

NOTEBOOK ARCHITECTURE

## Keeping a roof over Ottoman traditions

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FORTY years ago the hills descending from the Blue Mosque in Istanbul were crowded with traditional Ottoman wooden houses, picturesquely cascading down to the Sea of Marmara. Today almost all have been replaced by concrete blocks. The race is on to save the last of them.

One group survives around the mosque of Süleyman the Great. Another, still more embattled, group is clustered around the Zeyrek mosque established in the Byzantine Pantokrator church, the burial place of the last Comnenan Emperors. The importance of both areas was recognised by their inclusion in the World Heritage listing for Istanbul — though all the houses shown in the nomination dossier of a typical Zeyrek street have been demolished since the listing was published in 1985.

The appeal of Istanbul's wooden hillside houses lies in the harmony that comes from consistent use of boarding, bay windows, shallow roofs and deep, overhanging eaves. Added to that is the typically Turkish desire to gain a view of the street, however slanted, and a prospect over rooftops down to the sea. Hence the kiosk-like top storeys of some houses. In the 1960s the travel writer Michael Pereira described the view from one house across to the Süleyman Mosque: "Grey, remote, triumphant, its crested pinnacles flashing gold in the sun. To the south the minarets of Şehzade above the arches of the aqueduct; to the north a sweep of blue water beneath the hill of Galata."

Most of the Zeyrek houses were built between 1800 and 1840 and now many appear in the last stages of decay. Often they are occupied by migrants from southeast Turkey who lack the funds to make repairs.



Ottoman houses are being restored through the Turkish Timber Association, Unesco and the World Heritage Committee

All is not lost, however. In December 2003 the Save Our Roofs campaign was launched by the Turkish Timber Association with an endorsement from Unesco. Initially focusing on Zeyrek, it aims to repair the roofs of 50 houses at a cost of \$2,000 each. The first restoration project started last month with funds from Siemens.

A second project, funded by the World Heritage Committee, will start shortly. The Zeyrek Cultural Association has commissioned David Michelmore, a British expert on timber construction, to draw up specifications for repairs. He says: "Externally many of these houses look in a most dreadful state. Inside we have found

that the main frames, which are usually oak, are often in quite good condition. In addition, many of the houses retain wooden ceilings with good mouldings and wooden panelling. Some retain bed cupboards where beds were folded away during the day."

The tradition of timber houses stems from the great earthquake of 1509. Timber houses were quick to construct and are at less risk of collapse during earthquakes (hence their use in San Francisco). Michelmore continues: "The great danger came from fire — not that timber houses catch fire more easily than masonry ones, but because streets were narrow and houses close together."

Ali Sirri Oren, president of the Zeyrek Cultural Association, says: "The costs of repairs and improvements are considerable but not more than building new houses. Economies can be achieved if we can secure a deal with the Ministry of Forestry to supply the oak."

According to Michelmore, the timber was imported in the 19th century, mainly from the Balkans via the Black Sea, and numerous small ships carrying timber are still to be seen sailing down the Bosphorus.

Detailed surveys have been drawn up of most of the houses, with excellent input from Istanbul Technical University. Two thirds of residents, many of whom are owner-occupiers,

would like to stay if the houses can be improved, and some owners are moving back to historic districts where the EU is helping to fund improvements.

Istanbul's authorities are also beginning to recognise the importance of protecting the city's traditional domestic architecture as well as its great Byzantine and Islamic monuments. It is to be hoped that central government will follow suit. If a serious start can be made next year there is hope that other groups of timber houses will be rescued, both inside and outside the walled city.

[www.zeyrek.org.tr](http://www.zeyrek.org.tr)  
[www.ahsap.org/gallery/album13](http://www.ahsap.org/gallery/album13)