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ARTICLE

From stench to hygiene? Public toilets as liminal spaces in late Ottoman İstanbul

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Abstract

This article examines public toilets in late Ottoman İstanbul as liminal spaces where urban governance, public health, and everyday life intersected. It argues that these sites functioned as arenas through which modern notions of hygiene, order, and civilization were articulated and contested. Drawing on archival documents, municipal records, and contemporary accounts, the study shows that while purpose-built public toilets began to emerge in limited numbers in the early twentieth century, urban sanitation largely relied on mosque latrines and other semi-public spaces, blurring the boundary between public and private. At the same time, sanitary interventions in bureaucratic buildings reveal how the modern toilet was imagined as a controlled, technical environment, even as persistent problems exposed the limits of this ideal. Taken together, these sites demonstrate that sanitation did not follow a linear trajectory of modernization but unfolded through technological experimentation, institutional frictions, and everyday practices shaped by concerns over smell, gender, and property value. By tracing how waste, infrastructure, and urban space were continuously negotiated, the article positions public toilets as critical nodes in the making of late Ottoman urban modernity.

Keywords: public toilets; İstanbul; public health; urban sanitation; Ottoman Empire

Introduction

In 1911, the director of the *Servet-i Fünun* journal, Ahmed İhsan, had a journey on the Danube by ferry, moving from Vienna toward Budapest, Belgrade, and Bulgaria. Making comparisons between the East and the West during his trip, he reflected on public health and manners as key indicators of civilization and progress (*temeddün ve terakki*), observing a decline in these standards as he moved from west to east. At this point, he recalls a conversation with a friend, who claimed that the most decisive measure of a country's commitment to public health was something loathsome (*müstekreh*) even to name: public restrooms (*umumi helalar*). Ahmed İhsan agreed, contrasting the clean, odorless, and well-maintained facilities of Germany with those of Ottoman İstanbul, which he described as permeated by stench – even in state buildings and mosques. Concluding with sorrow (*teessür*), he remarked that if progress

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is measured by public restrooms, then "woe betide us." His account reveals how civilizational hierarchies were mapped onto sanitation, turning an abject object into a marker of progress and reform.[1]

Sociologist Harvey Molotch (2010, 4) claims that the toilet is an instrument and institution that both reflects how people and societies operate and also reinforces the existing pattern. Building on this insight, this article argues that public toilets in late Ottoman İstanbul were neither marginal infrastructures nor mere sensory nuisances. Rather, they emerged as critical sites where science, reform, and urban governance intersected in practice. Faced not only with wars, economic strain, and political instability, but also with recurrent public health crises, Ottoman municipal authorities, officials, intellectuals, and engineers increasingly framed interventions into latrines, cesspools, and sanitary facilities through the language of *fen* (science) and *hıfzıssıhha* (public hygiene), emphasizing technical rationality, hygienic order, and administrative regulation. In this context, waste management was redefined as both a practical and a moral concern – closely tied to public health, sensory discipline, and the performance of modern governance.[2]

Distinct from many nineteenth-century cities where public toilets emerged as purpose-built municipal infrastructures, in İstanbul they took shape through the reliance on existing spaces such as mosque complexes, shops, and other semi-public sites. Shaped by persistent financial constraints and a fragmented administrative landscape, public toilets did not constitute a clearly defined infrastructural system until the early twentieth century, but rather an improvised and contested field of practice. Bringing insights from urban environmental history into Ottoman historiography, this article shifts attention away from large-scale infrastructural projects and institutional reforms toward the everyday sites through which urban environments were actually experienced and governed. Rather than approaching sanitation as a top-down process driven solely by municipal planning, the article focuses on public toilets as points where environmental conditions, sensory perceptions, and administrative practices converged. In doing so, it shows that issues such as smell, overflow, and contamination were not peripheral concerns, but central to how urban order was defined, contested, and maintained in the late Ottoman city.

Theorizing excreta, toilets, and toiletry technology

What is sociopolitical about public toilets, and why should public toilets be considered as a legitimate subject of historical inquiry? In his influential study, David Inglis (2001, 15) presents a compelling analysis on why excreta and the way excretion had been organized should be considered as an important component of Western modernity.

[1] Ahmed İhsan, Hatıra-ı Seyahat: Tuna Üzerinde Bir Hafta. *Servet-i Fünun*, no. 1055, 11 Ağustos 1327 (August 24, 1911), 351–353.

[2] On the broader moral and social meanings attached to science in the late Ottoman period, see M. Alper Yalçınkaya's *Learned Patriots* (Yalçınkaya 2015). As Yalçınkaya (2015) argues, scientific discourse functioned not merely as a language of technical expertise but also as a means of defining virtue, social responsibility, and legitimate authority. Claims to scientific knowledge were frequently tied to ideals of usefulness and service to society, making fen a key idiom through which competing visions of progress and reform were articulated.

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In pre-modern societies, excreta circulated visibly within urban space, appearing in streets, courtyards, waterways, and shared latrines, reflecting a different relationship between bodies, waste, and the built environment, one in which excretion was embedded within ordinary social and spatial practices rather than systematically removed from them.[3] Excreta functioned also as a material with economic and symbolic value, reused as fertilizer or discussed openly in medical, religious, and moral discourses (Reid 1991, 71–83). The transition to modernity marked a decisive break with this regime of presence. Modern Western societies developed what Inglis (2001, 42–57) conceptualizes as a modern fecal habitus: a historically specific set of embodied dispositions through which excreta came to be understood as radically contaminating, morally offensive, and incompatible with civilized life. This habitus did not operate solely at the level of discourse; it structured everyday sensory experience, shaping how bodies learned to see, smell, avoid, and manage waste. The emerging bourgeoisie's high sensitivity to odor and sight, along with declining tolerance for the visible presence of excreta, became defining features of modern bodily comportment, and paved the way for the development of the large-scale systems of water-based sewerage, alongside the intimate means of disposal used by the individual, water closets (Inglis 2001, 58–62, 71). Hygiene, in this sense, was not only a medical concern but also a moral and political project, achieved through the reorganization of urban circulation.

As excretion was increasingly confined to isolated and regulated spaces, the modern city continued to generate a persistent need for public toilets, revealing a structural tension between the ideal of private bodily management and the realities of collective urban life. As Mary Douglas (1966, 36) famously argued, dirt is not an inherent quality of matter but matter out of place; in this sense, the problem of public excretion lay less in waste itself than in its appearance outside the spatial and social boundaries that modern hygiene sought to enforce. Thus, even when excretion is individualized and rendered solitary, it does not cease to be social. Rather, sociality is reconfigured through norms of privacy, sensory regulation, and architectural separation, making the public toilet a key site where these norms are negotiated rather than suspended (Oberg 2019).

The expansion of public toilets coincides with the last quarter of the nineteenth century, a period marked by rapid industrialization, dramatic urban population growth, and the reorganization of cities in order to manage both the health risks and the everyday bodily needs generated by this new urban mass.[4] This period also witnessed a shift from miasmatic theories of disease to germ theory, which reframed excreta as mobile biological threats and strengthened the case for permanent sanitary infrastructures such as sewers and public toilets as essential to urban health (Melosi 2008). By the 1890s, London had installed several dozen public urinals and underground conveniences as part of broader efforts to manage sanitation and urban congestion,

[3] One striking example of communal excretion can be found in the Roman world. For a nuanced analysis of how latrines functioned across Roman society (one that pays close attention to regional variation within the Roman Empire), see Kamash (2010).

[4] According to Martin Melosi, thanks to the expansion of commerce and manufacturing, between 1830 and 1860 the population of American cities increased by 552 percent to 6.2 million. Between 1820 and 1870, the urban population grew three times as fast as the national population. See Melosi (2008, 41).

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while Dublin followed on a smaller scale due to fiscal and administrative constraints (Flanagan 2014). In colonial Hong Kong, efforts to establish a modern public toilet system emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. Here, public toilets occupied an ambiguous position between public utility and private enterprise, serving simultaneously as sanitary facilities and sites of economic extraction through the trade in night soil (Chong 2016). Cities such as Chicago and Toronto were slower to provide permanent facilities, treating excretion largely as a private matter and relying on temporary or commercial solutions, which kept public toilets scarce well into the early twentieth century (Flanagan 2014). In Mexico City, both public sanitary provision and access to private household facilities remained uneven, with many working-class residents relying on shared toilets and bathing spaces in densely populated *vecindades* (courtyard housing complexes) in the 1920s. There was also a public stance against public toilets, claiming that every toilet was a site of infection (Vitz 2018, 165–168).

A growing body of scholarship has emphasized that toilets and excremental infrastructures were also key sites through which publicness, citizenship, and power were negotiated. Studies in urban and colonial contexts, for instance, have shown that the management of human waste was inseparable from projects of surveillance, spatial ordering, and moral regulation, particularly in densely populated cities and imperial settings. Some scholars have demonstrated how excrement became a crucial marker of racialized and colonial difference, while urban historians have highlighted how sanitation regimes translated concerns over filth into administrative practices that rendered certain populations governable (Anderson 1995; Esty 1999). Feminist analyses further complicate this picture by showing how access to toilets – and the spatial organization of sanitary facilities – shaped differentiated forms of public participation, producing gendered boundaries within ostensibly public space. Within this literature, toilets emerge not simply as endpoints of infrastructural systems, but as everyday sites where norms of propriety, visibility, and belonging are repeatedly enacted and contested. The regulation, inspection, and classification of toilets thus constituted a practical means through which modern states materialized abstract notions of hygiene, order, and the public itself.

What makes a public toilet in the Ottoman context?

Ottoman efforts to establish public toilets should be analyzed within the larger frame of urbanization efforts and the changing understandings of health and public hygiene under the Tanzimat regime. The establishment of the Şehremaneti (İstanbul Municipality) in 1855, followed by successive municipal regulations in the second half of the nineteenth century, marked a decisive shift from a decentralized, neighborhood-based system – where residents bore primary responsibility for cleaning and maintenance – toward a codified, state-supervised model of urban governance (Ergin 1995, 1601–1640).[5] Within this transformation, the regulation of streets, pavements, and underground networks, alongside the development of infrastructural projects, became central to remaking the city's physical fabric.[6] Sewer construction,

[5] For works on İstanbul's urban development, see Çelik (1986), Ortaylı (2000), and Gül (2012).

[6] For the work analyzing Ottoman İstanbul's infrastructures, see, for instance, Küçük (2026), Gümüş-İspir (2025), Kentel (2018), and İleri (2015). For the case of sewers in İzmir, see Adak (2022).

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though far less studied than water supply systems, formed a crucial component of this process.[7] Archival traces suggest the existence of an inherited and partially repurposed network of black channels[8] in İstanbul but nineteenth-century reforms increasingly tied street widening, paving, and drainage works to broader sanitary and medical concerns. In a rapidly expanding imperial capital facing recurrent epidemics, war-related demographic and economic pressures, and shifting population patterns, the organization of sewage and waste removal was not merely a technical matter. It was integral to redefining municipal authority, public health, and the very material conditions under which urban life – and by extension, public toilets – could function. The reorganization of İstanbul's streets and infrastructure coincided with a transformation in public hygiene (*hıfzıssıhha*), which, under the influence of bacteriological knowledge, reinterpreted foul smells, stagnant water, and waste as carriers of invisible microbial life. As David Barnes (2006, 11) terms it, this sanitary–bacteriological synthesis linked sensory experience to laboratory science, making odor control, drainage, and sewer construction central to securing collective health. Even as microbes displaced miasma, smell retained administrative force as a proxy for danger – detectable by inspectors, actionable for citizens, and treatable by municipalities. As studies on nineteenth-century urban environments from Egypt to the United States show, odors translated invisible risks into tangible concerns, becoming a practical language of pollution, cleanliness, and morality (Fahmy 2002; Kiechle 2019). Read alongside Alain Corbin's account of modern deodorization, late Ottoman İstanbul's olfactory environment emerges as a politically productive field, revalidating stench as evidence of microbial threat and justifying interventions in sewers, drainage, and public toilets as hıfzıssıhha in practice (Corbin 1986, 104).

In the context of heightened interest towards smells and germs in urban space, public urination became a challenge for Ottoman reformers who sought to bring order to the Ottoman capital. Although Ottoman archival documents offer only limited clues regarding the availability of public restrooms, a cross-reading of these documents with newspaper articles and statistics shows that public toilets in İstanbul were insufficient.[9] Under these conditions, it is reasonable to assume that men routinely relied on semi-public facilities such as those attached to mosque complexes,[10] shops, cafés, and other commercial establishments, blurring the boundary between private enterprise and public bodily need (see Figure 1).[11]

[7] On sewers and cesspools in Ottoman İstanbul, see Kentel (2021, 2023) and Gümüş (2022).

[8] Black channels (*kara kanallar*) referred to an older network of underground drainage conduits inherited from previous eras and incorporated into İstanbul's modern sanitary infrastructure. Although believed to extend beneath much of the city, their precise routes often remained unknown, rendering them a familiar yet only partially legible layer of the urban landscape. See İSKİ (1983, 139).

[9] See, for instance, The Ottoman Archives of the Directorate of State Archives, Presidency of the Republic of Türkiye (hereafter BOA) BOA. DH.MKT. 515-32, 8 Temmuz 1318 (July 21, 1902).

[10] Because no facilities existed that were designated as public (*umuma mahsus*), the entire urban population, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, was effectively forced to rely on mosque latrines. This absence of purpose-built public restrooms appears as the main reason why facilities originally intended for a limited religious community gradually acquired a public function, despite never having been designed as such. See, for instance, BOA. DH.MKT. 2582-52, 19 Kanunusani 1317 (February 1, 1902).

[11] Women, however, faced more limited access. In late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain, toilets were often accessible only through consumption, requiring women to enter shops or

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Figure 1. A grocery store (*bakkal*) incorporating a toilet (*kademhane*) within the same structure. Although originating from a rural setting, the image suggests patterns of shared and semi-public use in which sanitary functions were embedded within everyday commercial space.
Source: Cumhurbaşkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA). FTG. 1321, date unknown

Cemil Topuzlu, the former mayor of İstanbul, notes in his memoirs that there were no public restroom facilities in the city during his (probably first and second) term in the early twentieth century. As a result, people urinated in the street corners, effectively turning the streets into public urinals (*bevlhane*) (Topuzlu 2002, 114). Other archival records from the same period nonetheless demonstrate that the category of public restroom was far from clear-cut. A sanitary report dated 1902, for instance, counts 239 public toilets attached to shops and mosques within the Fourth Municipal District alone, that were whitewashed. These included nineteen in Nişantaşı–Pangaltı, ninety-six in Beşiktaş, thirty-two in Ortaköy, eighteen in Kuruçeşme, fifty-one in Arnavutköy, and twenty-three in Bebek.[12] Read together with the contemporaneous archival document stating that no latrines had been built specifically for public use in İstanbul, these figures suggest not the existence of a separate infrastructure of purpose-built public restrooms, but rather the inclusion of various semi-public facilities within a single, expansive administrative category. In this sense, public toilets functioned less as a distinct architectural type than as a classificatory label encompassing mosque

department stores and make purchases to legitimize their use of such facilities. See Flanagan (2014, 274) and Cooper et al. (2000, 422).

[12] BOA. Y.PRK.ZB. 12–53, 3 Eylül 1318 (September 16, 1902).

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latrines, ablution spaces, and facilities attached to shops and public buildings that had come to serve the urban population at large. This classificatory ambiguity becomes particularly visible in a newspaper article published in *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* during the cholera outbreak of 1910. According to the report, the Minister of the Interior, Talat Bey, visited Makriköy to conduct a sanitary inspection and, upon finding the district's ablution facilities in an unsanitary condition, ordered Architect Kemaleddin Bey to prepare a project for the construction of new public restrooms.[13] Rather than treating existing mosque-related facilities as public through administrative classification, the intervention pointed toward an emerging understanding of public sanitation as something to be addressed through purpose-built municipal infrastructure. Within this shifting conceptual language, statistical records from the early 1910s indicate a marked change in how public restrooms were counted. In comparison to the 1902 report, the number of public toilets recorded for İstanbul dropped to only twenty-two in 1913 and twenty-eight in 1914 (see Table 1). These figures, rather than suggesting an actual decline in sanitary provision, raise questions about how public toilets were defined and classified in this period. What now appears to have been counted were primarily purpose-built and municipally recognized facilities, while latrines that had previously been included within a broader category of public use – including those attached to mosque complexes and other semi-public spaces – were likely excluded from official statistics. Although the precise relationship between these facilities and the project commissioned by Talat Bey and Architect Kemaleddin Bey cannot be established with certainty, municipal statistics nonetheless list one public restroom in Makriköy in 1913 and two in 1914 (see Table 1).

Table 1. Number of public restroom facilities in İstanbul

Year	Bayezid	Fatih	Beyoğlu	Yeniköy	Anadolu Hisarı	Üsküdar	Kadıköy	Adalar	Makriköy	Total
1330 [1914]	7	4	9			3	2	1	2	28
1329 [1913]	7	3	7			3	1		1	22

Source: *İstanbul Beldesi İhsaiyat Mecmuası* [1330/1914], eds. Bilmez et al. (2023, 210). The original source reports the 1913 total as 20; however, the district-level figures sum to 22. The total has therefore been corrected accordingly

Municipal accounts further complicate this picture. In his memoirs, Cemil Topuzlu (2002) states that he personally oversaw the construction of nearly thirty *bevlhane* across different parts of the city, despite widespread objections. He further notes that plans had been finalized with a foreign company for the construction of twenty-five underground public toilets and toilet halls (*umumi hela ve tuvalet salonları*). The outbreak of World War I, however, halted the project before construction could begin (Topuzlu 2002, 129). Read alongside the statistical data, it is possible that the figures recorded by Topuzlu (2002) reflected projected or planned facilities rather than those that had actually become operational. In this sense, the numbers may have represented an anticipated sanitary infrastructure – one that was envisioned and administratively registered, but only partially realized in practice. Elsewhere in his memoirs, Topuzlu (2002) notes that he established several public restrooms in different parts of the city. Taken together, this fragmented narrative suggests that

[13] Teftişat-ı Sıhhiye. *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, no. 10650, 26 Teşrin-i Sani 1910.

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although he initiated plans for the construction of public restrooms during his 1912–1914 term, he was unable to fully implement them due to the outbreak of World War I. It is therefore possible to speculate that during his last term in office, between 1919 and 1920, he was finally able to put (at least some of) these plans into practice.

Mosque restrooms as liminal spaces

In the absence of a stable and fully functioning network of municipally operated public restrooms, mosque complexes continued to occupy a central position in the everyday management of bodily needs, functioning as the most accessible and reliable sites of sanitation for the urban population.[14] As accounts from late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century İstanbul indicate, the situation of the mosque restrooms constituted a key part of İstanbul's public restroom infrastructure, yet remained neglected. Journalist Basiretçi Ali describes, for instance, the latrines of the mosque in Beyazıt, along with others well known to the public, as being in such a condition as to be entirely impassable due to non-hygienic conditions (Basiretçi Ali Efendi 2001, 303). Two other examples he quotes were the Atik Ali Paşa Mosque and the madrasas surrounding the Fatih Mosque. Despite the existence of *waqf* (pious endowment) revenues allocated for their maintenance, these complexes were turned into spaces overwhelmed by filth, where open pits and overflowing latrines produced an unbearable stench that permeated courtyards and adjacent streets (Basiretçi Ali Efendi 2001, 126–127). For Basiretçi Ali, the smell emanating from these latrines was not merely a sensory nuisance but a clear violation of cleanliness (*nezafet*) and civilization (*medeniyet*), and a direct threat to public health (*sıhhat-i umumiyye*). The condition of mosque latrines thus emerged as a visible and olfactory sign of civilizational failure – one that demanded intervention and reform rather than silence. Their frequent clogging and overflows suggest heavy use that existing systems struggled to sustain, turning routine use into a persistent sanitary problem.

Archival documents corroborate Basiretçi Ali's accounts regarding the dire condition of mosque restroom facilities, which had become overburdened due to the absence of other public sanitary facilities. While discussions of public health mostly relied on sensory perceptions such as smell, archival records also reveal moments in which contamination was identified through inspection and testing, rather than through the senses alone. Although public health conditions were often described in an olfactory language – that is, through sensory experience rather than the material presence of bacteria – in some cases archival documents point to the interconnected nature of the problems surrounding public restrooms, water infrastructure, and food production. One such report comes from the Eyüp neighborhood in 1899. According to this document, which was based on tests conducted by municipal inspectors, the non-hygienic conditions of the restrooms of the Camii-i Kebir were polluting the local water infrastructure, producing an unintended consequence: a nearby baker, Tevfik Usta, was using this contaminated water to prepare his bread dough.[15] The connection

[14] A similar pattern can also be observed in Cairo. Shehab Ismail (2023, 440) shows that the mosque latrines were frequently used by men for both toilet purposes and religious ablution, especially during the first half of the nineteenth century.

[15] BOA. DH.MKT. 2169–60, 11 Şubat 1314 (February 23, 1899).

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between the mosque latrine and the neighborhood bakery reveals how problems of sanitation extended far beyond the confines of the restroom itself. Waste generated in one site could travel through shared water sources and reappear in another, directly shaping the safety of everyday food consumption. In this sense, the inspection of public restrooms was not merely a matter of cleanliness or odor control, but a crucial practice for protecting urban life. Examining Ottoman public restrooms, thus, became a way of governing the city at its most intimate level – not only managing space, but safeguarding bodies.

Archival documents confirm that the problems surrounding the public restrooms of mosques persisted in the early twentieth century, and that relevant parties including municipal authorities, pious endowments, or government officials attempted to address them. According to a report submitted to the Ministry of Pious Endowments in 1910, despite the ongoing cholera outbreak, the toilets of the Şehzade Mosque in Fatih had not been sanitized for an extended period and were emitting a foul stench (*taaffün*). This condition was described as unbearable for nearby shopkeepers and residents, creating an environment detrimental to public health.[16] Another example comes from Kasımpaşa, a working-class neighborhood located on the northern shore of the Golden Horn, one of İstanbul's main waterways.[17] According to an article published in *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* in 1913, complaints regarding the situation of public restrooms of Kasımpaşa's Camii-i Kebir (Big Mosque) persisted following the 1910–1911 cholera outbreak. Although work on the ablution facilities surrounding the mosque had been initiated, it remained incomplete.[18] As a result, unsanitary conditions and unpleasant odors had begun to affect the nearby streets, prompting renewed grievances from local residents who framed the situation as an unbearable urban nuisance. The newspaper ultimately directed responsibility to the Sixth Municipal District, urging municipal authorities to address the problem.[19]

The *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* article opens with a rhetorical question: Is Kasımpaşa's fate nothing but constant complaint? The tone is slightly ironic, suggesting that suffering and grievance had become almost ordinary features of life in the district. However, these repeated complaints should not be read simply as habitual pessimism. The persistent problems surrounding public restrooms were inseparable from the broader failures of urban infrastructure. Without a functioning sewer system capable of safely removing waste, toilets themselves became points where infrastructural breakdown became visible. What appeared to be a problem of cleanliness was, in fact, a problem of circulation of waste that could not be properly contained or removed from the urban environment. As studies on İstanbul's infrastructure have shown, Kasımpaşa was one of the areas most severely affected during cholera outbreaks, largely due to persistent infrastructural problems. Both the 1893 and 1910–1911 epidemics indicate a clear correlation between infrastructural deficiencies and the spatial distribution of disease in İstanbul, particularly in Kasımpaşa and its surrounding neighborhoods (Gümüş 2022; Kentel 2021, 2023). In this sense, what appeared in the press as endless

[16] BOA. DH.EUM.THR. 56-21, 27 Teşrin-i Sani 1328 (December 10, 1910).

[17] Situated between the historic peninsula and the districts leading toward the Bosphorus, Kasımpaşa developed as a working-class and industrial area from the early modern period onward. See Sefer (2025).

[18] Kasımpaşa'nın Kısmeti. *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, no. 10656, 2 Kanunuevvel 1910.

[19] Ibid.

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lamentation was in fact a response to structural conditions that shaped everyday life and health in the area.

But whose responsibility was it to keep the public toilets of the mosques clean? The Ministry of Pious Endowments (Evkaf Nezareti) or the Şehremaneti? One document from the early 1900s sheds some light on the discussion/dispute between the two institutions. At the core of the document lies a crucial distinction between intended function and actual use of the existing toilets within the mosques. According to the Evkaf's position, mosque latrines were originally constructed as part of waqf endowments exclusively for Muslim worshippers attending the mosque for prayers, not as facilities intended for the general urban population. However, because no public toilets had been built specifically for public use anywhere in the city, which was the duty of the Municipality, both Muslim and non-Muslim residents had to use these spaces. As a result, these spaces acquired a *de facto* public character, despite never having been designed or endowed as such. Hence, while the latrines remained legally waqf property, their widespread and indiscriminate use placed them at the center of urban public health concerns. The Evkaf therefore argued that maintaining hygiene under these new conditions exceeded the limits of waqf responsibility and budget. Since the latrines had become public in practice – though not in legal intent – their cleaning, repair, and sanitary regulation could no longer be treated as an internal matter of religious endowments, and the cost and responsibility should be shared between the two institutions.[20]

Hence, the latrines attached to mosque complexes can be understood as spaces in which publicness was not simply given but came into being through use and contestation, a process made visible in the objections raised by the Ministry of Pious Endowments to their indiscriminate use. In this sense, as Ruth Barcan (2010, 26) observes, public toilets are places where we meet members of the public and where we interact with, and continually reproduce, an idea of the public. Hence, rather than being a normative abstraction (Kırlı 2009), mosque latrines can be understood not as pre-existing public spaces but as sites where publicness was constituted through sanitary inspections, disputes over use, and administrative interventions.

The ambiguous status of waqfs further complicated these shifting boundaries of public responsibility. Neither fully public nor entirely private, waqfs historically provided and maintained many of the services later associated with municipal government, while remaining rooted in distinct legal, financial, and institutional traditions. The dispute over mosque latrines therefore reflected not only competing claims over sanitation but also broader uncertainties about how urban services should be funded, administered, and regulated in a period when older forms of communal provision increasingly intersected with the expanding authority of the municipality.[21]

[20] BOA. DH.MKT. 2582-52, 19 Kanunusani 1317 (February 1, 1902).

[21] The tensions described here resurfaced in later debates on urban reform. While Cemil Topuzlu (2002, 162–163) often portrayed waqf institutions as obstacles to urban improvement and municipal intervention, Osman Nuri Ergin (1936, 46–83) defended them as the historical foundation of urban public services and questioned narratives of a sharp divide between Ottoman and Republican forms of urban governance. For a detailed discussion, see Isaac Hand's doctoral dissertation (Hand 2022, 110–119).

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At this point, the shared use of mosque latrines by Muslim and non-Muslim residents acquires both material and symbolic significance. Dirt and foul smell operated not only as physical nuisances, but also as forms of symbolic disturbance. As Mary Douglas (1966) has argued, pollution becomes meaningful precisely when it threatens established categories. In this case, the everyday use of mosque toilets by a mixed urban population unsettled distinctions between Muslim and non-Muslim, religious and civic space, and public and non-public domains. The sanitary condition of mosque latrines thus functioned as a site where material disorder translated into symbolic ambiguity, transforming hygiene into a problem of classification and social order. In this sense, from the perspective of the Ministry of Pious Endowments, mosque latrines functioned as technologies of separation in Ruth Barcan's conceptualization (Barcan 2010). Rather than neutral infrastructures, mosque toilets materialized sociocultural hierarchies and operated simultaneously as sites of sanitation and as spatial devices that enforced social order through separation.

Against claims of the Ministry of Pious Endowments that there were no public restrooms available in İstanbul, the municipality argued that it had established *bevlhane*s in Beyoğlu and Galata – areas described in the document as the most crowded regions of İstanbul – and had made every effort to keep these facilities sanitary. In this context, public urinals emerged as inexpensive, makeshift solutions to the city's growing sanitary needs. While *bevlhane*s functioned as temporary and pragmatic responses to urban sanitary pressure, the measures envisioned for mosque latrines reflected a much broader sanitary vision. In order to eliminate harmful effluvia, the installation of siphons in toilets supplied with running water was proposed, while those lacking such infrastructure were to be provided with water from the Terkos system or from external sources, enabling daily cleansing.

As the dispute between the Şehremaneti and the Evkaf intensified, the Council of State intervened in 1902 and concluded that the costs of cleaning public restrooms, along with other related responsibilities, should be shared between the two institutions. This document provides us with some hints on how hygiene became not merely a technical or medical issue but a site of negotiation between older charitable–religious institutions and modern municipal governance.[22] Being legally private yet functionally public, mosque latrines thus became liminal urban spaces through which the limits of late Ottoman sanitary governance were repeatedly exposed. This institutional ambiguity persisted into the following decade. Mayor Cemil Topuzlu (2002) recalled that he formally requested the Evkaf to have the latrines located in mosque courtyards cleaned, due to their extremely unhygienic condition. The response he received, however, revealed the continuing jurisdictional dispute: the Evkaf argued that, since sanitation fell within the domain of municipal affairs, the cleaning of mosque latrines should likewise be carried out by the Şehremaneti (Topuzlu 2002, 163). This episode reveals the limited effectiveness of the Council of State's earlier decision to place mosque latrines under joint municipal and waqf responsibility. In practice, shared authority did not ensure effective oversight. Rather than resolving the problem, this arrangement allowed responsibility to remain diffuse, enabling both institutions to defer the burden of sanitation and leaving everyday hygienic conditions largely unaddressed.

[22] BOA. DH.MKT. 2582–52, 19 Kanunusani 1317 (February 1, 1902).

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Frictions around public toilets and public urinals

What was the real difficulty behind establishing public toilets or urinals? Rather than referring solely to fiscal constraints or bureaucratic delays, frictions around public toilets encompassed a broader field of tensions embedded in urban sanitary reform itself, including pre-existing social relations, anxieties over gendered use of space, and conflicts over property value and reputation. Thus, besides being technical infrastructures, public toilets emerged as sites where hygiene, morality, and urban economy intersected and were continuously negotiated.

For instance, in early 1873, a man known in the records as French Nikola submitted a petition to the Council of State, requesting a concession to construct European style (*Avrupakari*) odorless public toilets in suitable locations across the Sixth Municipal District.[23] Whether this concession was ever granted remains unclear. What is evident, however, is that the very question of establishing public toilets had already become a matter of public discussion in the early 1870s, revealing sanitation as a contested issue in urban life rather than a self-evident improvement. A 1905 article in *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* indicates that by the early twentieth century the issue of public toilets had entered the public press through detailed discussions. Reporting on a renewed request for a concession to construct public toilets (*umuma mahsus abdesthane*) in the capital, the article outlined the precise conditions proposed by the applicant. These included a thirty-year concession, the transfer of all facilities to the municipality at the end of this period, and the collection of a modest, fixed entrance fee that could not be increased. The article also specified existing latrines in Beyoğlu – such as those in Tünel Square, Taksim Square, and behind the British Embassy garden – that were to be included in the concession, as well as an extensive list of new sites across Beyoğlu, the historic peninsula, the Bosphorus, Kadıköy, and the Princes' Islands. All construction was to take place in locations designated by the municipality, with the applicant requesting municipal assistance in the building process.[24] While quite detailed in outlining the proposed terms of the concession, the article remained strikingly silent about the precise nature of the facilities and the identity of the concession seeker, who was simply defined as the applicant (*müstedi*).

Ottoman archival documents might provide us with some clues on the identity of this applicant. A document dated to the winter of 1905 states that a certain Süleyman Efendi requested permission (*ruhsat*) to construct a *bevlhane*, and his request was approved by the Ministry of Interior.[25] It is unclear what kind of a toilet was envisioned, how these spaces were internally organized, or whether women were intended to use them as public users at all. A document from 1907 reflects a cautious official stance on this last issue. While acknowledging the growing demand for public restroom facilities in the capital, the authorities emphasized moral and social concerns, particularly the risk that such spaces might function as sites of mixed gathering for genders. In this case, license requests were ultimately rejected on the grounds that allowing such facilities would not be considered permissible or appropriate, reinforcing the limits placed on public sanitation by prevailing norms of

[23] BOA. ŞD. 2873-22, 11 Kanunusani 1288 (January 23, 1873).
[24] Umuma mahsus abdesthaneler. *Tercüman-ı Hakikat*, no. 8774 (15 Eylül 1905), 2.
[25] BOA. Y.MTV. 281–44, 22 Teşrin-i Sani 1321 (December 5, 1905).

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gendered spatial order.[26] As Maureen Flanagan (2014) argues in her comparative analysis of public toilet construction in London, Dublin, Chicago, and Toronto in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these facilities were overwhelmingly oriented toward men. For Flanagan (2014), the reluctance to construct public toilets for women reflected male authorities' desire to regulate and limit women's presence in public space. While women's increasing visibility in the city was perceived as a threat to established gender hierarchies, public toilets also generated anxieties about moral disorder, particularly fears that such spaces might facilitate prostitution (Flanagan 2014, 272). As Cooper et al. (2000) demonstrate based on their analysis of the provision of public restroom services to women in New Zealand, by the early twentieth century, women's needs were increasingly framed in terms of citizenship and modernity, and by the interwar period the provision of toilets for both women and men had come to be recognized as a municipal responsibility.

In the early 1900s, a series of petitions submitted to different branches of the Ottoman administration reveals how the construction of *umuma mahsus* (public) toilets became a source of conflict over property value, other than posing a danger to established gender norms. One such case emerged in Imamzade Street, located within the Fourth Municipal District. Here, a public toilet was built directly across from plots owned by Emine Hanım and her relatives. Shortly after its construction, Ziya Bey, a clerk employed at the Ministry of Justice, submitted a petition on their behalf, claiming that the proximity of the latrine had caused a serious decline in the value and reputation of the property. Ziya Bey demanded that the latrine either be removed or the land be expropriated by the municipality. If neither option were accepted, he requested financial compensation for the loss incurred. In addition, Emine Hanım asked that the property tax levied on the land be reduced to reflect its diminished value, arguing that she was being taxed on an assessment that no longer reflected the property's actual condition.[27] The complaint thus framed sanitation not only as a spatial nuisance but as a fiscal burden.[28]

The response of municipal authorities, however, introduced a different interpretation. Officials initially argued that the decline in property value could not be attributed to the latrine itself. They pointed instead to the plot's earlier status as a licensed tavern (*gedikli meykede*) and to recent police restrictions on alcohol production and sale in the area. From this perspective, the loss was understood as the result of shifting regimes of urban regulation rather than the direct outcome of sanitary infrastructure. At the same time, however, the latrine was defended as a matter of public health necessity. Its construction was justified through references to hıfzıssıhha, the assessments of sanitary inspectors, and the demands of the local population, situating the facility within the responsibilities of municipal governance.[29]

As the correspondence continued, the dispute came to center on responsibility. While officials defended the latrine as a sanitary necessity, property owners framed it

[26] BOA. Y.MTV. 300–147, 26 Temmuz 1323 (August 8, 1907).

[27] For the relationship between urban reform, property, and the production of urban rent and value in nineteenth-century İstanbul, see Güçlü (2017).

[28] BOA. BEO. 1528–114541, 18 Temmuz 1316 (July 31, 1900) and BOA. ŞD. 810-27, 29 Teşrin-i Sani 1316 (December 12, 1900).

[29] Ibid.

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as a source of material loss, raising the question of whether the municipality could be held financially accountable for interventions carried out in the name of public health. The property's later auction at a price far below its assessed value reinforced claims of damage. Although the latrine was deemed indispensable, authorities ultimately acknowledged the loss and considered compensation or expropriation.[30]

These documents trace a prolonged negotiation in which public sanitation collided with private property and fiscal obligation. The construction of a latrine did not simply improve urban hygiene; it redistributed costs over time, binding property owners to an infrastructure whose benefits were collective but whose burdens were local. By demanding both compensation and tax relief, Emine Hanım's petition makes visible how sanitation reforms transformed hygiene into an enduring economic relationship between property owners and the municipality. The making of an *umuma mahsus hela* (public toilet) thus exposes why public health was more than a neutral technical intervention. It was a contested field in which health, governance, and urban value were continuously renegotiated.

If statistical records from the early 1900s suggest that İstanbul lacked public restrooms, what, then, was the structure that generated such intense property conflicts in cases like this one? Rather than pointing to a simple absence or presence of public sanitary facilities, this question draws attention to the difficulty of classifying these structures within existing administrative and architectural categories. The latrine in question appears to have occupied an uncertain institutional and spatial position: neither fully integrated into municipal infrastructure nor clearly separated from surrounding properties, often lacking standardized design, permanent supervision, or a stable legal status. It was thus sufficiently public to produce disputes over property value, reputation, and taxation, yet insufficiently institutionalized to be recognized as a public restroom in statistical or administrative terms.

Restrooms of public buildings: a showcase of science, public works, and civilization

If mosque latrines functioned as the city's most accessible public toilets by default, public buildings formed another key arena where the meaning of umuma mahsus hela was negotiated. Toilets in ministries, military offices, schools, and the Sublime Porte were not public in terms of open access, yet they were part of the state's visible body. Their condition therefore carried symbolic weight, reflecting the Ottoman Empire's capacity for order, discipline, and its ability to attain the scientific and hygienic standards of the time. Precisely because these institutions were meant to represent modern governance, the toilet emerged as a fragile point where infrastructural failure became visible. In official reports, such spaces were frequently described as harmful to health (*sıhhate mugayir*) and lacking cleanliness (*taharetten ari*), transforming problems of smell, decay, and waste into matters of administrative concern. In this sense, in addition to depending on who could use them, the publicness of toilets was also related to their location within spaces where modernity had to be performed, repaired, and made governable.

[30] Ibid.

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From a letter written to the Office of the Grand Vizier in June 1893, only a few months before cholera broke out in İstanbul, we learn that the Imperial Chemist Bonkowski Paşa carried out a sanitary inspection at the offices of the Sublime Porte (Bab-ı Âli). Bonkowski was a Polish refugee in İstanbul, and was among the key actors of the Empire's sanitary reform. He was especially active during the 1892–1895 crisis of cholera, during over the course of which he oversaw the modernization of sanitary infrastructure in İstanbul and beyond.[31] Together with his colleagues from the Board of Health, Bonkowski examined the Sublime Porte's spaces, including basements and toilets. His report described a striking contrast between the relatively clean upper floors and the lower levels, which were found to be in a severely neglected condition. The toilets used by staff, located both inside the building and in the courtyard, were described as entirely lacking cleanliness (*külliyen taharetten ari*). Broken pipes, damaged floors and walls, and the absence of sufficient running water for cleaning caused waste to accumulate and foul smells to spread. Bonkowski warned that such conditions, especially during the summer months, posed a serious threat to health due to the spread of *taaffün*.[32] The distinction that the report establishes between the lower and upper parts of the building does not only refer to an architectural matter. It was mostly the supporting staff (*hademe*, *odacı*) that occupied the lower stores. Hence, the high and the low, and the contaminating relationship between these categories were both symbolic and material.

To address these problems, the report proposed a comprehensive sanitary intervention grounded in contemporary sanitary principles, mobilizing what may be described as technologies of purity. Floors and walls were to be repaired with cement and coated with liquid tar to prevent the absorption of urine. Fragile pipes were to be replaced with more durable glazed iron ones. At the center of this vision stood the installation of siphons, presented as essential devices for removing waste through water pressure and preventing the upward spread of sewer gases and odors. While the installation of siphons was entrusted in June 1893 to the engineer Monsieur Joseph Dalmas, who was commissioned to prepare cost estimates and oversee construction, the provision of water to each toilet was assigned to the Terkos Water Company.[33] Defined as an engineer attached to the Bab-ı Serasker in the archival document, Dalmas was also an entrepreneur. He was a contractor specializing in modern sanitary installations in late Ottoman İstanbul and worked closely with the Terkos Water Company. Advertisements and trade directories present him as an official agent of Dalmas, offering water distribution systems, hydraulic services, and building plumbing, including odorless flush toilets (*garde-robes inodores*). Hence, through the installation of siphon-based toilets and related sanitary technologies, Dalmas operated as a key intermediary in the circulation of technologies of purity, translating infrastructural water systems into everyday practices of hygiene within the urban built environment (Dinçkal 2008).[34]

[31] For a detailed review of Bonkowski Paşa's profile, see Günergun (1992) and Low (2020, 155–156).

[32] BOA. BEO. 225-16827, 8 Haziran 1309 (June 20, 1893).

[33] Ibid.

[34] *Annuaire oriental du commerce de l'industrie de l'administration et de la magistrature* (Constantinople, 1889–1890), 188, 439, 444, 543.

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The material lists included in the 1893 contract – most likely prepared by Dalmas's firm – offer important insight into how a modern toilet was imagined in this period: cast-iron units lined with tiles, standardized lead pipes, covered iron siphons, and integrated handwashing taps. The contract carefully stipulated that any work failing to meet hygienic standards would have to be redone at the contractor's expense.[35] The material lists repeatedly refer to the installation of *bevllikler* (urinal bowls), specifying eight *bevllik* possibly paired with eight siphons, a numerical symmetry that suggests an envisioned one-to-one sanitary arrangement rather than an improvised addition. Its material specification as a cast-iron unit lined with tiles and its integration into siphon-based drainage systems suggest a hybrid sanitary form that does not fully align with later standardized, fully enclosed toilet designs, but rather reflects an intermediate stage in the gradual incorporation of water-dependent technologies into existing latrine arrangements. The terminology itself is revealing: the explicit naming of urination, contrasted with the absence of a similarly precise vocabulary for defecation, points to a cultural and bureaucratic economy in which certain bodily functions were more readily articulated and technologically managed than others.

One of Dalmas's surviving plans offers a concrete visual counterpart to the sanitary installations described in the *keşif defterleri* (estimate books) (Figure 2). The drawing depicts a sequence of water closet units arranged in a linear order, separated by partitions and linked to a shared drainage system through siphon-based connections. Technical elements that recur in cost estimates – such as cast-iron siphons, pipes of different diameters, and a common waste channel – are here rendered in plan and section. In this sense, the drawing helps materialize the infrastructural logic and spatial organization that structured contemporary projects of sanitary reform, translating written specifications into a coherent architectural configuration.

Ottoman archival documents from the autumn of 1893 provide further details on the installation of siphons in the toilets of the Sublime Porte, again involving Dalmas, although it remains unclear whether these were the same siphons discussed in June. The introduction of siphons was explicitly framed as the transformation of the Porte's toilets according to *usul-ı cedid* (the new method), marking these technologies of purity as signs of progress and civilization. Yet the focus of discussion increasingly shifted away from sanitary principles and the technology itself toward questions of cost. Negotiations centered on reducing the overall expense of the project, calculated at approximately 30,000 *guruş*, underscoring how the promise of hygienic modernization was entangled with fiscal constraints.[36] Archival correspondence from 1894 adds further detail to how this transformation according to usul-ı cedid was understood and implemented in practice. Repeated references to the conversion of the old-style toilets (*kâr-ı kadîm helalar*) within the Sublime Porte in accordance with usul-ı cedid framed this project not as routine maintenance, but as a comprehensive reworking of inherited sanitary arrangements. These documents make clear that the installation of siphons presupposed a broader hydraulic regime coordinated among multiple actors. While Dalmas remained responsible for the sanitary installations inside the building, the conveyance of water depended on the

[35] BOA. BEO. 225–16827, 8 Haziran 1309 (June 20, 1893).

[36] BOA. DH.MKT. 158–45, 18 Teşrin-i Evvel 1309 (October 30, 1893).

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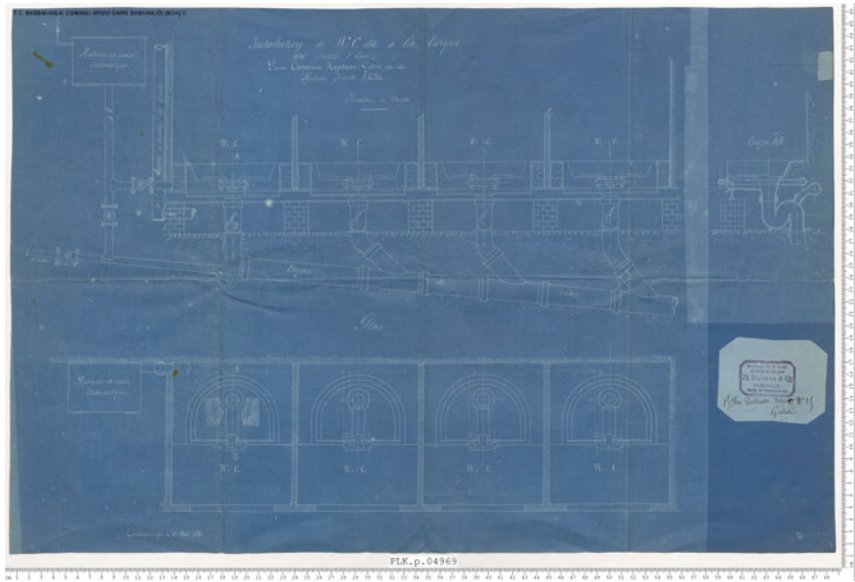


Figure 2. Dalmas et Cie's plan for a public toilet. The blueprint shows the toilets' connections to the sewer systems.
Source: Cumhurbaşkanlığı Osmanlı Arşivi (BOA). PLK. 4969, 1890

Terkos Water Company, binding different forms of technical expertise into a single and fragile project.

Cost tables and keşif defterleri prepared during the negotiations in 1894 reveal the material density and financial scale of this undertaking. Beyond siphons themselves, the projected expenses included cast-iron pipes of varying diameters, valves and fire hydrant fittings (*harik muslukları*), lead washers, water meters (*su saatleri*), wall drilling, excavation, and the repaving of streets and pavements disturbed during installation. One recurring problem concerned pipe diameter. Accordingly, existing pipes laid by the water company were found to be too narrow to accommodate additional valves, rendering parts of the proposed system technically unworkable. As a result, officials proposed enlarging the pipes, a modification that required a revised estimate and authorization for substantial additional expenditure beyond the initial calculation. What had first appeared as a finite sanitary intervention thus expanded into a costly recalibration of water circulation within and around the Sublime Porte. These 1894 negotiations underscore how the promise of usul-ı cedid depended not only on the hygienic virtues of siphons, but on the capacity to deliver water at the appropriate scale, pressure, and reliability. The language of conversion (*tahvil*) captured both a change in sanitary ideals, and the arduous and expensive work of translating those ideals into pipes, valves, meters, and budgets. In this sense, the modernization of the Sublime Porte's old-style latrines unfolded as a cumulative and negotiated process, in which each attempt to eliminate smell, decay, and danger revealed new technical constraints and fiscal limits embedded within the state's own infrastructural body.

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Despite this ambitious vision articulated in 1893–1894, a petition written by a doorkeeper employed at the Sublime Porte suggests that sanitary conditions within bureaucratic buildings remained far from resolved even years later. In his complaint dated 1901, the petitioner explained that the toilet of the Grand Vizierate's registry office had overflowed six months earlier, causing wastewater to leak directly into the small room allocated to him for sleeping. Despite repeated appeals, no effective measures had been taken.[37] The petition reveals how the effects of malfunctioning sanitary infrastructure did not remain confined to elite bureaucratic spaces, but kept extending downward – quite literally – into the living quarters of lower-ranking employees. While new hygienic standards were articulated at the level of policy and planning, their translation into everyday working conditions remained uneven, allowing leakage, neglect, and prolonged exposure to unhealthy environments to persist.

Concerns over official toilets continued into the following decades. A short document written on the eve of the 1910 cholera outbreak in İstanbul described the toilets of official buildings as contrary to the principles of public health. Reflecting the assessment of the Council for Civilian Medical Affairs and Public Health (*Meclis-i Umur-ı Tıbbiye-i Mülkiye ve Sıhhiyye-i Umumiye*), the document identified the transformation of these spaces in accordance with contemporary scientific progress as an urgent necessity.[38] In a similar vein, the toilets of the Office of the Court of Accounts (*Divan-ı Muhasebat Kalemi*) were likewise deemed harmful to public health, primarily due to the persistent stench emanating from them. Following a sanitary inspection, officials proposed the installation of modern siphon units in the six existing toilets of the office. Yet, as in the case of the Sublime Porte, the implementation of sanitary reform quickly became entangled in bureaucratic and financial frictions. As the inspection was conducted only partially, the initial cost estimate proved inaccurate and insufficient during the implementation stage.[39]

Even modest attempts at sanitary modernization thus became subject to renegotiation, delay, and recalculation, revealing the fiscal fragility of infrastructural reform. The ongoing discussions around budgetary constraints also illustrate that Ottoman officials acted as engineers-as-economists, a term Shehab Ismail (2023) uses to describe the convergence of technical expertise and fiscal management. In the administrative heart of the Empire, the technical imperatives of fen were constantly weighed against the immediate constraints of the state budget. Thus, the renovation of the official toilets was not merely a matter of hygiene but a technocratic effort to reconcile the physical infrastructure of the state with the rigorous demands of fiscal prudence.

If we look one step beyond the budgetary disputes, we can further trace how the modern toilet was imagined in material and technical terms. A *keşif defteri* from 1916 further illuminates how the modern toilet continued to be imagined as a carefully engineered sanitary environment in the late Ottoman period. Prepared for the reorganization of the toilets of the Council of State, the document articulated a vision of hygiene grounded in construction techniques, materials, and the controlled

[37] BOA. BEO. 1686–126382, 25 Haziran 1317 (July 8, 1901).
[38] BOA. DH.MUİ. 91–18, 20 Nisan 1326 (May 3, 1910).
[39] BOA. ML.EEM. 887–45, 9 Teşrin-i Evvel 1327 (October 22, 1911).

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circulation of waste, water, and air. Existing structures identified as *bevlhane* were to be dismantled, wooden flooring removed, and the entire ground rebuilt from the level of the toilet bowl (*hela taşı*) upward using brick foundations, Horasan mortar, and cement tiles. Clay pipes (*künk*) were to be refitted with iron clamps, sealed with cement mortar, and deliberately concealed beneath Horasan plaster and marble-based whitewash, rendering waste infrastructure both technically secure and visually invisible. Ventilation pipes were designed to rise above the building to expel foul air, while water was to be conveyed directly to the hela taşı, ensuring continuous washing and preventing stagnation. Read alongside the 1893 material lists – dominated by siphons, bevllikler, and standardized fittings – this document suggests a sustained sanitary logic increasingly articulated at the scale of the building itself. The emphasis on durable materials, regulated flows, and the concealment of waste extended earlier concerns with odor control, cleanliness, and technical order into a more comprehensive architectural program. Prioritization of material over technology might also be considered as a response to the constraints of cost, labor, and administrative capacity – revealing both the ambitions and the limits of the late Ottoman state's efforts to govern filth within its own institutional body. Despite these efforts, a 1919 memorandum concerning the toilets of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs described them as ugly and against public health (*çirkin ve muzır-ı sıhhat*), confirming that such sanitary challenges persisted well into the early post-World War I period.[40]

Conclusion

This article has examined public toilets in late Ottoman İstanbul as sites where hygiene, publicness, and governance were actively negotiated. Rather than treating these facilities as a fixed architectural type, it has shown how toilets became public through use, classification, and administrative practice across different settings, including mosques and public buildings. Publicness, in this sense, emerged not from formal designation alone but through everyday use, infrastructural pressures, and institutional negotiation.

Across these spaces, sanitary reform centered on the regulation of circulation – of waste, water, air, and responsibility – articulated through the language of fen and hıfzıssıhha. This process did not unfold as a linear transformation, but through coexistence and partial reconfiguration, shaped by fiscal limits, jurisdictional ambiguity, and uneven implementation. Public toilets thus appear as liminal infrastructures through which the ambitions, constraints, and everyday workings of late Ottoman urban modernity become particularly visible. In this respect, the case of İstanbul complicates dominant narratives that equate modern sanitation with the emergence of purpose-built infrastructures, demonstrating instead how urban environmental order could be produced through improvised arrangements, existing institutional frameworks, and the everyday management of waste, smell, and bodily practices.

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[40] BOA. ML.EEM. 1315-18, 28 Eylül 1335 (September 28, 1919).

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