

The mosque of the new

Schools for atonal muezzins, a huge mosque renovation project and the first mosque to be designed by a woman; how Istanbul is considering the way the city worships →



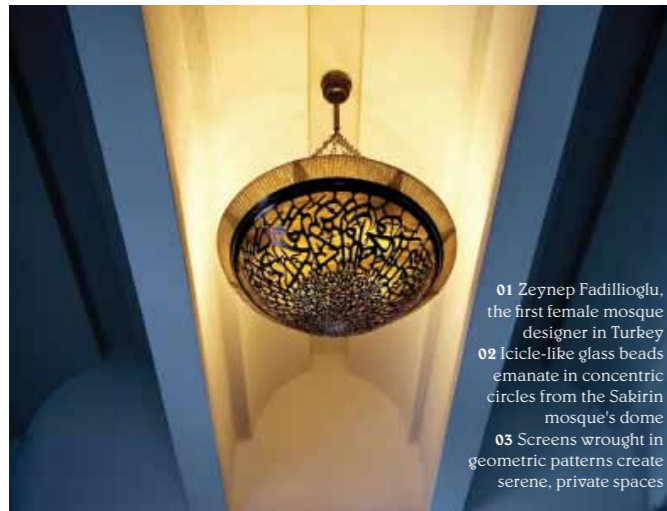
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ISTANBUL, TURKEY



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01 Zeynep Fadillioglu, the first female mosque designer in Turkey
 02 Icicle-like glass beads emanate in concentric circles from the Sakirin mosque's dome
 03 Screens wrought in geometric patterns create serene, private spaces



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First-time visitors to Istanbul often assume that its Asian shores are the more conservative side of the city. Yet little could be further from the truth. The east bank of the Bosphorus is lined with wooden villas known as *yalis*, the summer playhouses of the city's cultural elite. These picturesque mansions form the backdrop for 'Noor' – the taboo-busting Turkish soap opera that has taken the Middle East by storm.

The area is also an ideal setting for the Sakirin Mosque. This paean to modernism was planted in a leafy Ottoman-era cemetery in 2009. Inside, three concentric chandeliers loop down from the dome, each one dripping with icicle-like glass beads. The minbar and mihrab look like contemporary art installations in their own right. Through the transparent prayer-room walls, tall trees form a natural barrier around this captivating complex.

But it's not only the Sakirin's progressive design that has harnessed acclaim and debate in equal measure. This is also the first mosque in Turkey to be designed by a woman: interior designer Zeynep Fadillioglu.

It's a short hop across the Bosphorus to meet her. Fadillioglu's chic office is awash with objets d'art gleaned from business trips across Europe and the Middle East. We talk about her work for Dubai developer Emaar in the Burj Khalifa and discuss the Sheikh Zayed Mosque in Abu Dhabi, where she visited some weeks before. When talk turns to our shared love of the Alhambra in Spain, it's clear she embraces both past and future. 'In the Sakirin Mosque we inscribed a verse from the Sura an-Nur. We silk-screened it behind glass, which is a technique from Ottoman times.'

Her reinvention of the old won't please just from design aficionados and interiors magazines: 'Mothers from eastern Turkey would watch me talking on television and bring their children on buses to see the mosque. They would trace the verse with their fingers and explain the faith to them.'

Fadillioglu is also thrilled about the renovation of the city's grand mosques, many of which have been stunningly illuminated in the past two or three years.

So why did she opt to make the Sakirin so different and distinctly contemporary? 'In Turkey we had great architects, but ideas concerning mosque design have been frozen over the last 100 years,' she explains. 'If we don't change our thinking, one day people will say, "In this century nobody lived in Turkey," as everything new simply copies another time.'

Turkey's first female mosque designer has been proud to break recent tradition in more ways than one. 'There's no ban on thinking in Islam. It's us who create the barriers.'

The following morning, we wander from the city's European district into Fatih, the most conservative area of Istanbul. Seagulls swoop over the Galata Bridge – the link between the two sectors – as fishing boats chug out beneath. The pious return from prayers in Fatih's venerated mosques, while the clear up begins in the sheesha-clubs that line the bridge's lower walkway.

This being Istanbul, the Fatih district seems more flexible than firebrand. An Armenian church sits just up the road from an ancient synagogue. Bartholomew I, the Ecumenical Patriarch who oversees a flock of →

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Zeynep Fadillioglu

Fadillioglu had a modern Turkish upbringing. Her education at an English-speaking high school in Istanbul chimes with the schooling of the Ottoman elite, who studied in French before heading abroad for further learning. Fadillioglu's hands-on architectural education in London had her critiquing Da Vinci paintings in the National Gallery and discussing classic design at the V&A Museum. After modelling hotels and restaurants alongside famed British architect Nigel Coates, she opened her own office, Zeynep Fadillioglu Design, in 1995. Beymen Brasserie and Hotel les Ottomans – both in Istanbul – offer chic and classic examples (respectively) of her work.

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01 Interior of the recently restored Süleymaniye Mosque
02 The Grand Mufti of Istanbul, Dr Mustafa Çağrı in his office
03 A billboard shields a major restoration project on a mosque



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The Republican stance has softened and people don't look at their country's past with negativity, but with pride

300 million Orthodox Christians, calls the neighbourhood home. And back down by the water, the Church of St Stephen of the Bulgars was flat-packed Ikea-style, floated down the Danube in the 1890s and reassembled – no doubt with a few screws missing – underneath the Greek high school.

It's clear that the city elders hold Istanbul's live-and-let temperance in high regard. A number of mosques and churches are being renovated as I wander through the streets. But why reenergise the past now? We pose this to head of the city's religious affairs, the Grand Mufti of Istanbul.

The Mufti, Dr Mustafa Çağrı, is used to welcoming the likes of Barack Obama and Pope Benedict XVI. He exudes similar warmth as he ushers modest Brownbook into his office. Dr Mustafa seems happy to embrace and discuss contemporary ideas, and my emailed interview request lies printed out in front of him (incidentally, he uses Gmail).

We kick off by asking him about one of his office's thoroughly progressive inventions: a school to improve the way that the adhan – call to prayer – is delivered from Istanbul's 5,100 mosques. Some Istanbul muezzins have even received voice coaching from much-celebrated Turkish crooner, Seyfettin Tomakin.

Dr Mustafa retorts with a joke: 'A Christian comes to Istanbul and hears the call to prayer from the Yeni Camii, the mosque by the Galata Bridge. This first muezzin sings so sweetly that the Christian falls into a trance. He later crosses the bridge and hears a call to prayer sung so badly that he waits for this second muezzin and gives him a pile of money. "Why are you

giving me this money," asks the second muezzin? "Well," says the Christian, "the sound was so bad that you stopped me from changing faith."

But the Grand Mufti makes clear that his joke outlines a very serious subject. 'The makam, the melody used in the call to prayer, is key in Turkish and Islamic lore.' In the rush to modernise, he explains, some traditions have been left behind.

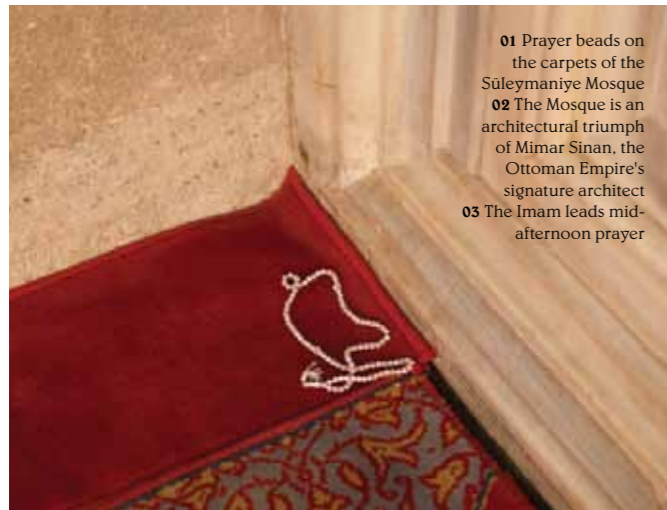
The project has been a successful one. Several once-croaky muezzins are now calling the faithful to prayer with such harmony that their mosque has been unhooked from the recorded relay system that automatically calls the prayer from loudspeakers in many city mosques.

'There are already competitions for the muezzins,' he says. 'First on a provincial level, then on a region level, then finally in a national competition.

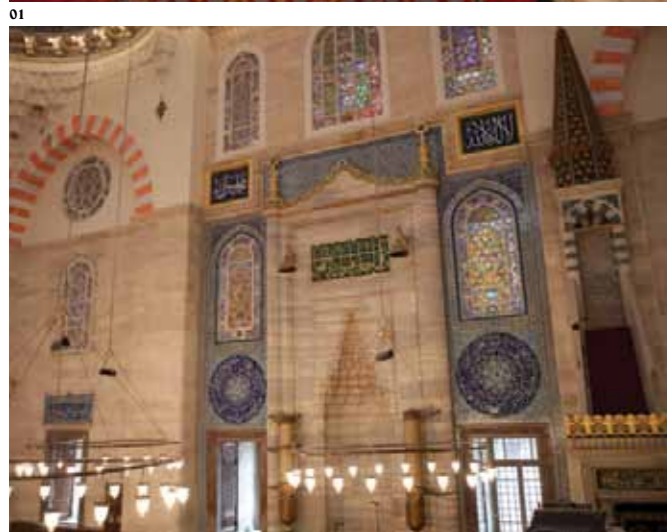
'And the winners,' Dr Mustafa proudly says, 'are usually from Istanbul.'

Why are these muezzin competitions and volley of religious renovations occurring now? The answer, it seems, is twofold: Firstly, the Turkish economy has been booming under a stable government – the religiously conservative and business-friendly AK Party of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. There are simply more funds to keep the past alive than ever before.

Secondly, says Dr Mustafa, revolutions so often seek to make a clean break with the past. The regime that dismantled the Ottoman Empire looked dismissively on Turkey's Islamic roots. But now, 'The Republican stance has softened and people don't look at their country's past with negativity, but with pride.' →



01 Prayer beads on the carpets of the Süleymaniye Mosque
 02 The Mosque is an architectural triumph of Mimar Sinan, the Ottoman Empire's signature architect
 03 The Imam leads mid-afternoon prayer



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It's vital to find out how this pinnacle figure in the city's religious infrastructure views contemporary developments, specifically the Sakirin mosque designed by Fadillioglu. 'It's a very modern and prominent structure,' he answers, diplomatically. 'Importantly, it has provoked discussions in Turkey about mosque design and made it a serious subject, which is a good thing.' He explains that a new generation of architects now wish to work on modern mosque design, and a serious number have approached the Mufti's office in the last year or two. Watch this space.

The Ottoman Empire's greatest architect was Mimar Sinan. His inventive legacy stretches from Bosnia to Palestine, assisted in no small way by his longevity: he was designing buildings right up to his 99th birthday. It is Sinan's masterpiece, the Süleymaniye Camii – designed for his patron, the spectacular Sultan Suleiman II – that has undergone the most all-encompassing renovation of Istanbul's mosques.

The muezzin, Mehmet Koçyigit, meets us outside. By coincidence, Koçyigit teaches at a muezzin school in Eyüp, a few kilometres away. He treats me to a brief lecture on Islamic architecture, old and new. Like both Fadillioglu and Dr Mustafa, Koçyigit clearly looks back on his country's past with affection.

He reminisces over the time when muezzins formed an a capella ensemble atop the six minarets of the Sultan Ahmet Camii, or Blue Mosque. In another area of old Istanbul, two muezzins from opposing mosques would spar with each other nightly in a sonorous rooftop duet.



Must-see mosques

- The Sakirin mosque lies in the leafy Karacaahmet cemetery, between the suburbs of Üsküdar and Kadıköy in Asian Istanbul.
- Also in Üsküdar are the Mihrimah Sultan Mosque and the Atik Valide Mosque. Built 35 years apart, both are fine examples of the great Mimar Sinan's work.
- Sinan's masterpiece, the recently renovated Süleymaniye Mosque, commands the Istanbul skyline from the Fatih district. Nearby is the Sehzade Mosque – currently under scaffolding – the architect's first mosque commission.
- While not a mosque, architecture fans shouldn't miss the flat-pack Bulgarian Church of St Stephen, which was reassembled alongside Fatih's Haliç ferry terminal.

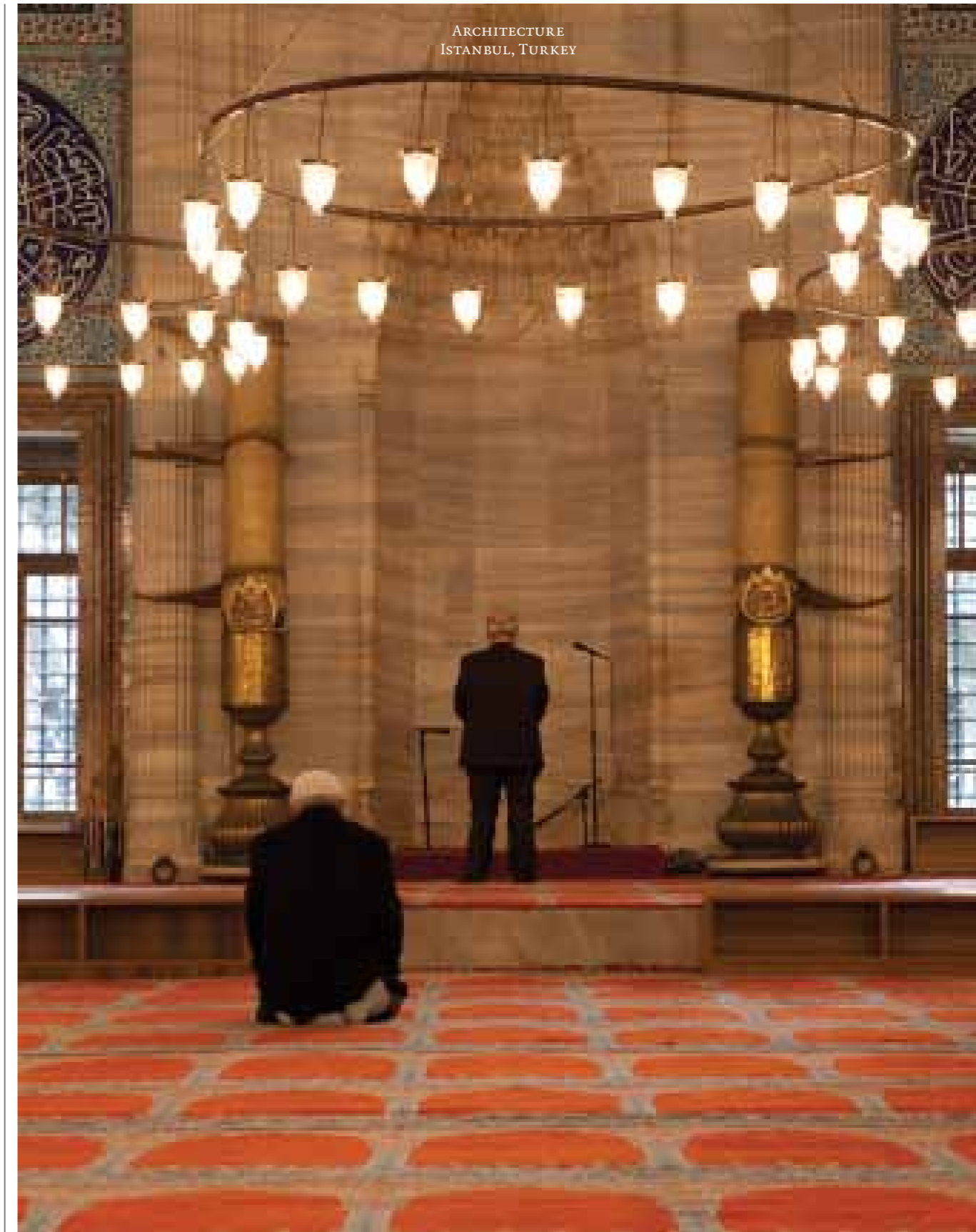
Koçyigit also tells us about the Süleymaniye Mosque's ostrich eggs, which were collected when Ottoman suzerainty stretched deep into the Arabian Peninsula. The eggs were placed around the mosque's balcony as a deterrent against spiders. They apparently exude a smell that dispels arachnids. The eggs have been put back in their place post-renovation.

Inside the mosque, the scene is breathtaking. An awestruck Italian visitor whirls around, glaring at the frescoed cupola. 'Che bella, che bella' she repeats: what beauty, what beauty. Despite the rainy April weather, shafts of light filter through the stained glass windows. The renovation team, says the muezzin, 'breathed the spirit of the architect Sinan from every pore.'

Koçyigit confirms that many groups from the Gulf have been to see the grand restoration. Prime Minister Erdogan is also a fan. He prayed in the Süleymaniye many times as the renovations neared completion and wished the gathered crowd a happy Eid al-Adha at the reopening ceremony in November 2010.

In a final flourish, Koçyigit claps his hands as the sound reverberates through the domes. 'Sinan made the best acoustics in Turkey,' he smiles, and that was half a millennia ago too.

We're waved us outside into the Süleymaniye grounds, towards the simple tomb of Sinan, the man who inspired modern Islamic architecture 500 years ago. 'Friend me on Facebook,' Koçyigit calls after me, his muezzin voice carrying in the wind. ☞



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