



Revisiting the House of a World Empire in the Light of Household Aesthetics of Islam: The Case of Topkapi Palace

Bir Dünya İmparatorluğunun Evini Yeniden Düşünmek: İslam Estetiği Bağlamında Topkapı Sarayı

Emine Filiz Kolmek*^{ORCID}

Abstract

This essay examines the impact of Islamic principles on the spatial organization and preferences of Topkapi Palace, which functioned as the "state house" of the Sultan for approximately 400 years. Although the Palace is a complex of buildings serving diverse functions—ranging from state offices and places of worship to madrasas, libraries, mansions, and reception halls—when evaluated collectively, it was the residence of the Ottoman state and its Sultan. By referencing the Quran and the hadiths of Prophet Mohammed, the two pillars of Islamic doctrine, this essay explores the household aesthetics in Islam, which define the conditions for a house, and how these principles influenced the spatial organization of the palace. In light of the Qur'an and Sunnah, the Palace will be evaluated based on privacy, spatial dimensions (width-height), humility/ simplicity, flexibility (*seyyâliyet*), spirituality (supporting Muslim life), and orientation towards the qibla. This study provides new insights into the relationship between Islamic household principles and imperial palatial architecture, enriching our understanding of the aesthetic and cultural legacy of the Ottoman Empire.

Keywords: Topkapi Palace; Household aesthetics in Islam; Ottoman palatial architecture; Ottoman cultural heritage, Domestic architecture.

Öz

Bu makale, yaklaşık 400 yıl boyunca Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda "devlet evi" olarak işlev gören Topkapı Sarayı'nın mekânsal organizasyonu ve tasarım tercihleri üzerinde İslam ilkelerinin etkisini incelemektedir. Saray, devlet dairelerinden ibadethanelere, medreselerden kütüphanelere, köşklerden kabul salonlarına kadar çeşitli işlevlere hizmet eden yapıların oluşturduğu bir komplekstir. Ancak, bütüncül bir değerlendirme yapıldığında, Osmanlı Devleti ve Sultanı'nın ikametgâhı olarak işlev görmüştür. Bu çalışma, İslam inancının kaynaklarından olan Kur'an-ı Kerim ve Hadis-i Şeriflere referansla, İslam'daki hane estetiğini ele almakta ve bir evin sahip olması gereken şartlar olarak tanımlanabilecek bu ilkelerin sarayın mimarî teşkilatına nasıl yansıdığını incelemektedir. Saray; mahremiyet, mekânsal boyutlar (genişlik-yükseklik), tevazu/sadelik, esneklik (*seyyâliyet*), maneviyat (İslamî hayatı destekleme) ve kibleye yönelme gibi ölçütler üzerinden değerlendirilecektir. Bu çalışma, İslami hane ilkeleri ile imparatorluk saray mimarisi arasındaki ilişkiye dair yeni bir bakış açısı sunarak Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun estetik ve kültürel mirasına dair anlayışımızı derinleştirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Topkapı Sarayı; İslam estetiği; Osmanlı saray mimarisi; Konut mimarisi; Osmanlı kültürel mirası.

* Sorumlu yazar - Corresponding author & Hamad Bin Khalifa University ^{ORCID} ekolmek@hbku.edu.qa

Araştırma Makalesi - Research Article & Benzerlik / Similarity: 8

Başvuru - Submitted: 29 Mayıs 2025 & Kabul & Accepted: 6 Eylül 2025

Atıf & Citation: Kolmek, E. F. "Revisiting the House of a World Empire in the Light of Household Aesthetics of Islam: The Case of Topkapi Palace", *Osmanlı Medeniyeti Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 28 (2026): 51-93.



Introduction

Islam is a holistic way of life, offering a comprehensive worldview that touches every aspect of existence. Its practice leads to the development of a culture and civilization deeply rooted in Islamic values, teachings, and principles, influencing all areas of life, albeit to varying degrees. Islam extends beyond prescribed rituals to provide a complete framework encompassing faith, philosophy, ideology, culture, and civilization, shaping personal, familial, and societal systems. Architecture, as part of this framework, is naturally influenced by Islamic beliefs, guiding how Muslims design and construct their living environments.

The expansion of Islam fostered significant intellectual activity and the development of knowledge, especially concerning the guidelines for living as outlined by religious principles and codes.¹ While Islam does not provide specific guidelines for house construction, it offers principles that shape various aspects of home and housing design. These principles form a foundation for creating environments that support the Muslim way of life.

In the Ottoman Empire, the Sultan and the palace stood at the center of the state and central government. The palace, as the Sultan's residence and office, was not only the administrative heart of the empire but also symbolized the authority of the Muslim Caliph, the leader of the world's Muslims. Religion, therefore, played an undeniable role in the governance of the Ottoman state, with the palace representing both religious and secular life.² As such, the palace represented the household of the Caliph, projecting his power and role to the world.³

The Topkapi Palace served as the "house" of the Ottoman state and the Sultan, the chief defender of the Islamic world, for nearly four centuries, overseeing an empire that spanned four continents until the 17th century. Despite being a vast complex housing state office, places of worship, madrasas, libraries, mansions, and reception halls, its core function was as the residence of the state and Sultan, a role emphasized in scholarly literature.⁴ Necipoğlu, for instance, highlights the third court as the residence of *Enderrun*, where the Sultan's family and inner household lived highlighting that this area served as both a royal residence, with the Sultan as the paternal figure, and as a palace school for the ruling elite, fostering bonds between the Sultan and future leaders of the empire.⁵ Similarly, Ortaylı in his work *Private and Royal Life in the Ottoman Palace*,

¹ Besim Selim Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic Cities: Building and Planning Principles* (London: KPI Limited, 1986), 15.

² İlber Ortaylı, *Private and Royal Life in the Ottoman Palace* (New York: Blue Dome Press, 2014), 75.

³ Ortaylı, 25.

⁴ Rhoads Murphey, *Exploring Ottoman Sovereignty: Tradition, Image, and Practice in the Ottoman Imperial Household, 1400-1800* (London: Continuum, 2008).

⁵ Gulru Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapi Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*, First Edition (New York: MIT Press, 1991), 129.

describes Topkapi Palace as the home of the Ottoman sultans. Built by Mehmed II starting in 1460, it remained the sultans' residence until the mid-19th century, despite later shifts to Dolmabahçe Palace. Even after the move, Topkapi retained its symbolic status as the "Father's House," with key imperial treasures, sacred relics, and archives preserved there until the abolition of the monarchy in 1922. According to him, Topkapi was both a residence and an administrative center, modest yet magnificent, with its gardens, treasures, and archives representing the heart of the empire.⁶ Anhagger, who oversaw repairs to the Harem section of the palace, also views Topkapi primarily as a residence in her work *Topkapi Sarayı'nda Padişah Evi* (The Sultan's House in Topkapi Palace: Harem), emphasizing its role as the home of the Ottoman sultans.⁷ In this sense, palaces—particularly Ottoman palaces—can be viewed as extensions of the Islamic homes, as they housed the royal Sultan and his family, and the imperial state and can be analyzed with their designs rooted in Islamic thought.

Building on these perspectives, this research explores how Islamic principles shaped the spatial organization and design preferences of Topkapi Palace.

Literature Review

Islamic architecture encompasses a vast array of structures, yet much of the scholarly focus has historically centered on mosques, madrasas, and other public religious buildings which are directly related with the central practices of Islam. Among the key types of Islamic architecture, the palace stands out as the one that has largely evaded thorough and systematic scholarly investigation, despite its importance.⁸ Several factors contribute to this, foremost among them being the extreme scarcity of surviving examples of Islamic palace architecture and the tendency of contemporary literary sources to depict palaces through exaggeration and recurring themes. As a result, our understanding of the Islamic palace remains largely superficial, offering a limited perspective that fails to capture these structures as dynamic, functioning spaces designed to accommodate specific human activities within their architectural environments.⁹

Topkapi Palace holds significant importance in the history of Islamic palatial architecture, a field largely centered on public religious monuments due to the scarcity of surviving palaces, many of which have succumbed to neglect or destruction by successive dynasties.¹⁰ Unlike many Islamic palaces lost to time, Topkapi Palace stands out for having largely retained its original form and being exceptionally well-documented—

⁶ Ortaylı, *Private and Royal Life in the Ottoman Palace*, 13–22.

⁷ Mualla Eyüboğlu Anhagger, *Topkapi Sarayı'nda Padişah Evi: Harem* (Istanbul: Sandoz Kültür Press, 1986), 9–12.

⁸ Howard Crane, 'Review of Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapi Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries by Gülru Necipoğlu', *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, no. 2 (April 1996): 327–28.

⁹ Crane, 327.

¹⁰ Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power*, xvi.

an uncommon combination in the study of Islamic palatial architecture. While the Umayyad *villa rustica* structures in Syria are relatively well-documented, the Abbasid palaces in Samarra, along with the Ghaznavid counterparts in *Lashkari Bazar* and Ghazni, have been the subject of research. Some attention has been given to the Ilkhanid *Taht-ı Süleyman* and Timur's *Ak Saray* in Shahr-i Sabz. In the Western Islamic world, Abd al-Rahman III's *Madinat al-Zahra* near Cordoba and the *Alhambra* in Granada have been explored both archaeologically and through the public imagination. However, descriptions of these vast complexes—scattered across different geographical regions and spanning various historical periods—have largely remained confined to basic physical depictions.¹¹ What is missing from the descriptions of these vast architectural complexes is a genuine insight into the social and ceremonial activities they hosted, as well as the ideological and iconographic purposes behind their construction. As a result, our perception of Islamic palaces remains largely two-dimensional, failing to recognize them as dynamic and functional entities—architectural environments intricately linked to specific human activities.¹² This deficiency can largely be attributed to the historical remoteness of these structures and the scarcity of primary documents and literary sources that could elucidate their architectural evolution and the complex functions they were designed to serve. Even for later Islamic palaces, such as the Mughal Red Fort in Delhi, the Safavid *Chehel Sotoun* and *Hasht Behesht*, or the royal gardens of Isfahan, such documentation remains quite limited. This is precisely why Topkapi Palace, in Istanbul, stands out as a unique and fascinating monument for historians, much of whom focused on sacred architecture, interested in the intersection of Islamic courtly rituals and built environments.¹³

Existing literature on Topkapi Palace is vast, drawing from both Ottoman and European sources. The architectural, functional and ceremonial aspects of the palace have been extensively explored through historical narratives, inscriptions, law books (*Kānūn-nāme*), from Ottoman historians such as Kritovoulos, Tursun Beg, Mustafa Ālī, and Peçevī, and figurative paintings, especially those in *Huner-nāme*. Besides, Western fascination with the "exotic East" has led to the creation of a rich and diverse body of literature over the centuries, particularly focused on Topkapi Palace,¹⁴ which served as both the imperial residence and the administrative and cultural center of an empire spanning three continents.¹⁵ European travelers, including Ottaviano Bon, Jean Baptiste Tavernier, and Albertus Bobovius, contributed to early Western accounts of the palace's structure and organization, albeit often influenced by orientalist perspectives. These sources, along with significant architectural studies by Ekrem Hakkı Ayverdi, Sedat Hakkı Eldem, and Metin Sözen, as well as Ahmet Şimşirgil's work, which specifically

¹¹ Crane, 'Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power', 327.

¹² Crane, 328.

¹³ Crane, 327.

¹⁴ Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power*, xi.

¹⁵ Walter B. Denny, 'Review of Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapı Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries, by Gülru Necipoğlu', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, no. 1 (February 1994): 99–100.

examines the palace's inscriptions and addresses a major gap, and İlber Ortaylı's extensive explanations on life in the palace, provide a foundational understanding of its historical and spatial significance.

International scholarship has also played a crucial role in shaping contemporary discussions on Topkapi Palace. Works such as Barnette Miller's *Beyond the Sublime Porte*, N. M. Penzer's *The Harem*, Fanny Davis' *The Palace of Topkapi*, and Howard Crane's studies on Ottoman architectural evolution have contributed strong insights into different facets of the palace. Additionally, architectural surveys by Feridun Akozan and Sedat Hakkı Eldem provided some of the most detailed plans and visual documentation of the palace's layout.

Among the most comprehensive studies on Topkapi Palace, Gülru Necipoğlu's *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapi Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries* stands as a seminal work. Her research uniquely combines archival documentation, spatial analysis, and ceremonial symbolism, offering a nuanced interpretation of imperial power and hierarchical structures within the palace. While her study provides unique insights into the palace's spatial organization, it primarily examines the palace through the lens of power, rulership, and imperial symbolism, rather than its religious dimensions.

Many past studies tend to focus on explaining the functional and spatial qualities of the palace, or more recent studies concentrating on specific details such as its inscriptions, imperial treasury, porcelain collections, copper and brass works, and weaponry often employing a descriptive narrative. While these studies enrich our understanding of Topkapi Palace's historical significance, they primarily examine the palace through a functional lens, focusing on its political and institutional roles rather than its religious foundations. Only a few works address the influence of Islamic concepts—particularly privacy—on its spatial organization, despite Islam's, as a religion, undeniable role in shaping the Ottoman state.¹⁶

Much of the scholarship on Islamic architecture has prioritized sacred monuments, leaving Topkapi Palace as a rare case where an imperial residence can be examined in depth. To fill this gap and contribute to the broader discourse on Islamic architecture, this study shifts the focus toward the role of religious principles in shaping the palace's spatial organization. It explores the alignment of Topkapi Palace with Islamic household aesthetics, demonstrating how key principles—such as privacy, humility/ simplicity, spatial dimensions, fluidity (*seyyāliyet*), spirituality, and qibla orientation—were embedded in the sultan's residence and, by extension, in the living arrangements of the Ottoman elite.

By bridging the gap between Islamic household aesthetics and imperial palatial design, this research offers a fresh perspective on the cultural, religious, and spatial

¹⁶ Ortaylı, *Private and Royal Life in the Ottoman Palace*, 13–22.

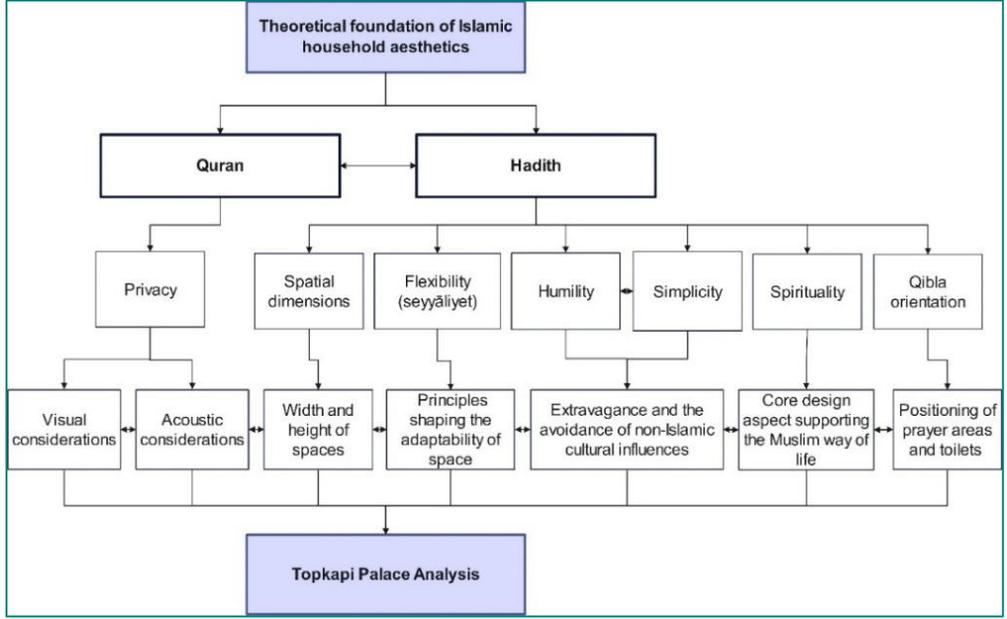
dimensions of Topkapi Palace, enriching broader discussions in Islamic architectural history.

Methods

This study investigates the household aesthetics of Islam, specifically the principles that define a beautiful house in Islamic thought and examines their reflection in the spatial and organizational design of Topkapi Palace. To establish a theoretical foundation, the research relies on primary Islamic sources, namely the Quran and Sunnah, which are analyzed in relation to broader Islamic teachings. Relevant Quranic verses and hadiths are examined systematically to identify key principles that shape household aesthetics. The analysis highlights privacy as a central concept in the Quran, while hadiths, Sunnah, and other Islamic teachings provide further elaboration on aspects such as spatial dimensions, humility/ simplicity, flexibility (*seyyāliyet*), spirituality, and qibla orientation.

Based on these initial findings, the study develops an analytical framework to evaluate Topkapi Palace according to seven key criteria: privacy, spatial dimensions, humility and simplicity, flexibility (*seyyāliyet*), spirituality, and qibla orientation. Privacy is assessed in terms of visual and acoustic considerations while spatial dimensions focus on the width and height of spaces. Humility and simplicity are evaluated in relation to extravagance and the avoidance of non-Islamic cultural influences. Spirituality is explored as a core design aspect supporting the Muslim way of life, while flexibility (*seyyāliyet*) is examined as an independent principle shaping the adaptability of space. Lastly, qibla orientation is analyzed through the positioning of prayer areas and toilets in relation to the qibla(Figure 1).

Figure 1. Research Methodology



The research follows a qualitative methodology, incorporating multiple sources of data and in field observation with a critical architectural analysis. A comprehensive literature review integrates both local and international sources to contextualize the palace's design principles. Additionally, historical travelogues provide external perspectives from foreign travelers who visited and documented Topkapi Palace. Finally, empirical verification is conducted using qibla-determining applications to confirm the qibla orientation of prayer areas, toilets, and bathrooms within the palace.

Through this structured approach, the study ensures a rigorous assessment of Islamic household aesthetics and their influence on the architectural and spatial organization of Topkapi Palace.

Topkapi Palace: Description

Topkapi Palace, also known as *Sarây-ı Cedîd*, was commissioned by Mehmed II in 1460 and constructed on a 70-acre site atop a hill with sweeping views of the Marmara Sea and the Bosphorus, in what is now Sarayburnu. The palace served as the primary seat of Ottoman power for almost four centuries. By 1478, the core structure was largely completed, though successive Ottoman rulers continued to add sections to the complex until the early 19th century.¹⁷ The palace's strategic location was deliberately chosen,

¹⁷ Fuat Ozan Birkan, 'Topkapi'dan Sâdâbâd'a: 15. Yüzyıldan 18. Yüzyıla Osmanlı Sultanının Sarayında ve İnzivasında Mekânsal Dönüşüm [From Topkapi to Sadabad: Spatial Transformation in the Palace and

providing an unparalleled vantage point over three seas, aligning with the primary ambition of the Ottoman rulers—starting with Mehmed II—which, as İnalcık highlights, was to establish Istanbul as the political and religious center of the world¹⁸ and the palace aligned with the tradition in Islamic culture of serving as a means to express power and authority, beginning to be adapted to Istanbul through Mehmed II's policies (See Figure 2).¹⁹ Positioned near the Hagia Sophia Mosque, the palace complex occupied the prominent Sarayburnu Peninsula, maximizing its visibility and significance. The site, once an olive grove, was enclosed by a 1,400-meter-long wall known as *Sūr-ı Sultānī*. This wall is connected with the ancient Byzantine fortifications that encircled the city along the Golden Horn and Marmara shores. Key gates punctuated these walls, including Otluk Gate, Demir Gate, and the primary entrance, *Bāb-ı Humāyūn* (Imperial Gate), which connected the palace to the city, alongside five smaller side entrances.²⁰

Figure 2. Special Location of Topkapi Palace.²¹



Seclusion of the Ottoman Sultan from the 15th to the 18th Century]', *Journal of Ottoman Civilization Studies*, no. 15 (October 2022): 1–16.

¹⁸ Halil İnalcık and Donald Quataert, eds., *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 18.

¹⁹ Oleg Grabar, 'The Architecture of Power: Palaces, Citadels, and Fortifications', in *Architecture of the Islamic World: Its History and Social Meaning*, ed. George Michell (London: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 70.

²⁰ Birkan, 'Topkapı'dan Sādâbâd'a', 2.

²¹ Nicole Kançal Ferrari, Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı-ISAM. 'Topkapi Sarayı', *Büyük İstanbul Tarihi*, 2025, <https://istanbultarihi.ist/302-topkapi-sarayi>.

The Topkapi Palace structure followed the traditional Ottoman organizational framework, with four principal divisions: the private residential quarters (Harem), educational and training spaces (Enderūn), administrative functions (Diwān-ı Humāyūn), and areas designated for service and security (Birūn). The palace's layout was marked by its three grand gates—Bāb-ı Humāyūn, Bābusselām (Middle Gate), and Bābussaāde (Gate of Felicity)—which, along with the adjoining courtyards as squares, created a sequence of progressively restricted spaces.

In 1863, after a coastal pavilion known as the Topkapi Coast Palace was destroyed by fire, the palace—previously referred to as Sarāy-ı Cedīd (New Imperial Palace)—became more commonly known as Topkapi Palace.²² For centuries, Topkapi Palace served as the residence of a powerful empire with a deep-rooted civilization. It continued its existence as a 'family home' and, later, as a museum, which it remains today.²³

The Topkapi Palace and Household Aesthetics

The Islamic faith provides principles and guidelines that shape the lifestyle of Muslims, outlining their responsibilities and rights. Islamic architecture and cities have been developed in accordance with these principles, drawn from the two pillars of Islam; Quran and Sunnah, since the advent of Islam in 611 CE.²⁴ A closer examination of the core sources reveals that Quranic regulations concerning the household condense around the concept of privacy. Additionally, an analysis of the Prophet Muhammad's perspectives on household matters reveals a wealth of insights, including guidance on dimensions (width-height), fluidity (*Seyyāliyet*), humility, spirituality, orientation towards the qibla, and broader considerations like preservation and community relations. This section of the study aims to shed light on the aforementioned guidelines and subsequently explore their influence on the spatial organization and design choices of Topkapi Palace, highlighting the deep-rooted Islamic impact on imperial palatial architecture.

Privacy, Etiquette and Norms

Privacy holds a central place in Islamic households. It is the primary factor influencing how Muslims design, construct, understand, and utilize their interior household living spaces.²⁵ Hakim²⁶ discusses that, it also extends to the confidentiality of communication. Privacy in Islamic residential architecture is categorized into three levels: privacy against the outside world, privacy against those allowed into the house, and privacy

²² Oktay Aslanapa, *Osmanlı Devri Mimarisi* (Istanbul: İnkılâp Kitabevi, 1986), 29.

²³ A. Enis Cetin, Omer N. Gerek, and Ahmed H. Tewfik, 'The Topkapi Palace Museum', *Museum International* 52, no. 1 (1 January 2000): 22–25.

²⁴ Mohammed Abdullah Eben Saleh, 'The Impact of Islamic and Customary Laws on Urban Form Development in Southwestern Saudi Arabia', *Habitat International* 22, no. 4 (1998): 537.

²⁵ Spahic Omer, *Islam and Housing* (Kuala Lumpur: AS Noordeen, 2010), 47.

²⁶ Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic Cities*, 20.

among family members themselves.²⁷ Respecting the privacy of others is essential, and any intrusion, such as creating direct visual access to another's private space, is strictly forbidden.²⁸ The Quran, as the primary source of revelation, provides guidance on matters related to the home, with verses on this topic predominantly emphasizing the concept of "privacy" some of which are below.

"O you who have attained faith, do not enter houses other than your own houses until you announce your presence and greet their inhabitants with the greeting of peace. That is better for you, that you may remind yourselves."²⁹

"But if you find no one in them, then do not enter them until you are given permission. And if it is said to you, "Turn back," then turn back; it is purer for you, for Allāh is All-Knowing of what you do."³⁰

God established certain prohibitions, including averting one's gaze, respecting the sanctity of others by not looking upon them, and refraining from entering others' homes without permission.³¹ Within this belief system, the family room is regarded as a private space, with entry allowed only with permission and at designated times. For example, bedrooms are typically located at the rear of the house or on upper floors, and boys' and girls' rooms are separated once they reach puberty.³²

Privacy can be understood in two primary dimensions. The first is visual privacy, which entails protecting female occupants by considering aspects like the placement of doors and windows³³, courtyard layout, and building height. The second dimension is acoustic privacy, which focuses on preventing sound transmission from the house to the outside³⁴ and among family members.³⁵ Both dimensions emphasize the importance of maintaining clear distinctions between private areas and public spaces.³⁶ The importance of being silent as an appropriate action is also highlighted in the Quran. In Surah

²⁷ Hamza Babangida and Halima Sani-Katsina, 'Integrating Islamic Design Principles for Achieving Family Privacy in Residential Architecture', *Journal of Islamic Architecture* 5, no. 1 (2018): 11.

²⁸ Mohammad Arif Kamal, Tahsinur Rahman Warsi, and Osama Nasir, 'Islamic Principles as a Design Framework for Urban System: Environmental Concern and Sustainable Development', *Journal of Islamic Architecture* 7, no. 4 (2023): 699–712.

²⁹ Al-Quran, *Surah An-Nur*, 24:27

³⁰ Al-Quran, *Surah An-Nur*, 24:28

³¹ Ali Bokhari, Mahmoud Tarek Mohamed Hammad, and Djamel Beggas, 'Impact of Islamic Values and Concepts in Architecture: A Case Study of Islamic Communities', *Proceedings of Sustainable Development and Planning XI* 241 (2020): 391.

³² Bokhari, Hammad, and Beggas, 391.

³³ Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic Cities*, 33–40.

³⁴ Mohd Akil Muhamed Ali et al., 'Islamic Values in the Design of Residential Internal Layout', *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 12, no. 11 (2022): 1732.

³⁵ Babangida and Sani-Katsina, 'Integrating Islamic Design Principles for Achieving Family Privacy in Residential Architecture'.

³⁶ Hisham Mortada, *Traditional Islamic Principles of Built Environment* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2003), 33.

Al-Hujurat³⁷, it is mentioned, “*Indeed, those who call you from behind the rooms - most of them do not use reason.*” This verse emphasizes that raising one’s voice unnecessarily is deemed inappropriate and discourteous, reflecting the broader Islamic principle of maintaining respect and consideration in communication, which aligns with the value of acoustic privacy in household settings.

In the context of housing, the primary focus of visual privacy is the family, with particular emphasis on shielding female members from the gaze of male strangers. Consequently, any setting that allows visual intrusion is regarded as harmful and is deemed an offense under Islamic law, necessitating its avoidance.³⁸ As Aljawder and El-Wakeel³⁹ explain, the design of a house under Islamic *Shariah* must prioritize the privacy of the household and its members, particularly women, as the Arabic word “*harem*”, which is a term used for domestic spaces reserved for women, and is defined with the words “forbidden, prohibited, sacred possessions, sanctuary.”⁴⁰ In addition, referring to two holy places two Mecca and Medina, as *harameyn*, signifies sanctity that must be safeguarded, underscoring that a woman in Islam should be approached with caution and respect.⁴¹ However, in Muslim society, ensuring visual privacy in homes does not imply isolating individuals entirely from their surroundings, as doing so could lead to adverse psychological and social effects, resulting in human isolation. To strike a balance between maintaining the necessary level of privacy and staying connected with the outside environment, traditional Islamic domestic architecture employed various techniques.⁴² According to Germeraad, these methods safeguarded visual privacy by using both horizontal and vertical strategies.⁴³ Horizontal techniques focus on structuring the layout and functions of the home, including the separation of male (*Salamlık*) and female (*Haramlık*) areas and the division between guest and family spaces. This layout establishes a gradual transition within the house, moving from public spaces to semi-private areas, and finally to private spaces.⁴⁴

Similarly, M. Ali et al. address the separation of public and private spaces, emphasizing the importance of a hierarchical layout to ensure privacy. According to Islamic teachings, public and private spaces should be distinct. In the home, the private area is primarily for family members, making it essential to protect female family members by maintaining this separation. To safeguard visual and acoustic privacy, the family area

³⁷ Al-Quran, *Surah Al-Hujurat*, 49:4

³⁸ Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic Cities*, 33.

³⁹ Hana Aljawder and Hala A. El-Wakeel, ‘Architecture and Privacy in Islam: An Analytical Review’, *Islamic Heritage Architecture IV* 211 (2022): 129–39.

⁴⁰ Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, ed. J. Milton Cowan, 4th edition (Spoken Language Services, 1994), 171.

⁴¹ Aljawder and El-Wakeel, ‘Architecture and Privacy in Islam’, 131.

⁴² Aljawder and El-Wakeel, 133.

⁴³ Pieter W. Germeraad, ‘Islamic Traditions and Contemporary Open Space Design in Arab-Muslim Settlements in the Middle East’, *Landscape and Urban Planning* 23, no. 2 (1993): 97–106.

⁴⁴ Germeraad, 100.

and bedrooms should remain separate. Rather than being divided into rooms, the interior space should be organized into zones that accommodate various social and household activities. The separation between public and private spaces is achieved by arranging the family area apart from the guest area. Public areas are positioned toward the front of the home, while private spaces are located at the back with separate entrances.⁴⁵

In the same vein, Hwaish explains how the concept of privacy manifests in Muslim households, noting that these homes are typically centered around inner courtyards. Muslim courtyard houses are often grouped together within a walled complex, with access provided through a single entrance leading to a passageway that connects the individual dwellings. The inward-facing design of the courtyard house reflects the desire to shield the household from the outside world while safeguarding the family and their inner life. Hwaish adds that the open courtyard is regarded as the most practical design for meeting the needs of a Muslim home. It not only symbolizes unity in space but also establishes a privacy hierarchy by offering four types of spaces: private, semi-private, semi-public, and public. This spatial hierarchy and the progression of privacy are key features of Islamic household design.⁴⁶

Similarly, Hakim describes the design language of a Muslim house as prioritizing visual privacy from external or neighboring areas while maintaining a connection to nature through the courtyard. He also underlines the acoustic privacy, and indicates that in a Muslim house, the layout is designed to provide a high level of acoustic insulation.⁴⁷

The concept of acoustic privacy involves providing adequate sound insulation both within and outside the home to ensure psychological comfort. This allows activities to proceed without disturbance or intrusion and prevents conversations from being overheard either inside or outside the home. The use of natural materials for partitions and doors, constructing thick walls from materials like timber waste and clay, positioning sleeping and living areas away from noisy zones, and incorporating trees and plants in courtyards all contribute to achieving acoustic privacy.⁴⁸

Moreover, Mortada explains that in Islamic households, internal spaces are typically divided into three primary zones—male, female, and service areas—connected to the courtyards to ensure acoustical privacy. The separation of spaces by gender helps control sound transmission, with dedicated rooms for men and women. Additionally, circulation spaces and corridors are used to further enhance acoustical privacy by creating a buffer between these zones.⁴⁹ Positioning public (male and guest areas) and semi-

⁴⁵ Ali et al., 'Islamic Values in the Design of Residential Internal Layout', 1733.

⁴⁶ Akeel Noori Almulla Hwaish, 'Concept of The Islamic House; A Case Study of The Early Muslims House', *International Journal of Advances in Mechanical and Civil Engineering (IJAMCE)* 3, no. 1 (2016): 89.

⁴⁷ Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic Cities*, 95.

⁴⁸ Bokhari, Hammad, and Beggas, 'Impact of Islamic Values and Concepts in Architecture', 390.

⁴⁹ Mortada, *Traditional Islamic Principles of Built Environment*, 41.

public (female and family rooms) spaces near the main entrance helps contain noise in the front areas, ensuring that the private spaces remain acoustically insulated and maintain privacy.⁵⁰

Another feature for ensuring privacy in homes relates to the placement of doors and windows in Islamic courtyard houses.⁵¹ It is observed that doors should not be positioned directly across from one another. Ali et al. explain that the main entrance should not align with other doors, such as those of rooms or the kitchen, to prevent discomfort for the occupants when receiving visitors outside the family.⁵² Having multiple entrances is encouraged, as it allows Muslim women to easily access their private living spaces. Bokhari et al. present similar ideas, noting that privacy regulations in Islamic belief are evident in the design of entrances to Islamic homes.⁵³ These entrances are often angled or followed by an internal space to obstruct the view from outside. Family members' pathways lead inward, while guests' access is limited to avoid passing through private areas of the home. Consequently, windows facing the inner courtyard are large, while external openings are kept small and elevated to ensure privacy. They emphasize that a twisting entrance prevents outsiders from seeing into the home, and high surrounding walls, along with raised external windows, further enhance privacy. So indeed, Islamic culture and tradition commonly embodied fundamental design principles such as inward-facing layouts, sunken courtyards, and mashrabiya, prioritizing gender separation and residential privacy throughout its history.⁵⁴

The principle of privacy, that are deeply rooted in the Quran and hadiths, found its architectural expression in the design of both private homes and monumental spaces such as Topkapi Palace. As the residence of the Ottoman Sultan and the political heart of the empire, the palace had to strike a delicate balance between its public and private functions. Inspired by Islamic guidelines on household privacy, the spatial organization of the palace employed various architectural strategies to safeguard the Sultan's private quarters. These strategies mirrored those seen in typical domestic space, such as the separation of public and private areas, the careful positioning of entrances and pathways, the use of courtyards as mediators between these spaces, and the strict division between female and male areas. To fully appreciate how privacy was maintained in Topkapi Palace, it is essential to examine its layout and spatial hierarchy in more detail, beginning with the division between public and private zones.

In line with the Ottoman palace tradition, Topkapi Palace was organized around four courtyards, all enclosed by the *Sūr-ı Sulṭānī* (See Figure 3). The First Courtyard, referred to as *Alay Meydanı* or the Procession Square, located between *Bāb-ı Humāyūn*

⁵⁰ Zulkeplee Othman, Rosemary Aird, and Laurie Buys, 'Privacy, Modesty, Hospitality, and the Design of Muslim Homes: A Literature Review', *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 4, no. 1 (2015): 17.

⁵¹ Ali et al., 'Islamic Values in the Design of Residential Internal Layout', 1735; Hwaish, 'Concept of The Islamic House; A Case Study of The Early Muslims House', 90.

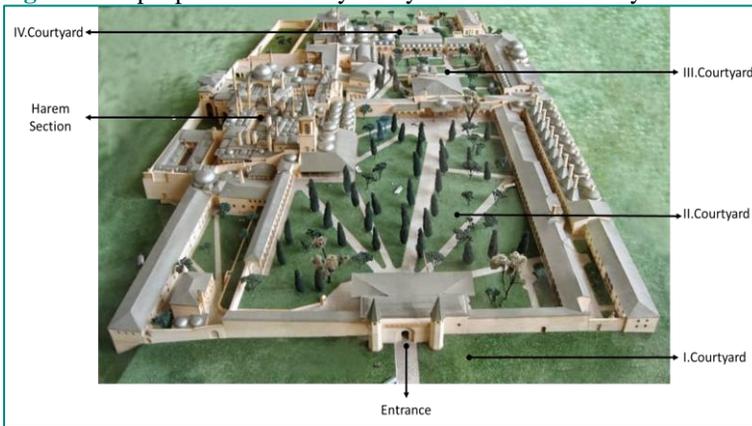
⁵² Ali et al., 'Islamic Values in the Design of Residential Internal Layout', 1735.

⁵³ Bokhari, Hammad, and Beggas, 'Impact of Islamic Values and Concepts in Architecture'.

⁵⁴ Saleh, 'The Impact of Islamic and Customary Laws on Urban Form Development in Southwestern Saudi Arabia', 540; Hwaish, 'Concept of The Islamic House; A Case Study of The Early Muslims House', 90.

and *Bābusselām*, served as a waiting area in its original function. The vast square between the first and second gates was not only a workspace for *Birūn* officials but also a public gathering place, especially during important ceremonies and festivals. The Second Courtyard, entered through *Bābusselām*, was enclosed by high walls and lined with inward-facing structures, emphasizing its ceremonial function from the 16th century onward. It hosted major state rituals such as *culūs* (enthronements), religious festivals, and the distribution of *'ulūfe* (stipends), and constituted the final area of the palace accessible to the public. Prominent structures within this courtyard included the kitchen complex, the *Has Ahır* (Imperial Stables), and the *Dīwān-ı Humāyūn*, where the imperial council convened. Behind the council hall stood the *Adalet Kulesi* (Tower of Justice). Adjacent to the tower was the entrance to the *Harem*, which began at the left edge of the *Birūn* (Second Courtyard) and extended into the inner quarters of the *Enderūn* (Third Courtyard).⁵⁵

Figure 3. Topkapı Palace Courtyard System.⁵⁶ Annotated by Author.



The Third Courtyard, entered through *Bābussa'āde*, marked the beginning of the *Enderūn* section, reserved for the education and training of palace elites, and was inaccessible to the public. The Audience Chamber, where the Sultan met with council members and foreign envoys, was located at the entrance to this courtyard. In keeping with the typical layout of a Muslim household, the areas for guests were separated from the Sultan's residence to ensure complete privacy. This courtyard, which accommodated the Sultan's private life, also included the *Harem*, situated on the northwest side of the palace's longitudinal axis. This section was divided into two main areas: the *Harem-i Humāyūn*, which housed the Sultan, and the apartments designated for the women of the palace. The most prominent residents of the *Harem* included the *Vālide Sultān* (Queen Mother), along with the Sultan's wives, sisters, and daughters, who held the

⁵⁵ İsmail Hakkı Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Devletinin Saray Teşkilâtı* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1984), 9–16.

⁵⁶ Alex C, 'Topkapı Palace/Topkapisaray, Istanbul, Turkey, Begun 1460', Chegg, accessed 26 February 2022, <https://www.chegg.com/flashcards/arh-1020-midterm-817f2465-8f46-43a1-89ea-293d36d5c043/deck>.

highest ranks within the institution. Since the women of the *Harem* did not participate in public life, they required a considerable number of attendants to assist them with education, entertainment, clothing, and daily needs such as food and drink. Much like the *devshirme* system, which brought boys into the palace's *Enderûn* for training, the *Harem* also acquired young girls—typically war captives or concubines—who served in various roles while simultaneously receiving education, just as in the *Enderûn*. This section was designed with an inward focus, opening onto the courtyard and beyond.⁵⁷

The Fourth Courtyard of Topkapi Palace, which Necipoğlu emphasizes was designed as an extension of the Third,⁵⁸ marked the culmination of the palace's spatial progression—from public to increasingly private zones. This secluded, walled garden reinforced the intimate character of the Sultan's domain, with belvedere towers, fountains, and pavilions offering both tranquility and detachment. Among them were the *İftariye Köşkü*, the Baghdad and Revan Pavilions, and the *Mecidiye Köşkü*, the latest addition to the complex. On rare occasions, ambassadors and high-ranking officials were received in this private setting.

The functional design of Topkapi Palace reflects a linear progression through its courtyards. This sequence, subtly misaligned to prevent direct visual access while maintaining a consistent axis, establishes the typological foundation of the palace's layout, aligning closely with the Islamic concept of privacy (See Figures 4 and 5). The palace's monumental scale is emphasized through a series of successive gates and courtyards, creating a transition from public to private, and from grand spaces to more intimate, human-scaled environments just in line with the concept of privacy in Islamic household aesthetics.⁵⁹

Figure 4. Axial Plan of Topkapi Palace (Author, 2024).

⁵⁷ Uzunçarşılı, *Osmanlı Devletinin Saray Teşkilâtı*, 9–16.

⁵⁸ Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power*, 184.

⁵⁹ Anhegger, *Topkapi Sarayı 'nda padişah evi*, 2.

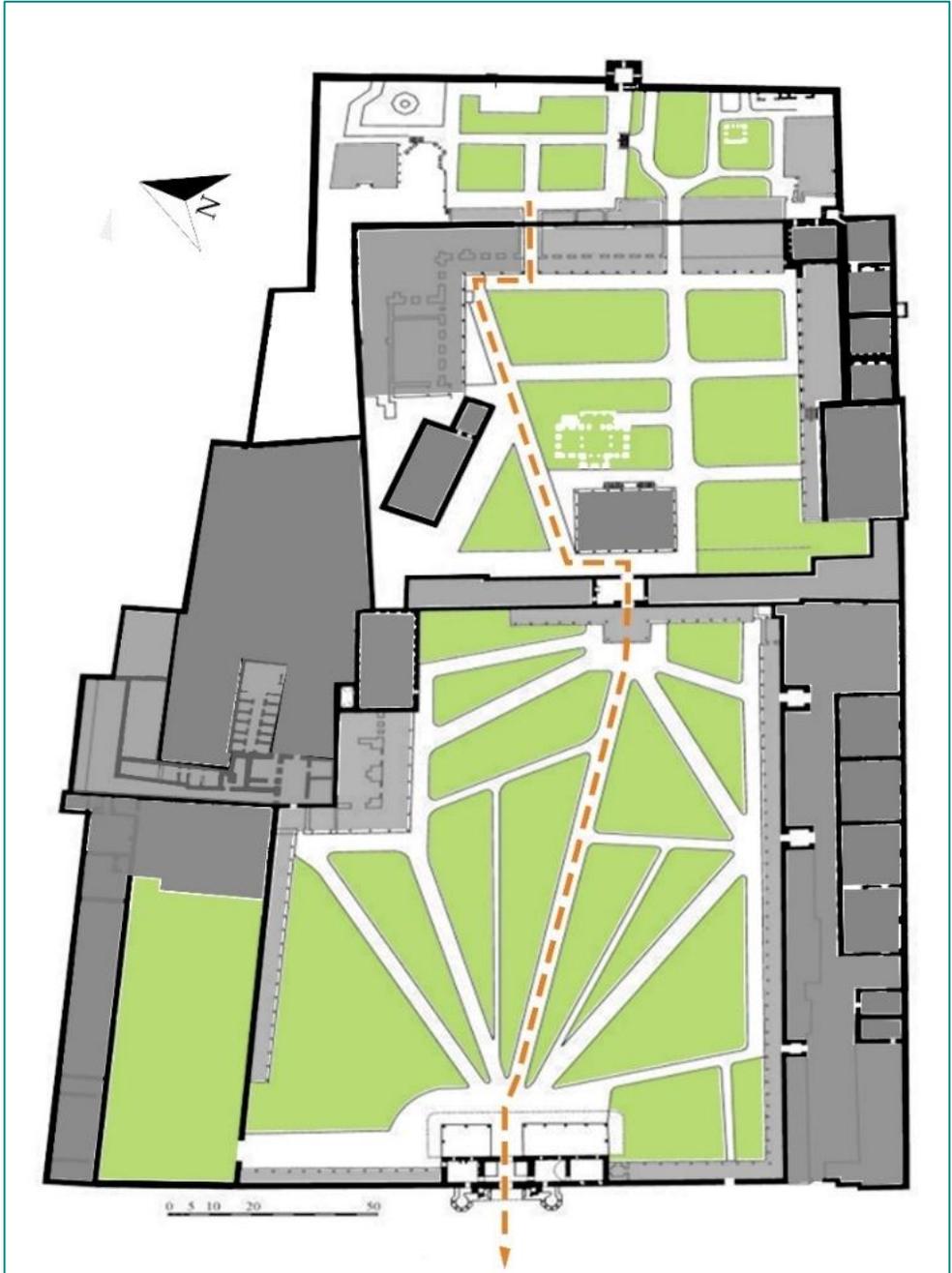


Figure 5. Aerial View of Topkapı Palace.⁶⁰



Visual privacy, a key principle in Islamic households, is typically defined by the separation of male and female areas. This concept played a crucial role in palace life as well, particularly in the spatial organization of the Sultan's residence. Like any traditional Muslim household, the palace was structured with a *harem* for women and a *selamlık* for men, reflecting this division.⁶¹ Anhegger emphasizes the high level of privacy maintained in the palace, particularly within the *harem*, where the Sultan's private life unfolded alongside his family. The *harem* housed the Sultan's mother, children, *haseki* (chief consort), favorites, and those who served under their command. The Valide Sultan (Queen Mother) oversaw the household, with an all-female staff working under her authority. These women, trained by Female Palace Masters, were either taken from the market at a young age or brought to the palace as war captives. The women in the *harem* lived entirely within the palace and maintained contact with the city, the Old Palaces, and the outside world solely through the *Kara Ağalar* (Black Eunuchs). Without the

⁶⁰ Habertürk, 'Tarihinin En Büyük Restorasyonunu Geçiren Topkapı Sarayı Havadan Görüntülendi', Topkapı Sarayı havadan görüntülendi, 2 February 2018, <https://www.haberturk.com/tarihinin-en-buyuk-restorasyonunu-geciren-topkapi-sarayi-havadan-goruntulendi-1834491>.

⁶¹ Anhegger, *Topkapı Sarayı'nda padişah evi*, 29.

mediation of these eunuchs, even the Valide Sultan had no direct connection to the official matters of the palace or life outside its walls.⁶²

The harem held a unique position within the palace, standing out due to its heightened level of privacy, while also maintaining a hierarchical structure of privacy, especially for the Sultan. Although there are no definitive records of the interactions between the Sultan, the princes, and the hasekis, Anhegger suggests that the palace's architectural layout indicates that during the first eight years after a prince's birth, the Sultan, princes, and hasekis could maintain easy and discreet connections.⁶³ The Privy Room had direct access to the apartments of the princes, as well as the adjacent Birth and Haseki Rooms. In the 18th century, after the construction of the Favorites' Apartments, the Haseki Sofa allowed the Sultan to meet with the hasekis privately, without the oversight of the Valide Sultan. Additionally, the pavilions used by the Sultan and princes, described as selamlık, featured hidden passages leading to the harem, allowing the Sultan to visit the hasekis or favorites without being seen. However, there was no secret passage to the Apartments of the Valide Sultan or the Apartments of the Concubines. Moreover, no direct passage existed between the Sultan's pavilions and the concubines' quarters. The Apartments of the Stewardesses were strategically placed to separate the Valide Sultan, the Sultan, and the princes from the concubines, preventing any unsupervised or secret interactions. According to the author, this arrangement implies that, aside from the hasekis and favorites, the Sultan's interactions with the concubines were carefully restricted and controlled.⁶⁴

Further insights into the palace's emphasis on privacy can be found in the accounts of foreign visitors.⁶⁵ In 1599, Thomas Dallam, a Christian and master organ builder, became the first to provide personal observations of parts of the palace beyond those serving it. He accompanied a remarkable clockwork to Constantinople in 1599 as a diplomatic gift from Queen Elizabeth I to Sultan Mehmed III. His detailed diary provides rare insights into the inner workings of the Ottoman palace, a privilege seldom afforded to outsiders. In his account, Dallam describes the palace's strict security measures such as:

The 11th, beinge Tuesdaye, we carried our instramente over the water to the Grand Sinyors Courte, Called the surralya, and thare in his moste statlyeste house I began to sett it up.... At everie gate of the surralia thare always sitethe a stoute Turke, abute the calinge or degree of a justis of the peace, who is called a chia (kapici, gatekeeper); not withstanding, the gates ar faste shut, for thare pasethe none in or oute at the owne pleasures... The waye from the

⁶² Anhegger, 26.

⁶³ Anhegger, *Topkapı Sarayı'nda padişah evi*.

⁶⁴ Anhegger, 109.

⁶⁵ Nilay Özlü, 'Single p(a)Lace, Multiple Narratives: The Topkapı Palace in Western Travel Accounts from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century', in *The City in the Muslim World*, ed. Mohammad Gharipour and Nilay Özlü (Routledge, 2015).

first gate to the seconde wale is som thing rising up a hill, betwyxte wales aboute a quarter of a myle and better. The gats of the second wale was also shutt... These gates ar made all of massie iron; tow men, whom they do cale jemeglans (ajem-oghlans, untrained youths, apprentice janissaries) did open them. Wythein the firste wales ar no housis but one, and that is the bustanjobasha (head gardener)his house, who is captaine of a thousande jemeglanes, which doo nothinge but keep the garthenes in good order: and I am perswaded that there is none so well kepte in the worlde.⁶⁶

Another account is provided by Domenico Hierosolimitano, an Italian doctor who served during the reign of Murat III. As one of the seven physicians responsible for the Sultan's care and the third most senior among them, his observations provide valuable insights into the palace environment. One of his notable remarks about the palace is as follows:

From the above mentioned piazza one enters a narrow corridor which leads to another court with a garden of various flowers: here on one side are the rooms of the Grand Turk, and when the women wait upon him they pass through high corridors by means of a key to the door which he reserves for himself alone, or his Chief Eunuch... On the side where the women are in attendance there are forty-four separate courts with conveniences of baths and fountains in each, so that one does not look at other, but he (the Sultan) has access by a secret corridor by means of which each can be entered without the others being any the wiser. Communicating with the women's rooms are the suites where the Grand Turk's children-that is to say, the males-are bought up; for the women remain with their mothers, and the boys on arriving at the age of six are taken from their mothers and placed in other rooms allotted to them with the masters who teach them. The aforesaid rooms of the Grand Turk stretch from the side of the men's suites to that of women's apartments- that is to say, the 40(44?) suites, each with its hall, chamber and conveniences of baths, fountains, gardens and aviaries built with surprising cunning and ornamented with panels of painted flowers but not figures, and hung with divers lovely brocades, with carpets on the floors and brocaded mattresses and cushions- the bedsteads all ivory inlaid with aloes and sandal-wood and large pieces of coral, of which one was sent to Amurat from Hiemen (Hiemen, Amoy, in China(?)) which cost more than 90 thousand scudi.⁶⁷

In addition to the architectural and behavioral practices, the concept of privacy within Topkapi Palace was also conveyed through religious inscriptions. For example, the *Ḥarem-i Humāyūn* gate (See Figure 6), now known as the Cümle Kapısı, separates the Ḥarem from the Eunuchs' quarters. This gate leads to the Nöbet Yeri (Sentry Post), where the three main areas of the Ḥarem are interconnected. The entrance, a domed and arched landing, features a decorative marble arch adorned with intricate Rūmī patterns and latticework. Above the arch is an inscription of the first part of verse 52 from Surah Al-Ahzab, written in jeli thuluth script:

⁶⁶ Norman Mosley Penzer, *Harem*, (New York: Dover, 2005), 32.

⁶⁷ Penzer, 29–30.

“O you who believe, do not enter the houses of the Prophet unless you are granted permission ...”

Figure 6. *Harem-i Humāyūn* Gate Cümle Kapısı of Topkapi Palace (Author, 2024).



This inscription serves as a reminder that just as entry to the Prophet Muhammad's home required permission, the same rule applies to the Sultan's residence, emphasizing the importance of respecting privacy and permission in Muslim households.

Beyond the visual separation of spaces, the concept of privacy in Topkapi Palace also encompassed acoustic dimensions. In line with Islamic architectural principles, control over sound played a crucial role in safeguarding private spaces. Given the high status and sensitive roles of the individuals living and working within its walls, particularly in areas like the Harem or the Sultan's private quarters, maintaining a quiet environment was essential. As noted by Necipoğlu, the use of silence and non-verbal communication, like sign language, reflects this cultural emphasis on privacy—not only visually but also acoustically.⁶⁸

Silence in Topkapi Palace was not merely an aesthetic or functional choice; it was part of a broader mechanism of power. The hierarchical structure of the palace demanded strict control over both behavior and communication. Crane explains that the first court's significance was not primarily architectural but ceremonial. It functioned as a space for imperial display, a gathering area for dignitaries' horses and attendants, and a staging ground for the sultan's processions beyond the palace walls. Official visitors moved along its central path amid the commotion of officers, servants, and petitioners before reaching the Middle Gate. Here, a solemn silence was enforced, growing progressively stricter deeper into the palace, culminating in the absolute quiet of the Third Court, broken only on rare festive occasions.⁶⁹ In this context, sound—or its absence—became essential for maintaining decorum and reinforcing the power dynamics of the court. By limiting noise and verbal communication, the palace's design promoted an atmosphere of solemnity, thereby reinforcing the authority of the Sultan and minimizing disturbances.⁷⁰

Topkapi Palace's architectural design played a crucial role in cultivating this culture of silence. Its vast courtyards, thick walls, and strategic spatial organization compartmentalized spaces, ensuring that sound did not travel freely between areas. This careful arrangement was particularly evident in the Harem and administrative sections, where preventing eavesdropping and maintaining a quiet, intimate environment were of utmost importance. Such spatial segmentation allowed for multiple layers of privacy—not only visually but also acoustically. The deliberate management of sound introduced an additional dimension to the concept of privacy, aligning with Islamic architectural principles.

The reliance on sign language within the palace, especially among palace staff and eunuchs, underscores a deliberate effort to minimize verbal noise. By restricting spoken

⁶⁸ Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power*, 148.

⁶⁹ Crane, 'Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power', 327–28.

⁷⁰ Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power*, 148.

communication, the palace ensured that conversations did not disrupt the tranquility of private spaces, particularly near the Sultan's quarters. This practice enabled the court to function smoothly without the intrusion of voices echoing through the palace's halls and courtyards, highlighting the extent to which privacy, including sound control, was ingrained in the structure and operation of palace life.⁷¹

The spatial and acoustic design of Topkapi Palace not only illustrates the architectural sophistication of the Ottoman Empire but also highlights the cultural importance of privacy rooted in Islamic principles. By skillfully dividing public and private spaces, employing strict access controls, and utilizing symbolic elements such as inscriptions, the palace effectively maintained a delicate balance between its ceremonial and domestic functions. The slightly shifted axis between the gates and courtyards reinforced the hierarchical nature of the palace's layout, subtly guiding movement from public areas towards increasing private spaces. This arrangement, combined with the separation of male and female quarters and the strategic use of silence and sign language, reveals a comprehensive approach to safeguarding both visual and acoustic privacy. These measures reflect the broader cultural and religious values that shaped the palace's architecture and life within its walls. Therefore, the integration of Islamic concepts of privacy into the built environment, where spatial boundaries, controlled communication, and ritualized behaviors collectively defined the social order and reinforced the power dynamics of the Ottoman court.

Spatial Dimensions of Topkapi Palace

The Prophet Muhammad highlighted the importance of certain household features for a person's well-being. He stated, "*The happiness of a person depends on a righteous neighbor, a comfortable mount, and a large dwelling.*"⁷² This hadith reveals the significance of the household in achieving happiness. Another hadith emphasizes: "*Three things are part of happiness: a righteous spouse, a spacious household, and a comfortable mount,*"⁷³ reflecting how crucial a large and comfortable home was in the Prophet's understanding of a good household.

Hadiths describing a bad household identify several negative traits, such as lack of space, which is expressed in two ways: limited rooms for use and the overall small size of the home. Other undesirable characteristics include having bad neighbors, being located far from the mosque (so the call to prayer cannot be heard), poor location and

⁷¹ Necipoğlu, 148.

⁷² IslamQA, 'Four Things Contribute to Happiness', 27 November 2019, <https://islamqa.org/hanafi/hadithanswers/122427/four-things-contribute-to-happiness/>.

⁷³ Ahmet ibn Hanbel, *Musnad*, vol. 1 (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2012), 168; 'Al-Adab Al-Mufrad 457 - Extravagance in Building', accessed 11 January 2025, <https://sunnah.com/adab:457>.

weather, an aesthetically unpleasant appearance, and living in an area that does not meet health standards.⁷⁴

The most emphasized feature of a good household in the hadiths is its spaciousness. Numerous narrations confirm the importance of having a wide, open dwelling. It is known that the Prophet also prayed, “*O Lord! Forgive my sins, expand my home, and bless my provision,*”⁷⁵ further underlining the importance of a spacious home.

The size of the household should correspond to the number of its inhabitants, ensuring functionality alongside spaciousness. In *Surah An-Nur*, adolescent children and other family members are commanded to seek permission before entering their parents' rooms.⁷⁶ This emphasizes the need for a home design that ensures privacy. A hadith states, “*A person should seek permission from his child, regardless of age, and from his mother, brother, sister, and father when entering their room.*”⁷⁷ Hence, the number of rooms should match the number and gender of family members. Separate rooms for parents and for each child reaching adolescence are essential. At the very least, separate rooms for boys and girls are required.

Another factor influencing the number of rooms is the presence of guests. The Prophet emphasized the importance of serving guests in several hadiths. He said, “*There are three beds in a person's house: one for the man, one for the woman, one for the guest, and the fourth for the devil.*”⁷⁸ Another hadith states, “*All things have a zakat, and the zakat of the house is offering hospitality.*”⁷⁹ Based on these teachings, Islamic scholars recommend that homes include a guest room where visitors can stay and be treated with hospitality. Beyond bedrooms and guest rooms, it is narrated that the Prophet's household had an upper room, called a “*meshrûbe*” which was accessed by stairs and used as a study or work area.⁸⁰

While it is not a strict requirement, the Prophet also encouraged having a *musallah* or prayer space within the home. Some companions consulted him about this, and he permitted them to designate a room in their house for prayer. Islamic scholars have supported the idea of having a masjid in Muslim homes.

⁷⁴ Ali Özek, ‘Kur’an’a Göre İslami Mesken veya Bir Müslümanın Evi Nasıl Olmalıdır?’, in *Mesken ve Mesken Mimarimiz*, ed. Ali Özek et al. (İstanbul: Ensar Publishers, 1995), 5–27.

⁷⁵ Ahmet ibn Hanbel, *Musnad*, vol. 4 (Riyadh: Darussalam, 2012), 63.

⁷⁶ Al-Quran, *Surah An-Nur*, 24:58-59

⁷⁷ ‘Sahih Al-Bukhari 6241 - Asking Permission’, accessed 11 October 2024, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:6241>.

⁷⁸ ‘Sahih Muslim 2084 - The Book of Clothes and Adornment’, accessed 24 October 2024, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:2084>.

⁷⁹ ‘Sunan Ibn Majah 3364 - Chapters on Food’, accessed 24 October 2024, <https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah:3364>.

⁸⁰ Özek, ‘Kur’an’a Göre İslami Mesken veya Bir Müslümanın Evi Nasıl Olmalıdır?’

Although the Prophet encouraged spacious homes, he did not advocate for tall buildings. It is reported that the height of the Prophet’s own rooms, which he built himself, was low enough to touch the ceiling with one’s hand.⁸¹ This was explained to avoid waste, prevent arrogance, and maintain privacy.

When examined in this context, Topkapi Palace adheres to these principles, embodying many of these features. The *Sarāy-ı Humāyūn* spans an extensive area of approximately 700,000 square meters, of which around 80,000 square meters are occupied by buildings. The remaining space is reserved for private gardens. The palace’s location on an airy, sunlit hill enhances its suitability for the health and well-being of its residents. This is reflected in descriptions by figures like Edmondo de Amicis, who called it “the green hill full of dreamy mystery and promise,” and Abdulkhak Sinasi Hisar, who described it as “one of the most beautiful places in the world, at the point where Marmara expands”⁸² (See Figure 7).

Figure 7. Topkapi Palace and its Horizontal Expansion.⁸³



⁸¹ ‘Sahih Al-Bukhari 160 - Ablutions (Wudu’), accessed 13 January 2025, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:160>.

⁸² Necdet Sakaoğlu, *Tarihi, Mekanları, Kitabeleri ve Anıları ile Saray-ı Hümayun: Topkapı Sarayı* (Istanbul: Denizbank Yayınları, 2002), 13.

⁸³ Aydınlik, ‘Topkapı Sarayı dünyanın en güzel sarayı seçildi’, Aydınlik, 3 September 2021, <https://www.aydinlik.com.tr/haber/topkapi-sarayi-dunyanin-en-guzel-sarayi-secildi-255907>.

In line with the Prophet's advice, the palace carefully separates male and female spaces into *haremlik* (female quarters) and *selamlık* (male quarters). The extensive service buildings and rooms were designed to adequately support the needs of the palace's residents. Topkapi Palace comprises around four hundred rooms and halls, twenty kitchens, six pools, two water scales, fourteen baths, two hospitals, two pharmacies, five schools, twelve libraries, seven pavilions, multiple treasury buildings, ten mosques, three prayer rooms, eight wards, twenty-two fountains, eleven wells, and two cisterns.⁸⁴

The palace also reflects the principle of having a dedicated study or work area, akin to the "*meşrûbê*" in Islamic household aesthetics. Specifically, the sultan's study room, known as the Privy Room, served this purpose. According to historian Ortaylı, the Privy Room was often used by sultans, particularly Mehmed II, Sultan Bayezid II, Sultan Selim I, and Suleyman I, who spent significant portions of their days there. Given the multitude of state affairs, sultans would sometimes spend their nights in this room.⁸⁵ In line with hadiths that emphasize contentment and tranquility in the home, the Harem Apartment—home to the Sultan and his family—was designed with comfort and happiness in mind. Anhegger notes that, although the women of the harem could not engage directly with the outside world without the mediation of Black Eunuchs, the palace's inner environment was crafted to evoke a paradisiacal setting, with flowing streams, lush gardens, and carefully orchestrated sensory experiences.⁸⁶

The harem's architecture, with its beautifully decorated interiors and harmonious elements, achieved a sense of peace and order without the need for music. Instead, tranquility was evoked through the sounds of water flowing from pools, the songs of birds, the scent of flowers from window pots, and the rhythmic ticking of ornate clocks.⁸⁷ Historian Sakaoglu similarly describes the Imperial Palace's harem as a self-contained institution, complete with apartments, baths, infirmaries, libraries, treasuries, and masjids, meticulously planned to support the lives of the Sultan, his mother, the *Valide Sultan*, the *hasekis*, the princes, and the princesses.⁸⁸

While the Prophet Muhammad encouraged the width and spaciousness of homes, he advised against excessive height. The hadiths warn against building overly tall structures to avoid wastefulness, arrogance, and a disregard for privacy. Similarly, Topkapi Palace reflects the grandeur of the empire not through towering verticality but rather through a horizontally diffused layout that indicates its complex institutional organization (See Figure 7).⁸⁹ The buildings are generally not excessively tall, and the architecture frequently emphasizes human-scale proportions.

The tallest structure within the palace is the Tower of Justice, symbolizing the paramount importance of justice in the empire. In the Sultan's quarters, domes are

⁸⁴ Ahmet Şimşirgil, *Bir Müstakil Dünya: Topkapı Sarayı* (Istanbul: Tımas Yayınları, 2016), 16.

⁸⁵ Ortaylı, *Private and Royal Life in the Ottoman Palace*, 111.

⁸⁶ Anhegger, *Topkapı Sarayı'nda padişah evi*, 26.

⁸⁷ Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power*, 20.

⁸⁸ Sakaoglu, *Tarihi, mekanları, kitabeleri ve anıları ile Saray-ı Hümayun*, 278.

⁸⁹ Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power*, 20.

constructed at a higher elevation, which may reflect the Sultan’s revered position as “the shadow of Allāh on earth,” as noted in the inscription of *Bāb-ı Humāyūn*. Yet even these elevated structures are carefully scaled to maintain an overall sense of harmony and modesty, aligning with the Islamic principles of balance and restraint in architectural design.

Flexibility (*Seyyāliyet*) and Evolution

Flexibility is a key element in the Prophet’s concept of household management. This idea is better understood through the principle of a spacious house that promotes adaptability, aligning with the notion of incremental development without superfluous extravagance.⁹⁰ The prophetic building principles in Medina exemplify the dynamic and adaptable nature of Islamic architecture, allowing houses to evolve in response to the changing needs of their inhabitants. This perspective encourages a balanced approach to home development, emphasizing functionality and flexibility.

In Islamic household aesthetics, the home is viewed as large, with its size adjusted according to the number of people living in it. However, family size is not static, such as births, deaths, separations, children reaching adolescence, and the presence of guests can all affect the household’s population. As a result, determining the appropriate size for a house becomes complex. Planning for the largest possible scenario may lead to financial strain and waste, while designing a smaller household could fail to meet the family’s needs and result in higher costs due to later modifications. Individuals should not construct above their actual need, since every construction endeavor will be detrimental to its perpetrator on the Day of Judgement, unless executed owing to an actual need, namely to fulfill a requirement, as declared by the Prophet.⁹¹

The Prophet’s guidance on maintaining a spacious household addresses both the physical area and the number of rooms. He proposed a flexible household structure that would allow for the expansion or reduction of rooms as needed. This can be seen in his own practice, where he would, for instance, set up a tent inside a room where additional space was required or use a mat to create a partition, as his wife Aisha narrated.⁹² This approach reflects a practical and adaptable solution to managing space in a way that aligns with both the needs of the household and the principles of simplicity and moderation.

Topkapi Palace embodies this concept of flexibility through its incremental development and adaptive design. Rather than being constructed all at once, the palace evolved over time by appropriating a vast tract of land from the city and gradually expanding

⁹⁰ Kamal, Warsi, and Nasir, ‘Islamic Principles as a Design Framework for Urban System’, 702–4.

⁹¹ ‘Sunan Abi Dawud 4559’, accessed 11 January 2025, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:4559>; Spahic Omer, ‘Integrating the Islamic Worldview into the Planning of Neighbourhoods’, *Journal of Construction in Developing Countries* 12, no. 2 (2007): 63–80.

⁹² ‘Sahih Al-Bukhari 512 - Prayers (Salat)’, accessed 11 January 2025, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:512>.

to meet the changing needs of the Ottoman court. As the state grew under the rule of Sultan Süleyman, the increasing number of palace servants necessitated the construction of additional buildings.⁹³ This expansion involved spatial analysis and modifications in accordance with the evolving requirements of the palace inhabitants.

During the reign of Murad III, who is reported to have had over 100 children from around 40 different mothers, the palace saw significant structural additions, particularly to the Sultan's private quarters and the Harem. This period marked substantial growth within the palace complex, reflecting the Sultan's expanding household and administrative needs. Additions continued throughout subsequent reigns, with key structures such as the Pool Pavilion of Murad III, the Pavilions of Murad IV and Mehmed IV, the Pavilion of Osman III, the Pavilion of Ahmed I, and the Fruit Room of Ahmed III being constructed to accommodate the court's requirements.⁹⁴

The evolving architecture of Topkapı Palace exemplifies the Islamic principle of flexibility, adapting to changes in population and function through a process of gradual expansion and modular construction. This flexibility mirrors the Prophet's guidance on creating adaptable household spaces, ensuring that the palace remained functional, efficient, and in harmony with Islamic aesthetic principles over time.

Humility and Simplicity

In Islam, humility is a fundamental principle that extends beyond design to encompass an entire worldview, emphasizing simplicity and prohibiting extravagance, unethical behavior, excessive spending, and the pursuit of fame. Islamic teachings prohibit ostentation, vanity, and actions detrimental to others, promoting isolation and humiliation, thus necessitating the Ummah to maintain discretion in all aspects of their existence. Several Quranic verses emphasize the broader Islamic ethos of modesty and humility.⁹⁵ Although the Quran does not explicitly emphasize humility in household design, it is repeatedly highlighted in the Sunnah and hadiths as a guiding principle for domestic architecture. This focus on modesty stems from the home's foundational role in society, as outlined in Sharia law,⁹⁶ and exemplified by the lifestyle of the Prophet Muhammad.⁹⁷

When considering the Prophet's approach to the household, particular attention is given to both furnishing and decoration, guided by two principles: simplicity and the avoidance of non-Islamic cultural influences. Simplicity was a defining feature in how

⁹³ Ortaylı, *Private and Royal Life in the Ottoman Palace*; Murphey, *Exploring Ottoman Sovereignty*; Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power*; Crane, 'Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power'; Penzer, *Harem*.

⁹⁴ Anhegger, *Topkapı Sarayı'nda padişah evi*, 27.

⁹⁵ Al-Quran, *Surah Al-Isra*, 17:37; Al-Quran, *Surah Al-Hadid*, 57:20-23; Al-Quran, *Surah Al-Qasas*, 28:76-77; Al-Quran, *Surah Luqman*, 31:18.

⁹⁶ Hakim, *Arabic-Islamic Cities*.

⁹⁷ Mortada, *Traditional Islamic Principles of Built Environment*, 116.

the Prophet maintained his home. He steered clear luxury, vanity, and wastefulness, ensuring that his household contained only the essentials. For instance, while laying carpets on the floor was acceptable, adorning walls with elaborate designs or imagery was discouraged. The Prophet was opposed not only to decorative coverings with pictures but also to items that were overly colorful or extravagant, as they could become distractions. In one instance, upon seeing an embroidered curtain at his daughter Fatima's home, he remarked, "I wish it were a single color." On another occasion, he asked Aisha to take down a brightly colored curtain, explaining that such decorations were reminders of worldly distractions that interfered with prayer.⁹⁸ Unnecessary items meant to impress others were considered *makrooh* (disliked), and the Prophet did not approve of them.⁹⁹ The interpretation of these principles led to the minimal design of façades in buildings in most Muslim countries.

Traditional Islamic teachings emphasize the removal of non-Islamic cultural elements from the household and encourage beautification through non-idolatrous decorations. Islam prohibits the use of images or statues of living beings, both in two- and three-dimensional forms, to prevent idolatry and maintain the principle of *tawhīd* (monotheism).¹⁰⁰ Instead, Muslims are encouraged to adorn their homes with items like flowers, decorated fabrics, floral patterns, or Islamic calligraphy, rather than using expensive materials like gold or statues resembling animals or humans. The Prophet firmly opposed symbols tied to foreign beliefs, such as the cross, which he instructed to be altered, and Aisha's account further reflects this disapproval.¹⁰¹ The Prophet also stated that "the angels do not enter a house which contains a statue," underscoring the importance of using appropriate decorations.¹⁰²

When the Topkapı Palace is analyzed, it embodies a complex reflection of Islamic aesthetics and political representation, navigating the tension between humility and grandeur. In Islamic art and architecture, humility often manifests through designs that avoid excess and ostentation, where beauty derives not from the intensity of materials or colors, but from simplicity and natural harmony. This principle is evident in Islamic teachings, which emphasize moderation and discourage extravagance in household design. However, the Topkapı Palace, as the seat of Ottoman power, presents a more nuanced interpretation of this principle.

.....
⁹⁸ 'Jami' At-Tirmidhi 2468 - Chapters on the Description of the Day of Judgement, Ar-Riqaq, and Al-Wara', accessed 13 January 2025, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:2468>; 'Sahih Al-Bukhari 5959 - Dress', accessed 13 January 2025, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:5959>.

⁹⁹ Özek, 'Kur'an'a Göre İslami Mesken veya Bir Müslümanın Evi Nasıl Olmalıdır?', 26.

¹⁰⁰ Ali et al., 'Islamic Values in the Design of Residential Internal Layout', 1739.

¹⁰¹ Ahmet Özek, *Hz. Peygamberin Hadislerinde Medeniyet, Teknik ve Kültür* (Istanbul: Cihan Yayinlari, 1984), 154-71.

¹⁰² 'Sahih Al-Bukhari 5957 - Dress', accessed 11 January 2025, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:5957>; 'Sahih Muslim 2106b - The Book of Clothes and Adornment', accessed 11 January 2025, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:2106b>.

Historians offer differing perspectives on whether Topkapi reflects humility in line with Islamic values. When viewed in comparison to the grand palaces of France, Russia, and India, Topkapi's smaller scale and less imposing structures suggest a degree of modesty.¹⁰³ However, when analyzed independently or in the context of Ottoman state power, the palace's design and functions reveal a deliberate intent to balance humility with magnificence. As the administrative center and residence of the Sultan, who was also the Caliph of all Muslims, the palace needed to convey not only the Sultan's authority but also the grandeur befitting an imperial and religious leader.

For example, while the palace's outer court and gates may appear modest in comparison to the elaborate architecture of Indian palaces, this simplicity was strategic. Historians Eldem and Akozan argue that, despite the Ottoman Empire's unmatched power, Topkapi's architecture intentionally avoided monumental grandeur. Its emphasis on natural beauty, with gardens seamlessly integrated into the palace's design, contributed to an understated magnificence, a contrast to the dominant and disciplined architecture of its contemporaries.¹⁰⁴

Nonetheless, the palace's simplicity did not extend to all areas. The second court, where ceremonies and state functions took place, was richly adorned to impress ambassadors and foreign dignitaries, showcasing the Sultan's wealth and authority. The carefully staged ceremonies, such as the "court of victory," demonstrated a clear understanding of political representation, aligning with the Ottoman expectation of dignified display (See Figures 8 and 9).

Figure 8. A Dinner Arranged for the European Ambassadors in the Audience Chamber.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Ortaylı, *Private and Royal Life in the Ottoman Palace*, 25; Sedad Hakkı Eldem and Feridun Akozan, *Topkapi Sarayı : Bir Mimari Araştırma* (Ankara: Ministry of Culture Publications, 1982), 65.

¹⁰⁴ Eldem and Akozan, *Topkapi Sarayı*, 65.

¹⁰⁵ Sakaoğlu, *Tarihi, mekanları, kitabeleri ve anıları ile Saray-ı Hümayun*, 107.



Figure 9. Splendid Divānhāne in Topkapi Palace (Author 2024).



The Harem's evolution further complicates the idea of humility in Topkapı. Initially characterized by simplicity during Mehmed II's reign, it gradually became more luxurious under Suleyman I and later Sultans. This shift in design reflects the changing priorities of the Ottoman rulers, who increasingly valued comfort and splendor in their private quarters (See Figures 10 and 11).

Indeed, European traveler Hierosolimitano's descriptions do not portray a palace designed with humility, as he explains:

... And in the middle of this garden are many well-designed rooms, but one in particular of six facades surmounting six large columns, and between the columns are slabs of rock crystal so cunningly inlaid the one with the other that looks on them they appear to be a single whole, and above is a cupola with a lantern covered with lead, gilded and damascened. But the lantern has pillars of carved rock crystal, and the top is made of pieces of coral wonderfully put together one piece with another. It shines in the splendour of the sun, dazzling the sight, and owing to the altitude of the building one can see from the rooms every detail of the entire garden from side to side.¹⁰⁶

Figure 10. Murad III Privy Room Representing Splendor of the Palace
(Author 2024).

¹⁰⁶ Penzer, *Harem*, 30–31.



Figure 11. Hunkar Sofasi of Topkapi Palace Reflecting its Opulence, Redesigned by later Sultans (Author 2024).



From a decorative standpoint, Topkapi aligns with Islamic aesthetics by avoiding symbols associated with other religions. The palace's use of Islamic calligraphy, floral

designs, and geometric patterns reflects its adherence to the visual principles of Islamic art. Yet, the palace's decoration and furnishing cannot be described as purely humble. Luxurious materials and vibrant colors, particularly in spaces like the Audience Chamber, were employed to convey power and prestige, diverging from the more restrained aesthetics promoted in traditional Islamic teachings.

According to Necipoğlu, Topkapi Palace was perceived not as a modest structure by contemporary Ottoman sources, but rather as "a microcosm of imperial grandeur and a symbol of the empire's greatness."¹⁰⁷ She mentions *Mustafa Âlî*, a 16th century historian, expressed that the palace represented the "honor of the sultanate" and served as a visual testament to the Sultan's power and status. This emphasis on grandeur and display suggests that humility in the conventional sense was not the primary consideration in Topkapi's design.¹⁰⁸

In conclusion, while Topkapi Palace incorporates elements of simplicity in its design, it also embraces grandeur to fulfill its role as a political and symbolic center. The palace's magnificence, particularly in its ceremonial spaces, reflects the Ottoman understanding of power and representation, where humility and grandeur were strategically balanced to project authority and command respect.

Spirituality, Topkapi Palace and Its Sacred Traditions

Islam is a religion that deeply integrates spirituality into all aspects of daily life, including the home. For a Muslim, the house should be more than just a physical shelter; it must foster a spiritual environment that aligns with Islamic principles. This encompasses not only its environment and structure but also its layout, arrangement, and furnishings. The home should be a place free from any forbidden acts and a space where prayers are regularly performed, ensuring that spirituality is at the heart of everyday life. For example, since Islam encourages humility, extravagant items such as silk mattresses, carpets, and pillows, or gold and silver utensils, are discouraged in a Muslim household.¹⁰⁹

Moreover, a Muslim home is not solely a place for physical needs like sleep, food, and safety; it is also a place for spiritual growth and well-being. As reported by Abu Hurairah, the Prophet Muhammad emphasized the importance of maintaining the spiritual atmosphere in the home, saying, "Do not turn your houses into graves."¹¹⁰ He further illuminated this idea through the following hadiths:

¹⁰⁷ Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power*, 14.

¹⁰⁸ Necipoğlu, *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power*.

¹⁰⁹ Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam* (Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1999).

¹¹⁰ 'Riyad As-Salihin 1018 - The Book of Virtues', accessed 23 October 2024, <https://sunnah.com/riyadussalihin:1018>.

Surely, the devil runs away from the house where the Quran is recited in it.¹¹¹

If a person recites the Quran in his house, the house expands for its inhabitants, the angels remain present, the devils flee, and good increases. However, when the Quran is not recited, the house constricts its owner, the angels depart, the devils invade, and good decreases. Perform your supererogatory prayers in your homes; do not turn them into graves.¹¹²

Thus, spirituality plays a central role in the design and use of Muslim homes, making it essential to include spaces dedicated to prayer. The flexibility of performing the five daily prayers allows Muslims to pray at home, either individually or in congregation. A prayer room, ideally equipped with accessible facilities for ablution and regularly used for reciting the Quran, is a key feature of an Islamic household. Such a specialized space must serve as an adequate means of worship and effectively function as a suitable medium, which connects the occupants of the dwelling with Allah.¹¹³

When evaluating Topkapi Palace through this lens, it is evident that spirituality was a central aspect of its design and daily life. After the transfer of the caliphate to the Ottomans under Selim I, the palace became a spiritual epicenter for the Islamic world. The Chamber of the Sacred Relics, which houses items of profound significance such as the Prophet Muhammad's piece of beard, footprint, the *Hirka-i Saadet* (Blessed Mantle), his cracked tooth, dust from his tomb, the sword of Hz. Ali and many others, holds a particularly revered place in this context (See Figure 12). The Sacred Relics, preserved in a dedicated room, were not only symbolic of the caliph's religious authority but also a focal point for spiritual practices. Quran recitations in the Privy Room, where the Blessed Mantle of the Prophet Muhammad is kept, were established as a continuous practice. Notably, this tradition of nonstop Quran recitation began in the palace during the Ottoman period and remarkably continues to the present day, even after the palace has turned into a museum.

Historian Simsirgil, drawing on the accounts of Mehmed Khalifa, describes this spiritual atmosphere, noting that forty selected *aghas* served day and night in this chamber, offering prayers and reciting the Quran. The ongoing recitations were seen as essential to maintaining the spiritual integrity of the palace, reinforcing its role as a center of religious devotion.¹¹⁴

The recitation of the Quran in Topkapi was not limited to special occasions but was a regular part of daily life. According to Simsirgil's account, the *aghas* would perform

.....
¹¹¹ 'Sahih Muslim 780 - The Book of Prayer - Travellers', accessed 23 October 2024, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:780>.

¹¹² 'Sahih Muslim 777 - The Book of Prayer - Travellers', accessed 23 October 2024, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:777a>; 'At-Tirmidhi 2877 - Chapters on The Virtues of the Qur'an', accessed 23 October 2024, <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:2877>.

¹¹³ Jefry Tarantang et al., 'The Idea of Building a House of Maqashid Sharia Perspective', *Journal of Islamic Architecture* 7, no. 3 (28 June 2023): 543.

¹¹⁴ Şimşirgil, 81–82.

their duties with discipline and piety, dedicating their spare time to religious activities such as memorizing the Quran, studying *tajwid* (correct Quranic pronunciation), and practicing calligraphy. In the evenings, it was customary for them to gather for Quran recitation before and after prayers, fostering a communal sense of spirituality.¹¹⁵

Additionally, Topkapi Palace housed ten mosques, three prayer rooms, and thirteen libraries, further enhancing its spiritual atmosphere. These spaces were not merely functional; they played an integral role in maintaining the spiritual well-being of the palace's inhabitants. The regular recitation of the Quran, combined with dedicated spaces for worship and learning, transformed Topkapi into a place where spiritual values permeated daily life.

This uninterrupted tradition of Quran recitation—initiated centuries ago and still continuing today—highlights the enduring spiritual legacy of Topkapi Palace. Even in its current role as a museum, the palace remains a living testament to the integration of spirituality into the heart of Ottoman imperial life.

Figure 12. Sword of Hz. Ali, the Hirqa-i Sherif (Blessed Mantle of the Prophet), the Footprint of the Prophet, and Manuscripts of the Quran.¹¹⁶



Qibla Orientation in the Architecture Of Topkapi Palace

A fundamental aspect of an Islamic household is its orientation toward the qibla. The emphasis on orienting oneself toward the qibla has influenced certain architectural considerations, including prayer spaces, and sanitary facilities.¹¹⁷ Ideally, the prayer room should be positioned at a direct angle to the qibla, facilitating communal prayer

¹¹⁵ Şimşirgil, 81–82.

¹¹⁶ Rasim Terzi, 'Topkapi Sarayı Kutsal Emanetler', Istanbul Guide Services, 11 September 2021, <https://istanbulguideservices.com/article/posts/xpn/topkapi-sarayi-kutsal-emanetler>.

¹¹⁷ Saddam Hussain, Zheng Chunrou, and Fu Juan, 'The Mosque's Primary Spaces and the Required Direction of the Mosque Building', *Journal of Islamic Architecture* 7, no. 4 (20 December 2023): 719–35.

(*jama'ah*) and allowing the maximum number of occupants to pray together. Additionally, the door to the prayer room should not be positioned in front of the congregation to avoid disturbances during prayer; instead, it should be placed elsewhere to maintain focus and tranquility.¹¹⁸

Islamic teachings also instruct Muslims not to face the qibla or turn their backs to it when relieving themselves.¹¹⁹ The Prophet Muhammad said: “*When you relieve yourselves, do not face the qibla nor turn your back to it, but face the east or the west.*”¹²⁰ Therefore, it is recommended that the toilet is not oriented towards the qibla but positioned perpendicular to avoid direct alignment, as a mark of respect.

Moreover, Islam encourages the provision of distinct rooms for bathing, using the toilet, and performing ablution. Ideally, the lavatory should be built separately from the bathroom. If they are combined, it is considered (discouraged) – not sinful but viewed as wasteful or inappropriate. Performing ablution in the toilet is discouraged, as impure substances or dirty water may splash onto the clothes and body, which are used for prayer. Additionally, Prophet Muhammad said that Satan frequents such places, so it is advisable to place these areas at a distance.

“These toilets are frequented by jinn and devils, so when any one of you enters the toilet, let him say, In the name of Allah, O Allah, I seek refuge in You from the male and female devils.”¹²¹

These foundational principles of qibla orientation and spatial organization in Islamic households also found expression in monumental architecture. The design of Topkapi Palace, while serving as an imperial residence and administrative hub, reflects a thoughtful incorporation of these Islamic teachings. The Topkapi Palace is oriented towards the southeast, taking advantage of its strategic location on the Seraglio Point to overlook the Bosphorus Strait and the Sea of Marmara. This orientation not only provided a panoramic view of the waterways and the Asian side of Istanbul but also underscored the palace's dual role as an imperial residence and a symbol of Ottoman power. By positioning itself with a visual command over key maritime routes, the palace emphasized its connection to nature and the spiritual significance of water in Islamic culture.

Despite the palace's overall southeast orientation, specific key structures within it are deliberately aligned towards the qibla (the direction of Mecca). In Islamic architecture, qibla alignment is an essential design principle, particularly in spaces intended for prayer and religious practices. The royal mosque within Topkapi Palace (the Enderûn

¹¹⁸ Ali et al., ‘Islamic Values in the Design of Residential Internal Layout’, 1733.

¹¹⁹ Tarantang et al., ‘The Idea of Building a House of Maqashid Sharia Perspective’; Sana Malik and Beenish Mujahid, ‘Perception of House Design in Islam’, *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 6, no. 2 (30 September 2016): 52–76.

¹²⁰ ‘Sahih Al-Bukhari 394 - Prayers (Salat)’, accessed 11 January 2025, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:394>; ‘Sahih Muslim 264 - The Book of Purification’, accessed 11 January 2025, <https://sunnah.com/muslim:264>.

¹²¹ ‘Sunan Abi Dawud 6 - Purification (Kitab Al-Taharah)’, accessed 11 January 2025, <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:6>; ‘Sahih Al-Bukhari 142 - Ablutions (Wudu)’, accessed 11 January 2025, <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:142>.

Mosque) is a notable example of this intentional orientation, along with prayer niches and other religiously significant spaces (See Figure 13). This design choice reflects the Islamic directive to align prayer areas directly toward the Kaaba in Mecca, ensuring the maximum number of participants in communal prayer without unnecessary spatial loss due to misalignment. Additionally, the door is positioned at the back to prevent disturbances when individuals join the congregation during prayer.

Figure 13. The Qibla Orientation of the *Enderûn* Mosque (Author 2024).



In terms of ablution and bathing practices, the palace's bathrooms, toilets, and hammam spaces adhere to Islamic guidelines by avoiding direct alignment with the qibla. The design of these areas follows Islamic teachings, which discourage orienting toilets towards the qibla to maintain the sanctity of this direction. Furthermore, separate spaces are provided for bathing and ablution to prevent the mixing of activities, reduce impurities, and respect privacy and modesty, as prescribed by Islamic principles (See Figure 14).

Overall, the layout of Topkapi Palace demonstrates a blend of functional, symbolic, and spiritual considerations. While its orientation capitalizes on strategic and aesthetic advantages, the incorporation of qibla alignment in key religious spaces highlights the palace's adherence to Islamic architectural norms. This balance between spiritual and practical elements is a hallmark of Ottoman palatial design, reflecting the intricate relationship between faith, power, and spatial organization in the empire's architectural legacy.

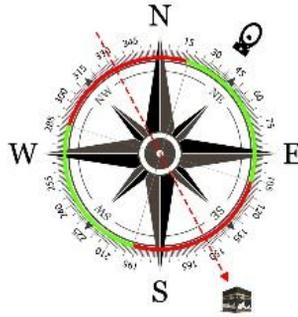
Figure 14. (a) Separated Spaces for Bathing; (b) Space for Toilet and Misalignment with the Qibla Direction (Author 2024).



a



b



Conclusion

Topkapi Palace stands as a rare and invaluable example of an Islamic imperial residence that has retained its original form while being exceptionally well-documented. Unlike many earlier and later Islamic palaces that remain only in fragments or lack detailed records, Topkapi offers a comprehensive lens through which the intersection of Islamic household aesthetics and courtly life can be examined. Yet, despite this wealth of material, its spatial composition has largely been studied through the lens of privacy, leaving other aspects of Islamic domestic traditions—such as flexibility, spatial adaptability, and religious symbolism—underexplored.

Far from being merely a stage for political spectacle, the palace embodies a spatial ideology deeply rooted in Islamic principles. Privacy, an essential component of household design, was carefully reinforced through inward-facing courtyards, staggered gates, and controlled transitions between public and private spaces. Deliberate misalignments of gates, inward-facing courtyards, and controlled transitions between public and private spaces reinforce principles of privacy, while the separation of male and female quarters and the regulation of movement illustrate a sophisticated approach to maintaining both visual and acoustic seclusion, as emphasized in Islamic teachings.

The question of humility in Topkapi Palace remains open to interpretation. While Islamic teachings advocate simplicity in domestic spaces, an imperial residence inevitably serves as a projection of authority. Unlike monumental structures that emphasize vertical dominance, Topkapi asserts its presence through an expansive, horizontally oriented layout, a design choice that conveys restraint while accommodating administrative and residential needs. Yet, despite its relative simplicity in comparison to other world palaces, the grandeur of domed sultan's quarters, richly decorated interiors, and lavish materials suggest a deliberate negotiation between modesty and magnificence. The absence of non-Islamic religious symbols aligns with prophetic guidance, but the use of vibrant ornamentation and intricate furnishings reveals an engagement with prestige. Thus, rather than a strict adherence to simplicity, the palace reinterprets humility within an imperial framework, striking a balance between religious ideals and governance.

Another defining feature of Topkapi Palace is its spatial flexibility. Its modular construction and gradual expansion allowed for adaptability, mirroring the Prophet's guidance on household design evolving with its inhabitants' needs. This dynamic approach ensured that the palace remained functional despite changes in population, administration, and ceremonial practices, reinforcing the Islamic preference for fluid, evolving spaces over rigid structures.

Beyond its physical and functional aspects, Topkapi Palace also served as a spiritual center. Housing the Sacred Relics, including the mantle of the Prophet, his sword, and early Quran manuscripts, the palace transcended its role as a royal residence to become a site of profound religious significance. The continuous recitation of the Quran,

a tradition initiated in the Ottoman period and still upheld today, further underscored its devotional role. The deliberate orientation of prayer spaces towards the qibla, the careful organization of ablution areas, and the placement of significant religious structures all reflect the integration of Islamic spatial considerations into the heart of the imperial residence.

Ultimately, the study of Topkapi Palace reveals how Islamic household aesthetics were adapted within an imperial setting—negotiating between humility and grandeur, privacy and ceremony, flexibility and permanence, spirituality and power. The question of how humility was expressed in different Islamic palatial contexts remains a compelling area for further research. A comparative analysis of palaces across different regions, such as the Alhambra in Spain or the Mughal Red Fort in Delhi, would offer deeper insights into how Islamic architectural principles were interpreted and transformed across diverse cultural and historical landscapes. Such inquiries hold the potential to further enrich scholarly discourse on the relationship between faith, space, and authority in the Islamic world.

Acknowledgments:

The author acknowledges that this article is an extended and further developed version of a chapter of a PhD thesis titled *Ottoman-Islamic Aesthetics and Visual Culture in Palatial Architecture and Landscapes: The Case of Topkapi Palace in the 15th and 16th Centuries*, conducted at Middle East Technical University.

Declaration

I declare that this study is original; that I have acted by the principles and rules of scientific ethics at all stages of the study, including preparation, data collection, analysis, and presentation of information; that I have cited sources for all data and information not obtained within the scope of this study and included these sources in the bibliography; that I have not made any changes in the data used, and that I comply with ethical duties and responsibilities by accepting all the terms and conditions of the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE). I hereby declare that if a situation contrary to my statement regarding the study is detected, I agree to all moral and legal consequences that may arise.

References

- Ahmet ibn Hanbel. *Musnad*. Vol. 1. Riyadh: Darussalam, 2012.
- Ahmed ibn Hanbel. *Musnad*. Vol. 4. Riyadh: Darussalam, 2012.
- ‘Al-Adab Al-Mufrad 457 - Extravagance in Building’. Accessed 11 January 2025. <https://sunnah.com/adab:457>.
- Alex C. ‘Topkapı Palace/Topkapisaray, Istanbul, Turkey, Begun 1460’. Chegg. Accessed 26 February 2022. <https://www.chegg.com/flashcards/arh-1020-midterm-817f2465-8f46-43a1-89ea-293d36d5c043/deck>.
- Ali, Mohd Akil Muhamed, Mohd Farhan Md Ariffin, Mohd Nazri Ahmad, and Shafiza Safie. ‘Islamic Values in the Design of Residential Internal Layout’. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences* 12, no. 11 (2022): 1728–40.
- Aljawder, Hana, and Hala A. El-Wakeel. ‘Architecture and Privacy in Islam: An Analytical Review’. *Islamic Heritage Architecture IV* 211 (2022): 129–39.
- Anhegger, Mualla Eyüboğlu. *Topkapı Sarayı’nda Padişah Evi: Harem*. Istanbul: Sandoz Kültür Press, 1986.
- Aslanapa, Oktay. *Osmanlı Devri Mimarisi*. Istanbul: İnkılâp Kitabevi, 1986.
- ‘At-Tirmidhi 2877 - Chapters on The Virtues of the Qur’an’. Accessed 23 October 2024. <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:2877>.
- Aulia, Dwira Nirfalini, and Abdul Rahman Syafikri. ‘Adaptation of Muslim Family Activity in Occupying Minimalist Contemporary Architectural Housing Design’. *Journal of Islamic Architecture* 6, no. 2 (2020).
- Aydınlık. ‘Topkapı Sarayı dünyanın en güzel sarayı seçildi’. Aydınlık, 3 September 2021. <https://www.aydinlik.com.tr/haber/topkapi-sarayi-dunyanin-en-guzel-sarayi-secildi-255907>.
- Babangida, Hamza, and Halima Sani-Katsina. ‘Integrating Islamic Design Principles for Achieving Family Privacy in Residential Architecture’. *Journal of Islamic Architecture* 5, no. 1 (2018).
- Birkan, Fuat Ozan. ‘Topkapı’dan Sâdâbâd’a: 15. Yüzyıldan 18. Yüzyıla Osmanlı Sultanının Sarayında ve İnzivasında Mekânsal Dönüşüm [From Topkapı to Sadabad: Spatial Transformation in the Palace and Seclusion of the Ottoman Sultan from the 15th to the 18th Century]’. *Journal of Ottoman Civilization Studies*, no. 15 (October 2022): 1–16.
- Bokhari, Ali, Mahmoud Tarek Mohamed Hammad, and Djamel Beggas. ‘Impact of Islamic Values and Concepts in Architecture: A Case Study of Islamic

- Communities'. *Proceedings of Sustainable Development and Planning XI* 241 (2020): 383–96.
- Cetin, A. Enis, Omer N. Gerek, and Ahmed H. Tewfik. 'The Topkapi Palace Museum'. *Museum International* 52, no. 1 (1 January 2000): 22–25.
- Crane, Howard. 'Review of Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapi Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries by Gülru Necipoğlu'. *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 116, no. 2 (April 1996): 327–28.
- Denny, Walter B. 'Review of Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapi Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries, by Gülru Necipoğlu'. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26, no. 1 (February 1994): 99–100.
- Eldem, Sedat Hakkı, and Feridun Akozan. *Topkapı Sarayı : Bir Mimari Araştırma*. Ankara: Ministry of Culture Publications, 1982.
- Ferrari, Nicole Kaççal. 'Topkapi Sarayı'. Büyük İstanbul Tarihi, 2025. <https://istanbul-tarihi.ist/302-topkapi-sarayi>.
- Germeraad, Pieter W. 'Islamic Traditions and Contemporary Open Space Design in Arab-Muslim Settlements in the Middle East'. *Landscape and Urban Planning* 23, no. 2 (1993): 97–106.
- Grabar, Oleg. 'The Architecture of Power: Palaces, Citadels, and Fortifications'. In *Architecture of the Islamic World: Its History and Social Meaning*, edited by George Michell. London: Thames & Hudson, 2011.
- Habertürk. 'Tarihinin En Büyük Restorasyonunu Geçiren Topkapı Sarayı Havadan Görüntüldü'. Topkapı Sarayı havadan görüntüldü, 2 February 2018. <https://www.haberturk.com/tarihinin-en-buyuk-restorasyonunu-geciren-topkapi-sarayi-havadan-goruntulendi-1834491>.
- Hakim, Besim Selim. *Arabic-Islamic Cities: Building and Planning Principles*. London: KPI Limited, 1986.
- Hussain, Saddam, Zheng Chunrou, and Fu Juan. 'The Mosque's Primary Spaces and the Required Direction of the Mosque Building'. *Journal of Islamic Architecture* 7, no. 4 (20 December 2023): 719–35.
- Hwaish, Akeel Noori Almulla. 'Concept of The Islamic House; A Case Study of The Early Muslims House'. *International Journal of Advances in Mechanical and Civil Engineering (IJAMCE)* 3, no. 1 (2016): 86–93.
- Inalcik, Halil, and Donald Quataert, eds. *An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- IslamQA. 'Four Things Contribute to Happiness', 27 November 2019. <https://islamqa.org/hanafi/hadithanswers/122427/four-things-contribute-to-happiness/>.

- ‘Jami` At-Tirmidhi 2468 - Chapters on the Description of the Day of Judgement, Ar-Rıfaq, and Al-Wara’’. Accessed 13 January 2025. <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi:2468>.
- Kamal, Mohammad Arif, Tahsinur Rahman Warsi, and Osama Nasir. ‘Islamic Principles as a Design Framework for Urban System: Environmental Concern and Sustainable Development’. *Journal of Islamic Architecture* 7, no. 4 (2023): 699–712.
- Malik, Sana, and Beenish Mujahid. ‘Perception of House Design in Islam’. *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 6, no. 2 (30 September 2016): 52–76.
- Mortada, Hisham. *Traditional Islamic Principles of Built Environment*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2003.
- Murphey, Rhoads. *Exploring Ottoman Sovereignty: Tradition, Image, and Practice in the Ottoman Imperial Household, 1400-1800*. London: Continuum, 2008.
- Necipoglu, Gulru. *Architecture, Ceremonial, and Power: The Topkapi Palace in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*. First Edition. New York: MIT Press, 1991.
- Omer, Spahic. ‘Integrating the Islamic Worldview into the Planning of Neighbourhoods’. *Journal of Construction in Developing Countries* 12, no. 2 (2007): 63–80.
- Omer, Spahic. *Islam and Housing*. Kuala Lumpur: AS Noordeen, 2010.
- Ortaylı, İlber. *Private and Royal Life in the Ottoman Palace*. New York: Blue Dome Press, 2014.
- Othman, Zulkeplee, Rosemary Aird, and Laurie Buys. ‘Privacy, Modesty, Hospitality, and the Design of Muslim Homes: A Literature Review’. *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 4, no. 1 (2015): 12–23.
- Özek, Ahmet. *Hz. Peygamberin Hadislerinde Medeniyet, Teknik ve Kültür*. İstanbul: Cihan Yayınları, 1984.
- Özek, Ali. ‘Kur’an’a Göre İslami Mesken veya Bir Müslümanın Evi Nasıl Olmalıdır?’ In *Mesken ve Mesken Mimarimiz*, edited by Ali Özek, Ibrahim Canan, Abdülaziz Bayındır, Himmet Taskömür, Turgut Cansever, Murat Daryal, Hüseyin Mehmet Atesin, and Saadettin Ökten, 5–27. İstanbul: Ensar Publishers, 1995.
- Özlü, Nilay. ‘Single p(a)Lace, Multiple Narratives: The Topkapı Palace in Western Travel Accounts from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century’. In *The City in the Muslim World*, edited by Mohammad Gharipour and Nilay Özlü. Routledge, 2015.
- Penzer, Norman Mosley. *Harem*. New York: Dover, 2005.
- Qaradawi, Yusuf al-. *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*. Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1999.
- ‘Riyad As-Salihin 1018 - The Book of Virtues’. Accessed 23 October 2024. <https://sunnah.com/riyadussalihin:1018>.

- ‘Sahih Al-Bukhari 142 - Ablutions (Wudu)’. Accessed 11 January 2025. <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:142>.
- ‘Sahih Al-Bukhari 160 - Ablutions (Wudu)’. Accessed 13 January 2025. <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:160>.
- ‘Sahih Al-Bukhari 394 - Prayers (Salat)’. Accessed 11 January 2025. <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:394>.
- ‘Sahih Al-Bukhari 512 - Prayers (Salat)’. Accessed 11 January 2025. <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:512>.
- ‘Sahih Al-Bukhari 5957 - Dress’. Accessed 11 January 2025. <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:5957>.
- ‘Sahih Al-Bukhari 5959 - Dress’. Accessed 13 January 2025. <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:5959>.
- ‘Sahih Al-Bukhari 6241 - Asking Permission’. Accessed 11 October 2024. <https://sunnah.com/bukhari:6241>.
- ‘Sahih Muslim 264 - The Book of Purification’. Accessed 11 January 2025. <https://sunnah.com/muslim:264>.
- ‘Sahih Muslim 777 - The Book of Prayer - Travellers’. Accessed 23 October 2024. <https://sunnah.com/muslim:777a>.
- ‘Sahih Muslim 780 - The Book of Prayer - Travellers’. Accessed 23 October 2024. <https://sunnah.com/muslim:780>.
- ‘Sahih Muslim 2084 - The Book of Clothes and Adornment’. Accessed 24 October 2024. <https://sunnah.com/muslim:2084>.
- ‘Sahih Muslim 2106b - The Book of Clothes and Adornment’. Accessed 11 January 2025. <https://sunnah.com/muslim:2106b>.
- Sakaoğlu, Necdet. *Tarihi, Mekanları, Kitabeleri ve Anıları ile Saray-ı Hümayun: Topkapı Sarayı*. Istanbul: Denizbank Yayınları, 2002.
- Saleh, Mohammed Abdullah Eben. ‘The Impact of Islamic and Customary Laws on Urban Form Development in Southwestern Saudi Arabia’. *Habitat International* 22, no. 4 (1998): 537–56.
- Şimşirgil, Ahmet. *Bir Müstakil Dünya: Topkapı Sarayı*. Istanbul: Timas Yayınları, 2016.
- ‘Sunan Abi Dawud 6 - Purification (Kitab Al-Taharah)’. Accessed 11 January 2025. <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:6>.
- ‘Sunan Abi Dawud 4559’. Accessed 11 January 2025. <https://sunnah.com/abudawud:4559>.

- ‘Sunan Ibn Majah 3364 - Chapters on Food’. Accessed 24 October 2024. <https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah:3364>.
- Tarantang, Jefry, Ahmadi Hasan, Ibnu Elmi A. S. Pelu, and Ahmad Dakhoir. ‘The Idea of Building a House of Maqashid Sharia Perspective’. *Journal of Islamic Architecture* 7, no. 3 (28 June 2023): 541–48.
- Terzi, Rasim. ‘Topkapı Sarayı Kutsal Emanetler’. Istanbul Guide Services, 11 September 2021. <https://istanbulguideservices.com/article/posts/xpn/topkapi-sarayi-kutsal-emanetler>.
- Uzunçarşılı, İsmail Hakkı. *Osmanlı Devletinin Saray Teşkilâtı*. Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu Basımevi, 1984.
- Wehr, Hans. *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*. Edited by J. Milton Cowan. 4th edition. Spoken Language Services, 1994.