

# Cultural Heritage and Semiotic Interpretation: The Case of Süleymaniye Mosque\*

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## Abstract

One of the most critical responsibilities of a society's members is to preserve cultural heritage. At this point, "awareness" is critical. It means keeping, promoting, and transferring cultural values, which play a vital role in forming social reality, cultural identity, and consciousness. However, to realize the acts of preservation, promotion, and transmission, it is a must to know, experience, and comprehend the heritage. We call it a consciousness-raising activity, contributing to forming individual's identity and national consciousness. Hence, individuals can comprehend themselves, fundamental values of the society, importance of being a nation through cultural heritage, and transfer it to future generations. The significance of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of the Süleymaniye Mosque –one of the most important cultural heritages in the world. In the study, the main internal and external structural features that make the magnificent artwork meaningful, the relational value of the elements contributing to the integrity of the architecture, its semantic universe, and reflections of each formative elements on human life are examined regarding surrounding/surrounded, form/substance, vertical/horizontal dichotomies within semiotics.

**Keywords:** Süleymaniye Mosque, semiotics, semantic universe, architectural structure, cultural heritage

## Kültürel Miras ve Göstergebilimsel Yorum: Süleymaniye Camii Örneği

### Öz

Bir toplumun bireylerinin en önemli sorumluluklarından biri kültürel mirasa sahip çıkmaktır. Bu noktada "farkındalık" önemlidir. Farkındalık toplumsal gerçekliğin, kültürel kimliğin ve bilincin oluşmasında hayati bir rol oynayan kültürel değerlerin korunması, tanıtılması ve gelecek kuşaklara aktarılması anlamına gelmektedir. Ancak koruma, tanıtma ve aktarma eylemlerinin gerçekleştirilebilmesi için mirasın iyi bilinmesi, deneyimlenmesi ve anlaşılması şarttır. Biz bunu, bireyin kimliğini ve ulusal şuurunu oluşturmasına katkı sağlayan bir bilinç geliştirme faaliyeti

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olarak adlandırıyoruz. Sonuç olarak bireyler kendilerini, toplumun temel değerlerini, millet olmanın önemini kültürel miras yoluyla kavrayabilir ve gelecek nesillere aktarabilirler. Bu çalışmanın önemi dünyanın en önemli kültürel miraslarından biri olan Süleymaniye Camii'nin ve onun anlam evreninin daha iyi anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmaktadır. Çalışmada bu görkemli eseri anlamlı kılan başlıca iç ve dış yapısal özellikler, mimarinin bütünlüğüne ve anlam evrenine katkı sağlayan öğelerin ilişkisel değeri ve bu oluşturucu öğelerin insan yaşamına yansımaları, göstergebilim içerisinde yer alan kapsayan/kapsanan, biçim/töz ve dikey/yatay karşıtlıkları bağlamında sorgulanmıştır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Süleymaniye Camii, göstergebilim, anlam evreni, mimari yapı, kültürel miras

## INTRODUCTION

**T**he Ottoman Empire has had an essential role in world politics and cultural history for five centuries. Besides Eastern China, Rome, and the Byzantine Empires, the Ottoman Empire is the strongest and longest-lasting state with powerful governmental and social orders. The Empire is the ancestor of many cultural heritages, including a wide range of elements from politics to diplomacy, economy to bureaucracy, education to language, and religion, left in various spaces from Southeast Europe to West Asia and North Africa. In those spaces, the palaces, madrasas, caravansaries, baths, almshouses, fountains, bazaars, bridges, buildings, and mosques, which bear the traces of the Ottoman civilization, are some of the vital cultural heritages of the Empire which reached the present-day.

Among the magnificent structures of the Ottoman Empire are mosques, which still exist in Anatolia, the Balkans, and the Middle East. Regarding the Empire's architectural heritage, mosques in many regions worldwide are significant. One of the major mosques is the "Süleymaniye Mosque", built in the Fatih district of İstanbul between 1550 and 1558 by the Imperial Architect Sinan at the request of Süleyman I. Süleyman, "who reigned from 1520 to 1566, led the Ottoman Empire during its peak of political power. In addition to his military victories, he is remembered for commissioning many mosques, aqueducts, bridges, and other public works" (Yapp & Shaw, 2023).

İbrahim Yılmaz and Doğan Savaş state that Süleymaniye, regarded as one of the most prominent exemplars of Ottoman architecture, transcends its primary function as a mosque, serving instead as a symbolic construct that encapsulates institutionalized social ideology and a deeply rooted historical continuum. Far beyond its role as a *conventional Ottoman külliye* (a religious and socio-cultural complex), Süleymaniye conveys multifaceted symbolic significance. In addition to manifesting the Ottoman Empire's architectural grandeur and material might, it also reinforces the imperial image and asserts the ideological supremacy of Islam. As a representative monument of state authority, it simultaneously reflects the political stature and sovereignty of Sultan Süleyman I. Functioning as the most comprehensive *külliye* of the Ottoman period, Süleymaniye encompassed not only religious services but also fulfilled vital educational, charitable, and medical roles. It incorporated institutions such as a *madrasa* (moslem theological school), *imaret* (public kitchen), and *dariüşşifa* (hospital), while being situated near key structures like the Ağa Gate and the Old Palace. The realization of Süleymaniye entailed one of the sophisticated construction enterprises of the

classical Ottoman era. The structure exemplifies the apex of Ottoman engineering and building economy, while simultaneously serving as a critical architectural and socio-political document that illustrates the functional and symbolic significance of large-scale imperial waqf institutions within the broader context of Ottoman urbanism (2021, p. 439). Accordingly, built on the orders of Süleyman I and the design of Mimar Sinan, Süleymaniye is one of the essential Ottoman monuments in İstanbul with its aesthetic and symbolic features. The various constructions that served many social needs and were built together with the Mosque constitute the Ottoman Social Complex—*küllüye*—with the richest features (Sezer, 2015, p. 278). It is one of the first examples of the traditional concept of an Ottoman Social Complex, which was built to serve the public and contains different types of buildings with various functions. The Süleymaniye Mosque, architectural structure in many respects, has been on UNESCO's World Cultural Heritage List since 1985, which is located at the heart of İstanbul.<sup>1</sup> (See Figure 1)



Figure 1: Süleymaniye Social Complex and UNESCO World Heritage Site (Adapted from Kan & Binan, 2014, p. 97).

The Mosque, one of the monumental examples of classical Ottoman architecture, was built between 1550 and 1558 by the Great Architect Sinan when the Ottoman Empire was at its best economically and administratively.

<sup>1</sup> For more information, see: [http://whc.unesco.org/archive/advisory\\_body\\_evaluation/356.pdf](http://whc.unesco.org/archive/advisory_body_evaluation/356.pdf) & <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/356/documents/%23ABevaluation>.

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In a semiotic sense, Sinan built a masterpiece that has the ability to communicate with humanity throughout history since it was constructed. At this point, Umberto Eco states that “A phenomenological consideration of our relationship with architectural objects tells us that we commonly do experience architecture as communication, even while recognizing its functionality” (1986, p. 56). That is, such communication is one of the significant functions of the masterpiece, just like the other architectural designs.

If semiotics, beyond being the science of recognized systems of signs, is really to be a science studying *all* cultural phenomena *as if* they were systems of signs—on the hypothesis that all cultural phenomena *are*, in reality, systems of signs, or that culture can be understood as *communication*—then one of the fields in which it will undoubtedly find itself most challenged is that of architecture. (Eco, 1986, pp. 174-175).

When considering the status and position of the research object—a cultural phenomenon constructed with meaningful sequences of signs within a specific system— within the world cultural heritage as an architectural structure, it can be observed that such structures reflect the values, beliefs, needs, and priorities of society and culture, as Eco points out above. Moreover, those structures’ design, material selection, forms, and functions can also reflect society's history, geography, and social fabric and culture. Therefore, semiotic analysis of such structures contributes to a deeper understanding of society, the way their belief, and the culture in which the structure is situated.

This study investigates the structural and cultural characteristics of the Süleymaniye Mosque and their societal implications through a semiotic method. At this point, it is important to recall Ferdinand de Saussure’s views on semiotics: “A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be a part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it semiology (from the Greek semeion ‘sign’). Semiology would show what constitutes signs, what laws govern them” (de Saussure, 1959, p. 16). Accordingly, just the formal and substantial features of the language itself, all works of art, including architectural structures, also have a language comprising similar formative and substantial aspects to express their identities, values, and messages in various semantic levels. Signs and symbols are studies of different forms of language, such as written and spoken forms. However, they can also be studied in cultural productions such as rituals, images, art, and architecture including anything as text that can be read. Therefore, such artistic and architectural textual formations are subject to interpretation and become meaningful through specific cultural codes and symbols if the semiotics of architecture is conceived as the semiotics of space or spatial semiotics (Juodinytė-Kuznetsova, 2011, p. 1270). Space is regarded as utterance, which is constructed and modified by a human subject that perceives the space not only visually but also using all the senses (Greimas & Courtés, 1982, p. 305). Space is also an interpretation that includes all construction’s structural, cultural, and meaningful parties. For example, a structure’s form, decorations, arrangement, and usage can refer to specific symbols and meanings within that culture. Hence, one function of semiotics is to facilitate understanding of the

signs and symbols associated with the structure and to serve as a bridge between the structure and meaning. In such a study, the social function of the research object from its parts to the whole cannot be ignored. That is because semiotic analysis of the structure also helps understand its function within society and the reasons for its usage. How the structure is used, by whom, for what purposes, and what activities it hosts also determine its social and cultural context and values.

Architectural structures, while fulfilling functional requirements through their direct meanings, simultaneously operate on an indirect level to produce social discourses such as ideology, identity, power, and belonging. In this regard, architecture should not be conceived merely as an aesthetic or engineering-oriented discipline, but rather as a potent cultural practice through which meanings are generated, negotiated, and circulated. In this regard, in his paper entitled "Semiology and the Urban", Roland Barthes asserts that "the city is a discourse, and this discourse is truly a language" (1986, p. 168). He cautions against viewing the relationship between signified and signifier as fixed and one-to-one. While signifiers remain stable, signifieds are portrayed as ephemeral and almost mythical. Additionally, Barthes highlights the concept of the empty signified, exemplified by Tokyo's "empty center" (1989, pp. 30-31). Signifieds, he argues, cannot be fully captured within a definitive signification and often participate in an endless chain of meaning. Barthes suggests shifting focus from mere surveys or functional studies of the city to more profound readings. He likens the city to a poem, where the unfolding of signifiers is central, urging semiotics of the city to aim for capturing and expressing this unfolding. Based on Barthes' idea, the architectural features of the Süleymaniye Mosque, which is the research object of this study, have not only been handled on the denotative plane. On the contrary, connotative reflections of meaning are included to look at the architectural structure from social and cultural perspectives and reveal other essential features in this context. Therefore, this study presents research that elucidates not only the structure, its constructive components, its designed spaces, and functions but also its relationship with culture and significance within society at both meaning levels, which can also be seen in Kristina Juodinytė-Kuznetsova's argument related to the space below:

Space is a broad term. We come across city, building, forest, map, a piece of art; the term space can also be used metaphorically, philosophically, psychologically or from a geometrical point of view. Space is also socio-cultural phenomenon, involving the theme of place. So architectural object is not just created with the help of measurement, but it is a result of socio-cultural processes. Consequently, people arrange their space reflecting differences in social and cultural life. (Juodinytė-Kuznetsova, 2011, p. 1271).

As an architectural structure, determinations have been made regarding the constituent elements, enclosed spaces, structural arrangements, and usage purposes of the Süleymaniye Mosque, shedding light on the nature of religious culture, social relations, and hierarchy. Those determinations have been revealed through semiotic analyses of societal perceptions of the structure and the emerging belief culture surrounding it. In this context, the organization of the mosque's interior and exterior spaces and how this organization reflects societal structure, culture, and belief have been elucidated. From past to present, the Süleymaniye Mosque, as a monumental work of

architecture, has generated a complex discourse through its internal and external structural characteristics, its form, function, symbolic elements, and spatial rhetoric. Far beyond its immediate religious and functional role, the mosque embodies layers of cultural, political, and aesthetic meaning, positioning it as a communicative entity within the urban and historical fabric of İstanbul. In this sense, the Süleymaniye Mosque may be understood not as a silent structure, but as an architectural text that continuously speaks—articulating values of faith, identity, and power across centuries, as Barthes asserts: “The city speaks to its inhabitants; we speak our city, the city where we are, simply by living in it, by wandering through it, by looking at it” (1986, p. 30). The architecture of the Süleymaniye Mosque, which has maintained its significance and grandeur for centuries, is seen as integral to social and cultural change in İstanbul, a city of the world that embodies the imperial discourse. Through the semiotic examination conducted, the data presented demonstrate how such a structure has evolved from past to present and how this evolution can be linked to broader trends in society and culture.

In conclusion, the semiotic examination of the structure sheds light on its physical attributes and assists in understanding its complex relationships with society and culture. Thus, it is natural to perceive architectural structures not only as aesthetic and engineering feats but also as significant expressions and manifestations of society. The utilization area of semiotics as a signification theory also includes the existing architectural structures which form an integral part of the cities in specific spaces. Architectural works of art, as polysemantic discourses with the meaningful interaction of signifier and signified, reflect the stupendous structures and the footprints of civilizations, creating a comprehensive study field for semiotics to investigate. In this way, it is possible to observe the characteristics of a society, its interaction with nature and culture, and the method of constructing and using architectural works of art. Hence, throughout the investigation, this research is conducted to reveal some of the significant structural, social, cultural, and religious aspects of the Süleymaniye Mosque.

## 2. ANALYSIS

The aim of this study is to reveal the semantic universe of the Süleymaniye Mosque, a world cultural heritage site, by utilizing the data provided by semiotics theory. Therefore, this section of the study explores the fundamental internal and external structural properties that give meaning to the artwork, the relationships between elements that contribute to the integrity of the structure, the value these relationships add to the semantic universe, and the reflections of each element on human life within the context of surrounding/surrounded, form/substance, and vertical/horizontal dualities.

### 2.1. Surrounding/Surrounded

Süleymaniye Mosque can be evaluated regarding the space, where it is located, within the surrounded/surrounding dichotomy. In this case, for Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtés:

A dichotomy is a pair of terms—usually belonging to the epistemological level of the metalanguage—which are simultaneously posited, with an emphasis upon the relation of opposition that allows them to be linked the one with the other. [...]

Such an approach is characteristic of the structural attitude, which prefers to posit the differences—viewed as more enlightening—before examining and defining the concepts. (1982, p. 78).

The main element surrounding the mosque is the social complex that serves the public. In Ottoman tradition, social complexes were built to provide beneficial charitable institutions to the society that met the needs of the people in the places where they were constructed. Süleymaniye Complex—*külliye*—is one of them. (See Figure 2)

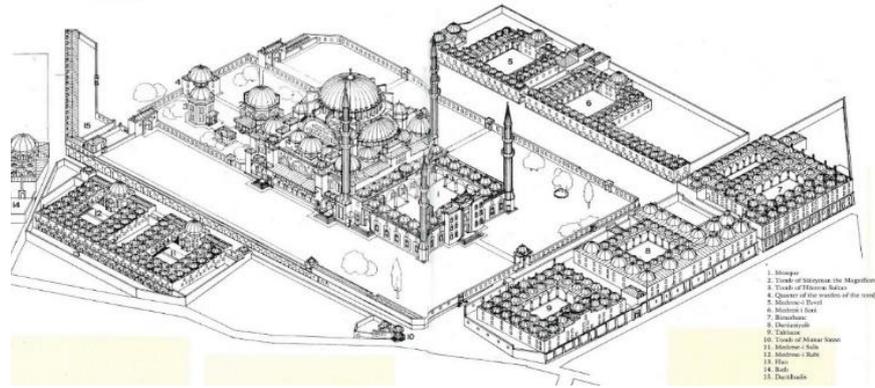


Figure 2: Formative elements of the space (Düzenli, 2019, p. 24).

In Figure 2, among the formative elements of the Süleymaniye Complex as a surrounding system, it is possible to see the mosque, fountain, madrasa (moslem theological school), providing education in different fields such as religion, law, medicine, and social sciences, mausoleums, school, *tabhâne* (caravansary), *almshouses* (dining hall, kitchen, pantry, bakery), *dârü'sşifâ* (hospital for regular patients), *bimarhane* (hospital for mentally ill patients), *hammam* (Turkish bath), *square fountain*, *darülhadis* (hadith teaching school), and *darülkurra* (Quran teaching school) in a single space.

Signs gain meaning through the relationship they establish within a particular system. As a sign, each of the constituent element of the Süleymaniye Mosque, in the figure above, is in a close relationship with each other. This relationship also reveals a semantic value of the construction system. Accordingly, the city developed thanks to the *külliye*, which includes buildings that respond to different material and spiritual needs. New settlements, bazaars, and markets organized social, economic, and cultural life, formed around the complex. It signifies the Empire's importance to religion, culture, education, health, and economic life. This sign makes the concept of "value", arising from the relationship between the formative elements of the complex, even more meaningful. Material and spiritual values are associated with the facilities provided within the space—Süleymaniye Complex—in question, which is reflected in the society as a value.

The constituent elements of the mosque, in general, define it as a surrounding space (see Figure 3).

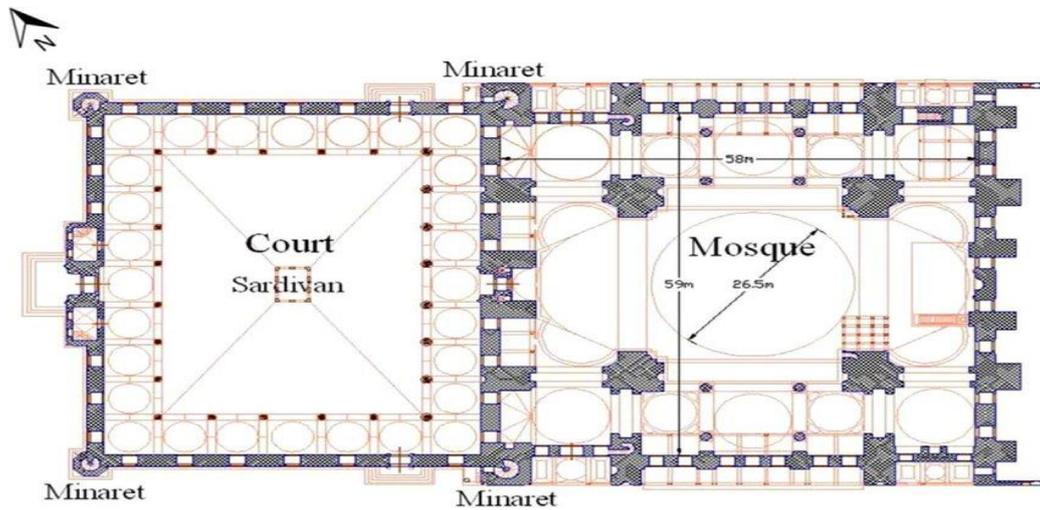


Figure 3: Süleymaniye Mosque as a surrounding space (Eilouti, 2017, p. 234).

As is seen in Figure 3, there are two square buildings; a Mosque, and a courtyard, which are situated in a rectangular shape within an area of 4,000m<sup>2</sup>.

In the following figure, a porch surrounds the courtyard with 28 domes and 28 marble and granite columns. There is a large rectangular marble *shadirvan* (water-tank with a fountain) in the centre of the square and three gates, one in the front and the other on the sides, to enter the courtyard. (See Figure 4)



Figure 4: The courtyard as a space (Adapted from Egesoy, 2019)

There are four minarets at the four corners of the courtyard; the front ones are 56 meters high and have two balconies each; the back ones are 76 meters high and have three balconies each. The four minarets symbolize that Süleyman I was the 4th Sultan after the conquest of İstanbul. Moreover, the total number of balconies on the four minarets is 10, which “Symbolizes that Süleyman I was the 10th sultan of the Ottoman Empire” (Necipoğlu Kafadar, 1985, p. 106). The mosque has a central dome with a height of 53 meters, a diameter of about 27 meters, and 32 windows. There are two half domes, two-quarter domes, and ten small domes around the central dome and the columns, each

weighing tens of tons, carrying these domes. It is possible to multiply the constituent elements of the Süleymaniye Mosque as surrounding space. (See Figure 5)



Figure 5: Minarets (Aslan & Şahin, 2016, p. 68)

It has been observed that structural features and cultural characteristics give meaning to the structure, reflecting important information about the functions of infrastructures and features inherent in every era's society within its space and their relationships with society. Therefore, both the structural and cultural features of the Süleymaniye Mosque have been examined together, revealing the reflections of these two features on society. The mosque, surrounded by a complex housing many functions, emerges not only as a place where worship takes place but also as a space where the community's needs are met. The Süleymaniye Complex and Mosque, which lead the interaction between society and architectural structure and serve as the language of social, economic, and cultural memory, stand out not only with their historical texture and spaces but also with the relationships they have established with society throughout the ages. It also reflects the communication between the living society in the space where the structural and functional characteristics of the architectural structure are present within the historical process.

## 2.2. Form/Substance

The term *substance* denotes the essential, unchanging core of being that exists independently, while *form* refers to the visible and perceptible expression of that core. The dynamics between these two notions are significantly influenced by culture, particularly in the processes of meaning-making and understanding existence. Culture encompasses the shared norms, values, symbols, and practices that shape how a society thinks, feels, and behaves. As such, the conversion of substance into form unfolds within a cultural context, since it is through culture that humans interpret and ascribe meaning to the world. According to Clifford Geertz, culture consists of a network of meanings in which humans are inherently embedded (1973, p. 5). In this sense, culture is not just an external backdrop but serves as the essential framework through which meaning is created. Substance is made comprehensible only when expressed through cultural narratives and symbols.

Concepts like love or truth, though universal in essence, take on distinct forms depending on the cultural context in which they appear. This act of representation reflects how substance is molded by the cultural codes that mediate our understanding of it.

Barthes' semiotic approach emphasizes that form is deeply embedded with cultural meanings. He argues that cultural signs—such as those found in fashion, art, and myth—play a central role in shaping substance by framing it within specific ideological perspectives (1972, p. 110). In this way, form functions as a culturally and ideologically interpretable version of substance. Fundamental ideas like love, heroism, and the sacred take on varied forms in different societies, with their expression being shaped by the distinct cultural codes through which meaning is constructed. Substance can also materialize by transforming into social forms. Cultural representations emerge from a collective consciousness that transcends the individual (Durkheim, 1912, p. 238). Through these cultural forms, substance is recognized and shared as a social reality. Elements like religious symbols, myths, and rituals function as formal expressions of substance. This process enables substance to become both functional and comprehensible within the social sphere. From the perspective of presenting substance through aesthetically charged forms, Theodor Wiesengrund-Adorno asserts that aesthetics goes beyond simply creating form—it is fundamentally a search for truth. Artistic expressions convey substance using aesthetic forms, thereby constructing a reality that engages both the senses and the intellect (1970, p. 102). Thus, culture plays a role in reshaping substance through artistic means, turning it into a coherent and meaningful entity.

Considering Saussure's work on language structure, we encounter his proposition that "language is not a *substance* but a *form*" (1959, p. 122). Every meaningful system created with language originates from the form given to it. On the other hand, the substance is something outside the linguistic phenomena that Saussure is interested in. Saussure's structuralist approach to language profoundly influences not only the study of linguistic signs but also our understanding of how meaning is generated within cultural contexts. By introducing the concepts of "form" and "substance", Saussure emphasizes that meaning does not stem solely from content, but from the specific ways in which that content is organized. This distinction is instrumental in analyzing the structure of cultural elements such as symbolic structures, myths, and rituals, all of which serve as carriers of meaning.

Also, Saussure's notion of language as a "system of signs" revealed that culture, too, operates through comparable structural mechanisms. Scholars like Claude Lévi-Strauss extended this idea into anthropology, showing how elements such as myths, laws, and kinship systems—cultural substances—are shaped and organized by underlying formal patterns. In this framework, substance is seen as the raw content of cultural life, while form provides the structure that gives it meaning. Accordingly, cultural narratives and symbols function similarly to linguistic signs in Saussure's theory: it is through form that substance becomes interpretable. As a result, culture and cultural productions can be understood as a system of structured forms through which meaning is systematically generated. At this point, it is possible to relate the form/substance opposition to the study object and analyze the Mosque as a cultural production within the substance/form binary opposition.

Saussure emphasizes that form is the primary basis for meaning. The value of linguistic signs is determined by their differences from one another, rather than by any intrinsic substance they possess. Meaning arises not from what a substance is in itself, but from how it contrasts with other forms (1959, p. 113). This idea extends to cultural systems as well: a gesture, symbol, symbolic structures, or myth gains significance not solely through its internal content, but through its position and relationship within a broader network of cultural forms. The distinction between form and substance highlights that meaning is generated through structure rather than essence. Form is more than a mere vehicle of expression—it is a socially and culturally shaped framework that organizes meaning. Just as it defines meaning in language, form also shapes cultural materials into comprehensible structures. Saussure’s perspective, which positions language as a fundamental system for producing cultural meaning, enables a deeper understanding of how form and substance interact within cultural contexts. (See Table 1)

Substantive field	Situation I	
<b>Untransformed materials</b> –natural–	Stones extracted from various deposits (19 types of stones), marbles, granites; different types of soil, various types of wood from different forests, various minerals (iron-copper-brass, etc.), glass, and tiles (Kolay & Çelik 2007, pp. 125-128).	Untouched, unformed, no human intervention
Formative field	Situation II	
<b>Transformed materials used in the construction</b> –cultural–	Cut stones of different sizes and weights used for different purposes; ornamented marbles and granites; terracotta used as building materials; trees used as doors, windows, pulpits, foundations and roofing materials; various metals mixed into building materials and used in the construction of ornamentation-coating- dome-brackets etc.; glass of different shapes and colors used in windows, and tiles used on walls (2007).	Human hands shaped them according to need and usage characteristics

Table 1: Structural materials of the Mosque in the context of substance/form

The opposition of substance/form can be associated with the nature/culture dichotomy. The most important reason is that the features that distinguish form and substance also distinguish nature and culture. Substance, as the pure and unformed state of something, can be associated with nature, whereas form can be related to culture as the form given to substantial or natural phenomena by the acts of individuals and societies per their mindsets and purposes. So, everything that emerges within the integrity of substance is natural, and the thing that humans give form is cultural. As a result, if the substance is nature, the form is culture (Kalelioğlu, 2023, p. 111). In the context of nature/culture (form/substance), it is possible to interpret the Mosque from different perspectives. The materials used in the construction of the Mosque and the form and meaning attributed to these materials can be taken as examples. In the substantive field of Table 1, the materials used in the

mosque's construction are in an untransformed or natural state. However, in the formative field, the stated natural (substantive) materials are transformed into cultural (formal) ones.

It is possible to observe the transformation concretely. (See Table 2)

	Marble	Granite	Wood	Glass	Copper	Chine
Substance (Situation I)						
Transformation ↓						
Form (Situation II)						

Table 2: Examples of the material transformation<sup>2</sup>

It is possible to learn the names and quantities of the primary materials used by Architect Sinan in his buildings and their places of origin from construction books and correspondences related to the ordering materials (Ahunbay, 1988, p. 531). The material for the construction of the Süleymaniye Complex, the provisions, and accounting books have been sent to various places to ensure the provisions are detailed sources of information.

Many factors affect the transformation process of constructive materials, as shown in Table 2. The photos in the first section of the table reflect any minerals in their pure state—substance—, while the photos in the second section contains their transformed state—form—. Here, it is possible to associate the *pure* with *nature* and the *transformed* with *culture*. That is, “The dichotomy between *form* and *substance* also reflects the dichotomy between *culture* and *nature*” (Kalelioğlu, 2018, p. 25). For instance, a block of marble found in its unprocessed state within nature represents substance itself. From this substance, one may produce a statue, a table, or a paving stone. At this point Murat Kalelioğlu asserts that “Any act of processing or shaping this marble constitutes culture. The manner in which substance is given form varies in accordance with the characteristics of the historical period and the prevailing cultural framework” (2024, p. 106). Accordingly, the process of transformation of substance into form is closely related to the social, economic, political, and cultural structures of the period in question. For example, in Ottoman İstanbul, neighborhoods were typically named after religious complexes such as külliyes, mosques, or city gates. Following the construction of the Süleymaniye Mosque, this area also came to bear the name of the structure and has since been known as Süleymaniye. The determining factor in this situation is, without a doubt, the political power of the period. In addition, for the construction of the mosque, materials—some of which are listed in Table 2—“were brought from all corners of the empire, and all available resources were mobilized. However, the most significant and striking materials are the monolithic, colored marble columns brought from ancient cities in Anatolia, and even from Baalbek and Cairo” (Ağaoğlu & Değirmenci,

<sup>2</sup> Photos in this section are taken from the <https://depositphotos.com/tr/>.

2019). The materials used in the construction of the mosque were sourced from various locations, carrying significant symbolic meaning: they demonstrated the Ottoman Empire's dominion over diverse civilizations and an extensive geographical territory. This also shows a close relation between the empire's political and economic power and materials used in the construction of the Mosque. Therefore, the fact that the materials brought from different places and countries in natural environments, that is, the substance acquires certain forms, is a critical sign that reveals both the characteristics of the period in many respects and the level of architectural development in the relevant society.

This situation should also be evaluated from another perspective in the context of cultural—formal—transformation. It is the human factor that enables the transformation in Table 2: The transformation of the *substance* in the first situation into *form* in the second situation, the fact that this transformed structure has survived for centuries and taken a considerable place among the world's cultural heritage shows that Architect Sinan's mastery of engineering. Also, regardless of the materials employed, the construction of the mosque was profoundly shaped by the cultural aspirations of Sultan Süleyman I, the intellectual and technical mastery of Mimar Sinan, and the broader symbolic imperative to project imperial authority through architecture. The transformation of materials such as marble, clay, wood, copper, and glass into built form reflects not only a technical process, but also the cultural, political, and intellectual values embedded in the act of building. The mosque thus emerges as a site where the material world intersects with the ambitions, identities, and worldviews of its patrons and builders, revealing how cultural meaning is inscribed into architectural form. In this framework, it is possible to see the reflections of Sinan's knowledge and experience in social, economic, political, cultural, and technical fields in the forms, functions, and meanings he gave to the material structures, as in the example of Süleymaniye Mosque.

### 2.3. Horizontal/Vertical

Considering mosques as sacred spaces in Ottoman culture, we encounter both vertical and horizontal dimensions; therefore, it is essential to evaluate the Süleymaniye Mosque as a spatial entity shaped by the interplay of these vertical and horizontal oppositions shown in the next figure:

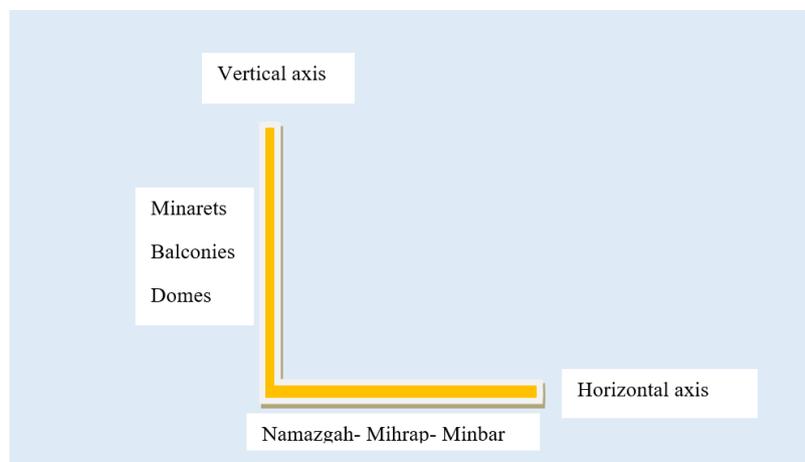


Figure 6: Formative elements and descriptive values of the Mosque

Interpreting the horizontal axis in Figure 6 in the descriptive meaning context, we encounter three different interior structures: *Namazgah* (place for praying), *mihrab* (niche of a mosque indicating the direction of mecca/kible), and *minbar* (preacher/imam platform), which are architecturally essential elements of the Mosque. As to the function of these structures, which are decorated with beautiful handicrafts, motifs, calligraphy, and ornaments, *namazgah* refers to the place (ground) where people pray; *mihrab* refers to the qibla and the place where the *imam* leads the prayer; and *minbar* refers to the place where the *imam* (orator) reads the sermon to the jamaat. The stated elements are on a horizontal plane relative to the minaret, balcony, and domes on the vertical axis. (See Figure 7)



Figure 7: *Minbar* (sermon pulpit in mosque) (Oral, 2019), *Namazgah* (place for praying) (İBB), and *Mihrab* (niche of a mosque indicating the direction of mecca) (Mülayim, 2010) as interior structures of the Mosque

The constituent elements of the vertical axis are the minarets, two located at the front and two at the back of the Mosque courtyard as shown in Figure 8 below.



Figure 8: Exterior structures of the Mosque (Adapted from Fikriyat, 2019)

As shown in Figure 8, the minarets' height at the front is 56 meters, and at the back is 76 meters. The front minarets have two balconies, and the back minarets have three balconies each, for ten balconies of various heights. One of the critical functions of these minarets and balconies is that the *imams* call the *azan* on the balcony at prayer times and invite people for prayer. As for the domes of the Mosque, the central dome, which is the largest and highest among the thousand domes, is

essential. The central dome is 53 meters high from the ground and 27 meters wide. The inner perimeter of the dome is full of ornaments, and there are thirty-two windows around it.

Axes evaluation in their symbolic value is essential for the integrity of the subject and can be seen below in Figure 9.

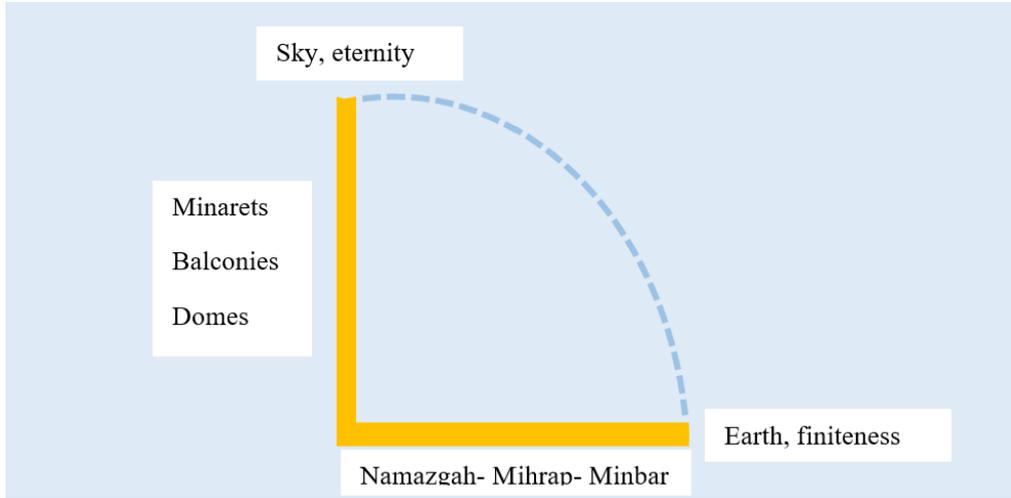


Figure 9: Symbolic values of the external and internal elements.

Architectural structures and the meanings attributed to them are essential in Ottoman art. Meaning ascribed to the structure can make it immortal as a narrative. “The mosque as a visual and physical space of power, has always been represented as the symbolic intersection of earth and heaven” (Frishman et al., 2002, p. 112). The architecture of the Süleymaniye Mosque creates a depth of meaning through the relationship between the earth and the sky. This relationship reflects both the architectural knowledge of Sinan and the metaphysical beliefs of Islamic mysticism. While the dome of the mosque symbolizes the sky, the minarets form an axis that rises from the earth towards the heavens. This vertical-horizontal union is a reflection of Islamic cosmology. The dome’s visual proximity to the sky symbolizes the divine order reflected upon the earth. Furthermore, the architectural arrangements in the mosque’s courtyard and ground floor provide a horizontal balance, symbolizing the transition between the earthly realm and paradise. In this context, looking at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal axes, we see the desire to unite the heaven and the earth sphere in the Süleymaniye Mosque with the order of Süleyman I and the mastery of Architect Sinan. One of the most important reasons for this desire is the semantic link between earth/sky and finiteness/eternity.

In mosques, which are dedicated to the most significant symbolic narrative of Islamic architecture, there are essential formative elements that embody the narrative. Among them are the *minarets*, which rise toward the glory of the sky and symbolize the *transcendent*. The minarets, reaching to quite high points, are manifestations of divine majesty and grandeur (Sağlam, 2020, p. 267-268). In Ottoman architecture, the dome constitutes one of the most prominent and defining architectural elements. In this context, the dome, minaret, and balconies, which are the formative elements of the Mosque on the vertical axis, can be associated with the concepts of the sky and eternity, which are considered symbolically sacred:

$$\text{Dome/minaret/minaret balcony} = \text{sky} \rightarrow \text{eternity}$$

As shown in Figure 9, the idea of a *horizontal axis* representing earthly existence and a *vertical axis* symbolizing a connection to the divine is reminiscent of Mircea Eliade's concept of the *axis mundi*, which represents the center of the world and the connection between heaven and earth (1959, p. 43). This concept is prevalent in many religious traditions, including Islam, where the sky and heaven hold significant spiritual importance. The concept of height in Islamic culture is strongly associated with closeness to Allah, spiritual elevation, and infinity. The event of the *Prophet Muhammad's Miraj*, or *ascension* to the heavens, symbolizes the highest spiritual point between *earth* and *sky* and is regarded as an expression of the human soul's union with the divine realm (Nasr, 2006).

The frequent convergence of vertical and horizontal axes in mosque architecture symbolizes a union between the concepts of finiteness and eternity. "In Islamic architecture, verticality symbolizes the connection between the finite earthly existence and the infinite divine presence" (Necipoglu, 2005, p. 194). The transition between the earth and the sky represents humanity's connection to the finite (the earthly existence and limited nature of life) and the eternal (the infinite nature of God's presence and divine power) as stated in Figure 9. Such a structure also reflects the spiritual orientation of the individual towards God in Islamic mysticism symbolically. The elevated dome and minarets in the interior of the mosque, which rise towards the sky, carry profound significance related to humanity's spiritual inclination towards the heavens and the love for divine power.

When it comes to the constituent elements of the structure located on the vertical plane, it is also possible to support it with certain passages from the Quran:

"Knowest thou not that to Allah belongeth the dominion of the heavens and the earth? And besides Him ye have neither patron nor helper" (Quran, Al-Baqara: 107). In Ottoman tradition, man, who lives a finite life on the horizontal axis, always wants to feel close to Almighty Allah and the sky. It is possible to see the importance of the sky –heaven– in religious practices. The man, filled with the desire to feel the divine power more effectively in his heart and to attain inner peace, prays by opening his hands toward the sky rather than the ground.

Here is another passage;

"Be quick in the race for forgiveness from your Lord and for a Garden whose width is that (of the whole) of the heavens and of the earth, prepared for the righteous" (Quran, Al-E-Imran: 133). The belief in the sanctity of the sky and its association with eternal life –paradise– has also manifested itself in the architectural structures where religious rituals are performed. For this reason, the minarets, balconies, and domes rising on the vertical axis, as in the Süleymaniye Mosque, can be associated with concepts such as the sky and eternity considered sacred.

At this point, it is possible to symbolically associate the constituent elements of the Mosque on the horizontal axis, namely the *namazgah* (place for praying), *mihrab* (niche of a mosque indicating the direction of mecca), and *minbar* (sermon pulpit in mosque), with the concepts of earth and eternity:

*Namazgah/mihrab/minbar*= earth → *finitude*

These are the structures in which people practice religion exercises. Comparatively evaluating both axes within the cultural context, we can say that;

The vertical axis creates the image of space, the sky, and heaven; this signifies the good life that humans aspire to reach spiritually, one that lasts forever. Furthermore, the horizontal axis indicates all the religious acts needed to climb up the vertical axis. In a sense, man's success in practice on the horizontal axis is a key that enables him to climb the vertical axis. In Ottoman tradition, man, who is involved in a finite life on the earth, has attached significance to the sky, heaven, and eternal life after death, which he considers sacred in line with his beliefs throughout his lifetime. In this way, the importance of architectural structures such as the Süleymaniye Mosque, where religious practices occurred, increased. It would be wrong to think of the Süleymaniye Mosque alone as a place where the community realized their religious or spiritual practices. At the same time, such structures meet society's social, economic, educational, and cultural needs.

The Mosque and formative elements are analyzed within two categories of horizontal and vertical opposition. In both analyses within the two spaces, the horizontal and vertical signs constituting the Mosque's arrangement are considered in both structural and cultural contexts. Here, the representative features and functions of the Mosque's constituent elements on horizontal and vertical planes have been elucidated in the structural context. In this manner, just like the constructive elements in a linguistic structure, it has been observed that considering the aspects of Süleymaniye Mosque on horizontal and vertical planes independently does not contribute much to the formation of meaning. It implies that the formation of the Mosque's universe of meaning, both structurally and culturally, and the expansion of this meaning relies on the structural and semantic relationship between the horizontal and vertical axes. A beautiful example of this can be seen by looking at the proximity of the constituent elements emerging on the horizontal axis of the Mosque's structure to the ground and thus their connection to finite life. On the vertical axis, the relation with eternity can be observed through the constituent elements constructed with the desire to draw closer to the sky—thus, the higher it is, the more sacred it becomes.

#### **2.4. Semiotic Square**

At this stage of the analysis, it is necessary to refer to Greimas, the semiotic square, and its function: The semiotic square, a fundamental component of deep structure, serves to articulate abstract and implicit meanings that can be "visually represented" through a diagrammatic form (Greimas, 1988, p. xviii). Developed by Greimas, the semiotic square offers a visual depiction of the elementary structure underlying a text's meaning. Its primary function is to reveal the abstract or latent semantic relationships of a text. Kalelioğlu states that the influence of the principles proposed by both Saussure and Hjelmslev in their work on the signification of signs can clearly be observed in the theories of Greimas. This process of logical-semantic analysis allows for the identification and discussion of potential oppositional, contradictory, and presuppositional relations concerning a given theme through the use of the *semiotic square* (2024, p. 224). In this context, the semiotic square functions as an analytical tool that reveals the network of relationships imposed by abstract, implicit, foundational, or ideological concepts—constructed within the deep structures of narratives—alongside their opposites. As Tahsin Yücel also notes, in order to uncover and explicate this entire network of relations, a language that transcends the limits of the ordinary language is required; that is, a metalanguage. The metalanguage referred to here is one that, for the purpose of describing and

analyzing meaningful wholes produced within a particular language in a clearer, more coherent, and systematic manner, goes beyond—even encompasses—the boundaries of the language it describes, though it is formed from the same linguistic elements, this time structured through a specific system of concepts and definitions (2012, p. 4).

In an attempt to examine the deep structure of narratives, the semiotic square is an important tool for the representation of ideas and meaning. The semiotic square is a visual depiction of the logical organization of meaning (Greimas & Courtés, 1982, pp. 303–309). Accordingly, constituent elements of Figures 6 and 9 on the horizontal and vertical axes, namely the dome, minaret, balcony, *namazgah*, *mihrab*, and *minbar*, provide the functionality to the architecture of the Süleymaniye Mosque: This functionality of the relevant space should be seen as a *sacred space* where *practices* take place. In this context, it is possible to interpret the phenomena of *religious space* and *religious practices* differently in terms of symbolic meaning within the opposition of vertical and horizontal space in a semiotic square. (See Figure 10)

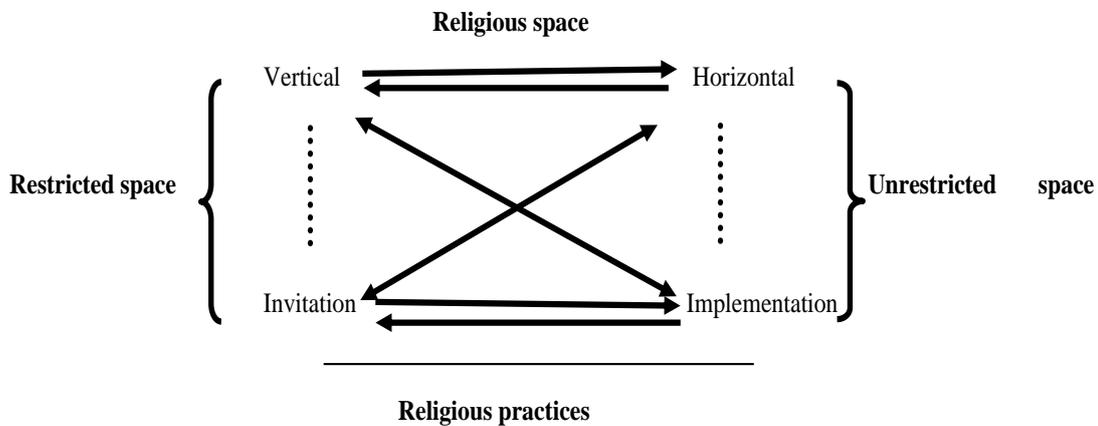


Figure 10: Semiotic Square of the Mosque in relation to the Figures 6 and 9 above

According to the semiotic square, it can be said that the structures built on the horizontal and vertical axes of the Süleymaniye Mosque in Ottoman architecture are complementary to each other. Accordingly, the fact that the space on the horizontal axis makes the Mosque meaningful as an architectural structure depends on the presence of the space on the vertical axis. That is because the meaning of the constituent elements of the horizontal space in the religious system is closely related to the elements' existence in the vertical space. The importance of this relationship is also seen during religious practices. For example, the public is invited from the space on the vertical axis to religious practice on the horizontal space –Mosque– on the horizontal axis. This invitation must first be made in the vertical space so that people can gather in the horizontal space and religious practice can take place. It means that the minaret and balcony, on the vertical axis signs in the Süleymaniye Mosque system, are in a close semantic relationship with the space where the invitation occurs. Similarly, signs such as the *namazgah*, *mihrab*, and *minbar* on the horizontal axis are also closely related to the space for religious exercise. It shows that the horizontal and vertical spaces, as the constituent elements of the Süleymaniye Mosque, become meaningful thanks to their close relationship.

According to the same semiotic square, evaluating Süleymaniye Mosque within the framework of restricted/unrestricted spaces is possible. In this context, the area covered by the constituent elements in vertical and horizontal space becomes prominent. While the constituent

parts of the vertical axis –dome, minaret, and balcony– cover a more limited space where they are located in the horizontal space, the elements of the horizontal axis –namazgah, mihrab, and minbar– cover a more expansive space.

Within Ottoman architecture, it is observed that the structures erected along the horizontal and vertical axes of the Süleymaniye Mosque mutually enhance one another. The significance of the architectural layout along the horizontal axis is contingent upon the presence of the structural space along the vertical axis. Thus, the importance of elements along the horizontal axis within the framework of religion and belief is intricately tied to their existence along the vertical axis. This semantic interrelation, evident in both structural and cultural systems, is also prominently reflected in the religious practices of individuals transitioning from vertical to horizontal spaces. Within the vertical domain, the community is initially summoned to the mosque through the call to prayer, and upon congregating in the mosque for worship, they engage in religious rituals within the horizontal space. The shift from the vertical to the horizontal space is of importance for fostering communal gatherings and conducting religious rites. Similarly, the constituent elements along the horizontal axis constitute the arena for religious observances. This scenario elucidates the semantic realms of the horizontal and vertical spaces, integral components of the Süleymaniye Mosque, demonstrating how these spaces mutually reinforce each other and contribute to the overarching significance of the Süleymaniye Mosque as a grand architectural edifice across structural, social, and cultural dimensions.

## CONCLUSION

Cultural heritage encompasses the totality of tangible and intangible values produced by a society throughout its historical trajectory and sustained through intergenerational transmission. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization defines cultural heritage as a holistic concept encompassing not only tangible elements such as monuments, buildings, and archaeological sites, but also intangible components such as language, traditions, rituals, and artistic forms of expression (UNESCO, 2003).

From a societal perspective, the “preservation, promotion, and transmission of cultural heritage” (UNESCO, 2003; Smith, 2006, p. 92) to future generations is not merely an aesthetic or nostalgic necessity; rather, “it constitutes a fundamental guarantee for identity construction, social cohesion, and historical continuity” (Smith, 2006, p. 93). Within this framework, societal responsibilities toward cultural heritage may be articulated on three primary levels. The first is the *responsibility of preservation*, which entails safeguarding the physical and spiritual integrity of heritage without deterioration. This responsibility involves restoration activities, legal regulations, and preventive measures against environmental threats (UNESCO, 1972; Jokilehto, 1986, p. 6). The second is the *responsibility of promotion*, which seeks to enhance the visibility of cultural heritage at both national and international levels, foster awareness across all segments of society (Graham, Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000, p. 2), and ensure that its value is broadly understood. The third is the *responsibility of transmission*, which extends beyond the conservation of physical assets to encompass

the preservation of contextual meanings, cultural memory, and modes of practice for future generations (UNESCO, 2003).

This study aims to provide a concrete example of a consciousness-raising endeavor within the framework of the stated responsibilities. In this context, one of the world's significant cultural heritages, the Süleymaniye Mosque, is reexamined through the theoretical lens of semiotics, a discipline concerned with the study of signs, signification, and meaning-making processes and interpreted the mosque as a multilayered sign system. As a masterpiece of classical Ottoman architecture, the mosque masterfully integrates aesthetic, engineering, and symbolic dimensions under the design of Mimar Sinan. It functions not only as a place of worship but also as a cultural memory space that reflects the intellectual, artistic, and social values of Ottoman civilization. As a result, the study demonstrates that semiotic analysis, by enabling the reading of the mosque's interior and exterior architectural elements through the specified binary oppositions, makes it possible to deeply understand the semantic universe of this masterpiece from a different perspective. Additionally, the study reveals that the structural components of the mosque—interpreted within the framework of these defined oppositions and the components of the interior and exterior spaces—are closely related to the social and cultural contexts of the structure, and that the building has significant impacts on the faith and life of the community.

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