

THE HAGIA SOPHIA should continue to be presented with all its layers, as a symbol of interfaith brotherhood and world peace.

CALL FOR HAGIA SOPHIA

10 July 2020

The Hagia Sophia, dating from the 6th century, has been admired around the Mediterranean for centuries as an architectural masterpiece. It has drawn the admiration of visitors with the marbles adorning its floors and walls, its wide dome, and its glittering gold and silver mosaics. Converted into a mosque by Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror in the mid-15th century, the monument has been highly respected by the Ottomans. Sultan Mehmet II established a foundation to protect this important cultural heritage site, ensuring its survival by endowing various properties for its upkeep.

After the War of Independence, the cultural heritage of Anatolia was transmitted to the care of the Turkish Republic, and experts were invited to work on monuments and to preserve them with their identities intact. Some of the endowed properties (foundations, or waqfs) were adaptively reused as museums, libraries, institutes and such, thereby providing for their maintenance and repair. Among examples that can be cited are the Seljukid madrassahs in Konya and Sivas and the Mahmut Pasha Bedesten (Bazaar) in Ankara.

The decision taken in 1934 by Atatürk and his cabinet members for the Hagia Sophia to become a museum reflects the worldview of the Republic of Turkey and its interpretation of 'common cultural heritage'. Secular Turkey opted for the museum function, to allow for scientific research that would inform the best way to safeguard a monument of universal value and present it in the best possible way. With the transformation to a museum, the artistic attributes of the monument that had previously been covered over were once again made open and visible. This function allowed the figured mosaics and calligraphic plates to stand side by side in peaceful co-

habitation. The mihrab, pulpit, sultan's gallery and lecterns, which had been added for use as a mosque during the Ottoman period, were preserved in situ, and the Hagia Sophia was presented for the people from around the world to visit as a monument reflecting our multi-layered history.

Thanks to this visionary decision by the Turkish State, researchers from many countries studied the architecture, loadbearing system, and decorative works of the monument, as well as developing proposals for its conservation. International expert contribution was provided by UNESCO for the protection of the Hagia Sophia, which was inscribed on the World Heritage List as part of the Historic Areas of Istanbul in 1985. Various international organizations, including ICCROM, the World Monuments Fund, Princeton University and the German Research Fund, conducted advanced technical analyses on the dome and piers, supporting the conservation efforts to mitigate the effects of time on the structure.

Today, there is a debate about transforming Hagia Sophia into a mosque. The decision for the use as a museum strengthened the perception of the multi-layered character that the Hagia Sophia accrued over time. It is essential that the change in use does not make it more difficult to grasp and perceive the Hagia Sophia as a masterpiece of 6th century art and architecture. For this reason, preserving the museum function of the Hagia Sophia also means preserving the Outstanding Universal Value that encompasses this identity, which justified its inscription as World Heritage.

Based on the principle of continuity in State decisions, the most rightful approach would be the continuation of the museum function. The use of the Hagia Sophia as a museum was taken as a basis in its acceptance on the World Heritage List. As a State Party that is signatory to the UNESCO World Heritage Convention, the Republic of Turkey is obliged to comply with the Convention's stipulations. The decision taken by Atatürk, who founded the Republic of Turkey, and his friends must also be respected. The Hagia Sophia is the most visited museum in Istanbul. Scientific studies and conservation works for the monument are ongoing. The discovery of an angel's face on the northeast pendentive in recent years hints at the surprises that the building may still have for us. The mosaics in the interior,

which have been preserved for centuries and are of high artistic value, should not be screened over.

The purpose of heritage conservation is to reveal the authentic values and attributes of cultural assets, to preserve and maintain them, to respect their historical and other values, and to ensure that every segment of society understands these values and celebrates them as enriching and adding meaning to their lives. Features that are integral parts of the monument should be displayed where they belong. What is respected at the international level, in the arena where nations of the world meet, is the preservation of historical memory and the universal, holistic nature of the culture shared by nations. The Hagia Sophia's presentation, intact with all its layers, should not be obstructed, so this magnificent monument of world architectural history can keep inspiring us all as a symbol of interfaith brotherhood and world peace.

ICOMOS TURKEY NATIONAL COMMITTEE