

# An architect building bridges between religions

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Armenian architect Kevork Özkaragöz designed many monuments, including mosques and churches, for various religions, forming bridges between faiths.

Kevork Özkaragöz, an Armenian architect who has designed many religious monuments for different religions and sects, refers to the opinions of the religious communities when developing his projects.

A member of an Armenian family renowned for their stonemasonry, Özkaragöz moved from Malatya to Istanbul with his family when he was 6 years old.

Speaking to the Hürriyet Daily News about his projects, Özkaragöz said those likening him the chief Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan were exaggerating his skills.

“During the Ottoman period, there was not a tradition of highlighting a certain ethnicity or religion. Such a situation was never seen in architecture and other art forms,” Özkaragöz said.

“Also, the Balyan family [an Armenian dynasty of famous architects during Ottoman period] did not come to the forefront with their identity. As architects, we never attach a special importance to religious structures in our projects. Each architectural project bears importance since they are the structures presented to a city’s community. However, religious structures sometimes require more concentration and effort due to some features peculiar to them,” he said.

The structures built by Özkaragöz in recent years include Mahmut Şevket Paşa Hacı Bektaş Cemevi (an Alevi house of worship) in Istanbul’s Okmeydanı district, Plevne Mosque in Balıkesir’s Gönen district and the final prayer chapel in his hometown, Malatya.

Last year, the final prayer chapel – in a historical Armenian cemetery in Malatya – was demolished by municipal teams, which stirred a lot of debate in society. Due to the objections, the chapel was rebuilt on the grounds that the teams had “misunderstood the order.”

“While designing the Cemevi, I obtained the opinions of elderly persons in the Alevi community. I obtained data on Alevi culture and beliefs from studies published on the subject. And when designing the mosque, I tried to get to know the functions of a mosque by chatting with imams. I especially observed Istanbul’s mosques from the perspective of a designer. I refreshed my knowledge of mosques by examining mosques’ stages of development in art history books. I also examined Vedat Dalokay Islamabad Mosque and Behruz Çinici TCMM mosque, which were built in the Republican period,” he said.

“Existence, oneness and love of God form the basis of religions, while they center upon human beings. I believe each faith has a different form of worship and different needs. I can develop my designs by taking all these [differences] into account with the aid of my cultural background. I am very pleased when a religious structure comes into being and people can worship in them,” Özkaragöz said.

