



SOHO HOUSE

ISTANBUL

Title: The New York Times
Subject: Soho House Istanbul
Circulation: 2,149,012

The New York Times

Late Edition

Today, times of clouds and sun, milder, high 65. Tonight, mostly cloudy, low 50. Tomorrow, a morning shower, some afternoon rain, high 60. Weather map appears on Page A16.

VOL. CLXIV . . . No. 56,828

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NEW YORK, MONDAY, APRIL 6, 2015

\$2.50

THE NEW YORK TIMES INTERNATIONAL MONDAY, APRIL 6, 2015

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ISTANBUL JOURNAL

Old Haunt of U.S. Spies Becomes a Playground for Turkish Elite

By TIM ARANGO

ISTANBUL — For more than a century, the grand Italianate mansion that serves as an anchor of this city's European quarter was a beehive of American diplomacy and espionage. Spies toiled within and met their agents at the bar across the street, reporters dropped by for after-work drinks, and any Turk could walk in off the street to see the latest art exhibition or browse the library. There seemed to be a celebration every night.

"We were partying all the time," said Ayse Ozakinci, who was a librarian for four decades in the imposing structure, the American Consulate in Istanbul. "There was a festive mood for everyone."

And then, a dozen years ago, the party stopped and security walls enclosed the mansion, as the threat of terrorism sent American diplomats to a fortified hillside compound on the city's outskirts, overlooking the Bosphorus.

That put the American government in the real estate business, thanks to a law that required the State Department to keep ownership of the historic building as a space to foster relations between the United States and the Middle East.

Now the party is back on, but not exactly in the way lawmakers had intended.

The walls came down recently, offering breathing room to a crammed neighborhood and unveiling the building's rebirth as an opulent clubhouse for Istanbul's social elite. With a new luxury hotel beside it, the mansion, under a 51-year, roughly \$25 million lease with the United States government, is the latest outpost of the private club empire Soho House.

In 2004, Congress, through the efforts of the former Senator Ernest F. Hollings and backed by onetime Istanbul diplomats who wanted the United States to preserve the building's history, created the Hollings Center for International Dialogue. The idea was to use the mansion as a place to "reinforce communication and understanding between the U.S. and the Muslim world," according to the center's website.

But the cost of renovations and upkeep eventually made it necessary to find a commercial use for the structure, known as the Palazzo Corpi for the rich shipbuilder who had it constructed in the 19th century as his home. Soho House has invested nearly \$110 million in

the project and is now the primary tenant, while the Hollings Center will have an office in the building and run its programs and workshops from there.

Walking through the building recently for the first time in years, Ms. Ozakinci, who is not a member of the new club, marveled at the renovations, saying they had restored much of the original grandeur, even as she lamented that the mansion was not open to the public.

She described how the modest wife of one former ambassador had ordered that ceiling murals depicting nude goddesses be painted over. The murals have now been rescued from layers of oil and paint.

She said there had been a "secret floor" up top for the Central Intelligence Agency.

"We pretended not to know about that," she said.

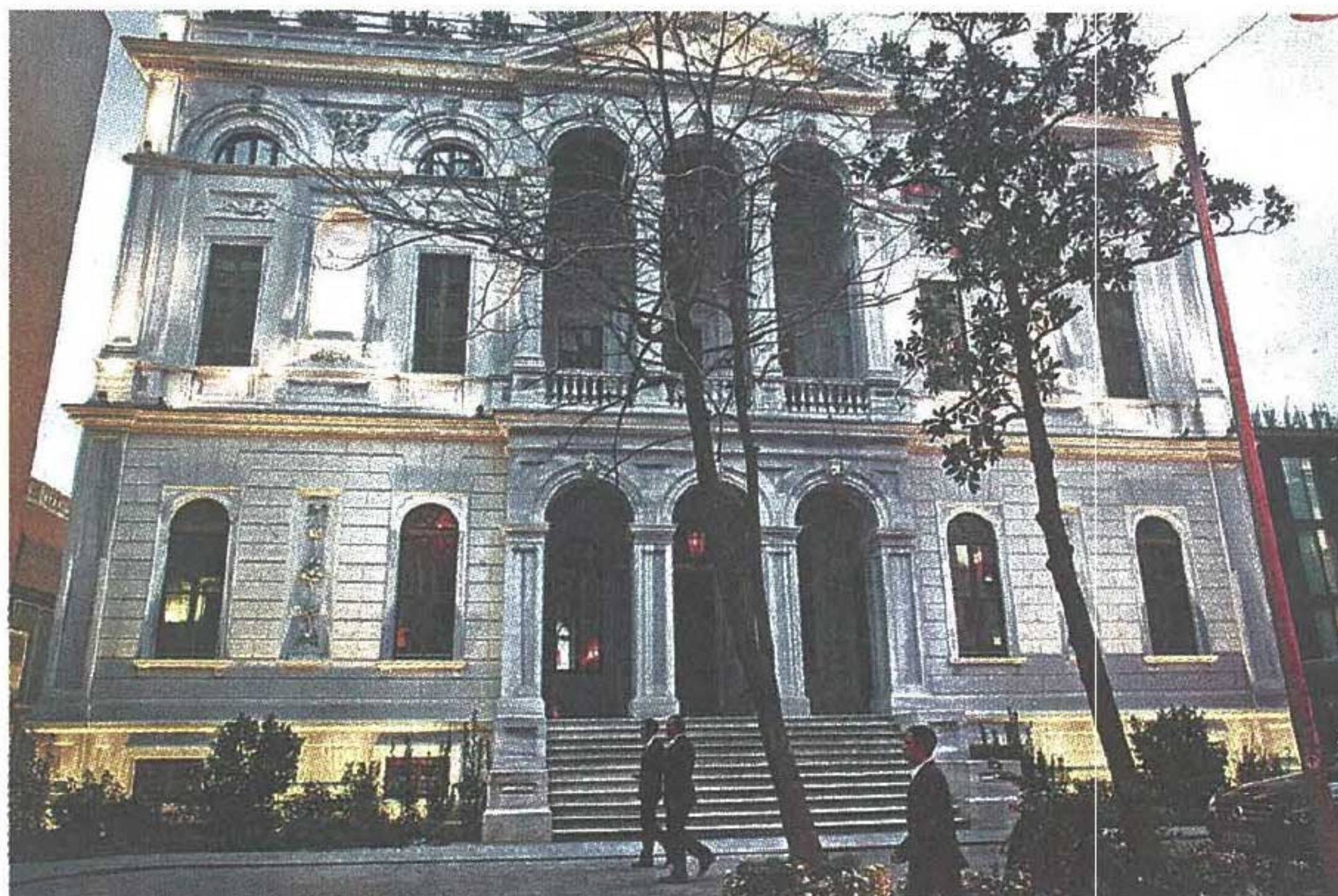
A rooftop pool, flanked by yellow-and-white striped beds and with a sweeping view of the Golden Horn waterway and the minarets of the old city, is a fresh touch. Inside, a layered approach to interior design creates a "Downton Abbey"-meets-"Mad Men" effect, mixing late 19th-century with midcentury modern furniture. There are vintage club chairs and old chesterfield sofas, and many new pieces manufactured in Turkey and made to look antique by workers banging away with hammers and chains.

Nick Jones, the founder and chief executive of Soho House, a growing network of private clubs across Europe and North America, decided on an Istanbul location after visiting the city several years ago. "I just fell in love with it," he said. "Wow. I was taken with the place. It sort of reminded me of New York energy."

Mr. Jones committed to Istanbul before violent antigovernment protests swept Turkey in 2013, and before the economy slowed, diminishing an image of the country as a rising global power that took hold in the earlier years of the Islamist government of Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who was prime minister for more than a decade and is now president.

Mr. Jones said he watched the unfolding political turmoil closely but was not scared away. "In my experience, 20 to 25 years now, whatever happens, people still want to eat and drink and have a bit of fun," he said.

A committee decides whom to



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TARA TODRAS-WHITEHILL FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

The mansion that once served as the United States Consulate in Istanbul has been reborn as an outpost of Soho House, a network of clubs across Europe and North America.

admit and whom to reject, and careful attention is paid to artists, writers and filmmakers, or as Mr. Jones put it, the "creative soul" of Istanbul. "The struggling scriptwriter is still one of our favorite members," he said.

But having money is important, too, and plenty of bankers and lawyers make their way through the door.

Amid the opulence, the drinking and the networking among the elite, there is also an inescap-

able sense of separateness: Those who gather here, despite their pretensions, represent a stratum of society far from the center of things in Turkey these days. Mr. Erdogan's government has pushed for more religion in public life, cracked down on alcohol and made Islamic schooling more widely available.

The mansion sits as a testament to a bygone — some would say more innocent — era of American diplomacy, when For-

eign Service officers and spies, in Istanbul but also around the world, could interact freely and casually with locals, without the barriers of high walls and intricate security procedures.

"Here in the middle of the city, everyone came in," said Ms. Ozakinci, who added that "relations flourished" between Americans and Turks. When the consulate moved to the fortified compound in 2003, she said, "suddenly we were far from everything and no

one wanted to come."

Graham Fuller, who as a young C.I.A. officer was stationed in Istanbul in the 1960s, recalled the time in an email as "truly a by-gone era when American diplomats were still welcomed and part of the inner city life with only a lazy guard or two keeping watch over the consulate. The magic of the neighborhood still lingers in those back streets, but the American presence no longer does."

Things began to change after the Persian Gulf war, Ms. Ozakinci said. Sandbags were piled near the windows, and eventually the street in front was closed to traffic and visitors had to be cleared days in advance.

The building was bought by the United States in 1907 — the first real estate it owned in Europe and the second worldwide, after a facility in Tangier, Morocco, a gift from the ruler of the country. The mansion was the American Embassy in the late years of the Ottoman Empire and became the consulate after Ankara was named the capital of the Turkish republic.

If the walls could speak, they might tell of the ghost of a Genoese shipping magnate's mistress, once said to haunt the halls and ornate rooms, or of the time the building changed hands in a poker game.

The latter tale goes like this: The rich American ambassador posted in the early 1900s to what was then called Constantinople bought the building with money out of his own pocket, for 28,000 Ottoman liras, or the equivalent of \$123,200 at the time, on the assumption that he would be reimbursed by Congress. Washington lawmakers refused. Then, as recounted in a memoir by an American teacher who lived here then and as passed down through generations of diplomats, the ambassador organized a party for senators and congressmen.

"There were rich meats, there were unlimited quantities of first class drinks, and finally there was poker which lasted deep in to the night," the teacher wrote.

At some point, having lost "conspicuous sums," the ambassador proposed the embassy as a bet. If he lost, he would pay for it. But he won, and Congress, it is said, appropriated the funds and acquired the mansion.

The story may be apocryphal, but it has persisted, lending the mansion's majestic history an extra glint of intrigue.