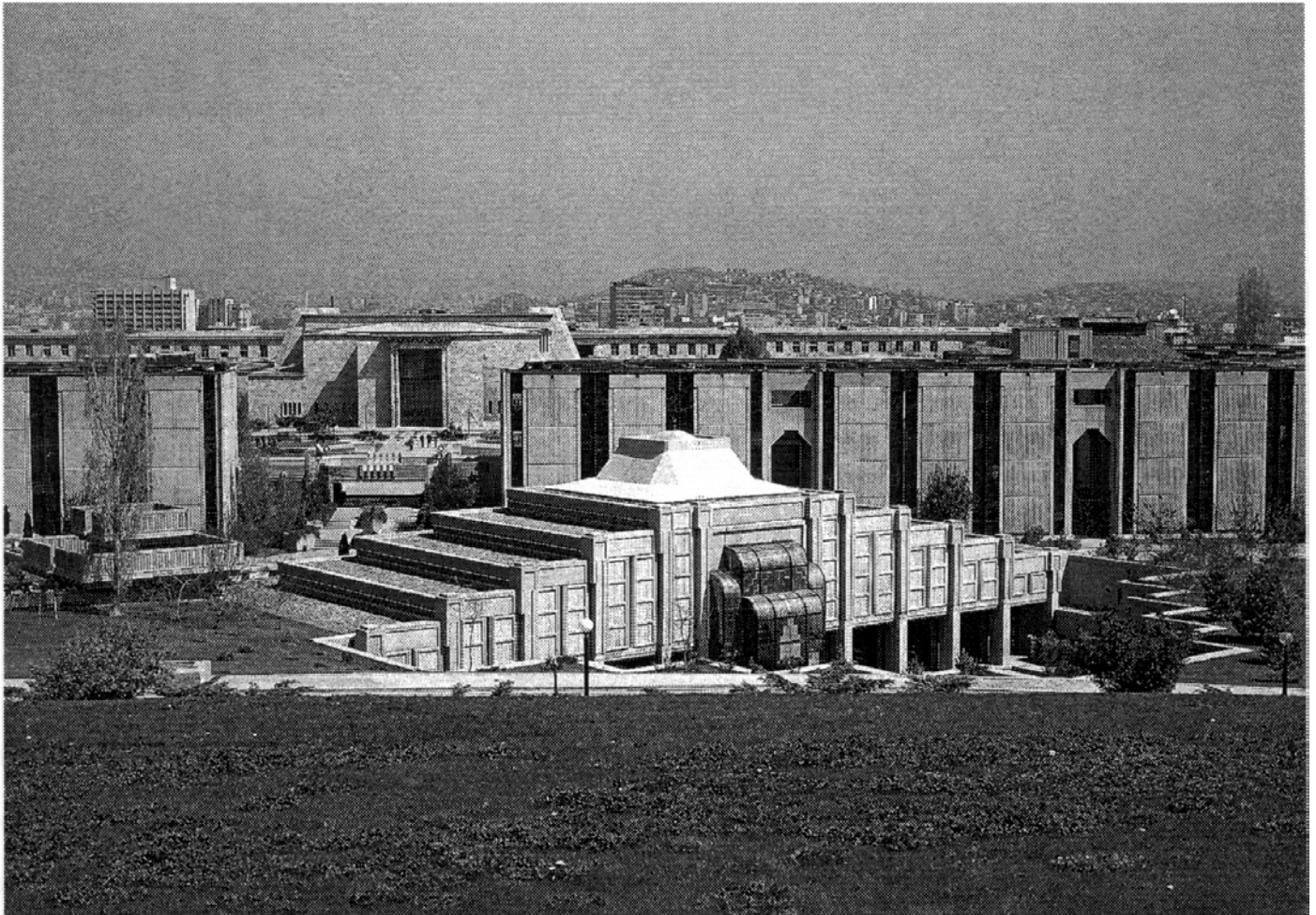




1995 Technical Review
Summary
by Mohammad al-Asad

Mosque of the National Assembly

Ankara, Turkey
1146.TUR



Architect
Behruz and Can Cinici

Client
Turkish Grand National Assembly

Completed
April 1989

The mosque of the Turkish National Assembly in Ankara, completed in 1989, is located at the Southern edge of the group of buildings which make up the Turkish National Assembly complex in Ankara. The mosque is located to the South of the Public Relations buildings of the complex. It is intended for the members of the National Assembly and the staff working in the complex. The building consists of a prayer hall, an ablutions area, an imam's room, and a library for religious publications.



Ankara, 260km south-east of Istanbul

Assembly complex, numerous governmental buildings, and embassies.

Climate

Ankara is located in the North-western section of central Anatolia. The central parts of the city are flat, but the city spreads into the surrounding mountainous areas.

The climate is cold in the winter and warm in the summer. Most precipitation takes place during the Spring. Snow is very common during the winter months.

Context

Historical background

Ankara, the capital of Turkey, has grown during the past seven decades from a small town of less than 30,000 when the Turkish republic was founded in 1923 into a large metropolis of over three million people today.

The choice of what was then the small central Anatolian town of Ankara as the capital of the newly establish Turkish republic to replace the old cosmopolitan capital of Istanbul was a conscious expression of the rupture that the Republic had intended to create with Turkey's Ottoman past.

Local architecture

Most of the city's structures have a bland, modernist architectural character and can be described as "International Style" building blocks.

An unusual uniformity characterises much of the city's architecture.

Brick and concrete seem to be the primary construction materials. Sloping roofs with red tiles characterise the city's outline. Many of the structures of the city are about four stories high. A few high-rise buildings, mainly bank and hotel buildings, break the uniformity of the city's skyline.

Since much of Ankara belongs to the Republican period, many of its sections were designed with the intention of reflecting its position as the capital of the new secular republic. Parts of the city, with their wide tree-lined boulevards and flanking massive public buildings, express an air of monumentality. This arrangement is obvious in Atatürk Boulevard, which is bordered by important structures including the National

Site

The National Assembly Complex is located in the central part of the city, and is bordered by Inonu and Atatürk Boulevards and by Dikmen Street. Occupying over 475,000 square meters, it can be described as a city within the city. Although it is open to the public, it is also heavily guarded and entry to it is controlled. Anyone wishing to enter the complex needs to obtain a permit from the security staff located at the gates leading to the complex.

The complex was designed by the Austrian architect Clemens Holzmeister (1886 - 1983). It is the third location for the National Assembly. Holzmeister resided in Turkey between the 1930s and 1950s and designed a large number of important buildings in Ankara

*Administrative Sector
of Ankara; the
location of the
mosque is encircled*

including those of the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Defence, and the Residence of the President. In 1937, he received first prize for the design of the Grand National Assembly building competition. Construction was begun later in that year, but was not completed until 1961.

The structures which Holzmeister designed are imposing and monumental. Stone is the primary construction material, and symmetry and axuality are dominant themes in the designs. These qualities provide them with some similarities to the government sponsored architecture built in Germany and Italy during that period.

In 1984, the Public Relations building was added to the complex. This building, which consists of two wings creating a U-shaped courtyard between them, was designed by one of the architects of the mosque, Behruz Cinici. The four-storey 14,000 square meter building contains offices for the members of parliament and general service facilities for the complex.

The Public Relations building establishes architectural connections with the Holzmeister complex. It continues the axis along which the Holzmeister buildings are located, and resembles them in its symmetrical arrangement. However, it has a very different feel from the Holzmeister complex. It makes extensive use of exposed pre-cast concrete panels, and therefore has a roughness to it which contrasts with the smoothly surfaced Holzmeister buildings. It rejects the rigid axuality of the Holzmeister complex, and gives the impression of an office building (which is what it primarily is) more than a monumental public

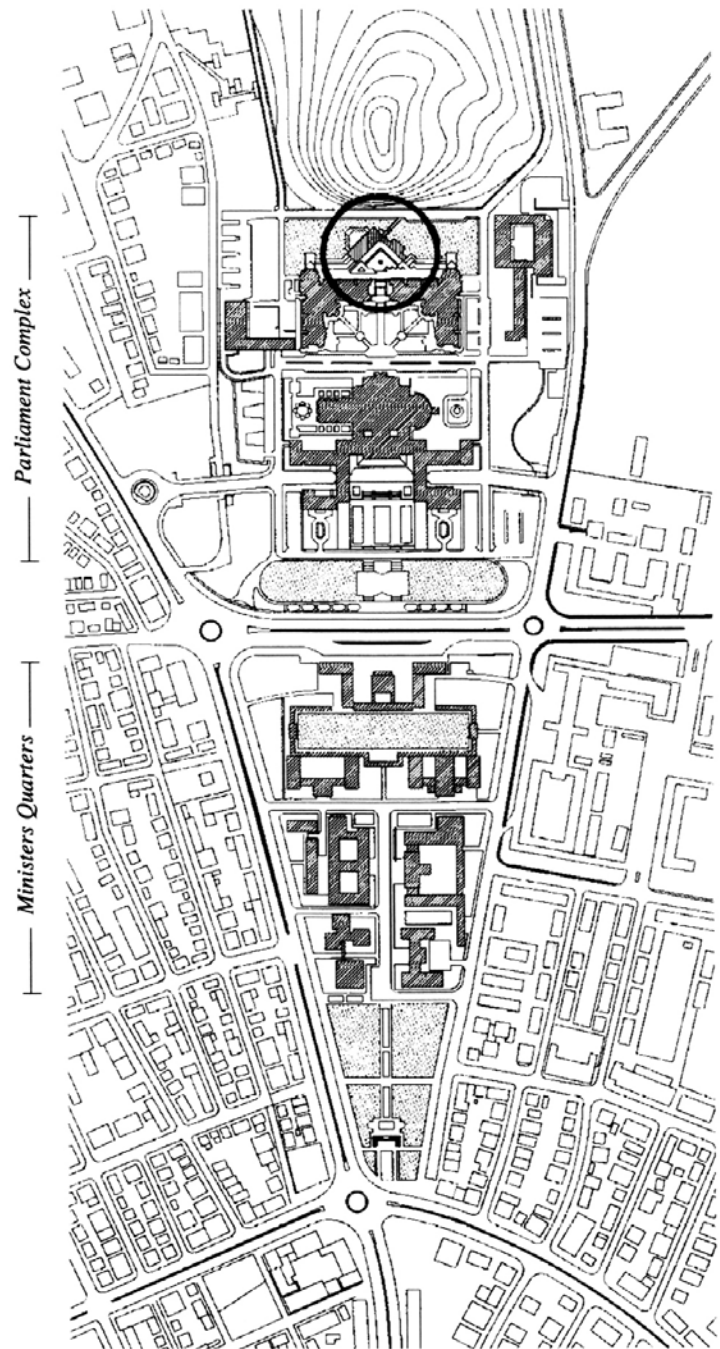
structure. Both the Holzmeister and the Cinici structures very much reflect the architecture of the period to which each of them belongs.

The site of the National Assembly complex contains large open areas. These green areas are carefully landscaped and well maintained.

Building site

The Public Relations building provides the Northern backdrop for

the mosque. The main approach to the mosque is from the North, along an axis on which both the Holzmeister buildings and the Public Relations building are located. The mosque is separated from the Public Relations building by significant open spaces which are discussed below. From the other three sides, the mosque is flanked and hidden by mounds resulting from the upward-sloping nature of the site towards the South. The architect decided to



place the mosque within the mound rather than on top of it.

Programme

General objectives

The administrative staff and a number of parliament members had felt the need for a mosque in which those using the complex could perform their prayers. (A mosque was planned for the complex at a much earlier stage!!?) The program was simple, and only asked that the architects provide a prayer hall for about 450 worshippers, a place for ablutions, an imam's room, and a small library. The mosque was not intended as an official congregational mosque (after all, Turkey is a secular state), but as a prayer area intended to serve the individual religious needs of those whose workplace is the National Assembly complex. Therefore, this mosque is not even

intended as a community mosque since the complex does not include any residential areas. The mosque would only be used during working hours.

Obviously, this is a sensitive project. It needs to address the position which Islam holds in Turkey. The vast majority of Turks are Muslims, and a significant number of them are practising Muslims. At the same time, Turkey has been committed to secularism since the earliest days of the establishing of the Turkish Republic.

Description

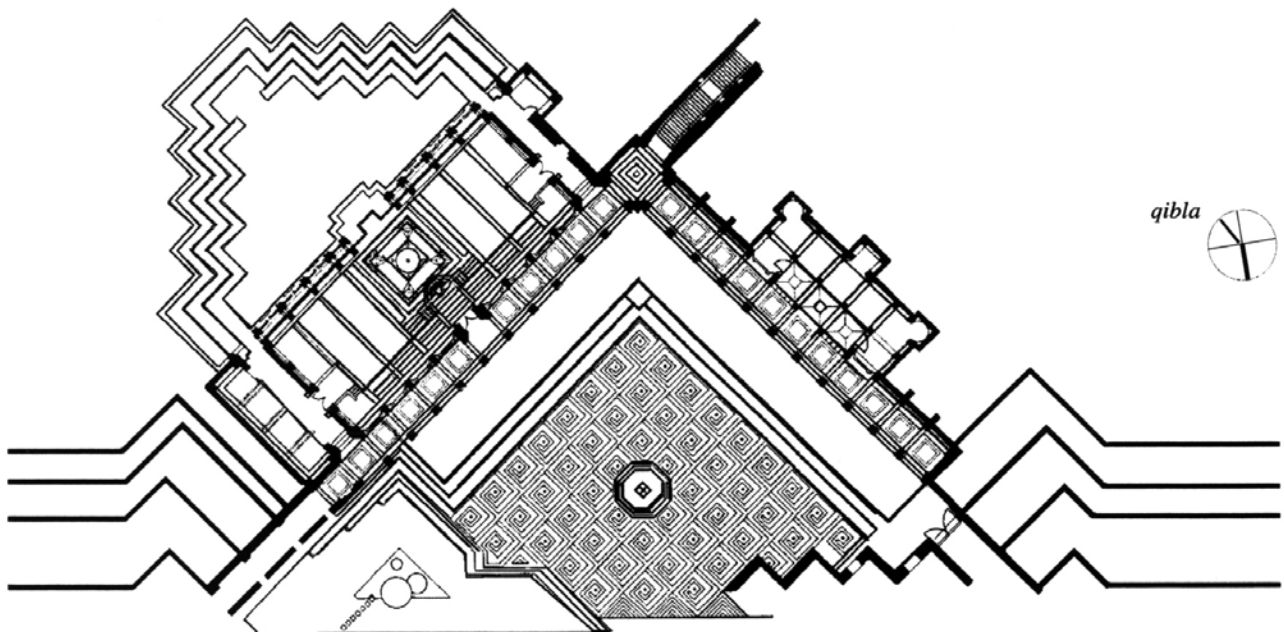
Building data

In plan, the 6400 square metre mosque complex consists of three major parts. The first is a triangular forecourt which precedes the prayer hall; the second is the rectangular prayer hall; and the third is the

garden located in front of the prayer hall and takes the shape of a stepping triangle. An often unsolved challenge in the design of many mosques is the manner of connecting the axis of the qibla with the differing axes of the surrounding fabric of streets, open spaces, and buildings. The structures of the National Assembly buildings are approximately oriented along a North - South axis, but the qibla is in the direction of the Southeast. The architects have skilfully solved the challenge of connecting these differing axes through using a triangular shape for the plan of the forecourt in front of the mosque. The triangle points in the same direction as the North - South axis along which the complex is planned, but one of its sides faces the direction of the qibla. The prayer hall is located along that side.

The triangular shape of the forecourt is the result of dividing a traditional square courtyard in half through a diagonal line connecting two of its corners. Porticoes border

General plan



Mosque of the Grand National Assembly, Ankara, Turkey

The main entrance to the mosque through the triangular plaza with the religious library adjacent to it

the resulting forecourt from two sides. The third and longest side is less clearly defined. Part of that side is bordered by fragments of a wall; another part by a reflecting pool; and the remaining part merges with the wide pedestrian path separating the mosque from the Public Relations building.

The mosque's small religious library is connected to the Western portico. The Southern portico leads to the prayer hall itself. The prayer hall is rectangular in shape with its longer side facing the direction of the qibla. Each of the Western and Eastern sides of the prayer hall, or its two shorter sides, is flanked by a covered passageway leading to the pool in front of the qibla wall. The imam's room is located along the Western passageway, and the ablutions area is located along the Eastern passageway.

The prayer hall can be entered from the front or the sides. It contains two levels. The higher level rises less than a meter above the lower one. This higher level consists of a narrow strip located along the prayer hall's Northern side, and the front entrance opens to it. It is designated as the women's prayer area. The qibla side with its wide mihrab projection contains large glazed areas opening to the sunken cascading garden located in front of the prayer hall.

Most of the sunken cascading garden is occupied by a pool with a fountain in its centre. Most of the cascading walls of the garden are planted, except for the central part which has water cascading from the top of the wall down to the pool.

An unusual element of the mosque complex is a stair which rises from the corner of the two



porticoes flanking the forecourt to the top of the mound. It can be said that the stair leads to "nowhere" in that the users of the mosque have no need to go to that area.

On top of the corner where the two porticoes meet, the architects have placed the balconies of a minaret, but removed its shaft and cap. These balconies barely rise above the ground. The architect placed a tree close to the minaret balconies as a substitute for the vertical orientation of the traditional minaret.

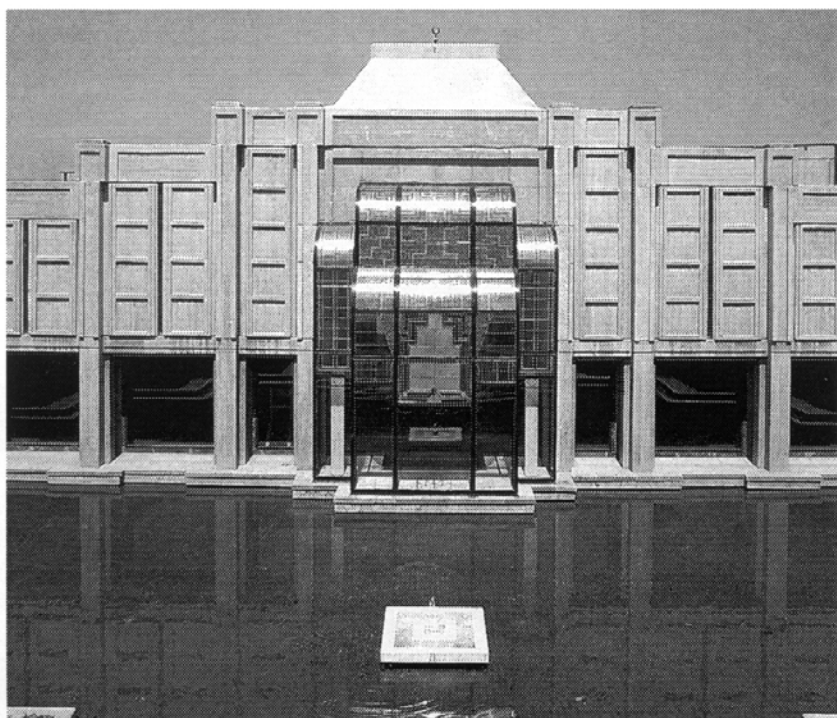
Design concepts

When examining the site plan of the National Assembly complex, one notices that the mosque occupies a very important position within it, since it terminates the longitudinal axis running through the buildings of the complex. The plan of the mosque area even approximates the shape of a spearhead located at the end of the axis.

Although the building occupies a prominent position in the overall plan of the complex, it presents itself as a very low-keyed structure when viewed as a three-dimensional composition. Much of the mosque complex is hidden within the slope of its site, and only parts of it rise above the surrounding landscape.

Even the major vertical elements that have come to characterise mosque architecture today, the dome and minaret, have been rejected in the design of this mosque, at least in their traditional forms. The minaret is only represented by two balconies located close to the ground. Its vertical elements, the shaft and cap, are done away with. The dome is also done away with and is replaced by the central part of a stepping pyramid which gives the impression of growing from the surrounding landscape, thus further emphasising the horizontal, rather than vertical, arrangement of the mosque complex.

The cascading garden in front of the mihrab wall is completely sunken



Courtyard façade of the mosque displays transparent qibla wall at centre

within the landscape, and those approaching the mosque would not be aware of its existence until entering the prayer hall.

The mosque complex contains three major three-dimensional spatial arrangements corresponding to the three major elements of the plan. Two of them, the forecourt and cascaded garden, are outdoor spaces; the third, or the prayer hall, is an indoor space. The architects have kept the forecourt as an ambiguously defined space. It is bordered by porticoes only from two sides. However, even the portico columns reflect an unusual treatment in that the column shafts are removed, and only their bases are kept. The

arrangement seems to function as a reminder of the presence of portico columns in traditional courtyards. Instead of being supported by columns, the portico roof is cantilevered from the adjacent structures. From the third side, the forecourt is partly defined by a reflecting pool and the fragmented walls. Otherwise, that side merges with its surroundings.

The space of the prayer hall is dominated from the top by a stepping pyramidal form. The central part of the pyramid, where a dome would usually be placed, steps up higher than its remaining components. The corners of this central part are articulated by what can be described

as abstracted muqarnas units. Large beams articulate the ceiling of the prayer hall.

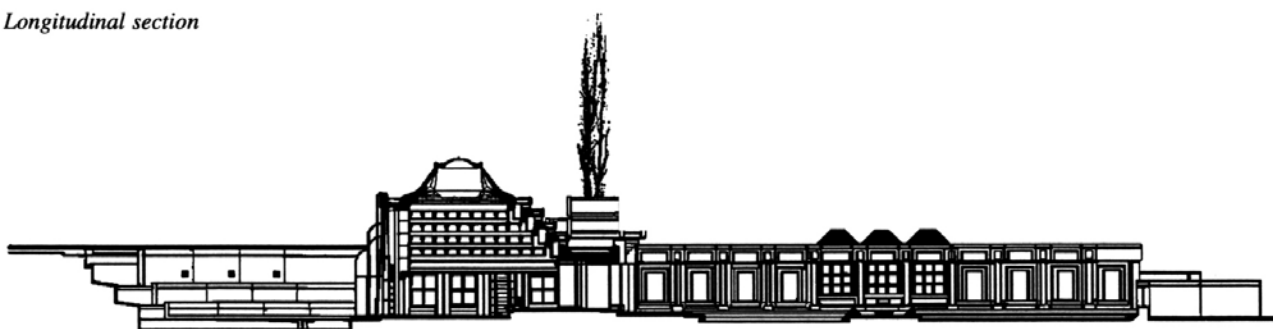
The prayer hall is served by both direct and indirect lighting. Direct lighting is provided from the large windows located along the qibla wall. Indirect lighting enters the prayer hall from openings located within the steps of the pyramid covering it.

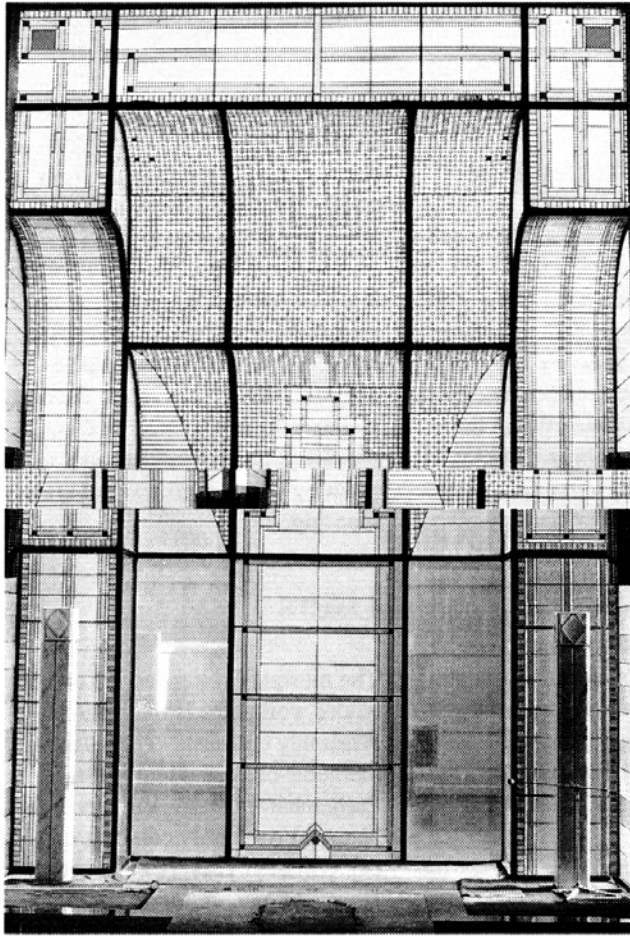
The two shorter sides of the interior are articulated by large ceramic inscriptions containing the words "Allah," "Muhammad," and the names of the four Orthodox Caliphs, Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, and 'Ali. A frieze of Quranic inscriptions is located on each of the two sides, above these inscriptions.

The large windows located along the qibla wall of the prayer hall visually open it to the cascaded garden located in front of it. The mihrab, which is a wide rectangular projection with a curving roof, is made of glass.

A wooden minbar is located to the right of the mihrab. Its design shows an abstraction of traditional minbars. Although the architects did not design the minbar, it was de-

Longitudinal section





*Transparent
mihrab overlooks
reflecting pond*

signed in co-ordination with them.

In contrast to the forecourt whose borders are ambiguously demarcated, the sunken garden is a clearly defined space. The high walls around it give it a powerful sense of enclosure. The space also seems to wrap around the prayer hall, thus providing a high level of integration between interior and exterior.

Use of traditional motifs

One of the most interesting aspects of this design is the manner in which the architects have dealt with motifs taken from the pre-modern architectural heritage of the Islamic world. This is evident on the levels of both architectural details and overall planning concepts. The architects have borrowed elements from the pre-modern architecture of the Islamic world as their starting point, but have also abstracted and frag-

mented them to a level which clearly asserts the existence of an architectural rupture between the Islamic world's present and its pre-modern past.

The design contains numerous features that illustrate this point. Rather than incorporating a full traditional courtyard with porticoes, the architects have cut the courtyard in half along a diagonal line connecting its Southern and Northern corners, thus only keeping two sides of the portico and providing an incomplete courtyard. The fragments of the wall along part of the third side of the forecourt provide a reference to the idea of the ruin, of something that was but no longer is. This theme is continued in the treatment of the portico columns, where the shafts are removed but the columns bases are kept. Here again, the arrangement reminds the viewer of the separation between past and

present. The past, with its enclosed courtyards and arrangement of porticoed columns, is acknowledged and referred to, but its distance from the present is emphasised.

These consciously incomplete references to the past are found in other parts of the mosque. The minaret is represented by two balconies which seem to refuse to wander too far away from ground level, thus rejecting the main characteristic of the minaret, verticality. The dome is replaced by the top part of a stepping pyramid which covers the prayer hall. Instead of the shields found in Ottoman mosques below the main dome and which contain the words "Allah," "Muhammad," and the names of the four Orthodox caliphs in the curvilinear cursive script, this mosque has these words written in ceramic panels using the more geometric Kufic script and located at eye-level.

The architects have also decided to use new spatial arrangements not found in other mosques. One of them is the lack of visual separation between the areas reserved for males and females. The only separation is through a differentiation in height, since the female area, which is located in the back, is raised less than a meter above the male area.

The more striking new arrangement is the opening of the qibla wall to the sunken garden located in front of it. Worshippers in a mosque usually face a blank qibla wall which directs their attention to the interior of the prayer hall. Here, the treatment of the wall presents the worshippers with a totally different experience since they look out at the garden while performing their

prayers. Therefore, a very strong visual link is established between the worshipper and the water and greenery of the garden.

The sunken cascading garden is, in my opinion, the most powerful element in the mosque. It provides a clear sense of enclosure and is the main visual magnet for the worshipper in this mosque. It also makes references to traditional gardens in the Islamic world. Water flows in the fountain located in the middle of the garden pool in a delicate manner reminiscent of the fountains found throughout the Islamic world, in areas including Andalusia, Syria, and India. On the other hand, the serenity and sense of enclosure which the garden conveys makes references to Japanese gardens

Materials and technology

The technology and materials used in this project are common in Turkey. The primary construction material is reinforced concrete. Both pre-cast and cast-in-place concrete elements are used. Exposed concrete is the dominant finishing material in the building. In fact, Behruz Cinici is one of the pioneers of using concrete as a surface material in Turkey.

Other materials are also used for the surfaces of the building. Marble is used for the frames of doors and windows, and also for floors. Stone is used for exterior floors. Ceramic tiles are used for the floor of the library, and ceramic panels are used for the prayer hall inscriptions. Glass block units cover the ablutions area,

thus allowing light to enter from above. Wood is used for shelves. The floor of the prayer hall is covered with blue carpeting containing pink stripes indicating the lines along which worshippers are to stand. In general, considerable attention has been given to the design and execution of details in this project. This has resulted in a building with a high level of craftsmanship.

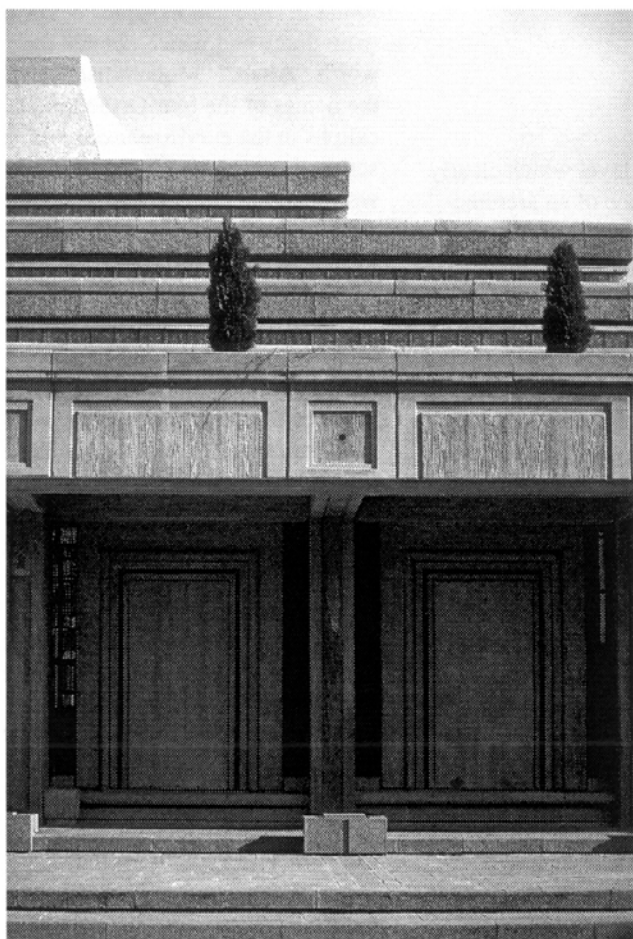
Users

The mosque is intended for those whose workplace is the National Assembly complex. These include members of Parliament and the Parliamentary staff. Visitors to the National Assembly complex can also perform their prayers in this mosque. However, as mentioned above, access to the complex is controlled, so a person whose workplace is not located in the complex cannot simply wander inside the complex to use the mosque.

User response

Establishing the response of a given public to a work of architecture is not an easy task. Viewers or users of a building do not usually articulate their responses to a work of architecture, and if they do, their comments are often restricted to issues relating to function and maintenance. Many people cannot articulate their thoughts concerning a work of architecture even when asked to do so, and seem to experience these works in a subconscious manner.

Having said that, one can add that responses to this mosque have varied, and that both Islamists (I am using this term in the widest sense of the word to indicate those who believe that Islam should play a central role in organising life in Muslim communities) and secularists have reacted to it in different manners. Some Islamists have welcomed



View of shaded portico that runs along the plaza entrance of the mosque



Interior view of main prayer hall; natural light penetrates through openings in the roof

Costs and financing

Costs:
1,636,000 US\$ (@1,200 US\$/ m²).

Project personnel

Architects:
Behruz and Can Cinici.

Client:
Turkish Grand National Assembly
(Represented by its Secretary General).

Civil Engineer:
A. Kutay.

Contractor:
Molin and Vakıflar As.

the construction of a government sponsored building in the site housing Turkey's national legislative body. On the other hand, other Islamists have opposed the construction of such a low-keyed structure which does not even include elements traditionally associated with mosque architecture such as the dome and minaret. In fact, the architects had to resist pressures exerted upon them to incorporate a minaret in their design.

Devoted secularists of course oppose the construction of a religious building in a complex housing a secular state's legislative body. Others of liberal-secularist leanings, but with less devotion to strict secular ideals, approve of the low-keyed nature of the project, which seems to emphasise the individual, rather than the institutional, nature of the act of worship.

The users of the building seem to be comfortable with it and have added elements that give it a sense of being "lived-in." For example, the prayer hall has items such as a large metal candle holder and clock that has a nineteenth-century European clock hung from the wall.

Entrance to triangular plaza, behind the National Assembly

Maintenance

The building is generally well-maintained.

Construction schedule and costs

History of project

Commission: March 1985.
Design: May 1985.
Construction: July 1987.
Occupancy: April 1989.



Mohammad al-Asad
April 1995