

Orientalist Orientals: re-conceptualizing Ottoman architecture in the late Empire

Review of:

Ahmet Ersoy, *Architecture and the Late Ottoman Historical Imaginary: Reconfiguring the Architectural Past in a Modernizing Empire*, Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2015, 313 pp. includes bibliographical references and index; 72 b & w illus., \$112.46 hdbk, ISBN: 978-1-4724-3139-4

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Architecture and the Late Ottoman Historical Imaginary is a book that, like nesting Russian dolls, contains multiple, interlinked stories across its four chapters. With each chapter, the story unfolds further, with many detours and subsequent returns to the central themes, gradually adding to and enriching the overall account of cultural change in the late Ottoman Empire giving us a truly 'thick description' of its subject matter. The specific story of one canonic architectural publication, *Usul-i Mimariyi Osmani* (Chapter 3), authored by a cosmopolitan group of Ottoman artists and intellectuals (Chapter 2), is nestled within the story of Ottoman participation in Vienna World Exhibition of 1873 for which the *Usul* was prepared (Chapter 1), which in turn, is nestled within the broader story of late Ottoman search for authenticity and cultural rootedness in the context of *Tanzimat* modernization (Chapter 4). Beyond its many scholarly contributions that are discussed below, it is this ingenious organization of the material into four chapters that complement each other in multiple ways but can nonetheless be read alone, that makes the book highly readable, informative and thought-provoking for diverse audiences.

The historical legacy of the *Tanzimat* and more generally, the political, cultural and aesthetic meanings of late Ottoman encounters with modernity has always been a contentious topic. Even seemingly competing interpretations have frequently collapsed back to the same Eurocentric conception of the 'globalization' of the world in the nineteenth century, taking for granted the West's privileged position as the exclusive source and agent of change, either positively as a necessary if belated modernization of the Empire along Western trajectories, or negatively as a lamentable contamination of its national culture by foreign influences. *Architecture and the Late Ottoman Imaginary* does an excellent job of dismantling this construct and historicizing *Tanzimat* culture in new ways. Taking issue with both the so-called 'westernization paradigm' in terms of which late Ottoman modernization has typically been viewed, and the 'nativist' or 'nationalist' readings which have treated the cosmopolitanism of the era as suspect, the book urges us to look instead at the complex histories of 'cultural inspection, syncretism and improvisation that

informed late Ottoman engagement with the modern world' (p.5). It urges us to get to know the multiple actors involved in this process, with their diverse backgrounds, ambivalent positions and sometimes-conflicting agendas. In short, the book is a call for understanding cultural change in late Ottoman Empire from within the Ottoman society itself, thereby giving agency to the myriad of local actors who articulated novel demands for an authentic cultural past in order to better position the Empire as a legitimate and still powerful player in the emerging modern world system.

As laid out in the Introduction (which is an invaluable essay in itself for recapping the book's contents and intellectual propositions), *Architecture and the Late Ottoman Imaginary* gives us a compelling case of how modernity and nostalgia were intimately intertwined in the latter part of the nineteenth century – how institutional, technological and social change following the *Tanzimat* reforms also fired up the 'historical imagination' and triggered local re-conceptualizations of the Ottoman cultural past in novel ways. This 'new historical mindedness of the 19th century', itself a modern concept (discussed via Stephen Bann), is offered in the book as the primary framework within which we should interpret 'the invention of the modern form of Ottoman nostalgia' as Ersoy calls it (p.15). The longing for the bygone 'golden ages' of Ottoman/Islamic culture that gripped the imagination of Ottoman artists, intellectuals and bureaucrats of the time, needs to be understood not as a reaction to *Tanzimat* modernization, but rather in continuity with it, as an integral dimension of the late Ottoman experience of modernity. The commonly accepted explanation of cultural change in late Ottoman Empire, based on an alleged opposition between the excessive westernization of the *Tanzimat* (during the reigns of Sultans Mahmud II and Abdulmecit) and the subsequent Islamist reaction to it (during the reigns of sultans Abdulaziz and Abdulhamid II), is effectively dismantled in favour of a more syncretic, ambivalent and polyvalent history of the latter.

Perhaps the singularly most important scholarly contribution of the book is its more historicized and nuanced understanding of Orientalism beyond the long-exhausted binary logic and the totalizing, monolithic discourse of the Saidian paradigm. Acknowledging the inspiration of Lisa Lowe's *Critical Terrains* on British and French Orientalism, as well as the work of Selim Deringil and Ussama Makdisi on Ottoman Orientalism, Ersoy reminds us how Orientalism intersects with many other modes of cultural differentiation and imperial hierarchies (gender, class, ethnicity, nation etc.) enacted differently in different sites, often giving us ambivalent, unstable and contradictory readings. His rendition of late Ottoman artists, intellectuals and bureaucrats as both self-styled 'orientals' of the modern world who embraced alterity as a valuable cultural asset and at the same time, as 'orientalists' who employed the canonic artistic, literary and scholarly conventions of European Orientalism, effectively blurs and complicates sharp binary oppositions

like East-West, subject-object, self-other etc. that were central to Edward Said's original conception of the term.

In Ersoy's account, Ottoman Orientalism (as manifest for example in Osman Hamdi Bey's 'orientalist' paintings or the very idea of an Ottoman Renaissance in late nineteenth century architecture) was neither a trivial stylistic exoticism derivative of European discourses, nor a deliberately 'subversive' or 'corrective' response to the latter's stereotypical renderings of the Orient. Rather, such works were inherently ambivalent texts, on the one hand claiming cultural difference and rootedness in the Empire's cherished Ottoman/ Islamic past, and at the same time, seeking to re-present this difference in an artistic and scholarly language intelligible to European audiences, so as to claim a place for Ottoman art and architecture within the established 'Western canon'. 'While projecting a definite image of locality, authenticity and aesthetic difference, they also hoped to defy marginality and pure otherness in their effort to inhabit, manipulate and ultimately expand a master discourse on art that was rigidly controlled and dominated by the Western center' (p.7). The four chapters following the Introduction elaborate this central idea from multiple directions.

Chapter One tells the story of the 1873 Vienna World Exhibition as the spectacular site of global encounters, exchanges and competition within which Ottoman Empire sought to represent itself as a powerful state, simultaneously modern and 'oriental'. Deriving from archival sources, official correspondences, contemporary publications, exhibition pamphlets and objects and paraphernalia on display, Ersoy gives us a detailed picture of Ottoman imperial priorities, economic agendas and specific strategies of self-representation. In post-colonial cultural studies, the politics of representation in nineteenth century World Fairs has often been discussed within the Saidian framework based on a separation between the West as the centre that alone holds the power of representation, and its 'non-Western others' who cannot represent themselves – as for example in Timothy Mitchell's classic discussion of Egypt at the 1889 Paris Exhibition. Ersoy's account of Vienna 1873 provides plenty of evidence that relations of power between centre and periphery were far more complicated and that, for example, contrary to the assumptions of a largely 'mute' Orient, both Ottoman Empire and Egypt were actively engaged in representing themselves, not just to Western audiences but also to each other. Within the comparative and competitive framework of the world exhibitions, representation was an effective instrument of self-definition in relation to *multiple* others. While the Habsburg monarchy saw the event as an occasion to assert its imperial identity by situating itself at the intersection of Western Europe and the oriental world (literally by placing the Austrian pavilion at the centre of the long exhibition building with other countries to its east or west according to their actual geographical locations), westernized Ottoman elites embraced Orientalism to solidify the Empire's privileged status as the primary representative of the Islamic world to the West.

Particularly refreshing in this Chapter is the discussion of Exoticism in terms of the relationship between cultural discourses and the material realities of the modern world – a relationship that has already been highlighted by more recent scholarly studies of commercial and touristic dimensions of Orientalism (Holly Edward's book accompanying the Clark Institute exhibition on American Orientalism in 2000 or Edhem Eldem's *Consuming the Orient* Exhibition in Istanbul in 2007 immediately come to mind). Exoticism, seen by many as a remedy for the commodification and homogenization of culture during the capitalist expansion of the nineteenth century, coupled with the global desire to aestheticize and consume cultural difference, constituted a favourable backdrop to Ottoman participation in the Vienna Exhibition. As Ersoy convincingly explains, the Ottoman resort to Exoticism –the emphasis on oriental crafts, costumes and styles, was an over-determined choice which not only reflected the aforementioned modern Ottoman nostalgia for the past (i.e. an aesthetic, cultural and ideological choice), but also intersected with the state's economic protectionism that sought to increase the visibility and competitiveness of Ottoman products against European goods (i.e. an economic agenda). For their part, the Austrians also promoted oriental arts and sought to establish an oriental museum to mark their intensified economic and cultural involvement in the Balkans and Ottoman territories – not unlike the example of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London that had emerged out of the British interest in the decorative arts of its colonial possessions. The many parallels between European agendas of applied arts reform (the *Kunstgewerbe* movement in particular) and the late Ottoman efforts to revive traditional craft guilds and establish industrial schools in Istanbul is one of the several important discussions in the book which, while only briefly treated in this broader cultural history, open up very interesting new directions of research and further inquiry.

That the Ottomans saw the Exhibition as an opportunity to assert the strength and coherence of their Empire, especially in the context of the prevailing competition with Egypt since the 1867 Paris Exhibition, underscores how rivalry *between* oriental powers can be as important to the story as much as, if not more than an oriental-occidental confrontation that often gets privileged treatment in postcolonial theory. In the second half of the nineteenth century Egypt was engaged in its own modernization program under Khedive Ismail Pasha and participated in the Vienna Exhibition with a larger, more impressive pavilion designed in the Neo-Memluk style. This competition, Ersoy explains, prompted the Ottomans, who were too strained economically to erect imposing buildings, to instead focus on a scholarly display of the inherent rationality and ornamental refinement of their architecture and showcase an ethnographic display of the ethnically, religiously and occupationally diverse peoples of the Empire. Consequently, in addition to the architectural pavilions erected on the exhibition grounds (including an exact replica of the Ahmed III Fountain and an accurately detailed wood-frame Ottoman house), three major publications were sent to Vienna by the Ottoman state: the monumental

and beautifully illustrated *Usul-i Mimariyi Osmani* outlining the principles of Ottoman architecture, a guidebook on Istanbul and an ethnographic-photographic costume album. The latter, insofar as it employed colonial techniques of viewing, ordering and representing imperial subjects, underscored the ambivalence of Ottomans as both 'orientals' (in their embrace of Islamic artistic and cultural heritage) and orientalists at the same time (especially in representing their Arab provinces).

Chapter 2 is an exposition of the main actors behind the preparation of *Usul* –an unpacking of their personal agendas and the broader cultural networks to which they belonged and how they came together to collectively engineer an artistic and cultural Ottoman revival. This is the story of a remarkably diverse and cosmopolitan group of people (with many Europeans, Levantens and non-Muslim Ottomans in their ranks) and the circles within which they operated, offering us glimpses of the rich social and cultural life of the late Empire. These 'embedded cosmopolitans' or 'border-crossers' as Ersoy calls them, give us a far more diffused vision of Ottoman culture, highlighting its 'trans-national' and 'translational' dimensions frequently obscured by nativist discourses of national identity. Rather than predetermined cultural processes or big concepts like 'westernization', 'Ottoman culture', 'imperial agendas' etc., it is these historical actors and their multiple connections to each other and to broader networks within and outside the Ottoman Empire that make up the main analytical tools of Ersoy's account. Thus, (with intellectual indebtedness to Bruno Latour) he effectively employs action-network theories that give agency to local actors and challenge traditional conceptions of cultural belonging and identity formation.

The personal backgrounds and individual idiosyncrasies of these primary actors, rendered in remarkable detail, paint a truly cosmopolitan picture. Ibrahim Edhem Pasa and Mehmed Sevki Efendi, the Muslim bureaucrats who were in charge of the whole enterprise; the French Romantic historian Marie de Launay and the Ottoman artist and bureaucrat Osman Hamdi Bey who shaped the 'historical imaginary' behind *Usul's* Ottoman Orientalism; the Italian-Levantine architect Pietro Montani who prepared most of the 'technical drawings' in the *Usul* and the two Armenian painters, Bogos Sasiyan and Koceoglu Krikor who assisted him, were all directly involved in different capacities while the prominent Ottoman intellectual Ahmet Vefik Pasa, the French architect Leon Parville and the French artist Eugene Maillard were also influential. There is a lot of new information and fascinating tidbits in this Chapter: for example, the discussion of Pietro Montani's mysticism and occultism, his theories of harmonious proportions in music and cosmology (articulated in his 1865 *Harmony of Spheres* book), as well as his ideas behind the naming of Ottoman architectural orders after mineralogy (Echanfriné, Bréchiforme and Cristallisé) are particularly interesting, curiously, anticipating by half a century, many ideas of the early 20th century theosophists, German Expressionists and artists of the Crystal Chain group.

Chapter 3 turns the investigation to the primary object of study, *Usul-i Mimariyi Osmani*, the monumental publication that was prepared for the Vienna Exhibition by the authors introduced in the previous chapter. By a wide consensus, it is accepted as the first major effort by local actors to construct a history and theory of Ottoman architecture at a time when romanticism, nationalism and the rise of art history as an academic discipline in Europe (and the concomitant challenge to the authority of the classic by the introduction of local traditions and cultural differences) constituted an inspirational backdrop. Whereas it was mostly European art historians who studied 'other architectures' of Asia and the Middle East in what may be regarded as the scholarly extension of the colonial project (Pascal Coste's surveys of Egyptian architectural monuments or James Fergusson's history of Indian architecture immediately come to mind), the Ottomans took the initiative to do this themselves, and 're-canonize' their architectural traditions in ways that will demonstrate to European audiences and educated orientals alike (hence the trilingual publication of the *Usul* in Ottoman, French and German), the inherent rationality, ornamental refinement and evolutionary capacity of these traditions. Most significantly, diverging from the received norm of European orientalist scholarship, the *Usul's* survey of Ottoman architecture employed a rigorously analytical and secular academic discourse that refused to take religion and race as the primary determinants of architectural styles.

The theoretical sources, representational conventions and scholarly precedents of the *Usul* were unmistakably European (from Viollet-le-Duc's theorization of Gothic architecture to Owen Jones' cataloguing of ornamental patterns from across the world). The very effort to codify the three Ottoman architectural orders (Echanfriné, Bréchiforme and Cristallisé) as corresponding to the three basic orders of the Western architectural canon from Vitruvius to Claude Perrault (Doric, Ionic and Corinthian) leave no doubt that the idea behind the *Usul* was to re-present Ottoman architecture as conceptually comparable to and on a par with the Western canon. It may be tempting to read this bold effort to insert Ottoman architecture into the Western canon on equal terms as an unequivocal affront or a subversive counter-narrative to the nineteenth century Eurocentric and orientalist biases of Western academic establishment (epitomized by Banister Fletcher's infamous designation of 'non-Western' architectures as 'non-historical styles'). Ersoy warns us, however, that this would be an anachronistic over-reading through the optics of postcolonial theory, rather than a historically grounded understanding of the making of *Usul*. As he compellingly argues in this Chapter, *Usul's* ambitious project was far more ambivalent and a largely conciliatory one, 'straddling effortlessly the corrective and affirmative modes of involvement with the Western norm' (p.134). While it inadvertently exposed the exclusivity of the Western canon, it did so by affirming the latter's authority and seeking admission into its pantheon.

Following the prevailing linear models of stylistic evolution inspired by naturalist theories (growth, decay and regeneration), *Usul* delineated the three phases of Ottoman architecture as a formative period culminating in the classical Ottoman architecture of the 16th century, a period of stagnation and decline in the 18th and early nineteenth centuries and finally, the anticipated period of revival under the imperial patrimony of Sultan Abdulaziz. While informed by evolutionary art historical models, this trajectory was closely tied to Ottoman dynastic history as the primary framing device within which architecture was evaluated. For example, in the first period, the Green Mosque in Bursa (1419-1424) and its decorative program (with beautifully illustrated colour plates in the pages of the *Usul*) were accorded a privileged status by virtue of coinciding with and symbolizing the Ottoman dynastic re-consolidation under Mehmet I after the turmoil of the preceding Interregnum when internecine strife waged among the sons of Beyazid I. The rendering of Sinan's work as the perfection of the Ottoman architectural canon, in turn, coincided with the dynastic high point – the forging of a powerful imperial identity after the conquest of Istanbul and during the reign of Suleyman, lasting until the end of the Tulip Era. Finally, the officially sanctioned revivalist architecture that emerged during the reign of Abdulaziz was celebrated as the beginning of the desired 'Ottoman Renaissance'. The latter's reliance upon an idealized Islamic past served to redress the balance of *Tanzimat*'s more egalitarian and cosmopolitan ideals of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious Empire by re-asserting the privileged status of the Muslim element within the Ottoman ruling elite.

As Ersoy points out repeatedly, the *Usul* was a profoundly ambivalent work throughout, 'straddling dynastic Islamic and secular-cosmopolitan definitions of Ottoman identity' (p.158). Perhaps the most conspicuous contradiction in *Usul*, was between the canonic status it accorded to classical Ottoman architecture on the one hand and the praise it bestowed upon the eclectic buildings of the Azizian era on the other. If the classical period of Ottoman architecture (the work of Sinan in particular) indeed constituted the canonic high point by virtue of the structural rationality, geometric clarity and tectonic purity of its monuments as described in the *Usul*, then why did *Usul*'s authors celebrate such stylistically hybrid late *Tanzimat* buildings like the Ciragan Palace (1864-71) and the Pertevniyal Valide Mosque in Aksaray (1869-71) as the harbingers of the anticipated Ottoman Renaissance? This question is fully unpacked in the following chapter, delving deeper into the historical, political and cultural underpinnings of late *Tanzimat* architecture.

The first explanation for these discrepancies between the purist theoretical discourse of the *Usul* and the eclectic building practices of the Azizian era, Ersoy tells us in **Chapter 4**, has to do with the gap between theory and practice. Its theoretical rigor notwithstanding, *Usul* was not conceived as a design manual for practicing architects and its authors (perhaps with the exception of Montani Efendi who was involved with the decorative schemes of both Ciragan Palace and the

Aksaray Valide Mosque) were not part of the professional circles that dominated the prevailing imperial building practices, in particular, the Armenian Balyan family, the prolific royal architects of the Empire in the nineteenth century. The highly eclectic repertoire of the latter, incorporating a diverse range of influences from Gothic to orientalised styles, constituted an already existing standard of Ottoman revival that the *Usul* tried to theorize and idealize alongside its main effort to re-canonize the Ottoman building tradition, inevitably with ambivalent results.

The second explanation has to do with how historical periods acquired new cultural meanings within the late Ottoman historical imaginary. Since periods of stylistic experimentation, syncretism and hybridity followed periods of dynastic turmoil in Ottoman history and promised a fresh beginning symbolic of the restoration of imperial stability, such periods resonated particularly well with the Azizian era. As already mentioned, the Green Mosque in Bursa celebrating Mehmed I's reconsolidation of the Empire in the 15th century or the Ahmed III Fountain in Istanbul marking the relative peace of the Tulip Era in the early eighteenth century appealed to *Usul's* authors with their potent political symbolism and their example of excellence in synthesizing stylistic influences from diverse sources, which in turn rendered them more suitable to the demands of the modern age.

Ultimately, however, the cosmopolitanism of its authors and the celebration of the eclectic architecture of the Azizian era (designed mostly by a third generation of Balyans), openly conflicted with *Usul's* embrace of what would be the most enduring master narrative of proto-nationalist Ottoman and nationalist Turkish art historiography (which would unfold in full-force in the early twentieth century): the so-called 'decline thesis' which denigrated the post-classical period of Ottoman architecture as one of contamination and its Armenian architects as the primary culprits. That among the authors of *Usul*, a non-Muslim, the French historian Marie de Launay spearheaded such proto-nationalist notions of purity and cultural authenticity (for example in his condemnation of Ottoman baroque, neoclassical and 'empire' styles as a 'ridiculous', 'impotent' and ultimately futile attempt to graft European styles onto Ottoman edifices) is a further irony that will not be lost to the readers.

Like in the previous chapters, Ersoy's account of late *Tanzimat* architecture in this chapter is overlaid with important historiographical points that challenge much of the existing scholarship on Islamic and Ottoman architecture by European and Turkish scholars alike (as in the case of Robert Hillenbrand and Dogan Kuban who are cited as proponents of the dominant westernization, decline and degeneration theories). Taking issue with these scholars' views of post-classical Ottoman architecture as 'imported', 'alien' and 'contaminated' and as such, the sad expression of the Empire's political, aesthetic and moral decay, Ersoy looks at this architecture more positively, as the embodiment of the inventiveness, experimentalism and openness to appropriating influences from diverse sources. Rather than being the passive recipient of European stylistic influences, he argues,

late Ottoman architects actively engaged and negotiated with European artistic discourses at the same time that they articulated a revivalism infused by a patriotic pride in the Ottoman dynastic past and its Islamic artistic and architectural heritage.

One of the most original and interesting scholarly contributions of this chapter is the discussion of 'Istanbul Gothic' – the pointed arches, lancet windows and tracery details that characterize the distinct novel style not only of the aforementioned Azizian buildings, but also of the architecture of the following Abdulhamid II reign, most notably the Hamidiye Mosque in Yildiz (1885-86). These buildings, much maligned by nationalist architectural historians of the early Republican period as 'devoid of character' (in the 1930s, prominent art critic Ismail Hakki Baltacioglu would call the Valide Mosque 'a gothic church disguised as a mosque'), are presented as the expressions of what Ersoy calls the Romantic Medievalism of late Ottoman literati against the changes and anxieties of the modern world. Based on an extensive study not only of the artistic and architectural developments of these periods, but also the poetry, literature, intellectual history and popular culture of the time, he locates this 'therapeutic' medievalism in a wide range of manifestations – from a rekindled interest in the history of the Crusades and the 'golden age' of Arab civilization to the artistic glories of Andalusia in medieval Islamic Spain. As the Empire's dynastic past was re-cast as the basis of Ottoman nationhood, and Islam was re-valorized as the basis of imperial legitimacy, the art and architecture of the Azizian and Hamidian eras displayed a distinct predilection for reclaiming 'orientalness' as the source of patriotic pride. The paintings of the Ottoman orientalist artist and public intellectual Osman Hamdi Bey illustrate the point.

At the end of the book Ersoy ponders the unrealized possibilities and shifting meanings of the idea of an Ottoman Renaissance as it unfolded in the late *Tanzimat*. He observes that, this seemingly eclectic architecture, which generously derived inspiration from multiple sources, was in fact not eclectic enough in the political sense of symbolizing the egalitarian pluralism of a multi-faith, multi-ethnic, polyglot Empire. Rather, the unmistakable Islamic hard-core of its Romantic engagement with history, coupled with the exclusion of Byzantine or Armenian medieval references from its otherwise medievalist discourse, ultimately privileged the dominant Muslim component of Ottoman society, failing to embrace non-Muslim sensibilities. As he briefly outlines in the Epilogue, the eclectic, inclusive and pluralist potentials of the initial idea of an Ottoman Renaissance would give way to an exclusively Muslim-Turkish definition of nationhood in subsequent decades and *Tanzimat's* dynastic definition of Ottoman architecture would be replaced by ethnic and nationalist readings informing an unequivocal denigration and dismissal of *Tanzimat* architecture, along with the value of its foundational text *Usul* for the education of the Turkish architect. Instead, the 'purer' classical period of Ottoman architecture would be exalted as the source of the emerging *Turkish* National Style that would dominate architectural practice in the final years of the

Empire well into the first decade of the Republic, especially through the work of the first two prominent Muslim-Turkish architects Vedat and Kemaleddin Beys.

Ersoy concludes the book with yet another contemporary twist to the story that makes the book especially pertinent for current debates on history, identity and cultural politics in Turkey and will surely capture the interest of a very wide audience. To demonstrate the dangers of an uncritical dialogue with the architectural past, he brings his story forward to the summer of 2013 when an ill-conceived government scheme to redevelop the now-famous Gezi Park in the modern heart of Istanbul triggered mass-protests and the occupation of the Park for two weeks. The project, subsequently stopped by court order, proposed to reconstruct a replica of the nineteenth century Taksim artillery barracks that once stood on the same site but was demolished in the 1940s to make way for the Park. With its stylistic eclecticism and orientalist details, the proposal to rebuild (as a shopping mall of all things!) this 'gaudy, onion-domed showcase of the late Ottoman Renaissance' as Ersoy calls it, amounted to a 21st century revival of what was already a nineteenth century revival, this time in the service of neo-liberal urban plunder that makes a mockery of architectural history and urban memory. Today, the aggressive neo-Ottomanism of the ruling AKP in Turkey can indeed be viewed as a contemporary, albeit debased reincarnation of the late Ottoman self-orientalization that Ersoy has covered in this book, as well as a blatant promotion of precisely the kind of 'nationalist' Turkish-Sunni Muslim readings of Ottoman culture that *Architecture and the Late Ottoman Historical Imaginary* seeks to dismantle.

Overall, with its embrace of 'the recent fascination with the contingent, a new attentiveness to cultural reciprocity and the appeal to radical historicizing' in scholarship (p.20), the book makes a major contribution to critical and revisionist historiography of Ottoman/Turkish architecture. It effectively challenges received paradigms and interpretive frameworks in favour of more complex, more nuanced, multi-dimensional and more ambivalent explanations and dismantles the dominant 'westernization paradigm' and its companion, the notorious 'decline thesis' in terms of which the art and architecture of Ottoman *Tanzimat* has long been written. Instead, it shows us an intense period of creative engagement with European influences and a major intellectual effort to construct a genealogy for Ottoman architecture, to make it intelligible in terms of European architectural theory and above all, to recast it as a historically evolving style capable of revival in the modern world.

To its further credit, the several historiographical contributions of the book outlined in this review, apply not just to Ottoman/ Turkish studies, but also to cross-cultural studies in general. Those interested in histories of cultural contact, reciprocity and resistance during the late nineteenth century global expansion of economies and mental maps (through both European colonialism and non-colonial mechanisms of penetrating the East through commerce, railway networks, schools and cultural missions within the territories of sovereign states), will find as much

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food for thought in this book as a specialist in Ottoman art and architecture. The story of the Ottoman Renaissance, offers many comparative insights to those studying the myriad of revivalist architectural styles that emerged in late nineteenth century in different places – from Indo-Saracenic style in British colonial India and French *Arabisances* in North Africa to the Neo-Memluk ‘national style’ of Egypt at the turn of the century.

It is also a meticulously researched and well-written book with an engaging narrative style and a good selection of images that effectively illustrate the points made in the text. Some readers may find it a somewhat wordy and over-written book (in the same way that some buildings may be over-designed), repeating its arguments in several different places, returning to them after long detours, rewriting them from multiple angles etc. It is indeed a book that demands laborious reading and one does finish the book with a palpable sense of exhaustion but again, that may also be the very reason why its ‘thickly described’ arguments stay with the reader. In the end, what makes *Architecture and the Late Ottoman Historical Imaginary* an especially important book is that it is simultaneously a historical study (of architectural discourse and practice in late Ottoman Empire) and a historiographical commentary (on the biases of orientalist and nationalist scholarship). The scholarly rigor of the historical material, derived from a wide array of textual, literary and visual sources (archival documents, contemporary publications, novels, poetry, even music) is matched by the intellectual sophistication of the author’s many framing references to relevant theoretical debates (on modernity, historicism, romanticism, orientalism, nationalism, revivalism, cosmopolitanism, authenticity and hybridity among other topics). The combination is a remarkably rich account that is clearly a labour of love, pieced together over a long period of time and will surely be the standard reference on the topic for years to come.

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