

Statement  
on  
The Use of Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey

Society of Architectural Historians  
Heritage Conservation Committee

**Issue**

Hagia Sophia, located in Istanbul (formerly Constantinople) is an internationally significant work of architecture that speaks to the sustained interactions between Europe and Asia over fifteen centuries.

On 10 July 2020, Turkey's Council of State reversed the previous decision of the Council of Ministers, decreeing that Hagia Sophia can only be used as a mosque and not "for any other purpose." The decree, signed by Turkish President Recep Erdoğan, ordered that Hagia Sophia be reclassified as a mosque. A presidential spokesperson announced that the change would not affect Hagia Sophia's status as a UNESCO World Heritage site, clarifying that Hagia Sophia would remain open to the public when not being used for worship. During worship, Christian iconography within Hagia Sophia has been temporarily concealed by curtains on the walls and rugs on the floor during worship but not permanently obscured or removed.

**Recommendation**

SAH joins with The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), The International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), The International Council of Museums (ICOM), and other international organizations in calling for continued conservation of and accessibility to Hagia Sophia. We call for it to remain a site for education and research, resulting in the exchange of knowledge between curators, scholars, and specialists, and for it to remain open to visitation by people of all faiths. We also support the retention of the many layers of religious symbolism in Hagia Sophia, and support the temporary concealment of some iconography during worship, with the understanding that those symbols will be retained and remain accessible to visitors outside of worship services.

**Background**

Dedicated in 360 by Emperor Constantius II, son of the city's founder, Emperor Constantine, it was originally called Megale Ekklesia (Great Church). This first church was destroyed during riots in 404. Its replacement was dedicated in 415 by Emperor Theodosius II, and around 430 became known as Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom). This church was burned during the Kika revolt of 532, and was immediately ordered rebuilt by Emperor Justinian I. Designed by Anthemios of Tralles and Isodoros of Miletos, the third Hagia Sophia was inaugurated in 537. Its central dome collapsed in 558, and was rebuilt to an even greater height in 562. After Mehmet II's conquest of Istanbul in 1453, Hagia Sophia was converted to a mosque and renamed Ayasofya Camii. It remained a mosque until the fall of the Ottoman empire in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, minarets were built around the perimeter of the complex, exterior buttresses were added for structural support, and Christian mosaic

icons were covered with whitewash. The complex remained a mosque until 1931, when it was closed to the public for four years. During this time the Ataturk's Turkish Republic, represented by the Council of Ministers, secularized the building, converting it into a museum and restoring the original mosaics. Since 1935, Hagia Sophia has remained open to the public, a place dedicated to the multi-cultural richness of a site that represents centuries of history. The importance of this shared heritage was acknowledged by the inclusion of Hagia Sophia on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1985. Hagia Sophia is visited by more than 3.7 million visitors each year.

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Society of Architectural Historians  
Heritage Conservation Committee*

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