

# The Armenian Architectural Heritage in Turkey: The State of Research

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**Abstract** The Armenian architectural heritage in Turkey has been left into disrepair and neglect for a long time. It represents a difficult and contested heritage especially for its relation to the Genocide, becoming the physical trace left of the absent Armenian community in Anatolia. For many years it was considered as the heritage of 'the other' and not particularly interesting for detailed studies and research. The activities by several institutions in Turkey, aimed to rediscover a forgotten and unknown heritage, led to increasing interest and the awareness of the critical condition of this heritage. This change led to numerous initiatives of preserving, at least virtually, what remains today of the Armenian architecture and to the increment of research activities in different academic institutions in Turkey.

**Keywords** Armenian architecture. Heritage. Destruction. Research. Preservation.

**Summary** 1 Introduction. – 2 The Armenian Architectural Heritage in Turkey. – 3 Research Projects and New Perspectives. – 4 Conclusion.

## 1 Introduction

This study aims to present the current state of research on the Armenian architectural heritage in Turkey. After a brief introduction on the studies related to the history of Armenian architecture, the paper focuses on some current research projects that interested the Armenian architectural heritage in Turkey.



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The history of the Armenian architecture has been studied extensively, with the result of monumental works such as *L'architettura armena dal quarto al diciannovesimo secolo* by Paolo Cuneo (1988); *Les arts arméniens* (The Armenian Arts) by Jean Michel Thierry and Patrick Donabédian (1987); the studies by Adriano Alpago-Novello in the eighties. Also recently, comprehensive works have been compiled, such as Mourad Hasratian's *Histoire de l'architecture arménienne des origines à nos jours* (2010) and Christina Maranci's *The Art of Armenia: An Introduction* (2018).

These works describe the historical and typological developments of the Armenian architecture. They cover a vast geographical area, including the territories of the today Republic of Armenia, Western Armenia/Eastern Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan; and a long-time span, usually beginning with the early Christian era (with the first examples of Christian-Armenian religious architecture) until the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries.

The architecture of the Ottoman period is almost left out from these studies except for some references to religious buildings, presented as not particularly innovative examples and resembling the late Greek typology.<sup>1</sup> Christina Maranci reports some references to several Ottoman cities as Aleppo, Smyrna, Kayseri, and Kütahya, which became important centres for Armenian artisanal activity in the Ottoman period. The author underlines the influential role of the *amiras* as court architects, as for the case of the Balyan family, however omitting their role in the rebuilding of churches for the Armenian community before and during the *Tanzimat* period (Maranci 2018).

The Ottoman period is often reductively described as a period of stagnation and decline, during which non-Muslim minorities were not allowed to build new places of worship. Even though the Armenians, as the other non-Muslim communities, had limitations regarding the building of sacred places, they were able to maintain them through restoration works authorised and controlled by the Ottoman authorities. In these regards, the Ottoman documentation contains a series of authorisation requests and permissions to repair churches. Therefore, from the Ottoman conquest until the *Tanzimat* Reforms (1839-1856), we mainly witness reparation works for the survival of the sacred architecture.

The *Tanzimat* reforms led to a big change in the building activity of the non-Muslim communities. In this period, the Armenians, as

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<sup>1</sup> Thierry and Donabédian refer to religious architecture in the Ottoman Empire since the seventh century as follows: "Dans le domaine de l'architecture, les édifices religieux n'eurent rien de novateur. La plupart des églises présentaient une typologie grecque tardive, à savoir une croix inscrite à quatre colonnes libres soutenant une coupole surbaissée à tambour bas ou, pour les communautés plus pauvres, de simple églises à une nef" (1987, 316).

the other non-Muslim minorities, could build and rebuild their sacred places. This marked the beginning of an intense building activity that saw the proliferation of churches both in the capital city and in the provinces. These new examples of churches appear very different from the traditional Armenian religious architecture and the medieval models of churches. The preferred architectural style was hybrid, eclectic, influenced by the European tradition and the Ottoman imperial style of the *Tanzimat* period.

The introduction of the *Tanzimat* (Reorganisation) edict in 1839 and *Islahat* (Reform) Edict in 1856 led to several transformations in different spheres of the Ottoman culture, including the urban landscape of Constantinople. The imperial architecture of the *Tanzimat* period saw the non-Muslim architects and artisans as the main characters in creating the new Imperial image, especially in the capital city. The Ottoman Armenians played an important role in this transformation. The Balyan family was involved in the main projects of imperial palaces and mosques, as the Dolmabahçe Palace and the Ortaköy mosque in Istanbul.

However, the Balyans and the entourage around them were also the designers of the Armenian churches built/rebuilt in the capital city and other regions of the Empire in the nineteenth century. Naturally, the style chosen for these new projects was a hybrid style combining the imperial style and the influences from Europe, which the Armenian architects learned during their studies abroad and reintroduced in the Ottoman context.

The religious architecture of the nineteenth century, considered not very interesting from an architectural point of view, is often overlooked in the history of Armenian architecture. However, the newly built and rebuilt churches are examples of the Armenian identity of the time, as part of the Ottoman culture. The hybridity in style was proper of the Ottoman architecture in general, but also of the religious architecture of the other non-Muslim communities, such as for examples synagogues and Greek orthodox churches. This aspect might be considered as an expression of a sense of belonging to the Ottoman culture and of a common taste in arts and architecture.

Moreover, the churches rebuilt under the patronage of the Balyan family and its entourage represent also the image of the *amira* class, a privileged class composed of wealthy bankers, architects, artisans.<sup>2</sup> The Balyans were *amiras* and architects as well. For instance, Amira Karapet Balyan invested in the Armenian community founding educational facilities, supporting the artisans, and rebuilding several churches, and at the same time, he was the architect in charge of several church projects during the first half of the nineteenth century (Wharton 2015, 56-7).

<sup>2</sup> On the role of the Armenian *amira* class see Barsoumian 1982 and 2017.

As already mentioned, the Armenian religious architecture of the nineteenth century, mainly because of a lack of interest in these architectural models, has not been much investigated, both internationally and in Turkey as well. In the studies on the Armenian architecture little attention has been given to the nineteenth-century projects until the development of recent studies that started to include the great number of churches that have been built all over the Empire. In this regard, it is important to mention *Armenian Architects of Istanbul in the Era of Westernization* published by the Hrant Dink Foundation in 2010. This study introduces the most important Armenian architects during the Ottoman Modernisation era, their contribution to the transformation of Constantinople, and their role in the reconstruction of religious buildings. Moreover, Alyson Wharton dedicated a monography to the Balyan family, entitled *The Architects of Ottoman Constantinople. The Balyan Family and the History of Ottoman Architecture* (2015), focusing on the important role of the Balyans in the history of Ottoman Architecture and as architects and founders of churches for the Armenian *millet*.

## 2 The Armenian Architectural Heritage in Turkey

The Armenian heritage in Turkey is inevitably associated with the disappearance of the Ottoman Armenians as a consequence of genocide, which is still officially denied in Turkey. As Ashworth states:

The removal of the people, whether through deportation or extermination, still leaves the problem that traces of their heritage survive in the areas that they formerly inhabited. Indeed such relicts become dissonant in a number of respects. They clearly no longer relate to the current population, among whom they may evoke feelings of unease or even guilt, and could form the basis of later claims, whether political or financial, upon the successor occupants. It is not surprising, therefore, that the removal of populations is often accompanied by the physical eradication of their principal heritage landmarks. (Ashworth, Graham, Tunbridge 2007, 109)

In the Armenian case, the remains of the Armenian heritage in Turkey are guilty reminders of an inconvenient past. Thus, it is not surprising that after 1915 the Armenian architectural heritage was destroyed, transformed, and reused. The surviving remains became useless ruins, excluded from the national cultural heritage as they belong to 'the other', namely 'the enemy', but at the same time they are traces of what happened, a genocide and for this reason, they should be erased or disguised.

The destruction of the Armenian heritage in Turkey has been considered as part of the genocidal process. For instance, Dickran Kouymjian in several of his works refers to the destruction of Armenian cultural monuments as the completion of the genocide through removing “all Armenian cultural remains or depriving them of their distinguishing national elements” (Kouymjian 2003, 7). More recent studies considered the destruction of Armenian cultural heritage referring to Raphael Lemkin’s definition of cultural genocide:

Cultural genocide can be accomplished predominately in the religious and cultural fields by destroying institutions and objects through which the spiritual life of a human group finds its expression, such as houses of worship, objects of religious cult, schools, treasures of art and culture. By destroying spiritual leadership and institutions, forces of spiritual cohesion within a group are removed and the group starts to disintegrate. (Lemkin 1947, P 154, 2)

Anush Hovanissian in her study *Turkey: A Cultural Genocide* supports the theory that vandalism against Armenian cultural monuments is an act of genocide, and precisely considers it as related to the project of exterminating the Western Armenians (Hovanissian 1999, 147-9). Moreover, Peter Balakian focuses on Raphael Lemkin’s concept of cultural destruction in the case of the Armenian Genocide conceiving destruction of culture as part of genocide. As regards specifically churches, the author stresses the fact that Armenian churches were not simply one-day-a-week houses of worship, but they were spaces for the communal life, repositories of artistic and precious records; they embodied the continuity of Armenian civilisation. He reports that for Lemkin the destruction of such cultural spaces was central for the eradication of any collectivity, and the destruction of houses of worship was essential for his concept of destruction of culture as a component of genocide (Balakian 2013, 65). Furthermore, Nanor Kebranian highlights the primacy of cultural destruction in Lemkin’s notion of genocide as it represents collective damage perpetrated through the

form of systematic and organized destruction of the art and cultural heritage in which the unique genius and achievement of a collectivity are revealed in fields of science, arts and literature. (Kebranian 2016, 243-4)

The study and research on Armenian heritage, and non-Muslim heritage in general in Turkey, has been always influenced by political reasons and the changing attitude towards minorities during the years. In the transition from a multiethnic empire to an ethnocentric nation-state, the Republic of Turkey, in the twentieth century, the inclination towards non-Muslim heritage changed with consequences in

the uses of churches. After the Armenian Genocide and the exchange of population with Greece, their sacred buildings were used as prisons, storages, barns, and so on. The change in uses corresponded also in a development in research and approaches. It is possible to analyse this complex development in the perception of minority heritage and its management considering three main phases, as suggested by Kaya and Çalhan (2018) for the study case of Izmir and its Greek Orthodox heritage, such as destruction, adaptation, and acceptance.

The first phase, mainly characterised by destruction, coincides with the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 and the associated nation-state building process. The cultural heritage of non-Muslim was associated with the enemy and thus conceived with hostility. In the Armenian case, after 1915, churches were left in disuse and reutilised as prisons, storages, and other purposes.

A second phase, which mostly developed after the fifties, is characterised by partial assimilation and adaptation to new functions. The Armenian churches were re-contextualised according to the new uses and assimilated in the urban context with their new functions. These reuses were usually characterised by the erasure of references to the Armenian origin of the building by covering the interior decorations and by removing the inscriptions. During this second phase, the conversion into mosque was reintroduced as a practice of appropriation, that contributed to silencing the Armenian past of the buildings.

Another issue that developed during those years is related to the late registration of non-Muslim buildings as cultural properties in the Cultural Assets and Museum Department (*Kültür Varlıkları ve Müzeler Genel Müdürlüğü*), the institution responsible for the conservation of cultural heritage in Turkey. For instance, several Armenian churches in the region of Kayseri, in central Anatolia, have been registered only in 2006 when they were already in a precarious condition. This aspect is particularly relevant to understand the current condition of a great number of Armenian churches, that were not considered cultural properties until recently and thus not protected. For this reason, most of the churches were left without surveillance, exposed to vandalism, or completely neglected.

During these first two phases, the controversial position of the Armenian heritage in Turkey led to a limited interest in researching and studying the architectural production. The Balyan family itself, composed mainly by imperial architects, has been partially studied and their Armenian origin was frequently hidden or disguised. During one of my visits at the Dolmabahçe Palace of Istanbul in 2007, the official guide presented the architect of the building as Baliani, an Italian architect in charge of the imperial construction. This name is clearly a transformation of the name Balyan into an Italian surname. This fabrication was supported by the massive presence of Italian and French

architects involved in the imperial projects of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

The negligence towards the Balyans and their importance as imperial architects is also demonstrated by the absence of any monument of their personalities or any public recognition of their works. The only monuments representing the architects are inside the courtyard of Surb Astvatzatzin church in Beşiktaş, and the Balyan family's mausoleum was erected only in 2016 at the Armenian cemetery of Üsküdar. Both initiatives have been supported and funded by the Armenian community.

The role of the Balyans as imperial architects has been questioned also in academic research. Among the studies, it is relevant to mention the contribution of Selman Can, who completed a PhD dissertation on the role of Seyyid Abdülhalim Efendi as the legitimate architect of several works attributed to the Balyan family (Wharton 2015, 20). In a book chapter entitled *Armenians in the Architecture of the Late Ottoman Period*, Can summarises the main points of his doctoral research and underlines that the Balyans were the contractors (*kalfa*) and not the actual architects, and he then provides a list of buildings wrongly attributed to members of the Balyan family (Can 2008, 332). This interpretation found an echo also in the media and following these studies several articles have been published supporting the idea that the Balyans were not the architects of numerous imperial works. For instance, an article published by the newspaper *Millyet* in 2012 reported that the Balyan family were not architects, rather they were the constructors.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, an article published in 2007 by the newspaper *Zaman* states that the attribution of imperial works, such as for instance the Dolmabahçe palace, to the Balyans should be reconsidered as they were contractors and not architects.<sup>5</sup>

In response to this kind of interpretation, the already mentioned study by Wharton (2015) includes different sources and gives an accurate description and interpretation of the role of the Balyan family in the imperial architecture of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth

<sup>3</sup> This personal experience is not isolated and other similar testimonies were reported on the media. For instance Garo Paylan, a member of the Turkish parliament, experienced a similar situation and denounced it on different online media: <https://gagrule.net/paylan-why-dont-turks-say-that-dolmabahce-palace-was-built-by-armenian-architect/>; [http://www.sbb.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/19-Kasim-2018\\_PBK\\_Gorusmeler.pdf](http://www.sbb.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/19-Kasim-2018_PBK_Gorusmeler.pdf); <http://gov-wa.info/?p=2852&lang=en>; Raffi Bedrosyan refers to the same issue as follows: 'The Turkish Tourism Ministry and official guides refrained from identifying the architects of these buildings as the Armenian Balyans until the 2000's and instead, mentioned an Italian architect called Baliani', (<https://mirrorspectator.com/2017/10/05/armenian-island-bosphorus/>).

<sup>4</sup> The full article in Turkish is published at the following link: <https://www.milliyet.com.tr/gundem/balyan-ailesi-mimar-degil-muteahhitti-1489374>.

<sup>5</sup> To read the full text in Turkish refer to: <http://www.bolsohays.com/haber-32939/dolmabahce-sarayi-nin-mimari-balyan-ailesi-degilmis.html>.

century. Moreover, the author focuses on the Balyans' education in Europe and the introduction of European artistic trends into the Ottoman architecture through their imperial works.

Likewise, the scholar Elmon Hançer, involved in several projects supported by the Hrant Dink Foundation and KMKD, focused on the role of the Balyan family as imperial architects, as in the article "Sultanın mimarları Balyanlar" (The Sultan's Architects: The Balyans) published in *Atlas*, a popular Turkish journal, in 2007.

The third phase developed in the twenty-first century, in connection with the European Union accession for Turkey and the consequent introduction of heritage politics more focused on acceptance, tolerance, and preservation aimed at creating tourist attractions (Kaya, Calhan 2016, 100). In this period several Armenian churches have been restored and open to public use and differently from the reuses of the second phase, the restoration projects included also reference to the Armenian origin of the buildings. The last phase encompasses also the reintroduction of the references to the Armenian origin of the buildings. Examples of recent reuses of churches as cultural centres and libraries display the attempt to restore the Armenian past of the buildings by reintroducing the inscriptions previously removed.

This last phase is also characterised by a return to the multicultural character of Turkey. Since the early twenty-first century, the government supported the conservation of Christian sacred sites as part of the "Faith Tourism" programme, aimed to emphasise:

the multi-religious composition of Anatolia and aimed to present Turkey as the homeland of a tolerant nation-state. (Över 2016, 174)

In this context, through the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the government promoted the restoration and reopening of Armenian religious buildings - e.g. the church of Aght'amar opened to the public as a tourist destination in 2007, and since 2010 it was open once a year as part of the "Faith Tourism" plan (Över 2016, 174). In the specific case of Aght'amar, it is important to highlight how the Armenian site, from oblivion and neglect, became one of the most important tourist sites advertised by Turkish airlines, the national flag carrier airline of Turkey, during its flights. In these regards, the perception of Armenian architectural heritage changed, namely from the idea of something useless and hostile, to become a resource, especially for economic reasons related to tourism.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Faith Tourism destinations are presented on the website of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, without any reference to be Armenian religious buildings (<http://www.kultur.gov.tr/EN-99252/faith-tourism.html>).



These initiatives contributed to the partial survival of some buildings, even though the Armenian origin of the sites is rarely mentioned. Religious architecture can become a “solely tourist object, without a clear definition of which ethnic or religious community it belonged to” but at the same time presented as an object of multi-religious past (Över 2016, 187). For instance, the church of Aght’amar is still presented by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism with the turkified name of *Akdamar* (in Turkish ‘white vein’) without any reference to the Armenian identity of the building.<sup>7</sup> Despite this aspect, the church is represented as a symbol of multiculturalism and used to advertise Turkey as a tolerant country and respectful of its multi-religious past. In this context, the Armenians as well become tourists of the Aght’amar church, forbidden to practice religious ceremonies, except for the once-a-year Holy Mass (Över 2016, 190).

Another example is the city of Ani, which through the years became an important touristic attraction. After its recognition by UNESCO World Heritage list in 2012, the number of visitors increased by 40-45%, leading to works of restoration and works aimed to facilitate access to the site.<sup>8</sup>

Similarly to Aght’amar, the site of Ani is presented and narrated on the tourist signs avoiding any mention to the Armenian origin of the city, completely in contrast with the significance of Ani for the Armenians as “a sacred place, a central cultural reference, and a symbol of nationhood” (Watenpaugh 2014, 530).

However, the third phase encompasses also the more recent approaches to the Armenian cultural heritage: the idea of a shared heritage and the rediscovery of a forgotten heritage through a variety of projects. For instance, the site of Ani was at the centre of a series of events intended to reevaluate the multicultural past of the city, including the Armenian one. In this regard, an important exhibition entitled *Poetry of Stones, Ani: An Architectural Treasure on Cultural Crossroads* was organised at the gallery Depo, in Istanbul in March 2018 and in Yerevan in July 2018 [fig. 1]. This project represents a significant attempt to organise an exhibition on the architectural heritage of Ani and the surrounding area with the collaboration of experts

<sup>7</sup> The official website of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism dedicated to Van and the church of Aght’amar: <http://www.vankulturturizm.gov.tr/TR-76403/akdamar-adasi-ve-kilisesi.html>.

<sup>8</sup> The increasing number of visitors to Ani was presented by the Turkish press as in the following article by Hürriyet Daily News of August 4, 2017. It is, however, important to underline how the article nevertheless refers to the Armenian past of the site of Ani with the only indication “Bagratuni dynasty” as follows: “The first settlement in Ani dates back to the 3000s B.C. and became home to many civilizations such as the Saka Turks, Sasanians, Bagratuni Dynasty, Byzantine, Seljuk, Ottomans and Russians” (<http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/unesco-registry-increases-interest-in-ani--116301>).



Figures 1a-b The two exhibitions *Ani. Poetry of Stones* in Istanbul and in Yerevan

from Turkey and Armenia. The involvement of Armenian professionals is an aspect worth mentioning, as for the past projects the presence of Armenians discussing and intervening in the decisions related to their own cultural heritage was quite rare. The exhibition is the result of a series of projects concerning the buildings of Ani, as the stabilisation and conservation programme of Surb P'rkich' church that begun in 2012 with the collaboration of the Turkish architect Yavuz Özkaya and the Armenian architect Armen Kazarian. Moreover, the church was reinforced with stones coming from Armenia

through the involvement of sculptors from Yerevan.<sup>9</sup> This example of a common project on an Armenian site can be the starting point for moving from a contested heritage towards the perception of a shared heritage that required a common commitment for its preservation.

The third phase saw also the proliferation of important projects aimed to rediscover the Armenian architectural heritage in Turkey and several actions have been proposed to save what remains of this heritage and prevent further destruction.

### 3 Research Projects and New Perspectives

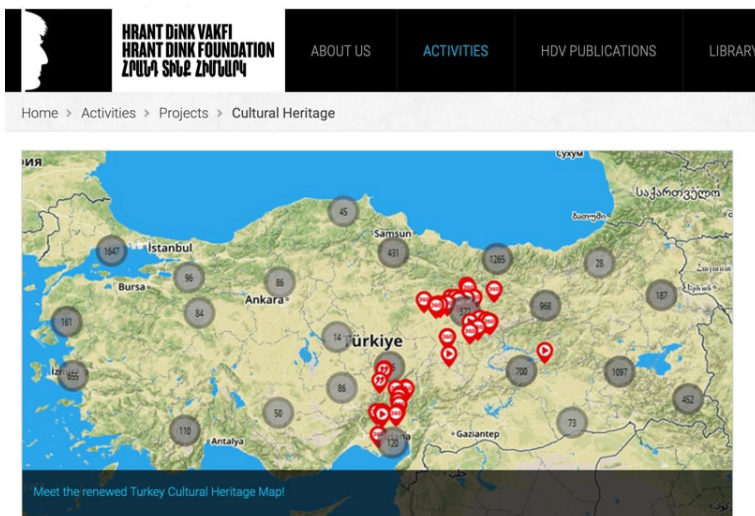
The assassination of the Armenian journalist and writer Hrant Dink in 2007 in front of the offices of *Agos*, the bilingual Turkish-Armenian newspaper of which he was the editor-in-chief, marked the beginning of a new interest in the Armenian culture and heritage. After his death, a foundation, namely Hrant Dink Vakfı (Hrant Dink Foundation), was set up in his name. Among the numerous activities of the foundation, a relevant place is given to the multicultural heritage of Anatolia with the creation of an interactive map where the buildings belonging to the Armenian, Greek, Jewish and Assyrian communities are located and documented. This tool is particularly important to locate churches that are almost destroyed and in some cases even forgotten because of their transformation in different reuses. Moreover, the map includes also important references to historical and archival documentation useful to research and study non-Muslim religious architecture in Turkey [fig. 2].

Another important institution, involved in the preservation of multicultural heritage, is KMKD (Kültürel Mirası Koruma Derneği / Association for the Protection of Cultural Heritage). Its aim, as stated on the official website, is “to preserve and to raise awareness of religious, civil and military monuments constructed by different communities within the boundaries of the Republic of Turkey”.<sup>10</sup> KMKD collaborated with the Association Anadolu Kültür<sup>11</sup> in the compilation of a volume reporting the results of architectural heritage assessment of non-Muslim heritage in different cities of Turkey. The study focuses on structures built by communities that no longer are present in Anatolia and that have been abandoned to face gradual destruction.

<sup>9</sup> For more details on this matter refer to the interview of the two architects by the newspaper *Agos* published in March 27, 2018: <http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/ya-zi/20398/ermenistandan-aniye-gelen-taslarin-hikayesi-ya-da-bir-ortacag-baskenti-olarak-ani>.

<sup>10</sup> Official website of KMKD: <http://kmkd.org>.

<sup>11</sup> The Chair of Anadolu Kultur, Osman Kavala was arrested in November 2017 and he is still in detention.



**Figure 2** The Cultural Heritage Map. It is an online interactive map that records the cultural heritage of different communities in Anatolia. It includes photos, videos and relevant documentation for further researches. © Hrants Dink Foundation. <https://hrantdink.org/en/>

The buildings have been measured and photographed, analysing the current condition and the risk assessment, including suggestions for interventions to minimise the risks. The aim of the project is also to convey the importance of this heritage to the public sensibility, as the attitude of local people living among these structures has a direct effect on its survival.

These projects and their related activities are important tools for the preservation of the Armenian architectural heritage in Turkey, intervening as a solution in the absence of specific policies or activities of preservation. Moreover, they function as archives of important documentation that is precious for further researches.

The changes in conceiving the Armenian heritage and the recognition of its relevance for the cultural heritage of Turkey led also to a proliferation of studies concerning the Armenian architecture. It is indeed interesting to observe how the academic interest in this matter increased in recent years. Several master theses and doctoral dissertations have been completed at the departments of Architecture and Restoration of numerous universities all over the country. These works are extremely important, together with the activities of the NGOs, as they fill the void left by the state institutions, hence preservation projects are still very limited.

## 4 Conclusion

The changing perception of the Armenian cultural heritage, through the activities of several institutions, encouraged the study and the investigation of Armenian architecture in Turkey. Firstly, the activities of surveying, documenting, and mapping shed light on the current condition of the Armenian sites in Turkey, mainly characterised by ruination and destruction, and emphasised the need for proper studies and activities aimed to save what can be still be saved. Secondly, the rediscovery of this heritage and its importance as part of a shared heritage of Turkey led to an increase of projects, researches, and studies that contribute to fulfilling the void left by the limited intervention and preservation activities supported by the state institutions of Turkey.

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