

Article

The Ottoman Külliye as an Enduring Urban Symbol and Cultural Landscape: Cognitive Mapping of the Selimiye Complex in Edirne, Türkiye

Emine Patan ^{1,*}, Işık Sezen Yavuz ¹ and Hayriye Eşbah Tunçay ²

¹ Department of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Architecture and Design, Atatürk University, Erzurum 25240, Türkiye; isiksezen@atauni.edu.tr

² Department of Landscape Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, Istanbul Technical University, Istanbul 34469, Türkiye; esbah@itu.edu.tr

* Correspondence: emine.patan@ogr.atauni.edu.tr

Abstract

Ottoman külliyes have structured urban life and city landscapes for centuries through the integration of monumental architecture, public functions, courtyards, circulation, vegetation, and constructed landscape elements. This study examines whether that symbolic role remains perceptible to people experiencing Edirne. Thirty architecture, urban planning, and landscape architecture students joined a field trip on 16–18 March 2018 and subsequently produced three ranked cognitive-map drawings with short descriptors. The dataset comprised 90 drawings. Drawings were coded by urban element, rank, monument, and perceptual attribute, and frequencies were analyzed descriptively. Külliyes accounted for 29 drawings (32.2%)—more than any other category—and Selimiye represented 19 of these 29 drawings (65.5%). Architectural splendor and size were the most frequent descriptors, followed by topographic prominence, citywide visibility, and lighting. Together with historical evidence, the drawings indicate that Selimiye continues to function as an urban symbol and landscape reference for this participant group. Its influence on people touring the city arises from the interaction of distant skyline visibility, elevated siting, approach sequences, and close-range architectural and courtyard experience. Heritage-led planning should protect these relationships while maintaining the complex's connection to everyday urban life. The exploratory sample limits generalization, but the protocol offers a reproducible basis for comparison.

Keywords: külliye; historic urban landscape; cognitive mapping; cultural heritage; perceptual salience; Selimiye Complex; urban sustainability; city landscape



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1. Introduction

The historic urban landscape approach treats urban heritage as a layered system in which topography, the built environment, visual relationships, social practices, and collective meanings interact [1]. This broader view shifts conservation attention from isolated monuments to the spatial and cultural processes that keep heritage legible within a changing city [2]. Such legibility matters to urban sustainability because built heritage can support place continuity, local identity, and informed adaptation, while poorly managed development can sever the visual and functional relationships through which heritage is experienced [3,4].

Urban perception offers a way to examine these relationships from the user's perspective. Lynch defined imageability as the capacity of a physical environment to evoke a strong and organized mental image [5]. Cognitive maps do not reproduce geographic space with survey accuracy; they reveal what people select, simplify, rank, and remember [6]. Spatial configuration, orientation, scale, and viewpoint influence those representations [7], while repeated encounters and emotional meanings contribute to place attachment [8]. A monument's prominence in cognitive representation can therefore provide evidence about how its physical position and symbolic significance operate together.

The Selimiye Mosque and its social complex occupy a dominant position in Edirne's urban image. UNESCO inscribed the Selimiye Mosque and its Social Complex on the World Heritage List in 2011 under criteria (i) and (iv), recognizing the ensemble as a major work of Mimar Sinan and a culminating expression of Ottoman architecture [9]. The complex includes the mosque, madrasas, a covered market, a clock house, an outer courtyard, and a library. Its composition and elevated siting make the dome and four minarets visible across substantial parts of the city. Histories of Ottoman architecture likewise emphasize the integration of imperial complexes with urban form, circulation, services, and symbolic representation [10,11].

Previous cognitive-mapping research has established methods for studying environmental knowledge [5,6,12–15]. Recent international research has further demonstrated the value of mental and cognitive mapping for eliciting collective landscape perceptions and sense of place, comparing residents' and visitors' spatial representations, and interpreting historic urban environments [16–25]. In parallel, contemporary heritage scholarship increasingly frames urban heritage as a people-centered, landscape-based system in which public perception, spatial biography, authenticity, and sustainable management are interdependent [17–20]. Together, these studies confirm the continuing methodological relevance of selective spatial representations while extending their application to landscape perception, cultural-heritage perception, historic urban landscapes, and heritage-sensitive urban development. Nevertheless, fewer studies connect ranked sketch-map content with the management of monumental heritage as part of a historic urban landscape. This article addresses that gap through an exploratory case study.

The study does not treat drawing frequency as a direct measure of heritage value or as a representative survey of Edirne's population. Instead, it uses cognitive-map salience as one indicator of how a group of design students selected and organized urban heritage after direct field experience. This distinction is central to the interpretation and to the study's sustainability claims.

The Külliye as an Urban and Cultural Landscape System

Definitions of the Ottoman külliye have commonly emphasized its buildings and their functions, leaving the open spaces between them and their landscape components comparatively underexamined. This study adopts a more inclusive landscape-based definition developed within the doctoral research from which the present article originates. A külliye is defined here as a cultural landscape established for social purposes through at least two architecturally independent but functionally complementary buildings, generally organized around a mosque, madrasa, tekke, or zaviye and serving religious, educational, health, nutrition, accommodation, hygiene, or commercial needs. Its identity also depends on the spatial composition of courtyards and passage systems, constructed and vegetative landscape elements, and boundaries defined by walls, wall-integrated structures, or roads. This operational definition treats the spaces between buildings as constitutive parts of the ensemble rather than as residual space.

Under this definition, a külliye operates at several urban scales. At the neighborhood scale, its educational, charitable, health, commercial, and religious functions historically concentrated complementary public services and supported repeated everyday encounters. At the site scale, courtyards, routes, thresholds, water structures, planted areas, and semi-open spaces organized movement and environmental experience. At the city scale, domes, minarets, topographic placement, and approach routes structured orientation, skyline identity, and connections between districts [10,11]. These interdependent functions make the külliye relevant to contemporary urban sustainability: conserving the ensemble can sustain cultural continuity, social infrastructure, walkable connections, public-space quality, and the legibility of the historic city [1–4].

For centuries, Ottoman külliyes have acted as both service centers and symbolic anchors of their cities. Their domes and minarets established recognizable silhouettes; their topographic placement supported orientation; and their courtyards, markets, educational buildings, entrances, and approach routes translated distant monumentality into an experience at pedestrian scale [10,11]. This long duration is important to the present research because an urban symbol is sustained not only by the physical survival of a building but also by its continuing ability to organize attention, movement, memory, place attachment, and public perceptions of heritage identity [8,23,26].

The Selimiye case enables this expanded definition to be examined through the experience of people touring the city. The participants encountered Edirne through movement and direct observation before they knew that they would be asked to draw what affected them most. Their subsequent references to elevation, citywide visibility, courtyards, entrances, lighting, and the integrity of the complex therefore connect the building ensemble with the routes, views, and experiential sequences of the city landscape. The research questions are interpreted not only as a ranking of landmarks but also as an inquiry into whether the centuries-old symbolic and landscape role of the külliye remains legible in contemporary experience.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Area

Edirne is located in northwestern Türkiye near the borders with Greece and Bulgaria. It served as an Ottoman capital before Istanbul and contains a dense concentration of religious, civic, commercial, and infrastructural heritage. The Selimiye Complex was constructed for Sultan Selim II between 1568 and 1575. Its mosque, courtyards, educational buildings, and market form a prominent ensemble within the city center. The study considered Selimiye within the wider field of urban elements encountered during a structured visit, including other complexes, bridges, the railway station, Karaağaç houses, the Lausanne Monument, and contrasts between older and newer urban fabric. The location of the study area is shown in Figure 1.

2.2. Participants and Field Procedure

The fieldwork was developed within a technical visit to Edirne organized as part of the students' term project on 16–18 March 2018. The participant group comprised all 30 students who attended the visit. No additional sampling or participant-selection procedure was applied; the study was conducted with the entire technical-visit group. Accordingly, the participants constituted a bounded educational group rather than a statistically representative sample of a wider student population. Participation was voluntary. Before the data-collection exercise, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study and that their drawings and written statements could be used for scientific research and publication. Verbal informed consent was obtained from the participating students.

The data-collection exercise was conducted with the knowledge and verbal permission of the relevant academic staff involved in the technical visit. No personally identifying information was recorded, and all drawings and written responses were anonymized before analysis.



Figure 1. Location of Selimiye Complex: (a) global location of Türkiye; (b) Edirne within Türkiye; (c) Selimiye Complex within Edirne (41.6779° N, 26.5594° E). (41.6779° N, 26.5594° E).

During the technical visit, the students observed historic and cultural buildings and urban spaces in Edirne in situ. The data-collection exercise was not administered during the visit; it was conducted in a classroom after the group had returned to the faculty. The students had not been informed in advance that they would subsequently be asked to recall and draw particular places. They were not provided with a predefined list of buildings, photographs, maps, visual materials, or prompting alternatives. This procedure was intended to minimize cue-induced recall and allow the students' spontaneous memory priorities to emerge from their own experience of the city.

Each student was asked to draw, from memory, the three buildings or urban elements that had remained most prominent following the visit. For each drawing, the students then identified three characteristics that had contributed to the memorability of the selected element. Finally, they ranked the three selected elements as 1, 2, and 3 according to their order of recall. Rank 1 represented the element recalled first and perceived as most prominent in memory, Rank 2 represented the element recalled second, and Rank 3 corresponded the element recalled third. These numbers were not treated as numerical scores or measures of preference intensity; they were analyzed exclusively as ordinal indicators of recall priority. The procedure produced 90 ranked drawings, corresponding to three drawings from each of the 30 participants. Sketch-based elicitation was selected because it can reveal spatial knowledge that may remain implicit in conventional questionnaires [5,6,12].

2.3. Coding and Analysis

The drawings were not evaluated in terms of artistic quality, technical accuracy, representational skill, or architectural completeness. They were treated as visual data reflecting the participants' mental representations of the places encountered during the technical visit and the environmental features that became perceptually salient in memory. The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, each drawing was assigned to one mutually exclusive urban-element category according to its principal subject. Second, drawings classified as religious complexes were identified according to the monument represented. Third, the three written characteristics associated with each drawing were examined through inductive content analysis. Semantically similar expressions were consolidated under thematic categories derived from the data rather than imposed through a predetermined coding framework. Fourth, frequency tables were produced for urban-element category, ordinal rank, monument, and attribute category.

AI-Assisted Visualization. Following completion of data collection and the analytical procedures, an AI-assisted illustrative visualization was generated using Google NotebookLM (Gemini, <https://notebook.google.com>) based on research materials provided by the authors, including the collected cognitive-mapping materials. This visualization was created solely to provide a synthetic visual representation of spatial relationships discussed in the study. It does not represent an original cognitive map produced by any individual participant. Generative AI was not used to produce, clean, trace, enhance, or modify the original student drawings, nor was the AI-generated visualization used as primary research data. It played no role in coding, category development, frequency calculations, recall-order analysis, or interpretation of the empirical findings.

Descriptive statistics were used because the study involved a small, bounded, and non-random participant group. Frequencies and percentages were calculated using the denominator relevant to each analysis: all ranked drawings ($n = 90$), drawings categorized as religious complexes ($n = 29$), participants ($n = 30$), or coded attribute mentions associated with the complex drawings ($n = 82$). Re-examination of the retained coding workbook yielded 82 coded attribute mentions across 21 categories. These coded mentions were not treated as statistically independent participant observations.

Coding was conducted by the primary researcher using an inductively developed coding framework. No independent second coder was employed; consequently, no inter-coder agreement coefficient was calculated. To improve transparency, the revised Appendix A reports the retained attribute categories and frequencies. Participant-level prevalence was reconstructed only where the retained participant-linked records permitted unambiguous identification of the represented complex. Participant-level prevalence was not retrospectively estimated for individual attribute categories because compound descriptors could not be mapped back to participants in every case without introducing undocumented coding assumptions.

3. Results

3.1. Urban Elements in the Ranked Drawings

Complexes were the most frequently represented category, accounting for 29 of the 90 drawings (32.2%). They also dominated first-ranked choices: 16 of 30 participants (53.3%) selected a complex as the first urban element they wished to represent. Other categories were more dispersed. Meriç Bridge appeared in 12 drawings (13.3%), new–old urban contrasts in eight (8.9%), Karaağaç houses in seven (7.8%), the train station in six (6.7%), the Lausanne Monument in five (5.6%), and texture differences in three (3.3%). Twenty drawings (22.2%) depicted other subjects (Table 1). Figure 2 presents the distribution by recall rank.

Table 1. Distribution of ranked drawings by urban-element category.

Urban Element	First	Second	Third	Total	%
Complexes	16	5	8	29	32.2
Meriç Bridge	3	3	6	12	13.3
New–old contrast	4	2	2	8	8.9
Karaağaç houses	2	2	3	7	7.8
Train station	2	3	1	6	6.7
Lausanne Monument	0	3	2	5	5.6
Texture difference	1	1	1	3	3.3
Other	2	11	7	20	22.2
Total	30	30	30	90	100.0

Note: Percentages use all 90 drawings as the denominator. The Meriç Bridge total corrects an arithmetic error in the source draft.

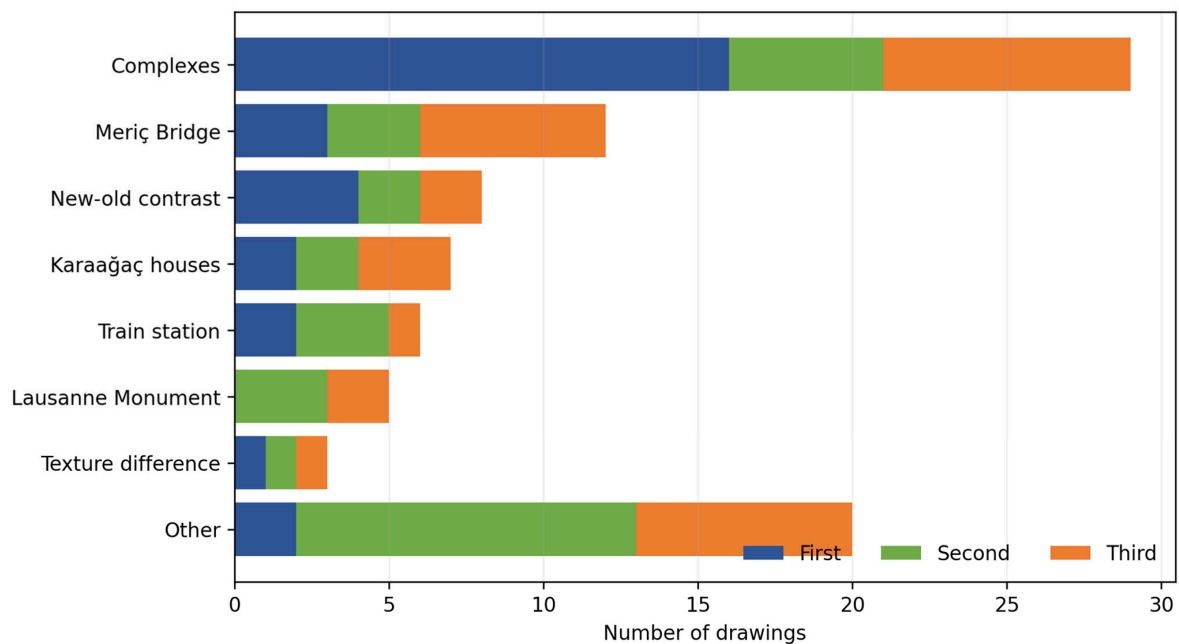


Figure 2. Rank distribution of the 90 drawings across urban-element categories.

3.2. Representation of Religious Complexes

Among the 29 drawings of religious complexes, Selimiye accounted for 19 (65.5%). The Bayezid II Complex appeared in five drawings (17.2%), the Old Mosque in four (13.8%), and the Üç Şerefeli Mosque Complex in one (3.4%). The result distinguishes Selimiye's perceptual dominance from a general tendency to draw monumental religious architecture: participants remembered several complexes, but nearly two thirds of the complex drawings focused on Selimiye (Table 2). Figure 3 illustrates the spatial arrangement of the Selimiye Complex.

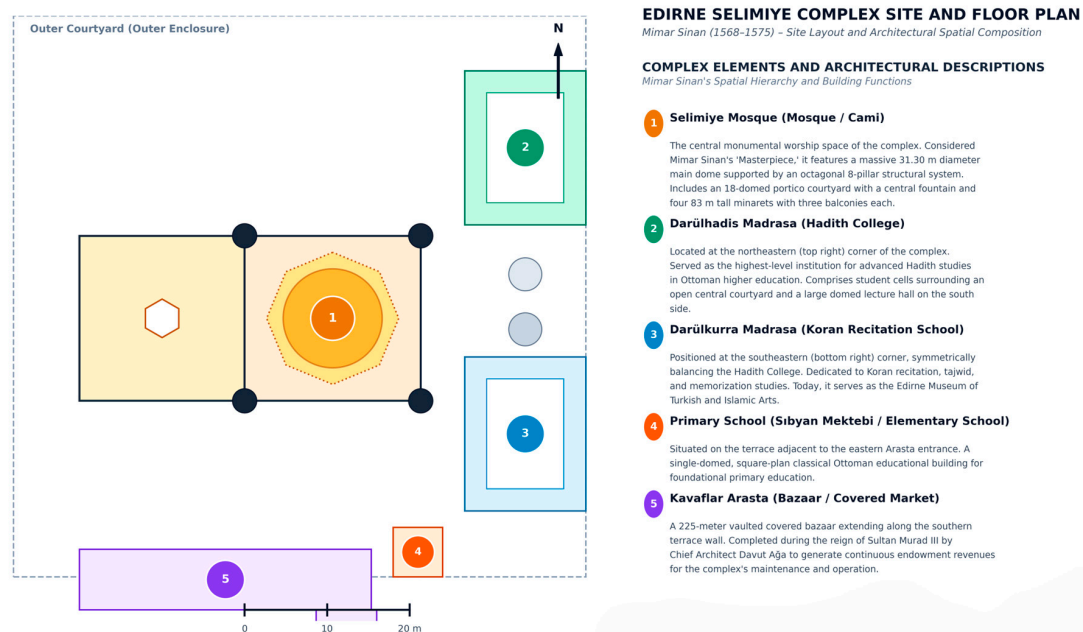


Figure 3. Schematic plan of the Selimiye Complex, Edirne. Developed based on the plan published on Archnet [Available online: https://www.archnet.org/sites/1941?media_content_id=49278 (accessed on 10 September 2026)], with the assistance of Google NotebookLM.

Table 2. Distribution of drawings within the complex category.

Complex	Drawings	% of Complex Drawings
Selimiye Complex	19	65.5
Bayezid II Complex	5	17.2
Old Mosque	4	13.8
Üç Şerefeli Mosque Complex	1	3.4
Total	29	100.0

At the participant level, 18 of the 30 participants (60.0%) recalled at least one külliye complex. The 29 complex recalls were therefore clustered within these 18 participants rather than representing 29 independent participants. Selimiye was recalled by 15 participants (50.0% of the full sample; 83.3% of participants who recalled at least one complex), Bayezid II by five participants (16.7%; 27.8% among complex-recalling participants), the Old Mosque by four participants (13.3%; 22.2%), and Üç Şerefeli by one participant (3.3%; 5.6%). Because individual participants could recall more than one complex, these participant-level percentages are not mutually exclusive.

This distribution is especially significant because participants were asked to represent the urban elements that had remained most prominent following their experience of Edirne. Külliyes were therefore not marginal background features in the drawings; they formed the leading category of the remembered city, and Selimiye was its clearest symbolic focus. Within the limits of the sample, the drawings provide time-specific perceptual evidence collected during the 2018 field study that the historic role of the külliye as a city landmark and landscape organizer was salient to this participant group. The findings should not be interpreted as a direct representation of present-day perceptual conditions in 2026. Figure 4 provides an illustrative synthesis of the spatial relationships discussed here; it is not part of the empirical dataset.

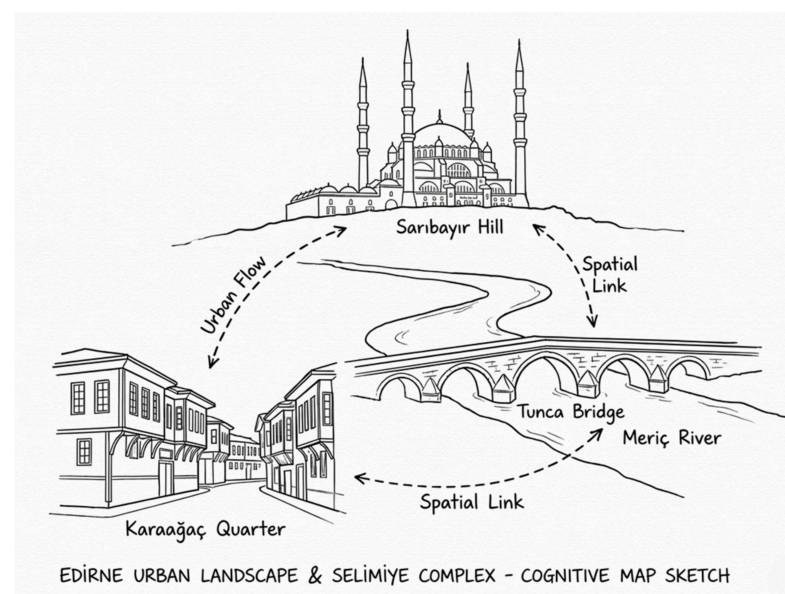


Figure 4. AI-assisted illustrative synthesis of spatial relationships within the Edirne–Selimiye urban landscape. The visualization was generated using Google NotebookLM (Gemini) after completion of data collection and analysis, based on research materials provided by the authors. It is presented solely as an illustrative synthesis and does not represent an original participant-generated cognitive map. The visualization was not used as primary data or as an analytical input. Source: Authors' research materials; AI-assisted visualization generated using Google NotebookLM.

3.3. Attributes Associated with the Complexes

Re-examination of the retained coding workbook identified 82 coded attribute mentions across 21 categories associated with the 29 drawings of religious complexes. These frequencies represent coded mentions rather than independent participant observations. Architectural splendor and size formed the most frequent category ($n = 14$; 17.1% of 82 coded mentions). Three categories followed with eight mentions each (9.8%): elevated placement in the topography, visibility from multiple parts of the city, and lighting effect. Design received six mentions, and large wall inscriptions received four. The pattern combines city-scale properties—elevation and visibility—with building-scale properties such as design, calligraphy, motifs, entrances, glazing, and courtyard experience. Participant-level prevalence was not calculated for these attribute categories because the retained coding structure does not permit all compound descriptors to be mapped back to individual participants without introducing retrospective coding assumptions. Figure 5 summarizes the most frequent coded descriptors.

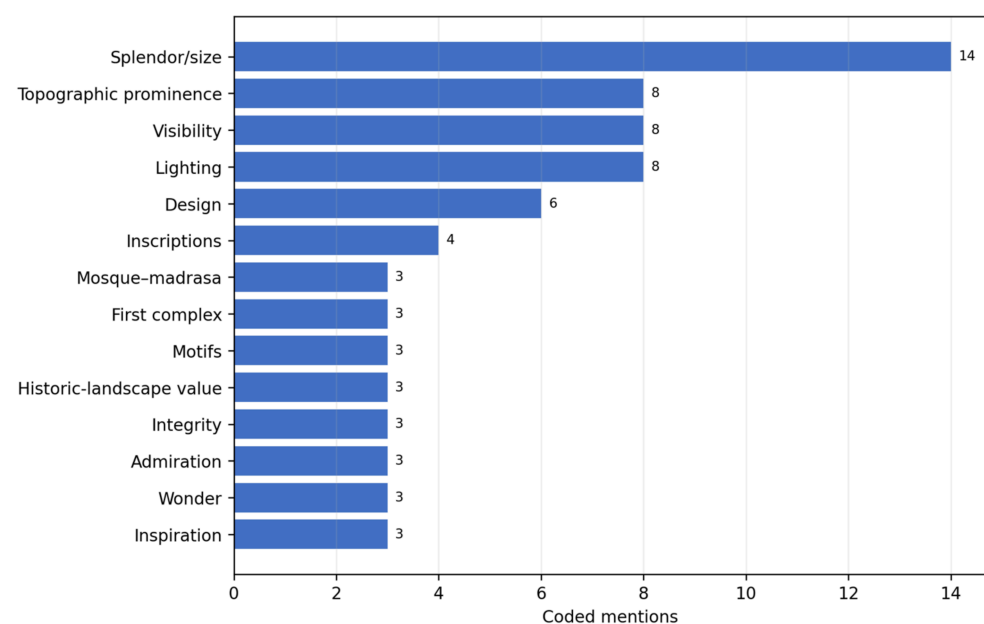


Figure 5. Most frequent descriptors associated with drawings of religious complexes. Categories with fewer than three mentions are reported in Appendix A.

Affective descriptors were also present. Admiration, wonder, and inspiration each appeared three times. These responses indicate that perceptual salience was not limited to recognition of form. Participants connected formal and spatial attributes with emotional reactions. The data do not establish causality, but they support an interpretation in which physical prominence and symbolic-experiential meaning reinforce one another.

Lighting effect was mentioned eight times. In the original coding, this category referred specifically to participants' descriptions of the nighttime visual appearance of the complex, including artificial architectural illumination and illuminated elements such as mahya light displays. Thus, the category should not be interpreted as a general reference to daylight or atmospheric lighting. Although these responses indicate that the illuminated nighttime appearance of Selimiye was perceptually memorable to some participants, the fieldwork protocol did not systematically record participant-specific observation times, routes, duration of exposure, or meteorological conditions. Accordingly, the data do not permit a controlled assessment of the effect of illumination on recall.

4. Discussion

4.1. Monumentality and the Urban Image

The predominance of complexes and Selimiye in particular is consistent with Lynch's proposition that distinctive form, continuity, and strategic location strengthen imageability [5]. Selimiye operates at several perceptual scales at once. Its dome and minarets support distant recognition; its elevated position reinforces orientation; and its courtyards, entrances, inscriptions, glazing, and lighting provide memorable detail at closer range. The ranked drawings show that participants did not remember the complex solely as an isolated architectural object. Their explanations repeatedly referred to relations between the object and the city: being on a high point, appearing from many locations, and shaping the skyline.

The references to lighting also add a temporal dimension to the perceptual prominence of Selimiye. Participants' descriptions coded under "lighting effect" referred to the nighttime appearance of the complex, including artificial architectural illumination and mahya light displays. These responses suggest that Selimiye's visual salience was not limited to its daytime silhouette and architectural form. However, because observation time, exposure duration, route, and illumination conditions were not systematically recorded, this finding should be interpreted as reported perceptual salience rather than as evidence of a causal lighting effect. Future studies could explicitly compare daytime and nighttime cognitive representations of monumental heritage.

This result also illustrates why cognitive maps are selective constructions rather than reduced plans [6,12,13]. Participants compressed a multi-element city into a small number of landmarks and contrasts. Selimiye's share of the complex drawings suggests strong salience within that selection process. Yet salience should not be equated with a universal hierarchy of value. The sample consisted of first-year design students participating in an integrated educational environment in the Faculty of Architecture. Their training involved spatial observation, visual communication, drawing, perspective, form, scale, composition, and design-oriented interpretation. Such disciplinary exposure may have increased sensitivity to monumentality, architectural form, visual prominence, and spatial composition. The findings therefore document the recall patterns of a specific design-educated participant group and should not be generalized to Edirne residents, general tourists, or other user groups.

Read alongside the historical role of Ottoman külliyes, this salience recorded in the 2018 field study indicates continuity in Selimiye's symbolic function. The complex was conceived as a dominant urban ensemble, and the students' drawings show that it still organizes the image of Edirne for people encountering the city centuries later. The evidence is not limited to recognition of the mosque: descriptors concerning elevation, visibility, lighting, entrances, courtyards, and complex integrity show how the symbol is produced through relations among architecture, topography, movement, and open space. In this sense, Selimiye contributes to the city landscape both as a distant visual reference and as an experienced sequence of spaces.

The findings also support interpreting the külliye not simply as an assemblage of monumental buildings but as an integrated cultural landscape in which built structures and the spaces between them operate relationally. Courtyards, thresholds, circulation routes, open and semi-open spaces, vegetation, topographic relationships, and visual connections contribute to how the complex is encountered and remembered. From this perspective, Selimiye's cognitive presence cannot be attributed solely to the architectural form of the mosque; it also emerges through spatial sequences and landscape relationships connecting the monumental core with the surrounding urban fabric.

4.2. Contributions of the Külliye to Urban Sustainability and the City Landscape

The landscape-based definition of külliye clarifies why the Selimiye ensemble matters beyond the continued survival of its monumental fabric. Its historical combination of worship, education, trade, charity, and public services created a compact social center, while its prominent form gave those functions a shared presence in the city image. Although contemporary functions and access conditions differ from those of the Ottoman period, keeping compatible uses active within the ensemble can sustain everyday contact, stewardship, and intergenerational continuity rather than reducing the site to a monument viewed only from a distance. Recent landscape-based and Historic Urban Landscape research similarly emphasizes people-centered management, adaptive change, and the integration of heritage conservation with long-term urban development [22,24,26].

Second, the spatial system of courtyards, passages, thresholds, planted surfaces, and water-related elements contributes to the city landscape by mediating between architecture and public life. These open and semi-open spaces create sequences of arrival, pause, gathering, and transition. Their maintenance can reinforce pedestrian permeability and human-scale experience, while context-sensitive planting, shade, drainage, and water management can improve environmental comfort without obscuring historic spatial relations. Such interventions should be based on documented historic character and ecological performance rather than decorative greening [1–4,26].

Third, the külliye contributes to urban legibility at the metropolitan and neighborhood scales. Selimiye's elevated location, dome, and minarets function as spatial dominants, while its market, courtyards, entrances, and approach routes connect the landmark to street-level experience. The participants' repeated references to topography and visibility demonstrate that the value of the ensemble is distributed across view corridors, skyline relationships, and movement through the surrounding city. Research on public perceptions of historic urban landscapes and on the conservation–development balance likewise shows that heritage value is experienced through relationships between historic fabric, urban functions, spatial setting, and perceived authenticity [23,24]. Protecting these relations supports both cultural continuity and a coherent city landscape.

The influence of the külliye on people touring Edirne is therefore cumulative. Selimiye first enters experience through long-distance views and the skyline; it then guides orientation and approach; and, finally, it is perceived through entrances, scale, inscriptions, light, courtyards, and associated structures. The drawings capture different stages of this sequence. Their concentration on Selimiye shows that the ensemble continues to shape what visitors select, remember, and use to represent the city. Recent cognitive-mapping research comparing residents' and tourists' perceptions of historic urban public space similarly demonstrates the value of spatial representations for identifying heritage landmarks and perceptual anchors relevant to heritage-sensitive design [17].

Taken together, these dimensions position the külliye as an inherited urban system whose sustainability depends on functional continuity, inclusive public use, environmental performance, and perceptual integrity. The cognitive-map results measure only the last of these dimensions directly, but they identify the spatial relations through which the other dimensions can become visible and meaningful. This distinction prevents perceptual salience from being treated as a complete sustainability assessment while showing how it can inform one.

4.3. Implications for Historic Urban Landscape Management

The historic urban landscape framework requires management of the setting and the relationships that make heritage meaningful [1,2]. The findings identify four relationships that deserve explicit attention in Edirne: topographic legibility, view corridors, pedestrian

sequences of approach, and the transition from city-scale silhouette to building-scale detail. Development that blocks major views, weakens the visual distinction of the elevated site, or disrupts approach routes may reduce the perceptual coherence recorded in the drawings, even if the protected buildings themselves remain physically intact.

For culturally sustainable planning, assessment should therefore extend beyond fabric condition. Visual-impact studies can map significant public viewpoints and seasonal visibility; pedestrian studies can evaluate how residents and visitors encounter the complex; lighting plans can balance nighttime legibility with energy use, biodiversity, and material conservation; and interpretation can connect the mosque, educational buildings, market, courtyards, and surrounding urban fabric as one ensemble. These actions align monument conservation with the broader urban relationships emphasized in heritage-led sustainable development [3,4].

This interpretation is consistent with recent international studies that approach historic urban landscapes as relational systems in which spatial form, public perception, authenticity, heritage functions, and sustainable management must be considered together [22–24,26]. It also aligns with cognitive-mapping research showing that perceptual evidence can reveal spatial anchors, collective landscape meanings, and differences among user groups [16,17]. For Selimiye, a defensible management framework would therefore identify public viewpoints, model the effects of proposed building envelopes on the dome and minarets, document approach sequences, and establish monitoring indicators for the surrounding urban silhouette.

Cognitive mapping can contribute to this process as a low-cost participatory diagnostic. Repeating the protocol with residents, tradespeople, school students, domestic visitors, international visitors, and people with different mobility or sensory needs would reveal whether the same landmarks and attributes structure the city image across groups. Comparison over time could also test whether new construction, traffic changes, landscape interventions, or interpretation programs alter the visibility and meaning of the complex.

A repeated and diversified protocol would also address a central concern in people-centered heritage management: one method and one stakeholder group cannot capture the full range of heritage knowledge. Landscape-based heritage research therefore emphasizes public participation and the integration of multiple forms of local and spatial knowledge [26], while Historic Urban Landscape studies advocate coordinated conservation, development, governance, and stakeholder involvement [22,24]. Combining cognitive maps with interviews, community workshops, visibility analysis, and scenario evaluation would connect perceptual evidence to these collaborative and integrated management approaches.

4.4. Limitations

The findings should be interpreted within the exploratory scope of the study. The participant group consisted exclusively of the 30 students who attended a single technical visit to Edirne and therefore does not represent the wider student population, local residents, or visitors to the city. The results reflect the participants' perceptions, mental representations, and recall priorities following a shared educational experience in 2018; recent exposure during the visit may also have influenced which elements were recalled. Because the data were collected in 2018, they should not be interpreted as a direct representation of present-day conditions in 2026. Accessibility, traffic organization, vegetation, surrounding development, visual openness, visitor management, and other aspects of the urban setting may change over time; these possible changes were not measured in the present study. The drawings were produced from memory in a classroom and were analyzed as representations of perceptual salience rather than as technically accurate depictions of urban space.

Differences in individual drawing ability may have affected the amount of visual detail, although artistic and technical quality were not included among the evaluation criteria. The dataset did not include demographic variables beyond the bounded educational context. Qualitative coding was conducted without an independent second coder, so inter-coder agreement could not be assessed. In addition, participant-level prevalence for the 82 attribute mentions could not be reconstructed unambiguously from all retained compound descriptors and was therefore not estimated retrospectively. Future studies should include larger and more diverse participant groups, independent coders, interviews, georeferenced viewpoints, systematically recorded observation time and weather conditions, visibility analysis, and longitudinal observation.

5. Conclusions

In this exploratory study, religious complexes were the most frequent subject in 90 ranked cognitive-map drawings of Edirne. Eighteen of the 30 participants (60.0%) recalled at least one külliye, producing 29 complex representations. Selimiye accounted for 19 of the 29 complex drawings (65.5%) and was recalled by 15 participants (50.0% of the full sample). Participants associated the complexes most often with architectural splendor and size, topographic prominence, broad visibility, and lighting. These results document a time-specific pattern of perceptual salience in this design-educated participant group following the 2018 field experience; they are not presented as a representative measure of Edirne's population or as direct evidence of present-day perceptions in 2026.

The findings also demonstrate continuity in an urban role established over centuries. Ottoman külliyes historically served as functional centers and symbolic landmarks; in the present study, they remained the urban element most frequently selected by students after touring Edirne. Selimiye's dominance, together with descriptors referring to visibility, elevation, courtyards, entrances, and integrity, shows that the complex still operates as a principal symbol through which this participant group perceived and represented the city. Thus, the drawings make visible the continuing contribution of the külliye to Edirne's skyline, orientation, spatial memory, and lived city landscape.

The practical implication is specific: conservation policy should protect the spatial conditions through which the complex remains recognizable. Maintaining view corridors, the legibility of elevated siting, connected pedestrian approaches, and transitions between skyline and architectural detail can help sustain Selimiye's place in the lived image of Edirne. Cognitive mapping cannot determine conservation priorities by itself, but it can reveal which urban relationships different groups notice and remember, providing evidence that complements architectural, historical, ecological, and socioeconomic assessment.

More broadly, the study demonstrates the analytical value of defining the külliye as a cultural landscape composed of buildings, complementary social functions, open and semi-open spaces, circulation, constructed landscape elements, and vegetation. In this framework, the contribution of a külliye to urban sustainability lies in the continuity of an integrated system: it can sustain public services and collective memory; support active and walkable urban life; conserve embodied material and cultural resources; and maintain the skyline, spatial hierarchy, and place identity of the city landscape. For Selimiye, future management should therefore evaluate the condition and use of the whole ensemble and its urban setting, not only the mosque as an individual monument.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: In accordance with the guidelines adopted by the Istanbul Technical University (ITU) Ethics Committee for Social and Human Sciences in 2014, this low-risk, non-interventional study does not require an ethics application; furthermore, educational field trips are considered part of the university’s prescribed academic curriculum.

Informed Consent Statement: Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants. Verbal rather than written consent was obtained to preserve participants’ anonymity and avoid concerns about potential links between participation, responses, and academic grading. No names, signatures, or other identifying information were collected. Participants were explicitly informed that neither their decision to participate nor their responses would affect their grades.

Data Availability Statement: The coded data supporting the reported frequencies are held by the authors.

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Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Appendix A

Table A1. Full frequency list of coded descriptors attached to complex drawings.

Descriptor	Mentions
Architectural splendor and size	14
Elevated topographic position	8
Visibility from across the city	8
Lighting effect	8
Design	6
Large wall inscriptions	4
Mosque and madrasa	3
First complex remembered	3
Motifs	3
Historic and landscape value	3
Integrity of the complex	3
Admiration	3
Wonder	3
Inspiration	3

Table A1. Cont.

Descriptor	Mentions
Dome and minarets	2
Use	2
Selimiye entrance and portal	2
Durability	1
Glazing and reflected color	1
Historical–motif–religion association	1
Spatial feeling of the courtyard	1

Note: Re-examination of the retained coding workbook yielded 82 coded attribute mentions across 21 categories. Frequencies represent coded mentions rather than independent participant observations. Semantically equivalent wording was standardized during inductive content analysis. Participant-level prevalence was not retrospectively estimated for individual attribute categories where the retained compound descriptors did not permit unambiguous participant-to-code mapping.

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