

Armenian elites and architectural placemaking in the Ottoman East

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Nearly a decade after it began, I am now in a position to bring together the research I started in 2012. At that time I was working at Mardin Artuklu University in southeastern Turkey and so was able to explore Mardin's built heritage as well as that of neighbouring cities, including Urfa, Diyarbakır and Antep. I completed this research in 2015, when, over the course of the summer, I undertook BIAA-funded travel to Kars, Van, Bitlis and Erzurum, and spent a month in the Istanbul archives. I aimed to investigate the little-explored but not insubstantial 19th-century rebuilding of cities in what is now often referred to as 'the Ottoman East' and the significant role of Armenians in this process.

As I wrote in *Heritage Turkey* in 2016, the role of Armenians in rebuilding this historically turbulent region has been a *tabula rasa* in comparison with the well-established (although continually debated) position of the Armenian Balyan family in the history of Constantinopolitan architecture. Upon moving to Mardin in 2012, I was startled by the omnipresence of historical Armenian architects, not only in that city but in neighbouring areas, too. This inheritance, long known by residents and circulated through oral histories, was celebrated in Mardin at the time. This was a particular moment when, due to changes in government as well as shifting approaches to representations of minority heritage, there was an openness and sense of optimism in the locality. A spate of initiatives included renaming a street after the Armenian architect Serkis Lole and the widespread renovation and repurposing of his buildings. These, amongst other actions, formed part of a UNESCO World Heritage Listing application, but they were also embraced by locals. Awareness of Armenian heritage and the role of Lole in Mardin was high. Yet this situation and parallel scenarios in neighbouring areas were not known to the wider public and scholarly community.

The methodology of my research focused on visiting cities in the Ottoman East, photographing 19th-century architecture and taking note of Armenian neighbourhoods that might indicate the style of buildings constructed by Armenian architects. Communal buildings could be more securely attributed to Armenian architects and would, through their stylistic and structural features, enable me to tie buildings not intended for use by the Armenian community to these individuals. Having worked for a long time on the Balyan family, I was aware that textual sources might be lacking and that this material evidence would be central to establishing their agency. Nonetheless, textual research accompanied the fieldwork, including a month spent in the Ottoman archives. When back in the UK, I made use of Armenian sources, such as the 'memory book' literature documenting Armenian life in the Ottoman East. The consular accounts of the British

National Archives, too, were very rich in terms of understanding local social dynamics. I was also fortunate to be contacted by relatives of architects who shared their family histories. This was added to the oral evidence I collected from local residents who told me stories about the architects.

The more information I pulled together, the more complex the picture became. When I wrote in 2016 of Armenian architectural monopolies throughout the region, this was from the perspective of the novelty of the material in comparison with that of the well-known Armenians of Constantinople. It was also from the viewpoint of wanting to write a cultural history of provincial Armenians in a context where political history overshadowed the pre-1915 legacy. As a result, I stressed the agency of these Armenians as providing a foil to the historiography remaining silent. I also drew attention to the fusion of 'local' and Constantinopolitan (as well as international) styles, so dispelling the assumption that these architects were 'master builders' (*kalfa*) who followed local carving traditions or the fashions of the capital, rather than showing any formal learning, creativity or external networks of their own. However, as I further researched the urban contexts and social and political situations in which these buildings were constructed, it struck me that there was a more significant story to tell.

It became clear to me that these Armenian architects were central to specific social and political transformations in their respective cities. They secured commissions and were thus able to determine the appearance of important structures, such as the Municipality and Government House in Bitlis (1897–1898), at the same time that Armenians were playing a stronger role in local government bodies. They also built lavish mansions and churches at the same time that the Armenian merchants of Bitlis were making considerable revenues from long-distance and regional trade. Barracks designed by Armenian architects were built, involving Arab families who were being used to outbalance Kurds in the locality.

Social and political relationships were accompanied by stylistic intersections between Armenian communal buildings, on the one hand, and mainstream civil and Muslim religious structures, on the other. In Bitlis, the Municipality and Government House echoed the ostentatious new style of Armenian mansions built in the same city in the 1880s. In Mardin, the grapevine motif carved into the altarpiece of Surp Hovsep Armenian Catholic Church (completed 1894) could be seen also on the lintel of the Hamidiye Barracks (1890), built with funding from the Arab Şammar *aşiret*. It also adorned the minaret of the Mardin Great Mosque, partially rebuilt in 1888–1889. In Erzurum, the various buildings of Government House (1889, 1904, 1920) were in dialogue with

the leading Armenian educational establishment of the Ottoman East, the Sanasaryan School (1881). In Diyarbakır, Surp Giragos Armenian Orthodox Church, rebuilt in 1883, had a square *kufic* panel above the altar (no longer to be seen, after renovation works) that was a reiteration of the *kufic* cubes of the Behram Pasha Mosque (1572) and Sarı Saltuk Mausoleum (1488) and was repeated on the Armenian Catholic Church (1895). Even more strikingly, the lions of the Great Mosque (1091–1092) were recreated on Surp Giragos (1883). In Antep, the style of the Surp Asdvadzadzin Cathedral (1872–1992), designed by Serkis Balyan and Serkis Kadehçyan, was echoed in the Alaüdevle Mosque (1901), which is attributed to the Armenian architects Armenak and Krikor. The Urfa Cevahir Konak (late 19th century) included the horseshoe arches of the city’s most famous building, the Halil ül-Rahman Mosque (built 1211–1212).

As I pull my research together into a book, I have been trying to frame these striking architectural occurrences within their social contexts across the region. The theme of placemaking seemed like a prescient means by which to unite them. I aim to show how this was a crucial moment in which this ‘space’ became contested – with contestations continuing today. Armenian architects played an important role in a process through which different communities ‘produced’ a space that was viewed as their own. This was not, contrary to the assumptions of the historiography that has tended to place the state at the centre of 19th-century transformations, a government intervention, but a ‘placemaking’ in which local inhabitants seem to have taken the lead spontaneously.

Placemaking strategies were particularly numerous under Abdülhamid II (1876–1909). Placemaking in these cities of the Ottoman East encompassed the building of ostentatious mansions that lined the main streets, involved the drawing of a stronger line between communities through the construction of new churches in the centre of the city and included individuals taking a leading role in the establishment of

political and civil institutions: the municipality, the government house and the new schools. Placemaking made use of architectural transference. This was often accomplished with the involvement of Armenian architects and/or other Armenian elites, and often referred to the heritage and myths of each city in its visual programme, as well as representing a strong dialogue between majority and minority architectures.

It struck me that the turning points in the Armenian voice in these respective cities often revolve around the Hamidian Massacres (1894–1896). This is perhaps unsurprising from the political perspective, which has been dominated by legacies of the events of 1894–1896 and 1915. However, it is noteworthy from the art-historical perspective, which tends to foreground changes emanating from the centre, such as the *Tanzimat* reform decrees of the mid-19th century, as impacting on architecture. It was inevitable that the massacres would alter local production. In Bitlis, they depleted the Armenian population, leading also to the decimation of the prosperity of the city and the temporary closure of its markets. Nonetheless, the massacres were followed by a concerted attempt to revive the role of Armenians in the locality, and this included an Armenian architect building the new Municipality and Government House. In Mardin, on the other hand, the massacres were averted thanks to the collaboration of Arab notables with Armenians to defend the city. This led to an efflorescence of architecture in Mardin in the late 1890s and early 1900s, contrasting with the decrease in expression of Armenian elites seen elsewhere.

Thus, architectural placemaking in the Ottoman East has much to offer in terms not only of enriching our vision of ‘provincial’ cultural history, but also of helping us to revisit better-known, dramatic events through local dynamics. For a climate in which the textual evidence is neither forthcoming nor unambiguous, material cultural heritage can shed light on the complex social and cultural interplay in these cities and the region as a whole.



A mansion designed by Lole in 1890 for the Kasparyan family in Mardin (image: Nevit Dilmen; CC BY-SA 3.0).