

Interpretations of the Ottoman Urban Legacy in the National Capital Building of Sofia (1878-1940)

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Introduction

In the first decades of Bulgaria's independence from the Ottoman Empire (1878), an aftermath of the Russo-Ottoman War of 1877-1878, the projected national identity of Bulgarians was shaped by the desire for 'de-Ottomanization' and 'Europeanization'. The ideological need to anchor the newly gained nationhood in European modernity went hand in hand with the zeal to distance the national identity from the Ottoman past by obliterating its traces in the inherited material and social world. In the ensuing anti-Ottoman casuistry, the interchangeable concepts of 'Oriental' and 'Ottoman' became bywords for 'underdeveloped' and virtually anti-modern.

Sofia became Bulgaria's national capital in March 1879, one year after the country's liberation from the Ottoman Empire. That rendered the processes of urban development subservient to state formation. The result was that the enforcement of a representational physiognomy of the national capital coupled with the symbolic reinforcement of national sovereignty.

However, the programmatic prerogatives of de-Ottomanization were rather a political allure than guidelines of a rationally conceived urbanist agenda. The 'Oriental' characteristics of the built environment and the lifestyles of inhabitation were an outcome of five-century-long development under the reign of the Ottoman Empire (1382-1878). As such, they were perceived as structural ingredients of a detested external domination, the materialized memory of which had to be effaced. In the conditions of Bulgaria's partial sovereignty as an autonomous country yet a tributary principality of the Ottoman Empire (1878-1908), this symbolic subversion of history was a highly loaded political project. By the same token, the belonging to Europe, as a cultural model and a political community, was still an aspiration rather than an achievement. In that sense, cultural 'Europeanization' was envisaged to pave the way for a political 'Europeanization', that is, for obtaining a European type of political standing and its recognition as a bearer of European civilization by the established European nation-states.¹

¹ Elitza Stanoeva, 'Sofia', in *Capital Cities in the Aftermath of Empires: Planning Central and Southeastern Europe*, ed. Emily G. Makas and Tanja D. Conley (London: Routledge, 2010), 94.

As an embodiment of the emerging nation-state and thus a vanguard of modernization, the capital city of Sofia was subjected to intensive reconstruction in the vein of the political agenda of de-Ottomanization and Europeanization. The visualization of that ideologically shaped agenda in the transformation of Sofia's cityscape triggered a persistent destruction of those components of the city's material culture that were perceived as 'Oriental' and, hence, as undesired remnants and reminders of the political oppression of the Ottoman Empire (the so-called 'Turkish yoke'²). The de-Ottomanization urban initiatives affected public spaces (e.g., through the eradication of mosques and other Muslim landmarks) but also private properties (e.g., through the expropriation of Turkish houses).

However, the seemingly plain dichotomy between 'Oriental' and 'European' as conceived on the discourse level of national ideology did not translate as such a clear-cut antithesis on the practical level of Sofia's urban policy. Inasmuch as the polarities of the 'Oriental' and the 'European' were politically constructed ideal types, within the social reality of post-Ottoman Sofia, they interfused in material artefacts, urban topoi, social practices, patterns of inhabiting the private sphere and of using the public space. Among those urban components most resistant to change was the socio-spatial formation of the traditional neighbourhood (*mahalla*) as well as the marketplace, being the traditional site of intensive social interactions.

The Ottoman town of Sofia: Inherited specificities

At the time of its designation as the capital city of the newly formed nation-state of Bulgaria, the former Ottoman town of Sofia spread over the meagre territory of 2.84 square kilometres, of which only 70-75 percent were actually occupied by the local population of 11,694 people.³ Although Sofia's newly obtained distinctive status and the opportunities it promised were quickly attracting newcomers and, within two years, the number of residents almost doubled to 20,856,⁴ the capital city was still far from becoming the demographically largest and economically prime city of the newly established nation-state. At the time of the first national census (1881), Sofia was the fourth largest city following Ruse, Varna and Shumen⁵, the first two being Bulgaria's major ports, respectively at the Danube and at the Black Sea, and, hence, economic centres processing most of the country's imports and exports.⁶

² This is how the period under Ottoman rule is commonly termed in Bulgarian literature and textbook historiography as well as in the nationalist historiographical discourse.

³ *Sofiya – 120 godini stolitsa* (Sofia – 120 years capital) (Sofia: Marin Drinov, 2000), 490.

⁴ *Sofiyski obshtinski vestnik* 7 (13 July 1914): 12.

⁵ *Sofiya – 120 godini stolitsa*, 78.

⁶ In 1888, the railroad Niš-Sofia-Constantinople was constructed as a section of the international line from Vienna to Constantinople ('the Orient Express') and, subsequently, the main imports of the country were diverted from the port of Varna to Sofia. Two years earlier, the imports of goods through Sofia customs amounted to 489,000 leva while the value of Varna's imports was 13,945,000 leva; at that time, Sofia was not an exporter yet. Ivan Sakazov, 'Sofiya kato targovski tsentar' (Sofia as a commercial center), in

The socio-spatial structure of Sofia produced by the traditional ways of inhabiting and using the city space further complicated the challenging task of transforming the Ottoman settlement into a modern capital city with the desired European glamour. Typically for a multiethnic Ottoman town, the urban public comprised various socially homogeneous neighbourhood communities (*mahalla*) differentiated according to their religious/ethnic belonging and/or craft-guild membership. Under Ottoman rule, the non-Muslim *mahalla* enjoyed a certain self-governing freedom. In addition, membership in a guild (*esnaf*) was restricted by neighbourhood residence and, sometimes, the guild-based occupation of the residents ensured certain privileges for the entire neighbourhood community: for example, a *mahalla* whose inhabitants were engaged in prominent crafts for the empire, such as hawk-breeding or horse-raising, was granted greater civil privileges and certain tax exemptions.⁷ The normative overlap between place of residence and place of work reinforced the socio-spatial integrity of the *mahalla*. In many ways, the *mahalla* was the intermediary nexus between local communities and the other scales of social organization: the local guild regulated the working conditions and trading relations; the head of the *mahalla* (*muhtar*) regulated both the horizontal social ties (e.g., solving local disputes) and the vertical ones (e.g., distributing the burden of the communal duties designated for the city's administration and the empire among the neighbourhood residents).⁸ The *mahalla* was also the principal supplier of public goods and services. Thus, each *mahalla* had a public fountain for the water supply of households, a crossroad square – often with a place of worship of the respective denomination (church, mosque, synagogue) – for communal gatherings, and an artisans' street or a marketplace for the trading of the local craftsmen surrounded by inns, pubs or coffeehouses. The coupling of physical proximity and social boundedness provided *mahalla* members with a supportive network of collective solidarity based on shared identity, on the one hand, and with an infrastructural network of domestic provision, on the other. Since civic status, craft permits and access to public amenities were conditioned on *mahalla* residence, the inhabitants to a great extent confined their public life and social interactions within the enclosed kinship milieu of their neighbourhood.⁹

In 1878, Sofia comprised eighteen *mahalla* neighbourhoods – the smallest of these enclaves, Kaloyanska Mahalla, had twenty-four houses while the largest

Yubileyna kniga na grad Sofiya (Anniversary book of Sofia city) (Sofia: Komitet za istoriya na Sofiya pri BAI, 1928), 253.

⁷ Georgi Tahov, *Ot Sredets do Sofiya: Letopisi i epizodi ot softyskite mahali* (From Sredets to Sofia: Chronicles and episodes of Sofia's *mahallas*) (Sofia: Izdatelstvo na OF, 1987), 34.

⁸ Svetlana Paunova, *(Pre)sazdavane na stolitsata: Sotsio-kulturno izsledvane varhu gradoustroystvenite praktiki na Sofiya sled Osvobozhdenieto* ((Re)creation of the capital city: A socio-cultural study of the urbanization practice in Sofia after the Liberation) (Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, forthcoming).

⁹ Stanoeva, 'Sofia', 92.

one, Mala Cheshma, had 375.¹⁰ Instead of forming an integrated system of functionally divided districts, they fragmented the city space into self-contained residential pockets territorially and socially isolated from one another, each a social network and a system of custom-based power relations in itself. Moreover, the preservationist strategies that had ensured their sustainability under Ottoman rule came into overt opposition to the modernization project of the new city authorities. On the one hand, by interiorizing social control over the community members, the *mahalla* assumed opacity to external agencies of regulation and sanction. On the other hand, the collective discretion of a *mahalla* to distribute neighbourhood land in a semiprivate manner resulted in a labyrinthine introvert spatial arrangement that concealed the *mahalla* territory from the wider city. The custom of largely independent local governance and spatial planning undermined the efficiency of the statutes and norms promoted by the newly established institutions of governance and their capacity for holistic urban planning and engineering.

In addition to the inherited socio-spatial structure of the city, the material legacy of the Ottoman times also did not easily facilitate the mission of building a European capital as understood by the municipal administration. The housing stock of Sofia consisted mainly of ramshackle dwellings, one or two stories high, constructed on individual plots and inhabited by one family. The size of the town, its streetscape of cul-de-sacs, the physical structure of the houses and the closed familial principle of their inhabitation made Sofia resemble a village type of settlement rather than a city and posed serious hindrances to the transformation of the settlement into a national seat of power with economic and cultural supremacy.¹¹

A further impediment was embedded in the peculiar structure of the public realm of Sofia – mainly, the lack of representative buildings that could host the state apparatus. In 1879, the number of public buildings (of predominantly commercial character) was 186 or 6 percent of the overall stock.¹² The larger buildings in the city comprised hospitals, barracks and warehouses, mostly military structures, mosques and commercial establishments such as caravanserais, inns etc. Those that were relatively intact from the wartime ravages were temporarily leased or expropriated by the new state apparatus.¹³ Being the only available public building with former administrative functions, the seat of the Ottoman regional governance headquartered in Sofia (*konak*)¹⁴ was singled out for the highest

¹⁰ SA [State Archive of the Republic of Bulgaria], holding 1K, inventory 1, archival unit 14.

¹¹ Stanoeva, 'Sofia', 91-92.

¹² Georgi Georgiev, *Sofiya i sofijantsi 1878-1944* (Sofia and Sofianites 1878-1944) (Sofia: Nauka i izkustvo, 1983), 201.

¹³ As calculated in 1911, public institutions in Sofia occupied four thousand rented rooms with an annual rent of 1 million leva. At the same time, the construction cost for public edifices of equivalent size was estimated at 8 million leva. *Sofijiski izvestnik* 4 (12 November 1911): 1.

¹⁴ In 1382, during the early phase of the Ottoman conquest in the Balkans, Sofia became the capital of the Rumelia *beylerbeilik* (or *eyalet*), a first-order administrative unit of the empire (homologous to the province of Anatolia). After the Ottoman administrative reforms in 1864 that replaced the *eyalets* with

institution of statehood – the palace. It was a plain edifice with the lodgings of the regional governor on the first floor, the local police department on the ground floor and lockups for prisoners in the basement. 'In its outward appearance, it had no architectural value and looked more like barracks than like a residential building'.¹⁵ In its surroundings, also devoid of prominence, the communal melon fields were spreading.

Despite its public primacy, the *konak* did not excel with a corresponding spatial centrality. Its utilitarian rather than representative functions were reflected both in its plain architectonics and peripheral location, at first glance in stark juxtaposition to the European imperial tradition of organizing the capital city around the power locus. From the Middle Ages on, the European city had orbited around the node of power – a citadel, a cathedral, and later, a town hall. That overlap of spatial centre and centre of rule was further highlighted with the rise of the nation-state and its exorbitant interest in embellishing the capital city in a display of power's magnificence and the centre as its spatial heart. In the European town planning, the holistic approach to the urban form aiming at monumentalizing power had its origins in the axial planning of imperial Rome characterized by 'long vistas, mechanical symmetry, centralized effects and sacrificing other considerations to the façade'.¹⁶ Those planning principles were not re-appropriated as apolitical aesthetic ideals ruptured from the Roman imperial power-centric ideogeme. As David Harvey emphasizes in his analysis of the political aesthetics of the Haussmannian reconstruction of Paris, its symbolic projection was to 'assume the mantle of imperial Rome and become the heart and head of civilization in Europe and beyond'.¹⁷

Considering the European vision of a symbolic hierarchical bond between rulers and ruled embedded in the centrist city design, one may interpret the spatialization of the Ottoman governance in Sofia in contrasting terms and conceptualize the peripheral location of its seat as a 'mark of an alien power that had disjoined itself from the city already at its very establishment'.¹⁸ Though tempting, such a reading could prove to be quite misleading by overlooking the general characteristics of the Ottoman territorial structure wherein the city did not have any special legal status of a collective subject. Instead, the *mahalla* was a social and productive unity approximating the medieval West European town in the sense of a corporation distinguished by its right of self-determination. Paradoxically, whereas in the European pre-modern context the ensuing 'corporate

the territorially smaller unit of *vilayet*, Sofia became the capital of a *sanjak*, a second-order administrative sub-region of the Danube *Vilayet*.

¹⁵ Anton Razsukanov, 'Sofiyskiyat dvorets' (Sofia's palace), *Serdika* 2 (1937): 3.

¹⁶ Ali Madanipour, *Public and Private Spaces of the City* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003): 195.

¹⁷ David Harvey, 'The Political Economy of Public Space', in *The Politics of Public Space*, ed. Setha Low and Neil Smith (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 24.

¹⁸ Magdalina Stancheva, 'Sledi v dнешniya grad' (Traces within today's city), *Sofiya* 1 (1987): 20.

belonging' was turned to the city and thus resulted in a peculiar 'patriotism and loyalty to the town',¹⁹ in the Ottoman context it was bound to the *mahalla* and had the opposite effect – a lack of urban ethos.²⁰

In the context of this internally fragmented realm of sociability, the public buildings in Ottoman Sofia were concentrated inside the localities of the diverse urban communities and designed to accommodate solely the neighbourhood inhabitants. Thus, they formed numerous non-interconnected constellations of places of sociability. The buildings that had social functions (churches, schools etc.) did not possess 'public' qualities in the proper sense.²¹ They belonged exclusively to the collective body of the *mahalla* micro-community and were designed through its self-regulatory will. Usually, they were lodged on land tracts or in old houses donated by *mahalla* members and were 'nested in a cramped way between residential houses with no square affront and often with a very narrow yard'.²² Their 'cramped nestedness' made them unsuitable to serve any wider society than the *mahalla* itself.

Because of the social deficit of urban ethos, the city centre of Ottoman Sofia as such had a purely geographical position devoid of any meaningful social content. Instead of grading the public status of urban places on the basis of their uses (governmental, commercial, residential etc.), the applicable differentiation criteria to compartmentalize the Ottoman city are grounded on the users of places and their group homogeneity or heterogeneity. In social terms, most places in the Ottoman city were places of sameness. The only locale transcending the communitarian gridding of space and tolerating diversity was the marketplace, a stage of social mixture and inter-group interaction and, thereby, a nodal scene of

¹⁹ Gerald Frug, 'The City as a Legal Concept', in *Cities of the Mind: Images and Themes of the City in the Social Sciences*, ed. Lloyd Rodwin and Robert M. Hollister (New York and London: Plenum Press, 1984), 244.

²⁰ The possibilities for an East-West comparative study of pre-modern urban dynamics that considers the microunit of *mahalla* (instead of the Ottoman city as a whole) a homologous counterpart to the Western mercantile city are explored in Part One of my ongoing dissertation entitled 'Sofia: The socialist city in its monumental vision and practice'.

²¹ Given the non-mediated channels of social contact and the lack of impersonal regulatory mechanisms of universalist validity in a traditional community governed by custom law, the public/private distinction is a problematic analytical razor. It holds differentiation potential for modern forms of social organizations cohered by legalist and bureaucratic frameworks. In the traditionalist context of the Sofia *mahalla*, neither was the house a 'private' place proper nor was the externality a 'public' place: the house was as much a familial residence as it was a workshop. At the same time, the space outside the house was an uncommodified collective good, perceived as communal property that could freely accommodate not only social ('public') activities such as mercantile exchange but also a variety of domestic ('private') activities ranging from garbage disposal to laundry-doing. With regard to traditional communities, the potential for drawing socially meaningful borders could rather be sought in the functional discrimination between relations of production and relations of social reproduction. See Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. D. Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 32.

²² Anastas Ishirkov, *Harakterni cherti na gradovete v Tsarstvo Bulgariya* (Characteristic traits of the towns in the Kingdom of Bulgaria) (Sofia: Ivan K. Bozhinov, 1925), 16.

urban life and sociability.

The marketplace was a unique heterogeneous social space both for the residents of the ethnically divided neighbourhoods and for the rural populace from the urban hinterland:

'The focal point of urban life in weekdays was the market (*çarşı*). In cities whose population lived enclosed within its neighbourhoods (*mahalla*), this was the place where people met and socialized. The market was the only area where Bulgarians and Turks, Armenians and Jews got in touch with one another... The market was also the most direct connection with the external world – news, novelties and new faces always appeared first there²³.'

Thanks to their attractive force and the resulting vivified encounters, the marketplaces served complementary social functions for the custom-based community: they were places of exchange not only of goods and news but of all kinds of social resources (e.g., negotiation of marriages²⁴).

The de-Ottomanization of Sofia (1878-1919)

In the first decades of Bulgaria's independence, the building of the newly determined national capital looked at Western and Central Europe for inspiration and patterns for adaptation. Moreover, the architectural projects of high symbolic importance were executed by foreign experts. Simultaneously, the old urban components -structures as well as institutions of urban life- were largely destroyed, being negatively marked as 'Oriental'.

Thus the early urban reconstruction and planning initiatives were meant to provide the guidelines for the subsequent modernization of Sofia envisaged as a symbolic rupture with the 'Oriental' urban structure. However, the affirmative aspect of urban transformation still suffered from descriptive deficiency. The normative ideal of the 'modern city' was hardly concretized in any technocratic guidelines and its approximation was rather assessed by the yardstick of 'de-Orientalization' than by some substantive and consistent criteria of 'modernity': 'The young urban administrations often did not set clear and definite requirements to the designers of the urban plan aside of the expressed desire their city to become "modern". By the concept "modern city", they imagined a city with straight and wide streets that would substitute the narrow, twisting and seesaw streets reminding them of the past that they associated with the detestable Turkish yoke'.²⁵ Throughout the period, public discourses and professional debates attributed most

²³ Rayna Gavrilova, *Koleloto na zhivota* (Wheel of life) (Sofia: St. Kliment Ohridski University Press, 1999), 42.

²⁴ Anastas Ishirkov, 'Naselenie na Sofiya' (Population of Sofia), in *Yubileyna kniga na grad Sofiya* (Anniversary book of Sofia city) (Sofia: Komitet za istoriya na Sofiya pri BAI, 1928), 76.

²⁵ Ivan Avramov, 'Planiraneto na naselenite mesta v Balgariya ot Osвобоzhdението до 9.IX.1944 g.' (The planning of towns and villages in Bulgaria from the Liberation until 9/09/1944), *Izvestiya na IGA* 10-11 (1957): 397.

of the undesirable traits of the cityscape and city culture as well as the traditional urban sites and informal institutions to a sort of unabated 'Orientalism' that allegedly characterized the typical Ottoman town.

In 1878, the Czech Adolf Václav Kolář who was appointed the chief town architect elaborated a plan for a partial urban reconstruction and street regulation. It aimed at replacing the traditional urban nucleus around the Ottoman central market street (*çarşı*) with a modern administrative centre. However, in its implementation, the executive authorities arbitrarily reshaped the initial plan because of the resistance of the indigenous property owners to the new lot lines and equally because of the stipulated expropriation compensations levied on the municipal budget.²⁶ Adding the lack of a detailed city cadastre, those factors altogether discouraged the authorities from intervening in the spatial arrangement of the socially cohesive and potentially reactionary enclaves of the *mahallas* of the Bulgarian ethnos that occupied a large part of the inner city.²⁷

For those reasons, the eastern part of Sofia with predominantly Turkish quarters depopulated during the Russo-Ottoman War became a preferable (de)construction site. The demolition of abandoned houses opened up vast terrains for the subsequent development of a modern central district and provided free lumber for the public buildings in demand. Some dilapidated Turkish houses that, according to the street plan, were not affected by the re-parcelization were nevertheless destroyed for 'public safety' reasons and, by the end of 1878, at least fifty houses were demolished in the absence of their legal owners followed by several minarets and mosques.²⁸ The following memoir's excerpt offers a narration of these stochastic processes of top-down displacement and the concomitant free-rein tactics of replacement from below:

'One day, my father called my brother Dimitar and me, and told us to go find some empty Turkish house to move there... My brother and I went straight away searching for a house in the area [where,] it seemed, the aristocratic Turkish quarter used to be. The seraglios of affluent Turks were burnt down and the whole area was filled with vetches, orchards, and, here and there, some small one-storied houses. We checked all the houses. All of them had no doors and windows'.²⁹

²⁶ See, for example, SA, holding 1K, inventory 1, archival unit 22, sheet 32.

²⁷ According to a local census conducted in May 1878, the ethnic composition of Sofia's population was as follows: 6,560 Bulgarians, 3,538 Jews, 839 Turks and 757 Gypsies. In the housing stock, 1,505 houses and additional 678 workshops were identified as belonging to ethnically Bulgarian citizens. SA, holding 1K, inventory 2, archival unit 1727, sheet 99.

²⁸ The census from 1878 indicates that there were 315 houses and 441 workshops with Turkish owners in Sofia neighbourhoods. Ibid.

²⁹ Yordan Venedikov, 'Spomeni ot Sofiya pri Osvobozhdenieto' (Memories of Sofia at the Liberation), *Serdika* 3 (1938): 24. For reports of the city authorities on the ravaging of desolate Turkish houses, see, e.g., SA, holding 1K, inventory 2, archival unit 110, sheet 3; SA, holding 1K, inventory 2, archival unit 415, sheet 1.

The fusion of properties rendered the resettlement of Turkish exiles if not impossible then at least tangibly unwelcome; thus, dispossession became an effective substitute for ethnically based disfranchisement that was prohibited



Fig. 1. St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia
Source: Ivan Barnev and Lyubomir Yurukov, *Nepoznatata Sofiya* (Unknown Sofia) (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2005), 291.

by the Treaty of Berlin of 1878 (article 12).³⁰ The large-scale construction *pro novo* in the eastern part of Sofia was further eased by the confiscation of Muslim and Jewish cemeteries.³¹ The motivation to create architectural landmarks free from undesired aesthetic contrasts attracted most projects for emblematic public buildings to this area which, in the following decades, developed as the governmental and cultural centre of the city. The heart of this Europeanized urban quarter was the palace, an epitome of state sovereignty. In the period 1880-1882, a thorough renovation of the building (formerly, the *konak*) was executed under the direction of the Austrian architect Viktor Rumpelmayer who was appointed the chief royal architect. During the reconstruction, the adjacent Çelebi Mosque was destroyed to open space for a representative palatial square that became a central arena of the ceremonies of declaration of power and its public legitimization; therein, protocol ceremonies took place such as military parades, solemn

³⁰ Although there were official provisions for partial compensations for the property owners, those remained only on paper as *pro forma* documental evidence of the observance of international instructions. For example, while all destruction certificates stipulated auction sale of the usable construction materials, an internal final report of the City Council reveals that those were never sold but were instead distributed for the erection of barracks and the repairs of the dungeon and the palace. SA, holding 1K, inventory 3, archival unit 427, sheet 1; SA, holding 1K, inventory 3, archival unit 3, sheet 4.

³¹ SA, holding 1K, inventory 4, archival unit 1292, sheets 1-2; SA, holding 1K, inventory 4, archival unit 1327, sheets 1-2.

welcomes, wedding and funeral processions.³²

A key construction project in the newly emerging European city centre was St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, planned as the dominant architectural masterpiece in Sofia (see Fig. 1). Its silhouette had to lend a Christian magnificence to the cityscape and thus to eclipse the notorious image of Ottoman Sofia with its minaret-carved contours. The cathedral was meant to be not simply a religious temple but



Fig. 2. Koca Mehmed Pasha Mosque (also known as Imaret Mosque), built in the sixteenth century and transformed into Sveti Sedmochislenitsi Church in 1901-1903
Source: Barnev and Yurukov, 262-263.

a monument of gratitude to Russia, and the decision for its construction was taken already by the Bulgarian Constituent Assembly in 1879. For its erection, Prince Alexander I, the first ruler of post-Ottoman Bulgaria, granted the land for his envisaged new palace – the highest site of Sofia in the vicinity of one of the oldest city churches, St. Sofia, constructed back in the sixth century. The Roman church of St. Sofia was simultaneously enunciated the symbolic formative landmark of the city to which the origins of the current city name could be traced back, hence eclipsing the 'in-between' period of Ottoman dominance. The cathedral – a projected twin-symbol of Christian integrity and Bulgarian historical continuity – was consecrated through a peculiar secularized variation of the traditional sanctifying rituals: a metal box with the names of all members of the first Bulgarian national government was cemented in the church's foundations.³³

At the same time that the Christian and European identity of Bulgaria was reinforced in stone, the mosques in Sofia were subjected to persistent destruction, a process described for decades in the following biased manner: 'One by one the minarets, symbols of century-long slavery and pursuit of spiritual assimilation,

³² Elitza Stanoeva, 'The Central City Square as a Legitimation Resource: The Main Square of Socialist Sofia', *Critique & Humanism* 35 (2010): 288-290.

³³ Stanoeva, 'Sofia,' 97.

were falling down'.³⁴ Some of the mosques in Sofia were destroyed already during the Russo-Ottoman War: the Ottoman statistical data indicate the existence of forty-four mosques in Sofia before the liberation of Bulgaria,³⁵ whereas in 1878, the register of the city's building stock listed only twenty-three mosques.³⁶ In the following years, several mosques were transformed into Christian places of worship; some of those had been churches before the Ottoman conquest of the Bulgarian territories and now underwent a secondary conversion, while others had been originally constructed as mosques by the Ottomans (see Fig. 2). Others were turned to secular utilization as warehouses, prisons and so on. Banya Bashi, the grand mosque of Ottoman Sofia built in the sixteenth century, was the only one that survived the destructions of Muslim temples in Sofia and preserved its religious functions. That was possible because its ownership was contractually bound to Bulgarian property rights in Istanbul. However, already in 1878, the precincts of this mosque were reclaimed as a sacred Christian place through the restoration of an altar of a destroyed church that was found in the mosque courtyard; the altar was subsequently consecrated as a ceremonial pinnacle of the welcoming celebration for the returning Bulgarian exiles banished by the Ottoman authorities.³⁷

Under subversion were not only Muslim structures that carried an explicit mark of the Ottoman dominance but also places that were the actual and symbolic arena of urban life in the Ottoman town and, hence, were viewed as receptacles of 'Oriental' city culture.

The authority of the *mahalla* in organizing the social interactions of its residents was being circumscribed since the establishment of centralized local governance in 1878. The Municipality act of 1882 completely abolished the traditional administrative division of the town into the ethnic enclaves of *mahalla* and revoked any decision-making powers of their heads. Instead, Sofia was divided into four construction zones with a class-based profile that, subsequently, were ratified as police districts by the Ministry of the Interior and were further institutionalized as the new administrative subsections of Sofia by the City Council. Yet, the *mahalla* survived as an intangible social realm of no official status throughout this period and the successive socialist epoch by providing community backup to its residents in times of crisis.³⁸

³⁴ Hristo Ganchev, *Sofiya – ulitsi i ploshtadi. Planovo i obemno prostranstveno prouchvane* (Sofia – streets and squares: Schematic and tridimensional spatial research) (Sofia: Komitet za kulturata, 1983), 13.

³⁵ Svetlin Kiradzhiev, *Sofiya kakvato e bila 1878-1943* (Sofia as it was 1878-1943) (Sofia: Svyat 2001, 2001), 16.

³⁶ SA, holding 1K, inventory 2, archival unit 1727, sheet 99.

³⁷ SA, holding 1K, inventory 1, archival unit 21, sheet 3-4.

³⁸ Milena Iakimova, *Sofiya na prostolyudieto* (Sofia of the hoi polloi) (Sofia: Iztok-Zapad, 2010), 85.

The other emblematic site and social institution of the Ottoman town, the marketplace, was also a special target of the campaign of urban restructuring. Initially, the traditional marketplaces were identified as problematic for their deviations from the norms of modern public hygiene. At first, they were subjected to disciplining rather than displacement. The first substantial measure to that end was the establishment of the Sanitary Bureau in 1880 as a unit within the administration of the Sofia Municipality. Yet, its existence remained on paper until 1898 when it recruited qualified personnel and built its first chemical laboratory to perform quality tests on food products sold on the market. The same year, 845 owners of market stalls, shops and restaurants were fined for all sorts of sanitary malpractice.³⁹

During the 1890s, there was a shift in the policy towards the marketplaces whose rationale changed from reorganization to replacement. In view of this goal, the City Council launched a project for municipally run market halls⁴⁰ that was finally implemented in 1911. Although their architect, Naum Torbov, studied architectural patterns of market halls in Central Europe,⁴¹ the prototype for the municipal market were Les Halles in Paris built between 1854 and 1867 as a part of Baron Haussmann's modernization project. The similarities between the two urban landmarks – the one in Paris and the other in Sofia – reached beyond the borrowing of the architectural model and pierced through the general policies of urban governance of the two cities.

The design of Les Halles in Paris aimed at channelling the vigorous commercial exchange inside a central working-class district into a confined area that could be easily supervised and controlled. Therefore, their construction was not merely an infrastructural improvement of trade but also a political campaign. From its inception in 1839, the Halles project was an integral part of a broader political agenda of regularizing the city quarter, whose social profile made it a potentially subversive spot in the very heart of the French capital.⁴² In addition, the intertwining family and work relations characteristic of that area not only posed the threat of militant class solidarity but also clashed with the bourgeois cultural ideology centred on the division of public and private realms.⁴³

Similarly, the project of the municipal market hall in Sofia aimed not only at restructuring an urban space of commercial use but also at supplanting the traditional forms of social interaction within the old marketplace with new norms

³⁹ Petar Orahovats, *Sanitarnata organizatsiya i sanitarnoto sostoyanie na grad Sofiya* (The sanitary organization and sanitary condition of Sofia city) (Sofia: Sv. Sofiya, 1899), 71.

⁴⁰ 'Proekt za hali (pokriti pazari) v Sofiya' (A project for halls (covered markets) in Sofia), *Spisanie na BIAD* 6-7 (1899): 127-128.

⁴¹ SA, holding 1K, inventory 3, archival unit 211, sheets 3-9.

⁴² For a history of the political participation of this area under the *ancien régime*, see Victoria Thompson, 'Urban Renovation, Moral Regeneration: Domesticating the Halles in Second-Empire Paris', *French Historical Studies* 20 (1997): 91.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 95.

of modern public conduct. Besides the authorities' practical considerations of improving public hygiene and sanitary control over food sales, the project for market halls under municipal management was driven no less by symbolic politics. Whereas in Paris the traditional uncontrolled market area was feared to become a site of popular unrest, in Sofia the old marketplaces were recognized as an epitome of the 'Oriental' legacy.⁴⁴

With the opening of the Municipal Market Halls in Sofia in 1911, the displacement of the old marketplaces was underway. The dislocation of shops and entire market streets was reasoned by practical and symbolic public concerns as well as by economic interests: ultimately, the market halls were a municipal commercial establishment intended last but not least to be a source of revenues for the local governance⁴⁵. Their modern building was located opposite to the Weekly Market, the main traditional marketplace of Sofia (see Fig. 3). In the following years, its area was redesigned into a garden and the market was removed, together with other 'Oriental' marketplaces in the old inner city that were dissolved or displaced to the periphery of Sofia.



Fig. 3. The Weekly Market located around Banyashi Mosque before its displacement in 1915

Source: Barnev and Yurukov, 419.

At the time, the urban improvements generated a specific narrative of progress against the backdrop of the inherited Ottoman 'backwardness'. The personage of this ideological narrative, the capital city, was presented as the individualized

⁴⁴ Elitza Stanoeva, 'Halite v modernata topologiya na Sofiya: simbolni i sotsialno-politicheski proektsii' (The market hall in the modern topology of Sofia: symbolic and socio-political projections), *Sociological Problems* 3-4 (2004): 297-298.

⁴⁵ M. Rusev, 'Nastoyashte i badeshte na Sofiyskiya pokrit pazar – Halite' (Present and future of Sofia covered market – Les Halles), *Serdika* 2 (1938): 4.

incarnation of the national *Geist*. Within the rhetorical context thus shaped, progress was an achievement of the active entrepreneurship of the capital city as a vanguard representative of the Bulgaria nation. This collective concept imposed a shared civic belonging onto the disparate traditional communities which had coexisted in socially self-sufficient and territorially self-enclosed manner during the Ottoman period. The unfolding ideological discourse had as reference points the discarded 'Oriental' legacy and the cherished European ideal. In that sense, Bulgarian 'modernization' had two clearly discernable dimensions: it was an irreversible forward movement in time, from past to future, but also in space, from East to West.⁴⁶ Ideologically, that movement was navigated by the general goal of replacing Oriental 'medieval backwardness' with European 'modern advancement' and thus transforming the 'unsightly Turkish provincial settlement' of Sofia into a 'pearl on the Balkan peninsula, a city... whose speed and scope of growth could be commensurate not with the Oriental but with the American scale.'⁴⁷

The reassessment of the Ottoman architecture (1919-1940)

The proclamation of the Third Bulgarian Kingdom in 1908 and the subsequent international recognition of full-fledged national sovereignty as well as the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1923 led to a historical reinterpretation of the Ottoman past in the context of a more confident national self-consciousness. Those psycho-social changes fuelled an endeavour of Bulgarian architects to invent a national architecture with its own original stylistic vocabulary instead of simply emulating European patterns. Such attempts dated back to the turn of the twentieth century when more and more Bulgarian architects of foreign training started their professional practice in Bulgaria; however, the early exercises of national architectural imagination drew heavily on neo-Byzantine inspirations. In contrast, in the interwar period, the search for a national style diversified in its sources and influences, and directed its attention to the so far ignored building traditions of the immediate Ottoman past. In the resurrection of the previously rejected 'Oriental' architecture, there were two interpretative paths of positive reassessment, one of a more internationalist zest, the other with rather nationalist undertones.

The 'internationalist' approach to the 'Oriental' architecture to a great extent followed the contemporary trends in the Western world and, in that sense, was in line with the Europeanization endeavour that had been shaping Bulgarian architecture since the state's liberation from the Ottoman Empire. Peculiarly, whereas earlier that endeavour had coupled with a cultural and political agenda

⁴⁶ Elitza Stanoeva, 'Socio-Cultural Dimensions of Urban Mass Transportation: The Introduction of Trams in Sofia (1901-1916)', in *Social and Spiritual Aspects of Material Culture*, ed. Aneta Svetieva and Ana Ashtalkovska (Skopje: Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, 2009), 501-502.

⁴⁷ 'Gradoustroystveniyat plan na Golyama Sofiya' (The master plan of Greater Sofia), *Serdika* 5 (1938): 3.

of de-Ottomanization, it now called for preservation of 'Oriental' artefacts which lately had been stirring fascination throughout the Western world. Within the ensuing re-conceptualization, the 'Oriental' architecture was now perceived as a repository of artistic forms and architectonical solutions that had an autonomous standing along with European styles. Thus, in 1923, Trendafil Trendafilov, the main Bulgarian theoretician of the 'modern city' at that time, made the following appeal in the journal of the Bulgarian Engineering-Architect Society: 'A time has come when the German vertical and stylistic forms should no longer serve as inspiration to us. We should rather find inspiration in the Bulgarian and Far Eastern styles because today's modern architecture seeks its inspiration exactly in the Near and Far East'.⁴⁸

However, as evident, the proponents of the cultural transfer of 'Oriental' architecture did not perceive it as an integral part of the Bulgarian cultural legacy but as a foreign material culture with roots in the former Ottoman domains in the Middle East whose achievements could be borrowed rather than rediscovered. In that sense, the ideological rehabilitation of the 'Oriental' culture did not necessarily imply physical rehabilitation of the vanishing Ottoman material legacy in the country and, more important, did not inspire a critical reappraisal of Bulgarian cultural identity univocally moulded in accordance with the pro-European striving of the nation-state. This differentiation between indigenous Bulgarian and Ottoman cultural authenticity was maintained not only in the context of architectural practice but also in more general and lay analyses of national culture. Thus, a paper on the Bulgarian potential for a profit-generating tourist industry in the newsletter of the Sofia Municipality acknowledged that 'lately in Europe, there evolved a special interest towards the Orient and the Balkans' and then continued to describe the local attractions under this rubric as 'something more wild, more virgin to satisfy [people's] aspiration for nature'.⁴⁹ When the author proceeded with an account of the cultural exponents of Sofia, he recognized as such the souvenirs of national folklore and the modern architectural landmarks comparable with the cityscape of Budapest, Vienna and Munich but omitted mentioning a single monument of Ottoman origin.

With regard to the export of Oriental trends to the West, Bulgarian architects reinterpreted the cultural belonging of their craft only as far as to claim an intermediary position in this cultural transfer: 'Since the art of each nation develops, more or less, under the influence of other peoples and each style is under the impact of others, Bulgarian art is located between the East and the West'.⁵⁰ In sum, within the 'internationalist' perspective of the architectural

⁴⁸ Trendafil Trendafilov, 'Materiali ot natsionalni arhitekturni formi' (Materials of national architectural forms), *Spisanie na BIAAD* 6 (1923): 90.

⁴⁹ Stefan Popov, 'Turisticheska Sofiya' (Tourist Sofia), *Serdika* 2 (1937): 27.

⁵⁰ S. Atanasov, 'Balgarski stil' (Bulgarian style), *Izvestiya na IAK* 5 (1940): 85.

theoretization of a Bulgarian national style, the Ottoman inheritance was reduced to alien influences, which, even though of an artistic value and cultural originality, were not an essential ingredient of the Bulgarian architectural evolution under the Ottoman Empire.

The treatment of the 'Oriental' building styles by focusing on their foreignness was the common line between the 'internationalist' and 'nationalist' approaches of reevaluating the Ottoman architecture. The broader framework of the 'nationalist' approach was the modified ideological conceptualization of the Ottoman era in Bulgarian history produced by the waning of the anti-Ottoman vigour as a result of the dismantling of the empire. The new treatment of that period no longer emphasized the political dependency of Bulgaria under the imperial colonization but rather the concomitant 'national consolidation' of the politically dependent Bulgarian people.⁵¹ Therefore, the vernacular architecture of the Bulgarian ethnic communities obtained a high value precisely because it was reinterpreted as a 'purely national' artistic production expressing their shared cultural belonging:

'The Bulgarian people, isolated in the midst of the powerful Ottoman Empire, were detached from any foreign influence and impact. Humbled and bent in the tranquillity of the foreign power, the population of the Bulgarian state [sic!] conglomerated and became welded together. Thus conditions emerged for folk art... In that regard, the Turkish domination exerted a beneficial influence.'⁵²

In the early 'nationalist' explorations of the inherited architecture from the Ottoman times, the ethnic divide was the uncompromising criterion of cultural value. One of the first proficient studies of the archetypes of Bulgarian national architecture, a monograph by Anton Tornoyov, found their relevant depository in the Ottoman period, yet discarded its private buildings because of their forms of 'slightly monumental nature that often had fallen under a strong influence of the Islamic art of construction';⁵³ instead, the author highlighted the church building trends whose ethno-religious purity was easy to justify.

Later on, however, the re-examination of the Ottoman cultural production in the field of construction broadened its scope to include the genre of private houses romanticized as the 'most natural fellowship for working together and supporting each other'.⁵⁴ Contrary to the 'internationalist' trend that insisted on the foreign origins of the Ottoman architecture, this approach to the invention of a Bulgarian national style confronted the challenge of purifying the ethnically hybrid nature of the construction patterns from the Ottoman times, an idiosyncratic hallmark of the

⁵¹ Stanoeva, 'Sofia,' 105.

⁵² Todor Zlatev, 'Periodi na balgarskata arhitektura' (Periods of Bulgarian architecture), *Spisanie na BIAD* 19 (1925): 305.

⁵³ Anton Tornoyov, *Arhitekturni motivi iz Balgariya* (Architectural motifs from around Bulgaria) (Sofia: Armeyski voenno-izdatelski fond, 1925), 15.

⁵⁴ Yordan Danchev, 'Gradostroitelnoto natsionalno stopanstvo' (Town-building national economy), *Serdika* 5 (1937): 9.

generic Balkan town in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in order to reclaim them as a vernacular Bulgarian building art. As Marinov shows, the fabrication of the Bulgarian traditional house out of the Ottoman Balkan inheritance partly relied on claiming a leading position of Bulgarian craftsmanship in the execution of house building throughout the Balkan territories of the empire.⁵⁵

Despite its return to the roots of vernacular architecture, this implicitly nationalist trend in interwar Bulgarian architecture was no less influenced by European artistic aspirations than its coeval 'internationalist' trend. It was in line with the European cultural particularism in the 1920s, whose genesis was in the ethnographic turn from the end of the nineteenth century, and responded to its inspiration for the resurrection of the repository of rustic building traditions as a stamp of national authenticity.⁵⁶

The contesting understandings of the traditions that could shape the projected national style crystallized in a spirited discussion in the journal of the Chamber of Engineering and Architecture, the professional agency of Bulgarian practicing architects and engineers established in 1937 by the government. The discussion, starting in 1940 and lasting for two years as a headline topic, was triggered by a critical review on the attempts at Bulgarian architectural authenticity whose author was the chief editor, Konstantin Dzhangozov. His stance was equally negative towards the imitative and non-inventive transfer of European trends and towards the 'retrograde' resurrection of vernacular building styles, both approaches qualified as 'alien to contemporary life' and to the 'peculiarities of Bulgarian way of life'.⁵⁷ According to the author, Bulgarian post-Ottoman architecture 'followed two quite erroneous extremes: the toilers of the "Bulgarian style" embraced a dead man, whereas the others embraced a foreigner', instead of 'fulfilling their historical duty by giving an expression in their works of contemporary material opportunities, technical achievements and social advancement among which our people live'.⁵⁸

The polyphony of responses to this grave evaluation of the Bulgarian architectural praxis condensed all the underlying ideologizations manifested in the invention of independent Bulgarian architecture. First, what was more openly emphasized were the nationalist implications of this endeavour, which was now formulated through the prism of the 'great responsibilities for our not

⁵⁵ Tchavdar Marinov, 'Chiya e тази kashta? Izmislyaneto na balgarskata vazrozhdenska arhitektura' (Whose is this house? The invention of the Bulgarian Revival architecture), in *V tarsene na balgarskoto: mrezi na natsionalna intimnost* (In search of the essentially Bulgarian: networks of national intimacy 19th-21st centuries), ed. Stefan Detchev (Sofia: Institut za izsledvane na izkustvata, 2010), 336.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 331-338.

⁵⁷ Konstantin Dzhangozov, 'Balgarska natsionalna arhitektura' (Bulgarian national architecture), *Izvestiya na IAK* 23-25 (1941): 381-383.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 381-383.

merely architectural but also state and, moreover, national future'.⁵⁹ Second, the desire was voiced for a shared belonging on equal grounds within a larger cultural community – recognized as either the entity of Slavic material culture or that of the Balkan one⁶⁰ – defined as an exchange between independent political and cultural nations rather than as a common legacy based on their ethnic coexistence within the former Ottoman Empire. And third, various appeals expressed the mimetic motivation of creating a distinctive national style commensurate with European cultural inventiveness.⁶¹

Conclusion

In its early history as a capital city of a modern nation-state, Sofia underwent a reconstruction intended symbolically to materialize the political autonomy of the country but itself short of an autonomous cultural imagery. The achievements of urban planning and monumental architecture in engraining the European belonging of the Bulgarian nation-state onto the representative image of its capital were constantly judged vis-à-vis external urbanist realities. In the early post-Ottoman decades, the benchmark for comparison and simultaneously a baseline for the modernization endeavours was the stereotyped 'Oriental' city embodying everything the city had to rid itself of according to the ideology and policy of de-Ottomanization. The other vector of commensurability, which in contrast pointed to the desired future of the city, was Europe with its promise of modernity. Between internationalist and nationalist inclinations that were both influenced by the European climate in architectural praxis, the search of Bulgarian architecture for national authenticity was time and again drawn to and driven away from the European styles and the 'Oriental' legacy.

⁵⁹ Trendafil Trendafilov, 'Balgarski stil v arhitekturnoto izkustvo' (Bulgarian style in the architectural art), *Izvestiya na IAK* 5 (1940): 86.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁶¹ Anton Tornyov, 'Balgarska natsionalna arhitektura' (Bulgarian national architecture), *Izvestiya na IAK* 35-36 (1941): 534; V. Bozhkov, 'Bezrobotitsata i chuzhdentsite v Balgariya' (The unemployment and foreigners in Bulgaria), *Izvestiya na IAK* 8 (1940): 140; Boris Chernev, 'V zashtita na rodnoto tehničko tvorchestvo' (In defense of the native technical creativity), *Izvestiya na IAK* 1 (1943): 8.

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