

## A Distinctive Architectural Example from the Era of Ottoman Westernization. Palazzo Corpi; The Former American Embassy Building

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**Abstract:** Ottoman architecture began to change around the beginning of the 18th century. The main factors influencing this change were the opening out to the West of Ottoman culture, relations with the West, and the inclusion of western architects in Ottoman society. The new look that classic Ottoman architecture assumed was to evolve under the thematic influence of European architects. Modifications were manifested not only in civil architecture but even in religious structures, which represented the breaking point of tradition. One of the cultural dynamics that represented the driving force of the changes in Ottoman architecture in the 18th century, producing innovatively novel effects under the European influence, was the various imported styles. The influence of Western art continued to make a mark on Ottoman architecture as from the start of the 18th century up until the end of the 19th century. The Edict of Reform (*Tanzimat Fermanı*) proclaimed in 1839 added momentum to the westernization movement, bringing with it new cultural dynamics and new types of structures as a result of the changing social climate. One of these architectural types was represented by buildings that housed diplomatic missions. The aim of this article is to examine the architectural and decorative characteristics of one of the important representations of the type of embassy architecture prevailing in the era of Ottoman westernization—the former American Embassy building in Istanbul, originally called the “Palazzo Corpi.” Toward this purpose, we will introduce in detail the plan and spatial organization of the building, the features of its mass, facades and interior.

**Keywords:** Ottoman Architecture, Westernization, Embassies, Palazzo Corpi.

### Introduction

At the beginning of the 18th century, with the advent of what was to be called the Tulip Era (*Lale Devri*, 1718-1730), the western influence and the aspiration to open out into the West was reflected in Ottoman architecture. The European influence ran parallel to the westernization movement and became prominent towards the end of the century. When the Edict of Reform was proclaimed in 1839, the same year that Sultan Abdülmecid ascended the throne, radical societal changes were seen as concrete examples of westernization began to be manifested. The Edict of Reform officially declared that all Muslims and Christians would be equal before the law and because this declaration was presented as a

written document delineating the relationship between the sultan and his people, it assumed the character of a social contract (Ortaylı, 1986, 24). In this period encompassing the reigns of Sultans Abdülmecid (1839-1861) and Abdülaziz (1861-1876), the Ottoman State established new institutions designed along the pattern of western examples, thus introducing a new concept of government (Çelik, Kuban 2009, 69). It would be non-Muslim and foreign nationals of Ottoman lands that would pioneer the Western way of life in these years.

Changes that began in the administrative ranks and widened into the upper layers of society began to be seen as the westernization movement accelerated in the 19th century after the proclamation of the Edict of Reform.

As in all other areas, the ideology of reform pervaded architecture with new organizational models and political mechanisms (Batur 1985, 1047). Government building programs in this period were accompanied by a diversity of typologies in civil architecture as well. Construction activity was especially extensive in the capital Istanbul.

In line with the political and social developments as well as the modernization endeavors that marked the Era of Reform, there appeared fundamental changes in the traditional Ottoman identity and fabric of buildings as well as on a city scale (Acar 2000, 12). In the time leading to the Reform, the offices of the Mayorship (*Şehreminliği*) and the Ottoman Guild of Architects (*Hassa Mimarlar Ocağı*) initiated by Sultan Mahmut II in 1831, were merged in 1839 to form the Directorate of Buildings (*Ebniye-i Hassa Müdürlüğü*). This directorate would work under the central administration and during the Era of Reform, city administration, planning and building activities exhibited radical changes (Batur 1985, 1047). Building Regulations (*Ebniye Nizamnameleri*) were adapted from Western sources and implemented one after another, leading to the adoption of many laws, rules and regulations that would determine how cities would be designed. The renowned Grand Vizier of the period, Mustafa Reşid Pasha, was to oversee the decisions taken for the construction of new buildings that would punctuate the modern and western outlook of the Era of Reform (*Tanzimat*) (Çelik, Kuban 2009, 70).

The Reform (*Tanzimat*) ushered in investments in many buildings that had an impact on the cityscape. The 18th century had witnessed the construction of a host of buildings of various types that had been added to the Ottoman architectural program by the government in line with their functions in the state. These included army barracks, police precincts and military hospitals. New types of structures started to appear in the Era of Reform. Among the types of buildings that manifested more radical examples of typological diversity than had ever been seen before were educational institutions, industrial structures, hospitals, municipal buildings, jails, post offices and telegraph offices, museums, government offices, hotels, theaters, commercial

buildings, passageways, banks and factories (Batur 1985, 1047).

Buildings were erected in this period that were to serve the needs of institutions that had been established in response to the changes taking place in Ottoman social life and governance. Most of these buildings were built by foreign architects as was permitted in accordance with the principle of equality before the law adopted during the Reform (*Tanzimat*).

One of the typologies of the new structures that made their mark in the era of reform during the 19th century constituted the foreign legation buildings, each with its own specific architecture and sociocultural surroundings. In the years following *Tanzimat*, especially at the beginning of the 19th century, the foreign embassy buildings, most of which were located in the Galata-Pera district, included the prominent structures of the British, American, French, Russian, Dutch, Belgian and Italian diplomatic missions. These buildings, which were prestigious symbols of their respective states, were built by foreign architects and boasted of palatial qualities.

The aim of this article is to examine the architectural and decorative characteristics of one of the important representations of the typological category of embassy buildings that contributed to urban life in the era of Ottoman westernization—the former American Embassy building in Istanbul, originally the Palazzo Corpi. The paper will examine the structural plan of the embassy, its spatial construct, its mass, facade and interior characteristics in its position as an embassy building that carried typical traces of the physical changes initiated during the period of reform.

## Method

The Palazzo Corpi (the former American Consulate building), located in the Pera District, is one of the most unique examples of legation buildings that represent the new type of structure introduced into Ottoman architecture in the period of Westernization instigated

by the Era of Reform (*Tanzimat*). Designed in 1873 by the Italian architect Giacomo Leoni as a residence for one of the most renowned shipowners of the period, Ignazio Corpi, the structure was built in the style of an Italian Palazzo. The building was leased to the American Embassy in 1883 and today is occupied by a private club called Soho House. It is important that future generations are made aware of this building, a structure about which there is currently scant information in the literature. It is from this perspective that this article seeks to use descriptive methodology to introduce the architectural and decorative characteristics of the building known as Palazzo Corpi.

### Embassy Buildings in Ottoman Architecture

Until 1835, the Ottoman state had preferred to send out envoys to foreign countries instead of having permanent legations established within the Empire (Akin 2011, 207). On the other hand, the Republic of Venice, Poland, Russia, France, Austria and England appointed ambassadors to Istanbul at different points in time (Unat 1968, 15). The first embassy to be established in Istanbul was the embassy of the Republic of Venice, established in 1454. This was followed, in order, by the establishment of the embassies of Poland (1475), Russia (1497), Naples (1498), France (1525), Austria (1528), Florence (1538), England (1581), Holland (1602), Sweden (1737), Prussia (1739), and Denmark (1756) (Sakaoğlu 1994, 149).

A large number of these embassies up until the first half of the 16th century were stationed in mansions either leased or purchased in the old Jewish Quarter near Yeni Cami (New Mosque) in Eminönü and in Elçi Han (Ambassadors Building) located at Divanyolu (Sakaoğlu 1994, 149; Eyice 1995, 15; Altıntaş 1987, 184). With the development of the Pera District in the 16th century, however, the embassies moved to this area (Akin 2011, 207). The French embassy was first to move, followed by the embassies of Venice, Holland, England and Russia, later to be joined in the district by the legations of other countries (Acar 2000, 238). The embassies played a significant role in the development of the district, with the embassy buildings becoming the focus of attraction for foreigners in the city and leading

to the establishment of communities that settled nearby (Akin 1994, 212). In addition to their contribution to the sociocultural development of the area, the embassies were also instrumental in increasing building activities (Acar 2000, 238).

The oldest legation building in the Pera District was the French Palace (Fransız Sarayı), dated to 1581. The first to settle in the district of Beyoğlu, the French State built its initial embassy on the hillsides of the Pera at the beginning of the 17th century. The building suffered a fire in 1767 and a new structure was built in 1774.

When this building, too, was destroyed in the Great Fire of Beyoğlu, this time in 1831, another building, still standing today, was rebuilt in 1847 (Cezar 1992, 89). Later, the area saw the opening of the British (1859), American, Italian, Russian (1847), Swedish (1870), Prussian (1872) and German (1877) legations (Batur 2000, 7). A large part of the 18th century embassy buildings were demolished in the Great Pera Fire of 1831 and other fires. The embassy buildings surviving today are from the 19th century. The architects of all of the buildings are foreign architects who found the opportunity to work on Ottoman architecture in the period following the Era of Reform (*Tanzimat*) (Acar 2000, 240).

These structures played a special role in both the architectural and the cultural development of the area and were potential mini-palaces that were referred to as "palazzos" (Akin 1994, 215). The embassies used to host tea parties, banquets, balls and other events that were of special importance to Pera society. Such activities contributed to the cultural development of the area and led Ottoman society into adopting the western style of living (Acar 2000, 239).

The buildings were built of masonry against the risk of fire and are two-, three- or four-story structures, depending on what the plot of land permitted. In terms of their layouts, a large entrance hall (*sofa*) stands in the center, around which other spaces are situated. The buildings are usually constructed on the "Turkish House" plan (Altıntaş 1987, 185).

As far as spatial distribution is concerned, a reception room, dining room, ballrooms/dancing halls can be found on the ground floor or first floor, while study rooms and special quarters lie on the upper floors, each unit opening out onto a corridor (Altıntaş 1987, 186). The entrance halls in the center of the structure are usually glass-covered. The buildings have large gardens in the back (Altıntaş 1987, 186, 189).

The facades boast predominantly of western architectural styles. In particular, facade configurations are most commonly of the Neo-Renaissance and Neo-classical architectural styles. Vertical partitioning with pilasters carrying Ionic, Corinthian and Composite capitals are the most common stylistic element of the facades (Altıntaş 198, 188). Windows with rectangular frames can be seen between the pilasters. Rounded arches with or without keystones are frequently a part of facade configurations.

Interior spaces also display rooms with walls exhibiting Ionic, Corinthian or Composite capitals set upon flat or grooved pilasters. Besides the windows appearing between the pilasters are classic motifs of garlands, palmettes, rosettes, egg friezes and meanders. Additionally to be found in the ballroom/dancing halls of the buildings are motifs of swans as well as musical instruments such as the lyre (Altıntaş 1987, 192).

The ceilings of the embassy buildings are usually in lacunar or flat form. Both the lacunar and flat-formed ceilings sometimes have moldings, usually with trompe l'oeil images of mythological characters.

### **Palazzo Corpi (Corpi Palace)**

This building located on Meşrutiyet Street on Beyoğlu is the newest embassy building in the area. It is constructed of masonry and was originally the mansion of a wealthy Genoese Levantine shipowner, İgnazio Corpi (Akin 1994, 21).

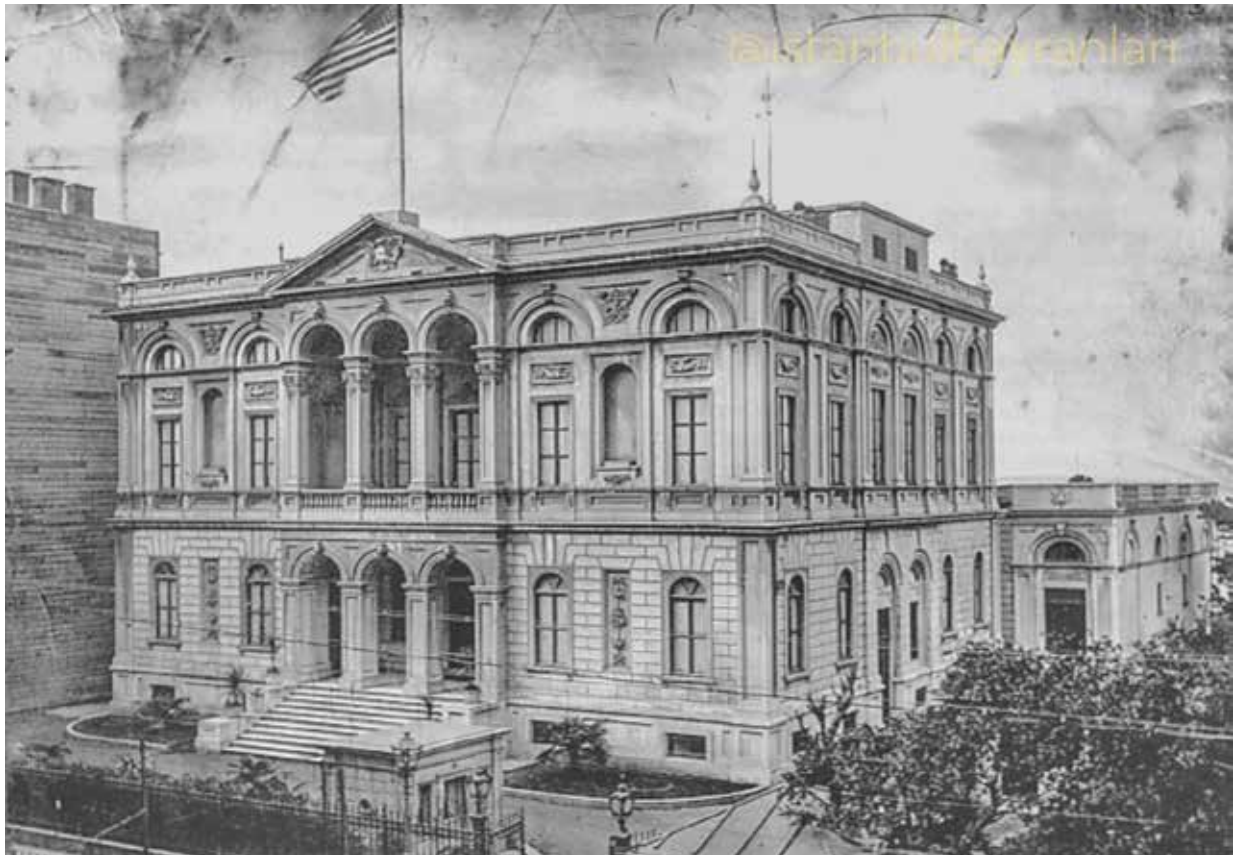


Fig. 1: Palazzo Corpi (URL 1).

The construction of the building started in 1873 under the Italian architect Giacomo Leoni, whom the Corpi family had invited to Istanbul for this project. The building was completed in 1882 (Mueller 2023, 5; Cezar 1992, 17). The Italian architect Giorgio Stampa also worked on the construction of the project (Can 1993, 84). Designed as a residential structure, the building was leased in 1883 to the American Embassy by the nephews of the owner Ignazio Corpi after his death. The American legation opened its doors in 1890 (Sakaoğlu 1994, 150). The Embassy purchased the building at the

beginning of the 20th century (Akin 2011, 2012). It was used as the American Consulate over the period 1883-2003, but now belongs to the private club Soho House. Situated in the midst of a large and well-kept garden, the building, designed in the form of an Italian Renaissance palazzo, reveals the Late Renaissance characteristic of consisting of two stories of masonry built upon a low-ceilinged basement floor (Fig. 1, 2). Standing on an east-west axis, the building also has a recessed terrace floor. Structurally made of masonry, the building's facade is covered in marble.



Fig. 2: Palazzo Corpi (URL 2).



The plan of the building is based on one of the layouts identified with the Turkish House—the “plan with interior sofa” (Fig. 3, 4). In front of the *sofa*, or entrance hall, is a triple-arched porch (windbreak) accessed by a majestic staircase of 10 steps (Fig. 1-3) that leads to the sofa (Fig. 5). At the rear of the *sofa* (entrance hall) is the part of the house that opens out into the garden in back. The back garden is very spacious. On the north-south axis of the side wings of the *sofa* (entrance hall) are two large stair landings leading to the two sides of the imperial staircase.

The spatial distribution of the structure comprises an entrance hall, a ballroom, dining room, reception room, and a dancing hall on the ground floor and the Greater Hall (Ceremonial Hall), study rooms and private quarters on the upper story. The Greater Hall (*sofa*) on the upper floor functioned as a ceremonial space and its roof is covered with a lacunar ceiling with lanterns (Üsdiken, Batur 1994, 243) (Fig. 6). In front of the sofa (Greater Hall) is a balcony with rounded arches that have three keystones (Fig. 1, 2). The balcony has a view of the Golden Horn (Haliç). The spaces on the upper floor have low ceilings (Altınkaynak 2006, 78).



Fig. 3: Ground plan (Altınkaynak 2006 Figure E.14).

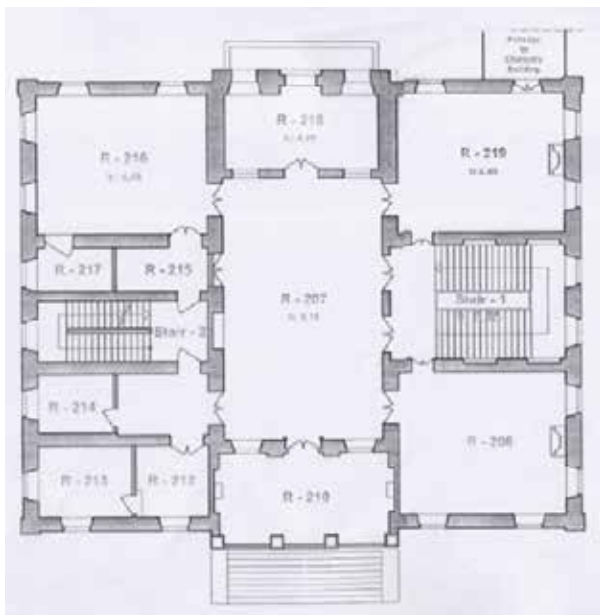


Fig. 4: First floor plan (Altınkaynak 2006, Figure E.15).



Fig. 5: Palazzo Corpi ground floor entrance hall (*sofa*) (Altınkaynak 2006 E. 18).



Fig. 6: First floor middle sofa (Great Hall) with its illuminating roof lantern (URL 3).

### Facade Arrangement

Conceived as a Renaissance palazzo, the building's front and back facades have different designs; the sides of the structure have the same arrangement. The entire facade decoration of the building boasts of Neo-Renaissance and École-des-Beaux-Arts stylistic elements.

The front facade's emphasis is on the central axis and constitutes the axis of symmetry. This axis is designed to project outward from the building. This feature is accentuated by rounded arches with keystones on the entrance floor and the first story. A ten-step marble staircase climbs to the entrance of the structure and entry to the porch (windbreak) unit is defined by a group of three arches (Fig. 1, 2). These arches are rounded and contain lion's heads on the keystones (Fig. 7). The arches rest on bases with molded capitals, with the body of the columns decorated with rectangular cartouches. This floor is covered with rusticated stones that were used in the era of the Late Renaissance (Fig. 1, 2).

There are symmetrically arranged spaces on the two sides of the central axis. There is a large fruit tree appearing inside the niche between the two rounded-arched rectangular windows in these spaces (Fig.1, 2). The tops of these rounded-arched rectangular windows are covered with vertically arranged rusticated stones.

Between the first and second floors is a floor molding with a cornice. The second floor begins at the floor molding and is much higher than the entrance floor. On the central axis of this heightened floor with its raised facade can be seen a rounded-arched balcony with capitals carrying keystones of the god Mercury (Fig. 1, 8-9). As on the entrance floor, the rounded arches rest on bases of rectangular cartouches, this time voluted and decorated with capitals of acanthus leaves. The balcony's balustrade is typical of the Late Renaissance (Fig. 1, 8). Behind the balcony is the sofa (Greater Hall) with its roof lantern. The central axis ends with a pediment, the inside of which has a dentil frieze. Inside the tympanum can be seen a relief of a bald eagle (Fig. 9). The bald eagle is an emblem of the American government that is used on legation buildings.



Fig. 7: Lion's heads as keystones on the rounded arches of the porch (windbreak) (URL 4).





Fig. 8: The balcony on the central axis of the first floor (URL 5).



Fig. 9: Capitals of Mercury on the keystones of the balcony arches of the first floor and the bald eagle emblem inside the tympanum (Müller 2023, Fig. 3).

There are again symmetrical arrangements on both sides of the central axis on this floor with its arched balcony. There is an empty arched niche in the center of this arrangement. Inside the niche is a marble block sitting on a base with motifs of acanthus leaves. On the two sides of the rounded-arched niche are rectangular windows, situated at a lower level than the niche. Underneath the windows on each side are decorative consoles (a characteristic of the Late Renaissance) with empty rectangular cartouches (Fig. 1, 2, 8). Above

the windows, inside rectangular frames, are reliefs of Pegasus (Fig. 1, 7, 8). There is a molded belt above this arrangement. On top of this and above the rectangular windows are rounded arches with keystones of acanthus leaves and moldings (Fig. 1, 8). On the insides of the arches are windows. Between the windows are motifs of roses and leaves set inside triangular cartouches that are situated right above the arched niches.

There is a dentil frieze, a characteristic of Renaissance palazzos, weaving its way around all the facades of this floor. Above the frieze is a recessed terrace floor, a feature of the École-des-Beaux-Arts, with high parapets that hide this floor from sight (Fig. 1, 8). The walls of the parapet are again decorated with empty cartouches. On the facade of the low basement story is an arrangement of windows with empty cartouches in-between, adding a break in the symmetry (Fig. 1).

The massive appearance that overpowers the front of the building is not repeated in the other facades. The sides of the north and south facades have again been designed in line with the style of the Late Renaissance. The arrangement of empty cartouches in-between windows continue on the side facades and on the lower basement story. The central axis of the side



Fig. 10: Palazzo Corpi north side facade (URL 6).



facades is boisterous and emphatic with its symmetrical arrangement on both sides of the axis as in the front of the building (Fig 10, 11). The first floor is again covered with rusticated stones. On the central axis of the first floor, there are two rectangular windows topped with blind rounded arches with molding (Fig 10). Beneath the windows are empty cartouche decorations. On two sides of the central axis are symmetrically arranged groups of two windows with rounded arches. The rusticated stones have been placed vertically over the windows of both the central axis and the side windows.

The arrangement for the second floor begins at the molding with a thick cornice to be found between the first and second floors. The second floor is elevated as on the front facade. At the projecting central axis of this floor are two high rectangular windows. The decorations on top of the windows depict rosettes with vegetative ornamentation on either side. On each side of the

central axis there are two rectangular windows that are lower than the others. The rectangular cartouches above the windows carry motifs of garlands. Vertically placed empty cartouches project outward from between the windows (Fig. 10). Below all of the windows and the vertical empty cartouches are again motifs of empty cartouches. On top of all the window groups, as in the side axes of the front of the building, can be seen a belt of molding. Above the belt of molding are rounded arches with keystones of acanthus leaves and moldings decorating the rectangular windows. The insides of the arches on the central-axis windows are embellished with a depiction of roses and leaf motifs in vases. The inside of the other arches display double-wing windows. There are empty triangular cartouches between all the windows. A overhang of dentil frieze winds around the sides of the building. Above the overhang there are again decorations of empty cartouches and high parapets that hide the roof (Fig 10).



Fig. 11: Palazzo Corpi south facade (Batur 2000 Fig. 8).

The back of the building looking to the west has again been designed in the form of three stories. While the upper floor on this facade has rectangular windows crossed with a plain transom at a proportion of 1:5, this proportion on the other stories is 1:2 and above the rectangular windows can be seen triangular and rounded pediments. The corners of the rear facade are clad with rusticated stones featuring cushion-shaped motifs, characteristic of Renaissance palazzos.

### Interior space

It was the owner's intention to use the best and most valuable materials available in the building and most of these were imported from Italy (Altınkaynak 2006, 78). The marble for the floors and the fireplace mantles were imported from Carrara, the rosewood for the window frames and doors from Piedmont (Farajova, Kılıç 2022, 89). The glasswork for the structure, its inlaid parquet flooring, and its elegant fireplaces were specially designed. The flooring is laid with mahogany parquet that generally carries the motif of an 8-sided star. A herringbone pattern can also be seen in some of the areas however (Fig. 12).

Inside, the walls of the rooms have been divided into panels (cartouches) and their borders on the edges are decorated with vegetative ornamentation. Between the panels are pilasters with Corinthian or Composite capitals and grooved bodies. There are rounded arches and again rectangular windows with rounded arches in-between (Fig. 13).

All of the walls of the rooms in the building have high ceilings and even the bathrooms are decorated with murals depicting mythological subjects engaged in scenes of bravery and Bacchalian revelry, produced by artists invited for the project from Italy. The images on the ceilings appear inside square or hexagonal panels. The most significant space in the structure in the high-ceilinged Great Hall, where characters of Greek mythology-Apollo, Neptune, Diana, the Muses, Graces, and the Bacchae are depicted (Fig. 6, 14-15).



Fig. 12: Mahogany parquet flooring adorned with 8-point stars and herringbone patterns (URL 7, 8).





Fig. 13: Rectangular panels on the walls with doors and windows with rounded arches in a radial pattern (URL 9).



Figure 14: The Greater Hall of the Palazzo Corpi, with paintings showing the mythological subjects Diana, Neptune, Bacchae, the Muses, and the Graces (URL 10).





Fig. 15: Right: A detail from the lanterned lacunar ceiling in the Greater Hall. Neptune (Müller Fig. 4). Left: Example of a trompe l'oeil in the ceiling (URL 11).



Fig. 16: The metal balustrade going upstairs, with its rounded arches and keystones over empty niches and the lacunar stairwell ceiling with its trompe l'oeil design (URL 12).

In some of the rooms, there are flat wooden ceilings that may or may not have moldings; the ones with moldings usually have trompe l'oeil depictions (Fig. 15: Left). The dining hall of the building features a panel depicting a life-sized Last Supper scene (Üsdiken, Batur 1994, 243; Can 1993, 85). As in all embassy buildings, the ballroom of the structure is quite ornate.

The spacious stair landings lead to the imperial staircases. The walls of the staircase are clad in marble and the steps are of solid marble. The balustrade is of metal. The staircase walls have areas of empty rectangular cartouches set in-between blind rounded-arched niches with keystones (Fig. 16). The balustrade is decorated with the family crest of a dragon motif.

### Conclusion

The embassy buildings that represent concrete examples of Ottoman architecture in the period of Westernization symbolize the Empire's outward orientation and the changes that were brought about by this shift. At the same time, these structures provide evidence of the way in which the ideology and systems of thought prevalent in the Era of Reforms (*Tanzimat*), an important stage in the Ottoman westernization movement, was reflected in architecture. Indeed, the buildings exude many signs of the changes taking place in the Ottoman state and in society.

Concepts of architecture maintained a civil character in this period but Ottoman architecture was under the influence of foreign architectural movements and the architects who promoted these. Almost all of the embassy buildings erected during this time mirror Western architectural styles. The style to be most commonly embraced at the embassies, which were manifestations of the Western influence in Beyoğlu, was the Neo-Renaissance and Neo-classical styles. Palazzo Corpi was the most distinctive example of this trend. The building, or palazzo, completely echoes the Neo-Renaissance style in terms of the body mass of the structure, its spatial organization, facade arrangements and interior decoration. There are however signs of the École-des-Beaux-Arts style as well, as can be seen in the railed parapet. The only Ottoman element to be seen is

its layout and the functionality of the rooms in terms of spatial distribution (ballroom, reception hall, dancing hall).

Designed as a Renaissance palazzo, the structure points to a radical change in Ottoman architecture and stands as a unique example of the architectural program adopted in the period of Ottoman Westernization. Describing this structure in reference to its role as an important representative of the new concepts that were introduced to Ottoman society in the period discussed, this article has attempted to contribute to the literature for the benefit of future generations.

### Comment

The building is today completely occupied by a private club (Soho House) and therefore despite the author's repeated requests, no permission could be obtained for taking photographs either inside or outside the site. The photographs shown here have been taken, with permission, from the Soho House website.

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