

When Constantinople Was a Center of Central Europe (We Were Best Friends) Merve Yıldırım

01
This text is based on sections of my master's thesis research at Goethe University Frankfurt.

02
Karl-Heinz Ziegler, "Deutschland und das Osmanische Reich in ihren völkerrechtlichen Beziehungen," *Archiv des Völkerrechts* 35, no. 3 (1997): 259. All translations from German and Turkish are my own unless otherwise noted.

Looking back at the friendship between Germany and Türkiye, before the establishment of their respective modern states and constitutions, the first written documentation of this relationship can be traced to the Habsburg Emperor Matthias.⁰¹ In 1616, he apostrophized his counterpart Sultan Ahmet as "the Turk, our neighbor and friend" to ratify the peace between the then neighboring empires.⁰² Over the next decades and centuries, this mention was followed by other mutual declarations, treaties, and diplomatic gifts with or in the name of friendship. Although this concept of friendship remained a constant amid their otherwise differing trajectories, one particular moment stands out. Exactly 300 years after the first official reference by Emperor Matthias, moving towards a point of concrete manifestation, an attempt was made to give this abstract friendship a home and a material foundation in Constantinople: the construction of a *Haus der Freundschaft/Dostluk Yurdu* (House of Friendship).

Conducting such an effort in the midst of the Great War may seem unexpected and certainly bold. The project exemplifies the paradox of seeking to provide stability to something often lacking permanence, physicality to something inherently relational, and appearance to something not necessarily visible. Yet, given the specificity of a German-Turkish friendship and the unprecedented nature of such a building, its intended construction appears more experimental than anything else—an effort to enact the proximity, similarity, and familiarity between two entities that had historically lacked all three.

It was in order to give material permanence to a longstanding friendship that, in 1916, the *Deutsch-Türkische Vereinigung* (German Turkish Union, hereafter 'Union') commissioned the *Deutscher Werkbund* (German Association of

Craftsmen) to organize a competition among selected architects for a building to represent the ties between the German and Ottoman Empires. But within two years, both empires had been defeated, changing the financial conditions and possibilities as well as the political intentions and goals. As a result, the construction of the House of Friendship never made it past the laying of the foundation stone. Today, all that remains is a street sign marking the planned building site. And yet, what does this sign still signify to anyone other than a short street, a mere 85 meters long?

Against this background, it becomes clear that the project needs to be understood not only as a material point of intersection of the history, politics, and culture of the two empires on a horizontal level but also, vertically, as their attempt to transfer the idea of their abstract relationship from a state level to the general public. Stimulated by a concrete object to be experienced and sensed, official relations were supposed to be “fueled by the will of the citizens of both nations to come close and remain close.”⁰³ Although the House never materialized, even today the ‘friendship’ seems to be more than just a (forgotten) memory, as former German Chancellor Olaf Scholz emphasized on the occasion of the devastating earthquake in southern Türkiye in 2023: “we are true friends.”⁰⁴

Perhaps the lasting nature of this friendship makes it more surprising that no ‘house’ for this ‘friendship’ has ever been attempted again, and that the history of what would have been a shared space remains largely overlooked and neglected. Indeed, especially since the 1961 bilateral recruitment agreement, which established Turks as the largest minority group in Germany, ties between the two countries have only deepened.⁰⁵ The House of Friendship would have symbolically integrated not only two cultures, but also (parts of) Europe and Asia into a new front “facing a whole world.”⁰⁶ But the memory of Constantinople—today’s Istanbul—as a center of such a union against the West was either successfully suppressed or gradually lost its appeal. And at this point, the question arises: was Constantinople really the only place and 1916 the only time to project a house dedicated to German-Turkish friendship between Germany and Türkiye, and, if so, why?

03
Deutscher
Werkbund and
Deutsch-Türkische
Vereinigung, *Haus der
Freundschaft:
Ein Wettbewerb
deutscher Architekten,
mit einer Einführung
von Theodor Heuss*
(F. Bruckmann, 1918), 5.

04
Die Bundesregierung,
“Kanzler kompakt:
Wahre Freunde
helfen einander,”
posted February 18,
2023, [https://www.
bundesregierung.de/
breg-de/suche/
kanzler-kompakt-
erdbeben-2166198](https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-de/suche/kanzler-kompakt-erdbeben-2166198),
2:16.

05
Bundeszentrale für
politische Bildung
(bbp), “Bevölkerung
mit Migrations-
hintergrund,” April 24,
2024,
[https://www.bpb.
de/kurz-knapp/
zahlen-und-fakten/
soziale-situation-in-
deutschland/61646/
bevoelkerung-mit-
migrationshinter
grund/](https://www.bpb.de/kurz-knapp/zahlen-und-fakten/soziale-situation-in-deutschland/61646/bevoelkerung-mit-migrationshintergrund/).

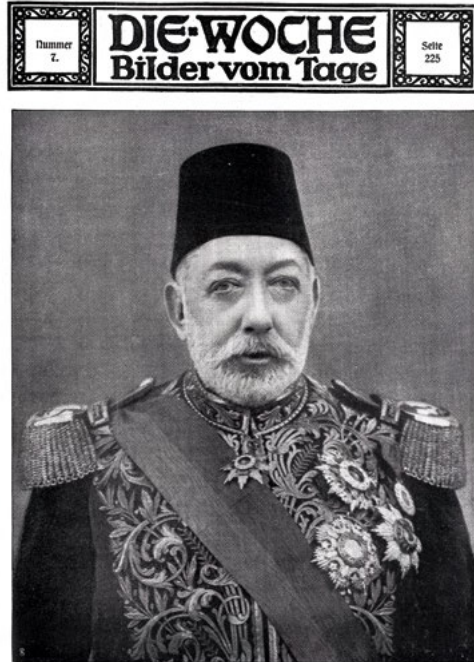
06
Werkbund
and Vereinigung,
*Haus der
Freundschaft*, 47.

Building a Friendship



حضور آغا ابرار اوری حضرت علی لسانبولہ عالی مشیر اویفورہ می آئندہ

- [34] Emperor Wilhelm II in Turkish Field Marshal uniform at Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul (October 15, 1917).



Sultan Muhammed V.

- [35] Sultan Mehmed V was appointed Prussian Field Marshal by the Emperor (1916).

07
'Germany' refers here to the German nation-state established in 1871 as well as to its predecessors.

In order to follow the paths that led the German and Turkish empires to each other as *friends* and the exceptional endeavor to materialize their friendship in a ‘house’ within a specific time and place, it is important to understand the conditions that each empire faced on the eve of the Great War. As we have seen, the friendship between Germany⁰⁷ and the Ottoman Empire can be traced back to earlier centuries, when the word “friend” was first used by the Germans to address the Turkish partner in a treaty. This agreement was reaffirmed in subsequent treaties, but it was in the *Friendship and Trade Treaty* of 1761 between Prussia and the Ottoman Empire that the word “friendship” first appeared in the title of a treaty. Thus, the reference to friendship shifted from a mere personal address and title to a term that characterized and named the official state relations between the two sides. ‘Friendship’ was now established as a contractual framework and political reality. The economic connection this shift brought paved the way

for a new geopolitical space that was to enter the global dynamic. Although the treaty's impact was initially discernible primarily in terms of trade and travel, it set the direction for the expansion of affordances, that is, the increasing potential actions and possibilities within the established space and environment⁰⁸—in *legal* terms of friendship.⁰⁹

The relationship further intensified with the proclamation of the German Empire in 1871 and, even more importantly, the accession of Emperor Wilhelm II in 1888, as did the meaning and value of this specific bilateral friendship. During his reign, the emperor would make three visits to the Ottoman Empire, the first in the year following his coronation. After his first visit to Constantinople, the existing *Friendship and Trade Agreement* of 1761 was expanded to include the German Empire and further augmented as the *German-Turkish Friendship, Trade and Shipping Treaty* of 1890.¹⁰ These agreements solidified into a framework for economic and political cooperation while maintaining their reference to friendship.¹¹

- 08 Originally developed by psychologist James J. Gibson, the theory of affordances is a concept in the field of perception that describes the potential actions that an environment or object offers to an individual. In the context of space and architecture, affordances refer to the ways in which the design and features of a built environment enable or constrain the behavior of its occupants.
- 09 From a legal perspective, it is noteworthy that, considering the Ottoman Empire's sharia-based legal system—which traditionally categorized territories as *Dar al-Islam* (under Islamic rule) and *Dar al-Harb* (outside Islamic governance and potential conflict zones)—Güneş Işıksel highlights how friendship served as a strategic framework to legitimize sustained peaceful relations with non-Muslim states. For an overview of the meaning and practice of friendship in the Ottoman Empire specifically, see Güneş Işıksel, "Hierarchy and Friendship: Ottoman Practices of Diplomatic Culture and Communication (1290s–1600)," *The Medieval History Journal* 22, no. 2 (2019): 12–13.
- 10 Ziegler, "Deutschland und das Osmanische Reich," 261, 270.
- 11 Around this time, the rhetoric of friendship in international treaties was frequently employed to formalize alliances and colonial arrangements, often serving to obscure underlying power asymmetries and strategic interests. For a concise overview of the use of friendship rhetoric in international treaties, see Heather Devere et al., "A History of the Language of Friendship in International Treaties," *International Politics* 48 (2011).

12
Ziegler,
"Deutschland und das
Osmanische Reich,"
269.

13
İlber Ortaylı,
*Osmanlı
İmparatorluğu'nda
Alman Nüfuzu*
(İletişim Yayınları,
2014), 94.

14
The fountain,
originally intended
to be completed for
the 25th anniversary
of Sultan Abdülhamid
II's accession (Sep-
tember 1, 1900), was
officially inaugurated
on Emperor Wilhelm's
birthday (January 27,
1901). See Meryem
Müzeyyen Fındıkgil
Doğuoğlu, "19. Yüzyıl
İstanbul'unda Alman
Mimari Etkinliği
[German Architectural
Activity in 19th-century
İstanbul]" (PhD diss.,
İstanbul Teknik
Üniversitesi, 2002),
244.

Wilhelm II's visits to the Ottoman Empire in 1889 and 1898 were crucial in transforming diplomatic relations into a more personal alliance. It was due to the personal relationship and trust between the emperor and Sultan Abdülhamid II that the friendship gained a new symbolic quality.¹² During his second visit in 1898, Wilhelm II was received "not with diplomatic displays of friendship, but with out-of-control displays of friendship," as the Turkish historian İlber Ortaylı points out.¹³



[36] Before the opening ceremony of the German Fountain on Emperor Wilhelm's birthday (January 27, 1901).

The spectacle of this public display and performance suggested the kind of alliance aimed for: an emotional affinity between peoples rather than merely a political relationship between two imperial rulers. The same visit also marked the donation of the German Fountain, built in the historic center of Constantinople, which foreshadowed the House of Friendship in its materiality, locality and meaning.¹⁴ The fountain not only symbolically broke ground for this friendship's public presentation and reception, it also inaugurated a spatial aesthetic targeting the perception of the local public. Since the abstract and symbolic relations of friendship find a material point of reference in the fountain, it serves as a site of encounter, inviting every (Turkish) passerby into a metaphoric space of friendship.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Friendship

Of course, these visits were neither based on nor motivated by personal, emotional affection. Instead, they were the result of a powerful pro-colonial lobby influencing both the emperor and the bureaucracy, and supporting their quest to expand Germany's cultural, economic, and political influence.¹⁵ As such, this period marked the beginning of what has been described as a *Drang nach Osten* (Drive to the East), moving away from Bismarck's cautious strategy of balancing and toward a more assertive imperial influence—especially in the Ottoman Empire.¹⁶ Representative of this course was the initiation of strategic infrastructure projects during this period, notably the Berlin-Baghdad railway, which facilitated access, movement, and transportation in the region. While stabilizing the integrity of the Ottoman Empire, the concessions granted effectively allowed the railroad to become an instrument of informal empire-building, extending German influence, presence, and profits. The orientation towards the East, however, was not simply a positive action, motivated by imperial ambitions or “colonial desire.”¹⁷ It was also a reaction to external pressure following the establishment of the Triple Entente between France, Britain, and Russia in 1907. Along with Germany's ambition of gaining parity with other colonial powers, further strengthening of economic and political-diplomatic ties with the Ottoman Empire was a strategic response to the isolation created by the Entente.

Conversely, for the Ottomans, the motivation behind official rapprochement with Germany was driven neither by expansionism nor by isolation; rather, it was a response to the encirclement and the subsequent concentration of Western interests upon the future of the Ottoman Empire. The central powers' discourse on the Ottoman Empire, as encapsulated in the *question d'Orient*, occurred in the context of the strategic and political challenges faced by the Empire as a result of significant territorial losses and increasing foreign intervention in its affairs.¹⁸ Realizing that it could no longer remain neutral or divert foreign interests by playing them off against each other, Türkiye adopted a policy of friendship in order to break its own encirclement and decided to approach Germany as the least threatening actor—the one with the

15
Suzanne L. Marchand,
*German Orientalism
in the Age of Empire:
Religion, Race, and
Scholarship*
(Cambridge
University Press/
German Historical
Institute, 2009), 336.

16
Malte Fuhrmann,
*Der Traum vom
deutschen Orient:
Zwei deutsche
Kolonien im
Osmanischen Reich
1851–1918*
(Campus Verlag,
2006), 152–54.

17
Malte Fuhrmann,
“Anatolia as a Site
of German Colonial
Desire and National
Re-awakenings,”
*New Perspectives on
Turkey* 41 (2009): 124.

18
Mustafa Gencer,
“Osmanlı-Alman
Münasebetleri
Çerçevesinde
‘Şark Meselesi,’”
in *Türkler
Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 1,
eds. Hasan Celal Güzel,
Kemal Çiçek,
and Salim Koca
(Yeni Türkiye
Yayınları, 2002), 45.

19
Gencer, *Osmanlı-
Alman Münasebetleri*,
50–51.

20
Ortaylı, *Osmanlı
İmparatorluğu'nda
Alman Nüfuzu*, 81.

fewest colonies.¹⁹ Within this framework of peaceful policy, the sultan took an open and welcoming stance towards the German alliance.²⁰ Shared by many circles, this sentiment was not merely strategic but was also actively reinforced through narratives of cultural affinity in the Ottoman press, which idealized Germany as a natural ally: “The courage, bravery, and high qualities of the Ottomans are also found in the Germans. These two peoples were created practically identical to each other. Ottomans remember the German name with respect and affection.”²¹

Unlike other powers, the German Empire claimed not to be interested in Ottoman territory, instead purporting to be concerned for its preservation and strengthening. The Ottomans hoped that German support would aid them in the belated modernization of their military and infrastructure, whose deficiencies were among the reasons for the Empire’s relative fragility and weakness. Meanwhile, Germany, as a ‘belated Great power,’ aimed to expand its economic outreach to compensate for its ‘delayed’ entry into colonial ventures.²² Thus, the alliance and collaboration between the two empires served their respective interests: the Ottomans sought modernization as part of their nation-building process and (financial) stability, while Germany, in search of its proverbial *Platz an der Sonne* (place in the sun), pursued geopolitical power and (economic) opportunities in the East. In this context, the term friendship reflects a tense if not paradoxical affair: while Germany positioned itself as a guardian of Ottoman territorial integrity, its deepening economic entanglement and infrastructural dominance ensured a growing dependence on German capital and expertise. As asymmetries deepened, friendship revealed its dual aspect—the intention to protect could easily turn into a desire to control.

21 *İkdam*, 2 Cemaziyelahir 1316 [October 18, 1898], 1, quoted in Ortaylı, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Alman Nüfuzu*, 94: “Osmanlıların cesaret ve mertlik ve yüksek nitelikleri Almanlarda da vardır. Bu iki millet birbirinin adeta aynası olarak yaratılmıştır. Osmanlılar Alman ismini saygı ve muhabbetle anarlar.”

22 Gregor Schöllgen, “Dann müssen wir uns aber Mesopotamien sichern! Motive deutscher Türkenpolitik zur Zeit Wilhelms II. in zeitgenössischen Darstellungen,” *Saeculum* 32, no. 2 (1981): 137, 145.

Increasing debt and other economic constraints meant that the Ottoman Empire came increasingly under foreign influence and control, intensifying the hegemonic ambitions not only of the Allied Powers but also of the German Empire.²³ To avoid threatening the balance of power or rousing Turkish suspicions, by displaying any apparent colonial activity toward the Ottoman Empire, Germany characterized its *Drang nach Osten* policy as a *friedliche Durchdringung* (peaceful penetration, or *pénétration pacifique*).²⁴ By forgoing territorial acquisition and material expansion, Germany claimed to avoid “sinking back to the level of territorial nations,” instead asserting its superiority through the “perpetual expansion of the German idea.”²⁵ As part of this new conception, it sought “moral conquests”²⁶ in the Ottoman lands by exporting “spiritual and material culture.”²⁷ Targeting Turkish “hearts and minds,”²⁸ Germany hoped to pursue economic and power-political advantages without assuming direct rule, administrative control, or other responsibilities of a colonial power. *Kulturpolitik*, as Suzanne Marchand describes it, “in theory aimed at conversion without force, friendship without binding ties, and benevolence without short-term reward.”²⁹

23 Cenk Reyhan, “Türk-Alman İlişkilerinin Tarihsel Arka Planı (1878–1914),” *Belleten* 69, no. 254 (2005): 224.

24 The actors of this movement have been referred to as “peaceful imperialists.” For an in-depth study see Jürgen Kloosterhuis, *“Friedliche Imperialisten”: Deutsche Auslandsvereine und auswärtige Kulturpolitik, 1906–1918* (Peter Lang, 1994). For a more detailed account of the development of *pénétration pacifique* within the Ottoman Empire, see Fuhrmann, *Der Traum vom deutschen Orient*, 142–94.

25 Paul Rohrbach, *Der deutsche Gedanke in der Welt* (Langewiesche, 1912), 8: “Zurücksinken auf die Stufe der Territorialvölker” and “immerwährende Ausbreitung der deutschen Idee.”

26 Rohrbach, *Der deutsche Gedanke in der Welt*, 217.

27 Rohrbach, *Der deutsche Gedanke in der Welt*, 225.

28 “Deutsch-türkische Vereinigung,” *Deutsche Levante-Zeitung*, April 1, 1914.

29 Suzanne L. Marchand, “Orientalism as Kulturpolitik: German Archaeology and Cultural Imperialism in Asia Minor,” in *Volkgeist as Method and Ethic*, ed. George W. Stocking Jr. (University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 300.

30
Malte Fuhrmann,
"Deutschlands
Abenteuer im Orient:
Eine Geschichte
semi-kolonialer
Verstrickungen,"
in *Türkisch-Deutsche
Beziehungen:
Perspektiven aus
Vergangenheit und
Gegenwart*, eds.
Claus Schöning,
Hatice Bayraktar
and Ramazan Calik
(De Gruyter, 2020),
13–14.

This informal cultural imperialism, intended to secure investments and increase trade, relied on concrete and material gestures that were both accessible and visible to the target audience. Cultural policy—which encompassed the foreign school service and the foreign press policy as well as private organizations, associations, and journals—sought to influence the local population through representative buildings such as embassies, churches, monuments, and schools, and by exhibitions and events.³⁰ Within the framework of friendship, culture became a means of extending influence beyond official borders without altering them—in other words, facilitating spatial expansion. Up to this point, the effective 'space' of friendship remained confined to individual actors or entities engaged through various agreements and the resulting military, trade, or diplomatic ties. However, for this network to expand beyond formal agreements and manifest in the broader public of both empires—and, by extension, their territories—it was necessary to enact its presence within society, reaching those who were not de facto subjects of friendship.

Against this background, the German-Turkish Union was established in February 1914 by Ernst Jäckh, a leading member of the *Arbeitsausschuss für Mitteleuropa* (Working Committee for Central Europe), following an invitation from German Secretary of State Gottlieb von Jagow.³¹ The Union brought together nearly all major financial and industrial companies with interests in the Eastern Mediterranean region in order to centralize, practice and maintain German-Turkish friendship.³² With this step, what had previously been rather an abstract friendship, a contractual reality and metaphoric space, took on a more tangible form. With the institutionalization of the friendship, the German-Turkish Union emerged as an official actor in its own right, a third political authority with the power to shape relations and curate this friendship.³³

31 Sabine Mangold-Will, *Begrenzte Freundschaft: Deutschland und die Türkei 1918–1933* (Wallstein Verlag, 2013), 247.

32 Fuhrmann, "Deutschlands Abenteuer im Orient," 28.

33 A few years later in 1917, its Turkish counterpart, the *Türk-Alman Dostluk Cemiyeti* (Turkish-German Union) would be founded in Constantinople.

Friendship: A Space between Two

What began as an official declaration of friendship not only created (the perception of) a common space supported by two empires, it became an instrument for uniting and directing disparate interests. Although these interests were related to the same shared space of friendship, they were targeted at different spheres of influence and action that could conflict with, counteract, or play off each other. Within this space, economic, infrastructural, and technological asymmetries or political, cultural, and religious differences did not hinder this friendship; on the contrary, asymmetries and differences opened opportunities for power-political spaces and resources that each side could offer, negotiate, or make accessible to the other. The concept of friendship enabled the development of a shared space even while maintaining the boundaries of the individual entities and the antagonisms between them. Yet when access is not negotiated or willingly offered but instead assumed or asserted, a space of friendship risks being reversed. Since friendship suggests a trust built up over time and is supported by a common past rather than a future, its rhetoric could ultimately be exposed as a mere language of persuasion and disguise if that trust was betrayed.

The core around which this particular friendship evolved, the reason for its resilience and increasing strength and stability, was military cooperation. The challenges faced by the Ottoman Empire—between 1875 and 1878 alone, state bankruptcy, two changes of sultan and a defeat by Russia—led Sultan Abdülhamid II to seek civilian and military advisors from Germany.³⁴ German military missions to the Ottoman Empire began as early as 1882. By the time of the second mission, well before any conception of the House of Friendship, this alliance was already being described as the “(corner)stone of German-Turkish Friendship-building.”³⁵ Although still a metaphor, the allusion to a relationship that was being projected, taking shape, and becoming tangible foreshadowed the later material and real dimension. But in another sense, the image acquired spatial reality even sooner. By 1914, the abstract space of friendship was translated into military borders, as military cooperation evolved into a brotherhood in arms with the Ottoman Empire’s entry into the war alongside

34
Elke Hartmann, “Das Dilemma der Reform: Die Arbeit der deutschen Militärmission im Osmanischen Reich in der Zeit Sultan Abdülhamids II. zwischen Kulturdivergenz und Interessendivergenz,” in *Osmanen in Hamburg: Eine Beziehungsgeschichte zur Zeit des Ersten Weltkrieges*, ed. Yavuz Köse (Hamburg University Press, 2016), 71.

35
Dr. rer. pol. Schaefer, “Zur Gründung der Deutsch-Türkischen Vereinigung,” *Tägliche Rundschau*, January 3, 1914: “ferner bildet die Militärmission einen Eckstein des deutsch-türkischen Freundschaftsgebäudes.”

36
Werkbund and
Vereinigung,
*Haus der
Freundschaft*, 5.

37
Werkbund and
Vereinigung,
*Haus der
Freundschaft*, 8.

38
Werkbund and
Vereinigung,
*Haus der
Freundschaft*, 5.

39
Ernst Jäckh,
*Der goldene Pflug:
Lebensernte eines
Weltbürgers*
(Deutsche Verlags-
Anstalt, 1954), 130.

40
"Wettbewerbe,"
Deutsche Bauzeitung
50, no. 74
(September 13, 1916):
387.

41
Kloosterhuis,
"Friedliche
Imperialisten," 265.

Germany. The joint effort to defend the common space not only tested its limits and boundaries, but also gave them physical expression.

For the general public, these borders and military frontiers were still far away, and the contractual ties of a space just beginning to be contoured and defined were still too abstract. But how to bring something close that in fact just is not? How to make a metaphor concrete, and how to materialize space and, possibly even friendship in a *house*? Now that we are beginning to grasp the abstract space of this friendship, which began as a friendly address and later became a contractual framework and even a defended territory, let us turn to its projected physical manifestation as a 'house.' As we approach the time and place of the House of Friendship, it should come as no surprise that its conception was closely linked to the discourse of war and that it was launched as a project to deepen and consolidate the wartime alliance.³⁶ Against the political and historical background of Turkish-German friendship outlined above, let us examine the architecture as an example of its unique aesthetic appearance.

Shaping a Building

The idea for the House of Friendship was to accommodate "[t]he high purpose of spiritual give and take between the two nations,"³⁷ to create a "center point"³⁸ for German-Turkish collaboration. As a part of cultural policy, the project originated from the private initiative of the German-Turkish Union, with Jäckh as its self-appointed "author."³⁹ Nonetheless, it was "in any case to be regarded as a political matter for the *general* German public."⁴⁰ The idea was promoted extensively in the press and by prominent personalities, quickly gaining widespread support and popularity in society at large, with members of the Union alone collectively donating two million marks.⁴¹ In addition to individual supporters, Jäckh's connections in the state and in business were also instrumental (most notably Robert Bosch), as was the emperor's donation of one million marks. On the Turkish side, the sultan contributed a property as large as five thousand square meters in the *center* of the then-capital, Constantinople. Once again, a metaphor began manifesting as the cultural policy aimed at winning the "hearts and minds of the Turks" gradually

materialized: the project was to be located “not in the foreign neighborhood of Pera or Galata, but in the heart of Turkish life.”⁴² The site chosen from among those suggested to the Union was situated on Divan Yolu, near the fountain gifted by the German emperor. It was surrounded by Cistern Square and the site of the future Turkish parliament building, a project in which Germany was expected to play a role.⁴³ Even though neither building was ever completed, the significance of this planned spatial arrangement extends beyond mere physical proximity. Read symbolically, Germany’s involvement in the construction of the ‘body of government’ reflects its vision of influence and presence in Türkiye’s nation-building.⁴⁴ Rather than imposing direct authority, built interventions—particularly the design and construction of spaces of control and governance—could become a means of embedding and consolidating the long-term projection of power through presence.

A German counterpart of sorts to the House of Friendship in Constantinople, on the other hand, was initially set up in the rooms of a student dormitory in Berlin’s Grunewald before a planned move to a more prestigious and spacious location at the corner of Unter den Linden and Wilhelmstraße in April 1918.⁴⁵ One could certainly argue that the realization of a Turkish space in Berlin progressed more quickly, but its scale remained modest and temporary—perhaps more akin to ‘Apartments of Friendship.’ By contrast, the 49 by 96 meter plot in Constantinople was not only significantly larger but also far from empty. To make room for the project, the demolition of two mosques, a school, and dozens of houses and workplaces was quickly initiated. It seems that any obstacle, regardless of scale and matter, could be overcome, as the sultan’s adjutant-general Mehmed Zeki Paşa candidly admitted: “Do you realize that if our government provides you with a building site in Stambul for your Dostluk Yurdu, this is against our laws? Islamic law does not allow foreigners to own land in Stambul. But you are no stranger to us, you are our best friend.”⁴⁶ While accommodating friends is important, what does a place designed to accommodate friendship look like, what are its form and function?

42
Werkbund
and Vereinigung,
*Haus der
Freundschaft*, 5.

43
Jäckh,
Der goldene Pflug,
330.

44
Fuhrmann describes
the binary process
of a “coincidental
appropriation by
German imperialism
and Turkish national-
ism” as fundamental
to the idea of
colonizing Anatolia.
See Fuhrmann,
“Anatolia as a Site
of German Colonial
Desire,” 143–44.

45
Jäckh,
Der goldene Pflug,
334.

According to the building program, such a building was to house libraries, lecture halls, exhibition rooms, a theater, a cinema, an outpatient department, a telegram room, a café, and apartments. At the request of the Union, the task of finding a suitable architect for the project was delegated to the Werkbund.⁴⁷ Jäckh, who was at the forefront of both organizations, hoped thereby to enhance the Werkbund's prestige and increase its opportunities.⁴⁸ The Werkbund was entrusted with a key role in shaping the House of Friendship, both in terms of its architectural design and also in defining the symbolic terms of German-Turkish friendship and thereby making a geopolitical statement. As such, this project was not only central to the Werkbund, it was to be foundational in the ideological and aesthetic construction of an imagined supranational space known as *Mittleuropa* (Central Europe).⁴⁹

The selection of architects took place at the *Werkbund's* annual meeting in Bamberg in June 1914, where Jäckh also delivered his lecture *Der Werkbund und Mittleuropa*. In relation to the *Werkbund's* political agenda, Jäckh outlined the project's political role and aesthetic design as a key component of German foreign policy. Accordingly, in his speech, Jäckh imagines the friendship between the German, Austrian and Ottoman empires as a larger geopolitical force that aesthetically demonstrates clear distinctions and boundaries, asserting that "After all, the borders of a future Central Europe, the greater Central Europe, are also indicated in this

46 Mehmed Zeki Paşa to Jäckh, April 2, 1917, quoted in Jäckh, *Der goldene Pflug*, 329: "Ist Ihnen auch klar, daß, wenn unsere Regierung Ihnen in Stambul einen Bauplatz für Ihren Dostluk Yurdu zur Verfügung stellt, dies gegen unsere Gesetze geschieht? Das islamische Recht ermöglicht keinem Fremden Grundbesitz in Stambul. Aber Sie sind ja kein Fremder für uns, sondern unser bester Freund..."

47 A German association of artists, architects, designers, and industrialists, founded in 1907 in Munich. Its purpose was to establish a partnership between traditional craftsmanship and industrial mass production, promoting quality in design and contributing to the creation of a new cultural and aesthetic identity in Germany. The *Werkbund* was a significant force in the early 20th century, influencing the development of modern architecture and design, and laying the groundwork for what would later become the Bauhaus movement.

48 Karl Ernst Osthaus-Archiv Hagen, DWB1/211, "Protokoll der Vorstandssitzung," June 13, 1916.

way.”⁵⁰ This idea of an affinity between aesthetics and (geo) politics further underscores the significance of architecture in its spatial manifestation.⁵¹ The project should be understood not as a passive representation of relations but rather as active participation in shaping them, giving spatial form to something hitherto undefined.

Against this background, Jäckh presents a harsh critique of the “Europeanization” of Stambul, a neighborhood known today as Fatih. While acknowledging the contributions of French and Italian architects, he also accuses them of having “deindividualized, deadened, deformed” and indeed “raped” Constantinople.⁵² Here, the distinction extends beyond architecture, highlighting a deeper political contrast. As the historian Malte Fuhrmann observes, Germany’s tendency to identify with the allegedly subjugated Other was a defining characteristic of German colonial ideology, shaped by a 19th-century self-image of having been subject to French colonialism.⁵³ This affinity for the Turks, evident in the romanticization of Turkish architecture, was not merely a reflection of political rhetoric but an active effort on the part of Germany to align itself aesthetically with Türkiye, reinforcing and justifying Germany’s political distinctness from other European states by framing them as the ultimate *Other*.

49 Originally emerging in the nineteenth century, *Mitteleuropa* gained strategic importance during the Great War as part of a vision for a German-led supranational order. While Friedrich Naumann, *Mitteleuropa* (Reimer, 1915) popularized the idea, Ernst Jäckh had already articulated this vision in an earlier Werkbund lecture, framing design as a geopolitical instrument in the envisioned integration of Central Europe and Asia Minor. For broader context on the early 20th-century imperial and geopolitical frameworks relevant to the House of Friendship, see Kenny Cupers, *The Earth That Modernism Built: Empire and the Rise of Planetary Design* (University of Texas Press, 2024), chap. 4.

50 Ernst Jäckh, *Werkbund und Mitteleuropa* (Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1916), 20.

51 Cupers argues that Ernst Jäckh should be understood “as a geopolitician in his own right,” emphasizing his role in linking modern design with German political ambitions and geopolitical strategies. See Cupers, *The Earth That Modernism Built*, 229.

52 Jäckh, *Werkbund und Mitteleuropa*, 22.

53 Fuhrmann, “Deutschlands Abenteuer im Orient,” 15.

54
Jäckh,
*Werkbund
und Mitteleuropa*, 22.

The *Werkbund*'s and, by extension, the entire German attitude toward the protection, preservation, and defense of Turkish architecture reflects the German policy of preserving the territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire, which set Germany apart from other European states. On an international level, this was accomplished by contextualizing the project within 'Central Europe,' as opposed to the 'West.' This distinction is further addressed at the urban scale and, more subtly, through architectural styles. The geopolitical contrast established with Central Europe is followed by a socio-cultural differentiation between the 'Turkish' architectural landscape of Stambul and the 'European' neighborhood of Pera. Finally, an art-historical contrast is indicated by the juxtaposition of the "Mohammedan mosque" as a symbol of Islamic architecture and the "Greek temple" as a symbol of Western architecture. At the height of this discourse, Jäckh strategically employs the stark contrast between deeply rooted cultural-religious expressions to support his argument. He presents the "organic" Turkish and *Werkbund* approach to architecture as one that "grows from within" in direct opposition to the "representative" Greek/Western temple, which had developed "from the outside in." In conclusion, he states: "The German *Werkbund*'s sense for the organic finds a like-minded note in the Turkish sense of building."⁵⁴ The term "organic" here implies the development of a natural and authentic style or (building) culture, as opposed to a forced and synthetic one that is external to the circumstances. Ultimately, the term aims to validate a sense of place while recontextualizing historical continuities. Again, all levels of comparison presented by Jäckh serve to construct, justify, and legitimize an innate proximity to—and unity with—the Ottoman Empire by excluding the West *aesthetically*.

Regardless of the final design, the building process itself became an instrument for the aesthetic creation and performance of a distinct common culture and space. Yet space cannot simply be created, nor did it need to be. These projects were framed as a reconstruction of what was already shared, whether in borders or buildings. Ultimately, individuals were to believe in these structures by inhabiting them. Perhaps even more important than the project itself were the actions and interactions related to it that sustained

the divide the building itself was meant to define. In this respect, Jäckh's approach to the site visit was as a means of distinguishing approvingly "that no European had undertaken a Constantinople building project in the way we Germans had."⁵⁵ But as already mentioned, the project was to concern the whole of German society, and Jäckh's assertion of Germany's unique affinity with the East was not sufficient in itself. The *Bulletin of the German-Turkish Association*, published in *Deutsche Levante-Zeitung* on July 16, 1916, presents "11 Hints for Travelers to the Orient," suggesting understanding, appropriate behavior, and sympathetic attitudes towards Turks on account of their cultural seniority: "The cradle of our culture was in the East. It is only since the end of the Middle Ages that we have gone our own way. So enter the Orient as you would your grandfather's house, filled with awe and gratitude!"⁵⁶

The image of the Orient itself as a "house" is striking in the context of the construction of a House of Friendship, "house" in each instance signifying the concretion of an abstract idea, its appearance in space. Less obvious, perhaps, are the political implications of how this idea was realized. Although the House of Friendship symbolized a shared spatial vision for both Germany and Türkiye, there was a tension in the project between Germany's vision of imperial expansion and the Ottoman Empire's desire for preservation. However, the rather passive involvement of Türkiye should not be misunderstood as a lack of agency. It was not the Ottoman Empire that had to construct an innate proximity to Germany; rather it was Germany that, in seeking more than proximity, had to devise a narrative to legitimize its presence. For such a spatial narrative, architecture can serve as a common ground, a supposed "a-historical reference that enables the translation of difference into similarity."⁵⁷ The House of Friendship provided a potent metaphor for that common ground—yet one that still had to prove its worth by being realized. And for that, it had to be *designed*.

55
Jäckh,
*Werkbund
und Mitteleuropa*, 22.

56
"Mitteilungen der
Deutsch-Türkischen
Vereinigung e.V.
(Bulletin of the
German-Turkish
Association)," *Deutsche
Levante-Zeitung*,
July 1, 1916:
"Die Wiege unserer
Kultur stand im
Osten. Erst seit
Ausgang des Mittel-
alters sind wir eigene
Wege gewandelt.
Tritt deshalb ein in
den Orient wie in
das Haus deines
Großvaters, erfüllt
von Ehrfurcht und
Dankbarkeit!"

57
Gülsüm Baydar,
"The Cultural Burden
of Architecture,"
*Journal
of Architectural
Education* 57, no. 4
(2004): 25.



[37] Students playing chess and checkers at the German-Turkish Friendship Dorm in Berlin (November 10, 1917).

Friendship by Design

58
Gropius was invited but could not participate due to military service, see *Werkbund and Vereinigung, Haus der Freundschaft*, 8.

59
Werkbund and Vereinigung, Haus der Freundschaft, 46–47.

At the same *Werkbund* meeting in Bamberg, the architects who would participate in the competition were chosen in a confidential vote, as a result of which invitations were sent to Peter Behrens, German Bestelmeyer, Paul Bonatz, Hugo Eberhardt, Martin Elsaesser, August Endell, Theodor Fischer, Walter Gropius, Bruno Paul, Hans Poelzig, Richard Riemerschmid and Bruno Taut.⁵⁸ These architects were then required to submit their designs within two months, by October 15, 1916, to be judged about a month later. The competition was judged openly by the architects themselves and was won by Bestelmeyer, with Behrens coming second and Riemerschmid third. However, due to both the close involvement of the emperor and significant changes in plot size, Bestelmeyer's design underwent several adaptations, until finally, despite mounting political uncertainties, the foundation stone was ceremonially laid on April 27, 1917.⁵⁹

Though the Union initially planned to wait until the end of the war, the chosen date—the anniversary of Sultan Mehmed V's accession to the throne—was ultimately set under pressure from the Turkish government, which sought to strengthen its prestige.⁶⁰ While neither the emperor nor the sultan attended the ceremony, officials of both empires did, alongside representatives of the Union. The emperor did visit the construction site later the same year, on October 16, testifying to the importance of this project. The visit was closely followed by the press as well as being filmed by Turkish and German crews in an effort to publicize the message of a successful and productive cooperation.⁶¹ The primary goal of these media efforts was to promote the wartime alliance and bolster a supposedly unbreakable friendship.

60
Kloosterhuis,
"Friedliche
Imperialisten," 631.

[38]
Sultan Mehmed V
receives Emperor
Wilhelm II
(October 15, 1917).



[39]
Jäckh presents
the building plans
to Emperor
Wilhelm during
his visit to the
construction site
(October 16, 1917).



Within this context, the war was not taken to jeopardize the realization of the project but rather to enhance its symbolic function as the spatial representation of a friendship, public appearance and promotion of the House were accordingly further cultivated. An exhibition was organized in Berlin, presenting all eleven design proposals.⁶² The exhibition was accompanied by a catalog featuring an introduction by Theodor Heuss, a co-founder of the *Werkbund*, who would later become the first president of the Federal Republic of Germany. A testimony on how the materialization of friendship might have looked can be found in this 1918 catalog, which presents all the proposals. But maybe Heuss's comments are even more telling than the individual architectural projections of friendship depicted in the catalog. What his judgments reveal are aesthetic expectations of the building, which reflect expectations of the appearance of the friendship itself. Seen from this perspective, these comments refer less to the House of Friendship itself than to the project and the projection of friendship as a space of appearance.

Heuss begins with a fundamental question: should the architectural statement be artistic or political? Unlike an embassy, he argues, which tried to "represent" the state it "serves," the House of Friendship was meant to be a "self-portrayal" not of the state but rather of a "nation." Yet the building was nonetheless to be representative in character, capable of expressing German national identity. Here another question posed by Heuss becomes more pressing: "Do we have an architecture that clearly expresses the German essence?" While acknowledging that "the building will have to

61 The film was shown for fourteen days in Turkish cinemas, see Jäckh, *Der goldene Pflug*, 330. The German film material is available at Filmschatzarchiv, *Isanbul-Konstantinopel 1917: Kaiser Wilhelm II Visits Turkey's Capital*, YouTube, posted May 24, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HTMGwFVMr8I>. The Turkish film material has been incorporated into a short documentary produced by the state television channel TRT 2: TRT 2, *Tarihin Ruhu / Kayzer'in İstanbul Ziyareti / 15. Bölüm*, YouTube, posted July 10, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jEpr7TmbONA>.

62 Tobias Schlunk, *Das 'Haus der Freundschaft' und der Genius loci: Martin Elsaessers Beitrag in dem Architekturwettbewerb des deutschen Werkbundes für ein deutsch-türkisches Kulturhaus in Konstantinopel 1916* (Wasmuth Verlag, 2018), 46.

blend in with the cityscape,” this expectation is set against a broader claim: that through this building, “German architecture will be given its first opportunity to demonstrate its skills in an outstanding location in Türkiye.”⁶³ While various architectural styles were associated with Germany, the pursuit of a distinct and unified national style revealed a lasting sense of inferiority with regard to the well-established architectural traditions of France and Italy. German architects were expected to foreground their national identity in their work. As they operated within the *Werkbund*, their designs were inevitably institutionalized and tied to the *Werkbund*’s broader political ambitions for Germany and, by extension, Central Europe.

With a third question, reminiscent of Jäckh’s speech in Bamberg, Heuss asks to what degree architects should concern themselves not only with the urban context and environmental aspects of the setting for their designs, but also with the question of “whether and to what extent impulses from Oriental architecture should and wanted to be adopted.”⁶⁴ Heuss follows up an assessment of the state of German architecture with a suggestive evaluation of its Turkish counterpart. Acknowledging the rich architectural history of the “Islamic Orient,” he declares that it had become creatively “sterile” and dependent on “Western Europe,” particularly through the influence of French architects. Not only had its buildings become “boring” and fallen prey to an “academic schematism” alien to “the Orient, its character and tradition,” but Heuss also notes that the Turks had remained unconcerned with this development, as evidenced by their deliberate surrender to “Westernization”—at least until now. Suggesting that a turn may now be underway, he identifies the aim of what he calls “Orientalizing” designs as “to show the Turks in a great attempt what can be developed from the formal ideas of their past.”⁶⁵

63
Werkbund and
Vereinigung,
*Haus der
Freundschaft*, 6–11.

64
Werkbund and
Vereinigung,
*Haus der
Freundschaft*, 6.

65
Werkbund and
Vereinigung,
*Haus der
Freundschaft*, 6–7.



[40]

This was surely a noble aspiration but in retrospect appears rather tragicomic, as it created a double bind both for the participating German architects and for the Turks who later trained with some of them.⁶⁶ Ought their designs to appear Turkish in a German manner, or rather German in a Turkish manner? In other words, was it “right and possible to come to the Turks in a ‘German’ house in such a ‘Turkish’ way”—the question remains as to how the architects navigated the commission and instructions from the German side while simultaneously addressing the Turkish context.⁶⁷ Underlying this negotiation is a deeper tension posed by Heuss earlier. His curious initial question—should architecture be making an “artistic” or a “political” statement—raises the issue of whether the political should visibly manifest in the design. However the brief to express national character in a façade might be interpreted, the aesthetic was inextricably bound up with the political through the House’s projected role and

66 For a third of the participants, the competition served as a gateway to future professional opportunities in Türkiye. While Bruno Taut and Paul Bonatz took on influential teaching roles, others such as Hans Poelzig and Martin Elsaesser contributed to the architectural development of the newly founded Turkish state. See Burcu Dogramaci, *Kulturtransfer und nationale Identität: Deutschsprachige Architekten, Stadtplaner und Bildhauer in der Türkei nach 1927* (Gebr. Mann, 2008).

67 Werkbund and Vereinigung, *Haus der Freundschaft*, 41.

place in shaping an amicable space between Germany and Türkiye. Seen from this angle, this project is less about the political manifesting aesthetically than about an aesthetic constituting politics: Germany seeking to appear as Türkiye's best friend.

Needless to say, the term friendship was from the start more an instrument for achieving a desired end rather than a mere description of a state of events, and the House in this respect was a "curtain act," to borrow the words of the architectural historian Suha Özkan.⁶⁸ Behind the curtain, the peaceful performance of friendship was little more than a play of war. As part of this display, Germany encouraging the sultan to declare jihad was framed as an act of friendship, strategically constructed to help win the war 'as friends.'⁶⁹ War, in Jäckh's imagination, seemed to be a comparatively small step before "the German victory in this world war" provided an opportunity "to organize the new world politics and a new world culture."⁷⁰ But before abandoning the notion of friendship entirely, let us hold on to this sentimental idea for just a few more paragraphs. In the end, what would such a building really have looked like?

The House of Friendship

Setting aside Jäckh's confession—"I have always held with the Apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthians: '...To the Jew I have become a Jew..., to the Greek a Greek, to the Roman a Roman...' So: a Turk to the Turks!"⁷¹—the architects' approaches raised further political questions instead of providing aesthetic answers, thereby revealing the negotiation of power through representation. Hence, Martin Elsaesser's

68

Suha Özkan, "Türk-Alman Dostluk Yurdu Öneri Yarışması, 1916," *O.D.T.Ü. Mimarlık Fakültesi Dergisi* 1, no. 2 (1975): 178.

69 For the related "Revolutionary propaganda through Turkey," see Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, *Denkschrift betreffend die Revolutionierung der islamischen Gebiete unserer Feinde*, ed. Steffen Kopetzky (Das kulturelle Gedächtnis, 2018), 17–19. For a detailed discussion of the Ottoman declaration of Jihad during the Great War and its strategic aspects, see *Jihad and Islam in World War I: Studies on the Ottoman Jihad on the Centenary of Snouck Hurgronje's "Holy War Made in Germany"*, ed. Erik-Jan Zürcher (Leiden University Press, 2016).

70 Jäckh, *Werkbund und Mitteleuropa*, 6.

71 Jäckh, *Goldener Pflug*, 323.

72
Werkbund
and Vereinigung,
*Haus der
Freundschaft*, 26.

73
Werkbund
and Vereinigung,
*Haus der
Freundschaft*, 33.

74
Werkbund
and Vereinigung,
*Haus der
Freundschaft*, 15.

75
Werkbund
and Vereinigung,
*Haus der
Freundschaft*, 35.

76
Jäckh,
*Werkbund
und Mitteleuropa*, 21.

77
Werkbund
and Vereinigung,
*Haus der
Freundschaft*, 5.

design was questioned by the jury as to whether it “hit the right tone in picking up Persian motifs,”⁷² while Bruno Paul “said himself that he drew a building that could just as easily be in Munich and Berlin as in Italy,” aiming to convey its purpose “as unobtrusively as possible.”⁷³ Peter Behrens’s proposal was discussed as “American” or “Turkish,”⁷⁴ and Hans Poelzig’s “imperiously cheerful” design prompted concerns about “whether such a grand gesture is not too self-willed, self-confident and grandiose when the German will to friendship asks for hospitality in a foreign country.”⁷⁵

As these questions remained unanswered, the House of Friendship—a building never built, never materialized—also never became the intended symbol of friendship it was meant to be. Instead, it became a metaphor for a friendship that never got beyond the laying of its foundation stone. The building was intended not to reflect any kind of existing friendship, but rather to serve as a medium for the construction of a specific German-Turkish friendship that others would experience, witness, and produce. Not only would every future visitor and passer-by add to the evidence of its existence, but the discourse around the House—including the competition, activities, practices, and preparations surrounding it—was a testimony already. Even before its realization, the project was already reshaping perceptions of landscape and geography, envisioning Constantinople as “the oriental center of our Central Europe.”⁷⁶ And although Germany’s plan for a Central Europe was never realized, its projection was the driving force of a friendship that, for a while, itself constituted such a space. Once so close as to constitute a center of Europe, Istanbul, the former Constantinople, now looks across the Bosphorus to Asia again. Though perhaps Heuss’s words will hold true and the friendship will prove more enduring:

As long as [the German-Turkish] friendship does not have the character of an accidental combination (comparable to the English-Romanian, the Serbian-French ‘alliance’ of those years), they have the greatest interest in ensuring that official state relations are fueled by the will of the citizens of both nations to come close and remain close.⁷⁷



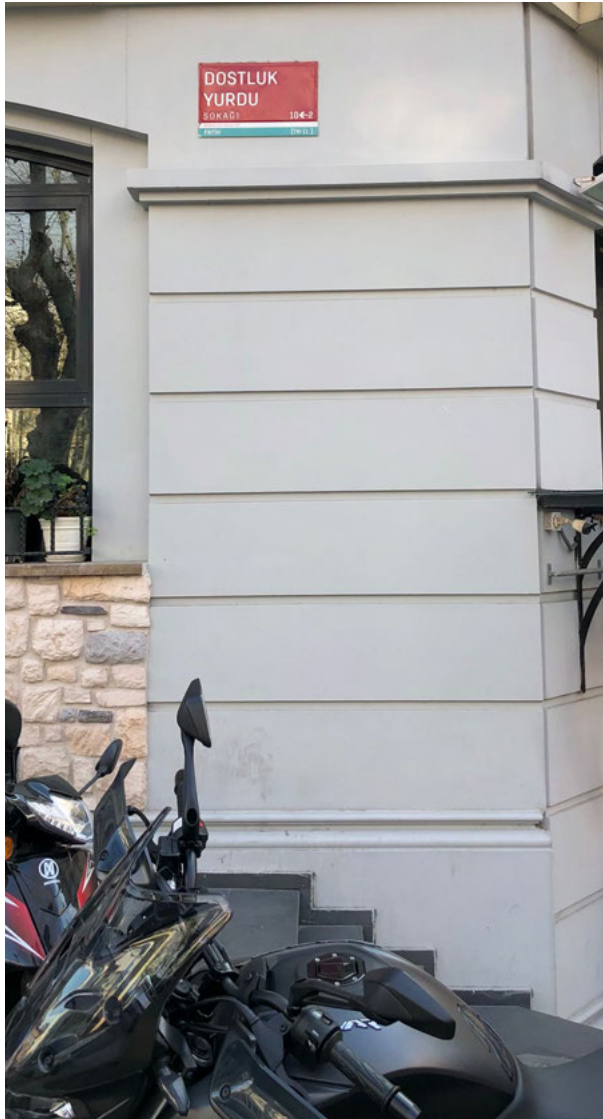
[41] The foundation ceremony (April 27, 1917).

Ultimately, we did not see a building, but through it, mechanisms of building and constructing relations that are still lasting.⁷⁸ And while their friendship did not require a building to exist, the ‘House’—much like the idea of Central Europe—needed friendship to be realized. Yet its failure to materialize affirms friendship as a projected space of appearance rather than a physical space with borders or walls. Even without the built structure, the very projection and creative process generated, for the project’s duration, the perception of a spatial reality that never physically existed. Thus, the architectural designs and styles need and perhaps should not be discussed—just as the House of Friendship seemed able to make something present without ever being visible itself. To look at the proposals might actually distract us from seeing how friendship was being made to appear. And yet something of the House becomes visible in hindsight: its evanescent presence at the foundation ceremony is difficult to unsee.

78 Only last year both countries celebrated the “centenary of the friendship treaty,” see Anadolu Ajansı, “Cumhurbaşkanı Erdoğan, Almanya Başbakanı Scholz ile ortak basın toplantısı düzenledi,” YouTube, live-streamed October 19, 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVDh7AgWwxE>.

WHEN CONSTANTINOPLE WAS A CENTER OF CENTRAL EUROPE

While the foundation stone was also the project's tombstone, the event—marking the beginning of construction—now also reveals that something had died and was buried here too. But, looking back on the friendship between Germany and Türkiye should not trap us in the past. Rather, it invites us once more to consider Turkish-German relations as an inherently *aesthetic affair* and to appreciate the countries' historic friendship as a distinctive instance of unresolved style.



[42]

