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Ottoman Historicism in Contemporary Hammams: A Case Study of Istanbul's Luxury Hospitality Sector

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Abstract

This study investigates the reinterpretation of properties of traditional Ottoman hammams in the interior design of contemporary hammams within Istanbul's luxury hospitality sector. Rooted in a tradition that spans from Roman and Byzantine bathhouses to Ottoman architectural refinement, hammams have historically served as vital social and cultural spaces in Turkish life. Today, many high-end hotels in Istanbul integrate these historical references to evoke a sense of authenticity, heritage, and luxury. The research focuses on 5-star hotels chosen in the historic center and the Bosphorus waterfront of Istanbul. Based on a Purposive Sampling approach, data was collected through visual analysis integrating the Convenience Sampling methodology. The findings reveal that while some design elements—such as domes, marble finishes, and geometric tilework—closely mimic historical precedents, others are subtly adapted to meet modern expectations of comfort, functionality, and aesthetics. This study highlights the dynamic balance between authenticity and innovation in contemporary interior design. It contributes to the broader discourse on cultural continuity in hospitality design and offers insights for incorporating historical narratives into modern interiors.

Keywords: Ottoman hammams, interior design, luxury hospitality, cultural continuity, heritage architecture

Introduction

Historicism in architecture can be broadly defined as a design approach that incorporates stylistic elements and construction principles from earlier periods. This practice often draws on architectural forms, motifs, and symbols that are historically and culturally significant, adapting them to new contexts and functions. As Gül (2024) notes, historicism reflects a return to past design values, often as a response to the perceived loss of cultural continuity in modern architecture. In design, this tendency extends beyond form-making to include the symbolic consumption of heritage, wherein elements are selectively abstracted from their original contexts and reassembled into contemporary narratives (Yenişehirlioğlu, 2002). In doing so, historicism can reshape users' relationships with history by transforming spaces into sites of cultural storytelling.

Within this framework, the Turkish hammam offers a particularly rich case for investigation. Evolving from Roman and Byzantine bathing traditions, the Ottoman hammam developed into a highly codified spatial and cultural institution. Its architectural language, characterized by domes, marble interiors, kurna basins, and göbektaş platform, reflects a synthesis of functional efficiency and symbolic richness. However, the hammam's function and meaning have shifted significantly in the modern era, particularly within the hospitality sector.

This study investigates how Ottoman historicism is reinterpreted in the design of contemporary hammam spaces within Istanbul's five-star hotels. Using purposive and convenience sampling via Booking.com website, the research identifies a selection of high-end accommodations in Istanbul's historic center that integrate spa facilities. Through visual analysis, the study explores how traditional hammam features are preserved, adapted, or abstracted in hotel settings. The aim is to understand how historical narratives are maintained or transformed in contemporary interior design and to contribute to broader discussions on cultural continuity in commercial hospitality environments.

The Turkish bath, commonly known as the hammam, is a distinctive bathing culture rooted in ancient traditions that merge Roman engineering with Islamic hygienic practices. The practice of communal bathing dates to ancient civilizations like Mesopotamia, the Roman Empire, and the Byzantine era. The Islamic hammam, however, developed distinct religious, architectural, and cultural dimensions. While influenced by Roman public baths (thermae), Turkish baths adapted to cultural and climatic conditions in the Islamic world, evolving into an institution

deeply embedded in the daily and spiritual lives of its users. In Islamic and Middle Eastern traditions, a hammam refers to a bathhouse designed for ritual and physical cleansing, and it has been a significant part of urban and social life for centuries.

Central to the Turkish bath experience is the sequential movement through rooms of varying temperatures. Bathers typically begin in a warm room (tepidarium) where their bodies start to acclimate and relax. From there, they proceed to a hot room (caldarium) filled with steam that opens pores and encourages perspiration. This is the core of the cleansing process, often accompanied by scrubbing and massage services delivered by trained attendants. Afterward, bathers transition into a cool room, where their bodies recover and close after intense heat exposure (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.). A traditional hammam structure includes several components:

- Soyunmalık (dressing room): a place to undress and prepare for the bath.
- Ilık-lık (warm room): an intermediate space for acclimating the body.
- Sıcaklık (hot room): the central bathing area with intense heat and steam.
- Kurna (basins): used for washing with bowls.
- Göbektaş (central stone platform): a heated marble slab for scrubbing and massage.
- Soğukluk (cooling room): for relaxation after the bath.

These spaces are arranged to create a gradual thermal transition, helping the body adjust to different temperatures and improving circulation (Eyice et al., 1997).

The architectural design often features domed ceilings with small holes, allowing filtered sunlight to illuminate the space while maintaining privacy. Hammams often feature domed roofs with star-shaped skylights, ornate stonework, and functional elegance. Floors are usually made of marble, which retains heat effectively, enhancing the overall experience. Historically, Turkish baths served multiple purposes beyond hygiene. They acted as social venues, especially for women, who used them as communal spaces for gathering, celebration, and conversation. Hammams also played a spiritual role, being connected to Islamic purification rituals such as ghusl (full body washing). Moreover, many Ottoman-era hammams were built as philanthropic institutions, attached to religious and civic structures like mosques and marketplaces (Encyclopaedia Britannica, n.d.).

Over time, Turkish baths became symbols of urban sophistication and wellness. Though their usage declined with the advent of modern plumbing and private bathrooms, many historic hammams remain in use today, cherished for their therapeutic and cultural value. In modern tourism, they are promoted as wellness experiences, blending history with rejuvenation. With modernization, the number of functioning public hammams has decreased. Yet, historical bathhouses have gained attention as heritage sites and are still visited for their health benefits and atmospheric charm. Many are now maintained as tourist attractions, symbolizing the fusion of health, architecture, and culture in Islamic civilization (Eyice et al., 1997).

Methodology

The article first sets the boundaries of the study area to achieve the analysis. The research focuses on the online booking website Booking.com and utilizes the filters within the website to create a sampling pool of hotels. Convenience Sampling and Purposive Sampling methods are used in order to select both the website and the hotels within. Purposive sampling, also called judgmental or selective sampling, is a non-probability method where the researcher intentionally selects participants or cases most relevant to the research (Palys, 2008). This approach allows for in-depth analysis of subjects with specific characteristics. This focused method ensures that the findings directly support the research objectives, offering meaningful insights through carefully selected, information-rich examples (Patton, 2015). The study focuses on only 5-star hotels in the historic centre of Istanbul, considering the scale of the city and cultural and architectural differences between the neighbourhoods.

Convenience sampling, also known as haphazard or accidental sampling, is a non-probability method where participants are selected based on their ease of access, proximity, availability at a specific time, or willingness to take part in the research. This approach involves including individuals from the target population who are most readily accessible to the researcher, making it a practical option when time, resources, or logistics are limited. It does not rely on random selection, and thus, may not represent the broader population accurately, but is useful for exploratory or preliminary studies (Etikan et al., 2016). It is utilized in this study to choose the main website to work with in order to cover more examples and achieve consistent and easy accessibility.

The sampling through the website of Booking.com is executed between the dates 24.05.25 and 27.05.25. The destination Istanbul is under the category Turkey, Marmara Region as a location. The study used the neighbourhood 'Old City Sultanahmet' and '5-star' filters to narrow down the hotels. In order to focus on the hammam and spa spaces, the filter 'Spa' is selected under the category of Facilities. This purposive approach enables a deeper understanding of how historical influences are shaping contemporary interiors. The search results in 11 hotels. The study uses the photos provided from the Booking.com website and the hotels' own websites if available. Below are the hotels selected with the above-mentioned criteria in alphabetical order.

- AJWA Sultanahmet – Preferred Hotels LVX Collection
- Bentley Hotel Old City – Special Class
- Cronton Design Hotel
- Crowne Plaza Istanbul – Old City by IHG
- Demiray Hotel Old City
- DoubleTree by Hilton Istanbul – Old Town
- Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at Sultanahmet
- Hagia Sofia Mansions Istanbul, Curio Collection by Hilton
- Legacy Ottoman Hotel
- Sura Hagia Sophia Hotel
- Wyndham Istanbul Old City

The Case

The following section presents visual and descriptive analyses of the selected five-star hotel hammams in Istanbul's historic center. Each case is examined for its use of Ottoman design elements, material choices, and spatial composition, highlighting how traditional references are preserved, reinterpreted, or simplified in contemporary hospitality settings. The study focuses on the online inventory of the website and analyses the design properties of the objects through the lens of historical references.

AJWA Sultanahmet - Preferred Hotels LVX Collection

The hammam at AJWA Sultanahmet reflects a reverent approach to Ottoman hamams through its material palette and spatial hierarchy (Figure 1). The image shows polished white and grey marble enveloping the walls and floors, reminiscent of classical hamam interiors. Kurna is emphasized in the middle of the symmetrical layout. Star-shaped cutouts on the wall niches allow filtered light to highlight the traditional patterns. The use of turquoise tile accents hints at Seljuk and Ottoman influences. Traditional marble and bright green colours are observed in contrast and balance.

Figure 1.

Preferred Hotels LVX Collection



Bentley Hotel Old City-Special Class

Bentley Hotel's hammam offers a minimal reinterpretation of tradition. The space, as seen in the visual, forgoes heavy ornamentation for a sleek, neutral-toned marble interior (Figure 2). While the göbektaş is retained, its edges are softened and its scale subdued, catering to modern comfort. Ambient lighting replaces traditional skylights, giving a more spa-like than communal feel. Though less focused on architectural grandeur, the inclusion of kurna basins shows a commitment to ritual authenticity. The design references Ottoman hammams in form but is clearly recontextualized to meet contemporary wellness aesthetics—clean, intimate, and pared-down in its historical storytelling.

Figure 2.

Bentley Hotel Old City-Special Class



Cronton Design Hotel

Cronton Design Hotel embraces a hybrid visual strategy that merges classical references with bold, contemporary flourishes. The hammam features a pronounced use of golden lighting, contrasting with the more muted tones of traditional baths. Though the materials—like polished marble and ceramic tiling—echo Ottoman choices, their use is stylized rather than literal. The use of the traditional Islamic star pattern on the walls behind the kurnas are duplicated on the gobektasi in a bigger scale. (Figure 3).

Figure 3.

Cronton Design Hotel

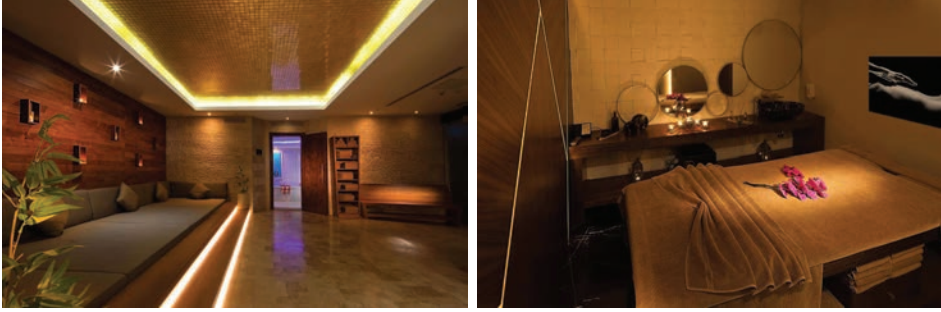


Crowne Plaza Istanbul - Old City by IHG

Crowne Plaza's hammam (Figure 4) captures a transitional approach between traditional hammam architecture and hotel spa modernity. In the images provided, the göbektaşı appears square instead of circular, deviating from the classic configuration but still central to the layout. Smooth marble dominates the space, punctuated by simple, symmetrical motifs. Ambient lighting is used in place of skylights, offering a dimmer, more intimate setting than historic hammams. The restraint in ornamentation may signal a shift toward minimalist luxury. Nonetheless, the layering of thermal zones—suggested by visible warm and steam room divisions—preserves the traditional hammam's ritualistic spatial progression.

Figure 4.

Crowne Plaza Istanbul - Old City by IHG



Demiray Hotel Old City and DoubleTree by Hilton Istanbul – Old Town do not provide visual documentation of their hammam or spa interiors in the publicly available resources, including their official websites and booking platforms. This limits the ability to assess how—or whether—traditional Ottoman elements are incorporated into their designs.

Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at Sultanahmet

Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at Sultanahmet introduces its spa with hammam facilities with the name Kurna Spa. The photo reveals an interior where marble surfaces blend with bronze-toned fixtures, creating a luxurious atmosphere (Figure 5). A modern interpretation of the göbektaş_ı sits center stage, minimally detailed but commanding. Both the dark gray veins of the marble and the use of traditional Iznik tiles create a strong reference to the Ottoman era.

Figure 5.

Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at Sultanahmet



Hagia Sofia Mansions Istanbul, Curio Collection by Hilton

Figure 6 depicts a hammam space that diverges from polished marble aesthetics, featuring exposed brick walls and a vaulted ceiling that evoke the spatial atmosphere of a historic cistern rather than a classical Ottoman bath. The material choice creates a sense of groundedness and antiquity, emphasizing texture and volume over ornamentation. Unlike tiled interiors, the use of brick references Byzantine or earlier infrastructural typologies, offering a raw, architectural ambiance. This reinterpretation positions the hammam as a heritage-immersive environment. While deviating from standard Ottoman visual language, the space still fosters a contemplative mood aligned with ritual cleansing traditions.

Figure 6.

Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul at Sultanahmet



Legacy Ottoman Hotel

Legacy Ottoman Hotel hammam opts for a minimalist, spa-inspired reading of Ottoman aesthetics. The image displays a compact, softly lit interior clad in light beige marble. Though traditional features like the kurna and göbektaş are present, they are scaled down and rendered in simplified forms (Figure 7). The absence of a dome or visible ceiling apertures suggests a shift from vertical monumentality to horizontal calm. This design prioritizes tranquility and comfort, mirroring the contemporary preference for privacy over communal experience. Still, the presence of historical markers—water basins, stone seating—anchors the space in cultural continuity, even within a reimagined visual language.

Figure 7.

Legacy Ottoman Hotel



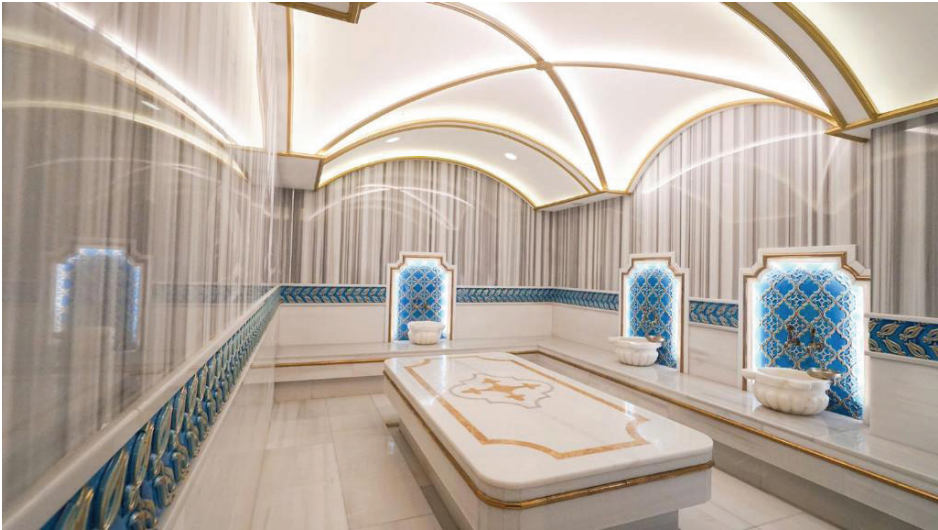
Sura Hagia Sophia Hotel

Sura Hagia Sophia Hotel hammam is a bold celebration of Ottoman grandeur. The photo showcases a multi-domed space with high arches, heavy marble use, and intricate decorative tilework—elements that directly echo 16th-century classical hamams. The göbektaş is prominently elevated, reinforcing its symbolic centrality.

Light filters through traditional star-cut skylights, bathing the room in a diffuse glow reminiscent of spiritual ritual. While opulence is clearly a goal, the design refrains from becoming pastiche; instead, it embraces the performative role of the hammam as a space of both purification and spectacle. It is a faithful revival, where tradition is not only referenced but dramatized (Figure 8).

Figure 8.

Sura Hagia Sophia Hotel



Wyndham Istanbul Old City

Wyndham's hammam combines traditional Ottoman references with a plaster dome ceiling featuring circular light apertures, evoking the skylight typology of historic hamams and allowing soft, diffused natural light to shape the atmosphere. White marble is used extensively across floors and walls, echoing classical material palettes. Kurna basins are recessed into the walls, maintaining ritual continuity. The space follows a square, centralized plan, favoring geometric clarity over spatial layering.

Figure 9.

Wyndham Istanbul Old City



Conclusions

This study has examined how aspects of traditional Ottoman hammams is integrated, interpreted, or recontextualized in the design of hammam interiors in selected five-star hotels in Istanbul's historic core. The findings indicate that while visual and symbolic references to the traditional Turkish bath are prevalent, their application varies considerably across different establishments, reflecting diverse strategies for balancing historical identity with contemporary hospitality expectations.

Several key architectural and decorative elements emerged as common motifs in the contemporary reinterpretation of the hammam. The göbektaşı (central heated marble platform), domed ceilings, kurna basins, and marble cladding are consistently present in most hotel examples. These features serve as visual anchors to Ottoman typologies and help establish an immediate sense of cultural authenticity. For instance, in hotels such as Bentley and Sura Hagia Sophia, the use of decorative domes and tiles strongly echoes the aesthetic vocabulary of classical Ottoman

hammams. The presence of light filtered through the domes, as seen in these examples, further reinforces the spatial atmosphere of historical hammams.

However, not all hotels employ these historical components with the same level of intensity. Some, like Legacy Ottoman Hotel, adopt a more minimalist interpretation, prioritizing modern spa aesthetics while only selectively referencing historical motifs. While these choices align with international standards of luxury wellness environments, they also represent a departure from the ornamental traits that defined traditional hammams.

Another group of hotels, such as Cronton Design Hotel and Crowne Plaza Istanbul – Old City, exemplifies a hybrid approach. Their designs feature stylistic gestures to Ottoman architecture—such as arches, domes, and marble textures—yet they incorporate them within modern spatial layouts and lighting systems. This approach reflects a broader trend in the hospitality sector where historical narratives are preserved but adjusted for modern standards of intimacy and efficiency.

The absence of visual data for Demiray Hotel and DoubleTree by Hilton Istanbul – Old Town highlights a limitation in accessibility and suggests that not all five-star accommodations prioritize showcasing their hammam designs in online promotional materials. This may be due to a variety of factors, including architectural constraints, marketing strategies, or a diminished emphasis on the hammam as a central cultural or design element within their spa offerings.

Across all examples, one of the most notable findings is the selective appropriation of historical references. Rather than replicating entire traditional layouts or aesthetic systems, contemporary designs tend to extract iconic features—such as the *göbektaşı* or domed ceilings—and reinterpret them within the language of modern luxury. This process aligns with broader definitions of historicism, where components are detached from their original functional and social contexts and repurposed within new aesthetic frameworks. In this context, Ottoman hammams become visual and experiential signifiers of cultural heritage rather than fully restored typological spaces.

In conclusion, the integration of Ottoman historicism in Istanbul's luxury hotel hammams reflects a spectrum of design intentions, ranging from literal revivalism to abstract evocation. This diversity is informed by brand identity, target clientele, architectural constraints, and evolving standards of hospitality. While some hotels aim to preserve cultural memory through highly referential designs, others seek to reinterpret tradition to serve the functional and atmospheric demands of the

modern spa experience. This study underscores the importance of context-sensitive design strategies in maintaining historical continuity while accommodating contemporary expectations and suggests further opportunities for critical dialogue between heritage and innovation in interior design.

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