

Why Türkiye, What is Paphlagonia?

Examination periods are long, stressful and exhausting! That is a fact. What helps is to give yourself something to look forward to. In this case, it was a promising email offer on “Active Students” mailer. A trip to Türkiye for a week, immersing yourself in a completely unknown subject? Sounds great! So I quickly wrote my cover letter. The name of the workshop week was “Learning from Heritage Citys, Designing the Future”—a vague title that could be anything. Looking deeper into the workshop description, I found the three main topics to be architecture, urban planning, and archaeology. None of these are my field of study but it still piqued my interest because the region (Paphlagonia) where the Erasmus+ program would take place is an area I have been to before.



Source: Wikipedia

To my surprise, a few days later I was accepted for the Erasmus program. The program was designed as a BIP (blended intensity program) which emphasizes its short duration and mix of online and face-to-face classes.

The online classes had started a few weeks later and were mainly an introduction to the history of the region, the geography and the architectural and urban layout of Paphlagonia. Paphlagonia is located in northern Turkey, between Ankara and the Black Sea coast. One of the few remaining historical towns is Safranbolu, a place characterized by old timber-framed houses comparable to German “Fachwerkhäuser”. Due to the development of a new town (Karabük) next to it, most of the old town has remained untouched for the past 200 years, which contributed to its inscription as a Unesco World Heritage Site in 1994. Safranbolu became my home for the first week of May.

Arrival and accommodation



View of the city in the evening sun



Traditional guesthouse with built-in closet bathroom

After departing from Leipzig and a quick layover in Istanbul, I arrived in Ankara where I spent a couple of days before taking the bus (FlixBus, yes it's the same in Türkiye) to Safranbolu. Arriving at the golden hour of the day was a surprising but welcome pleasure.

The city is surrounded by hills where the houses seem to climb up to, forming a pleasing picture in the evening sun. My accommodation “Safranbolu University Guesthouse” is in one of the above mentioned wooden houses built in the traditional mansion style. After being greeted by the staff (all students of the University of Safranbolu/Karabük), I received my room key and was shown around the building. Traditional Safranbolu houses have the peculiarity of hiding the bathroom and toilet in a closet. From the outside, the rooms look like normal closets but if you take a closer look you will discover the hidden rooms. It is one of the many unique details that can be found in the houses of the late Ottoman period (between the 19th and early 20th century).

The workshop week

On Monday morning, all workshop participants had a Turkish breakfast together to get to know each other. We all came from different parts of Europe: a group of architects from Romania and Moldova with their professors, the civil engineers were a group from Croatia, and another from Lithuania. After breakfast, we were welcomed by Professor Aysun Özköse from the nearby Karabük University and shown around the campus. During the first day, we all explored the old town together, making connections between the teams and getting to know the Turkish architecture students. They were already familiar with most of the places and were able to give us some additional information about them. For me, it was a lot of new input because we, from the German team, were all from engineering and computer science departments in Ilmenau. So we haven't been exposed to any of the architecture topics prior to this week. Nevertheless, it was an opportunity for me to dip my toes into unfamiliar territory.



University building in Safranbolu/Karabük

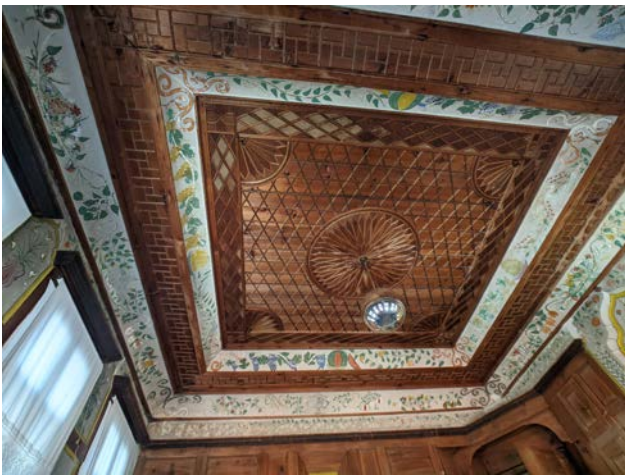


Exploration the old town with the groups

The scope of the “Learning from Heritage Cities Program” was to capture and document all relevant information and then “design the future” which meant that all students were divided into three groups focusing on different topics. My group's task was to find “sustainable and ecological design” in historical places and propose ideas on how to adapt them to contemporary urban and housing design.

The following two days were filled with further exploration of the surrounding historical sites. We visited a Roman Hamam that is still being excavated. The professors encouraged the students to observe the fine details and understand the concepts, materials and design of ancient buildings. In addition to these thousand-year-old excavations, we also focused on more recent history going back a few hundred years to the late Ottoman Empire (19th to early 20th century).

Especially the interaction with the local people from the traditional Yörük village will stay in my mind. The people are passionate about the local way of living. This includes repairing and preserving their houses and the stories that go with them. Upon closer observation, we all realized that these places were made for people—not for cars, not for technology, and not for investors. These principles also kept the village closer to nature. Over many generations and iterations of more or less the same buildings, the overall design was refined to a point where it could meet all the needs of its inhabitants at that time. Undoubtedly, many things are outdated by modern standards, but on the other hand, other things are better executed than in our familiar spaces where we spend our daily lives. Important issues like seismic safety, energy efficient heating, shading and passive cooling, walkability were all better addressed than in our machine and concrete-built cities.



Traditional Turkish ceiling with metal ball for better illumination



Houses and nature together form the city

On the last day, we worked hard to summarize all our impressions. Our goal was not to criticize contemporary cities or to praise traditional ones, but to select the important ideas that can be adapted to our time. Our group proposed future concepts, such as changing the spacing between houses from the grid layout typical today to an organic pattern to ensure adequate cooling without creating wind tunnels. We pointed out the value of well-maintained local communities because they protect their inhabitants from natural threats. Finally, we proposed the concept of a local community center to serve Safranbolu residents and tourists in the same careful and ecological way.

Looking back on a week of lively cultural exchange

The goal of the Erasmus program was not only to discuss the topics mentioned above, but rather to bring people from different cultures together and give them the space to become friends. The recent European elections have shown the rise of nationalism and anti-European attitudes, especially in Germany. Fortunately, the Erasmus+ program supports and strengthens intercultural exchange to connect people from different countries.

The educational process during the workshop week was much more than just reading books, using formulas or writing exams. It was a chance to slow down individualism and strengthen my ability to work better with others.