half-dome solution of the Beyazit II Mosque and ultimately enabling the fully integrated four-semi-dome scheme that architect Sinan would realize in the Shehzade Mosque. The Old Fatih Mosque thus retains its significance not despite its limitations, but in part because of them — as a formative stage whose unresolved tensions drove the next generation of Ottoman architectural thought.

Conclusion

Many researchers and historians argue that the architectural form of the Old Fatih Mosque — as the first imperial mosque erected in Istanbul — reflects direct Byzantine influences, particularly

⁵⁶ Naser Thabet Al-Mughrabi, "Shehzade Mosque: The Unique Harmony Between Arabic Calligraphy Decorations and Architectural Structure," *Journal of Islamic Architecture* 9, no. 1 (2026): 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.18860/jia.v9i1.26606>.

through its strong central composition reminiscent of Hagia Sophia. This is evident in the massive upper dome, the four large arches supporting it, the three tympana pierced with windows, and the frontal semi-dome. The present study concurs with this perspective. However, at the ground level, the author proposes that the design may equally be understood as a natural and logical continuation of the Ottoman architectural tradition that had been steadily developing in Anatolia for more than a century and a half prior to the construction of this mosque.

The Old Fatih Mosque has often been described as having been built “in the style of Hagia Sophia.” Yet this characterization appears to refer not to a direct imitation of Hagia Sophia’s design, but rather to the sense of grandeur and wonder the mosque inspired in its visitors. In reality, the two buildings differ substantially, particularly in scale and structural character. Hagia Sophia, with its thick walls and massive structural supports, conveys an overwhelming feeling of weight and monumentality, whereas the Old Fatih Mosque presents a lighter and more graceful architectural character. Inside, Hagia Sophia is dominated by heavy columns, piers, and buttresses, in sharp contrast to the open and unencumbered interior of the Old Fatih Mosque. On the exterior as well, Hagia Sophia is distinguished by large projecting piers surrounding its dome, while the Old Fatih Mosque displays a considerably gentler and more refined silhouette.

Figure 9: A comparison illustrating the architectural differences between the Hagia Sophia and the Old Fatih Mosque

HAGIA SOPHIA	ASPECT	OLD FATIH MOSQUE
Heavy, monumental	CHARACTER	Lighter, more graceful
Heavy piers & buttresses	INTERIOR	Open, unified space
Projecting exterior piers	EXTERIOR	Refined dome profile
Two frontal semi-domes	SEMI-DOMES	One frontal semi-dome
No traditional grid	PLAN	3×4 unit Ottoman grid

Source: Author

Structurally, the mosque achieved its expansive interior through a remarkably economical support system: only four main supports — two free-standing pillars and two porphyry columns — carried the entire upper structure of arches and domes. This minimal intervention within the prayer hall became a model subsequently adopted in many later Ottoman mosques.

The prayer hall, its frontal portico, flanking minarets, and rectangular courtyard with its central ablution fountain together established the standard compositional sequence that would define the Ottoman imperial mosque type for generations to come.

In this longitudinal configuration oriented parallel to the qibla direction, the Old Fatih Mosque occupied a significant position in the continuous evolution of Ottoman architecture. The cubic structure, with its prominent entrance gate, the two minarets rising at its flanks, and the central courtyard framed by porticoes, all became foundational elements that shaped the subsequent development of the Ottoman Mosque typology. The original Fatih Mosque thus not only

represented a monumental architectural achievement in its own time, but also established a model that profoundly influenced the trajectory of Ottoman architectural design for generations to come. Its roof composition — six lateral domes flanking a single frontal semi-dome beneath a dominant central dome — produced a graduated skyline that clearly articulated the qibla axis, achieving for the first time in Ottoman design a composition of such spatial clarity and formal resolution. The elevated central dome, set upon a windowed cylindrical drum, established an enduring typological model for subsequent Ottoman Mosque design.

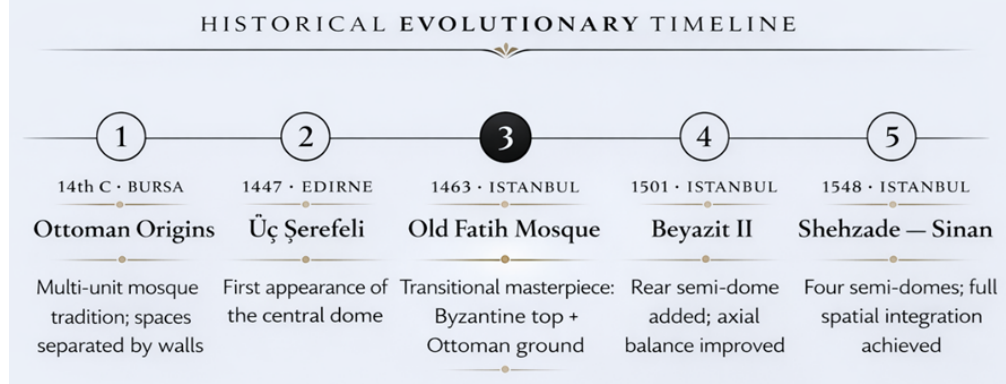
At first glance, the ground plan of the Old Fatih Mosque reveals a systematic approach to the unification of interior space in Ottoman architecture. The vast prayer hall unfolds from a series of square domed units — a recurring motif in Ottoman Mosque design. Unlike the earlier Bursa mosques, where walls segmented the interior into discrete compartments, here the spaces flow seamlessly into one another through arched openings. Rows of three equal squares extend along the narrower sides, punctuated at the center by a larger square and an adjoining semi-square, all organically interconnected.

A closer examination reveals that this arrangement of the central unit builds upon earlier mosque designs, yet with an important distinction: while previous mosques featured a center composed of equal squares, the second spatial unit here is reduced by half and covered by a semi-dome. This modification marks a decisive step toward centralizing the entire interior. It demonstrates both a continuity with the spirit of earlier buildings and an ambition to create a spacious, monumental interior befitting what came to be known as a “Great People’s Mosque” — the congregational mosque of an imperial capital.

The Old Fatih Mosque thus introduces a new spatial arrangement that is simultaneously innovative and respectful of tradition. Its design presents a harmonious dialogue between the architectural experiments of Bursa and Edirne and the evolving spatial demands of a large communal place of worship. The mosque embodies a careful architectural balance: it preserves the clarity and order of earlier square-unit systems while expanding and integrating them into a more unified and spatially coherent interior. In doing so, the Old Fatih Mosque not only represents a logical continuation of established Ottoman architectural principles, but also sets a significant precedent — offering a model that would influence the development of mosque architecture for generations to come.

Despite its grounding in earlier architectural traditions, the Old Fatih Mosque reveals a new artistic vision that transcends the prevailing design conventions of its time. This departure from established norms was essential to its architectural development, introducing a subtle yet meaningful diversification in spatial composition — an approach hinted at earlier in the Uc Sherefli Mosque in Edirne, but realized here in a distinctly innovative manner. In terms of form and aesthetic expression, the Old Fatih Mosque may be understood as a thoughtful and deliberate transformation of the traditional model. While it had not yet attained the full spatial mastery that would characterize the great Ottoman works of the following century, it served as a pivotal transitional stage, laying the intellectual and structural groundwork for the architectural brilliance that would flourish under the renowned architect Sinan. It is thus with full justification that we place the Old Fatih Mosque — destroyed by earthquake yet preserved in historical memory — in its rightful and formative position within the broader development of Ottoman architecture.

Figure 10: Historical Evolutionary Timeline of Ottoman Mosque Architecture



Source: Author

The findings of this study open several promising avenues for future research. First, the application of space syntax analysis to surviving Ottoman mosques that were directly influenced by the Old Fatih Mosque—such as the Beyazıt II Mosque and the Shehzade Mosque—could yield valuable quantitative data on patterns of spatial integration and visual connectivity, thereby providing an indirect yet empirically grounded basis for inferring the spatial qualities of the lost original structure. Second, advances in three-dimensional digital reconstruction and Building Information Modelling (BIM), informed by the archival descriptions and comparative typological evidence assembled in this study, could enable virtual reconstructions of the original Fatih Mosque that allow for computational structural analysis, lighting simulation, and acoustic modelling—methods that cannot be applied to the physical building itself but that may be productively applied to carefully calibrated digital surrogates. Third, further archival research in Ottoman vakfiye documents and court records may yet reveal construction details, material procurement records, or design specifications that shed new light on the working methods of the architect Atik Sinan and his team. Finally, a broader comparative study situating the Old Fatih Mosque within the wider Mediterranean architectural exchange of the fifteenth century—including possible connections with contemporary Italian Renaissance building practices, given Sultan Mehmed II’s well-documented interest in Italian art and culture—could enrich our understanding of the cross-cultural dynamics that shaped early Ottoman imperial architecture.

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