



Contemporary  
Architecture  
In Turkey:  
An Evaluation

Turkey has carved out its own position in the architectural world. While engaged and competing with the West, it has also sought out its own identity and never lost sight of its architectural values. Doğan Tekeli outlines the main strands and leading figures in Turkish architecture, highlighting how its contemporary culture is indebted to a process of modernisation that took place very much on Turkey's own terms.

For many years, Turkish architecture has not been considered worthy of extensive evaluation, viewed as it was within the generalised context of pluralistic Islamic architecture. At the beginning of the 20th century, Turkish art historian Celal Esat Arseven and architect Kemalettin rewrote the history of Turkish architecture, maintaining that it was a distinct genre in its own right. Although contemporary Turkish architecture has largely broken with its past, it continues to be evaluated within the realm of Islamic architecture. Yet among today's non-Western architectural traditions, it deserves particular attention because, with the possible exception of Russian architecture, it was the earliest that aspired to be Modern.<sup>7</sup>

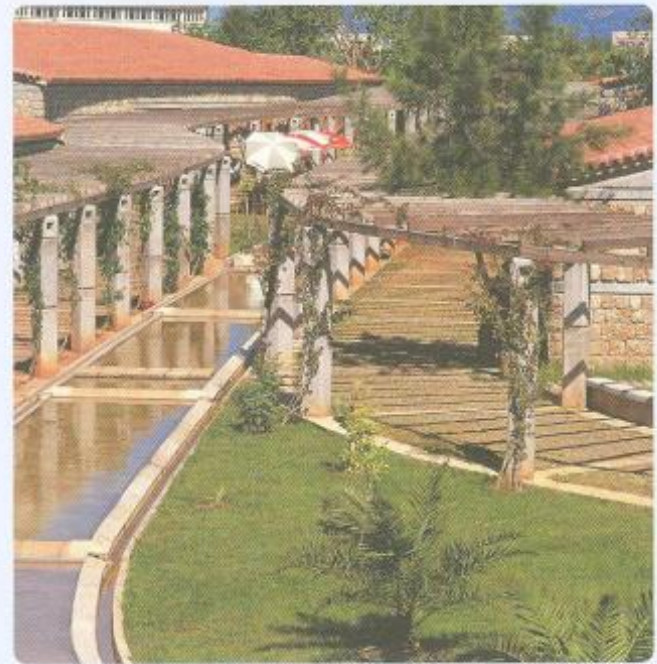
Modern architecture was established in the first half of the 20th century with the claim of universality and creativity as its success criteria. The claim of universality dissolves the importance of time and place. On the basis of this assumption, an architecture regarded as 'non-Western' can be evaluated according to the criteria of abstract universality and originality, and yet the diversity within the Modernist genre is denied. This denial demeans the claim of universality in time and place, and the search for abstract originality becomes impossible.

The exclusion of local distinctions from the claims to universality of Modernist architecture is striking. Studies evaluating the architectural performances of peripheral countries ignore the contextual conditions of architectural practice. This results in a search for marginal buildings that exemplify this Orientalist bias. This type of evaluation, which has been widely criticised, is at odds with the evaluations of those within the architectural practice of these countries. Thus, there are no viable grounds for claiming that Western evaluation is more valid than an evaluation from within a particular historical architectural tradition.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the nationalist War of Liberation, Turkey

embarked on building a nation-state. It adopted a modernising principle that might be described as 'Westernisation despite the West'. The statesmen of this new era saw the West as a source of both good and evil. The West was evil because it was considered to obstruct Turkey's modernisation, which the West saw as a threat to its own interests. Nevertheless, Turkey persevered in implementing a radical project of modernisation across all social spheres, marked by its significant attention to architecture.

At the time the Turkish Republic was founded, a neoclassical architecture referring to the Ottoman and Seljuk architectures that had preceded it, and described as 'nationalist' predominated. The founders of the new republic rejected this style of architecture because they sought to found their nationalism on recognition within an international context. This meant that instead of an architecture that referred to the past, Turkish architects were expected to work within a contemporary idiom and produce work that was on a par with the work of Western architects.

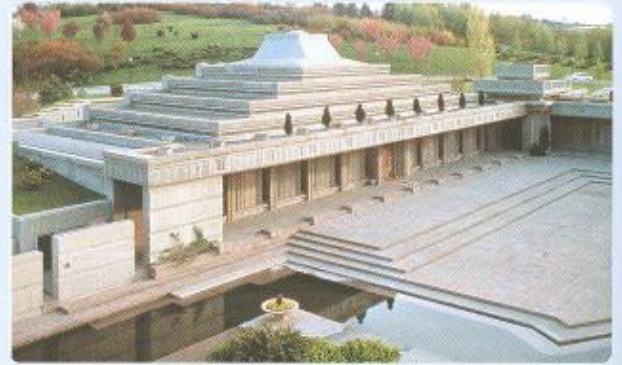


Turgut Cansever, Nautical Archaeological Institute, Bodrum, 1992-8

Opposite  
The use of repetitive local architectural elements constructed with artisanal sensitivity is a fresh interpretation of regionalism.

Cengiz Bektas, Olbia Social Centre, Antalya, 1999

Right  
The detached social units of a Modernist university are linked alongside a series of open spaces, invoking the spirit of an Oriental bazaar.



When Turkey embraced this ambitious objective, it did not actually possess a sufficient number of architects trained along contemporary lines. In Ankara, the new capital of Turkey, many new buildings were required. In order to meet this demand, a small number of foreign Modernist architects were invited to the country, and educational institutions were reorganised to provide training in the new idiom. Though various foreign architects designed buildings during this period, care was taken not to turn Turkey into a commercial arena. The Great Depression of 1929 sharpened sensitivity on this subject and, whilst official campaigns encouraged the public to buy local goods, international architectural competitions were held in order to put pressure on Turkish architects to raise the level of their work. The international competition held for the design of the Local Products and Savings Society building was won by a Turkish architect, Sevki Balmumcu, demonstrating that Turkish architects were capable of competing on an international level. It was realised that competitions had an important function in protecting the domestic market.

During the 1930s, architectural and engineering practices, and building development, in Turkey were institutionalised along lines of Modernist legitimacy. However, the number of trained architects was insufficient to meet all construction demands. During these years, Turkey began training a new generation of architects with the help of prominent German academics who had been compelled to flee from Germany.

Following the Second World War, Turkey experienced rapid urbanisation. Adapting to this radical transformation demanded both rapid industrialisation and urban building development at a time when Turkey, in only the early stages of its economic development, did not have the necessary level of capital accumulation. Moreover, the new arrivals in the cities did not have the cultural and financial capacity to meet the demands of institutionalised modernity. Under these circumstances, the new arrivals sought solutions to their own problems in accordance with their own rural traditions, with the result that cities became surrounded by shanty-town belts.

In the wake of the Second World War, architectural practice was limited to two spheres. The first was prestigious public buildings, and the second the 'build and sell' sector that developed spontaneously as a means of meeting the housing demands of the middle classes. Turkish architects rapidly embraced the international architectural idiom and developed an architectural philosophy that distanced itself from the inward-looking strategies that had been aimed at protecting the domestic architectural market.

The outcome of this approach was in line with the republic's modernising principles. The construction of prestigious new buildings was therefore governed by architectural competitions, which made it easier for young architects to obtain commissions and speeded up the transformation of architectural concepts. Success in competitions began to determine the level of prestige architects enjoyed. Studies in the field of the history of architecture are largely confined to this aspect. Architects who did not participate in competitions either followed the Modernist school within state bureaucracy or made a living designing 'build and sell' apartment buildings, and were excluded from academic architectural evaluations.

These internal dynamics continued into the 1980s. Significant changes came with the emergence of globalisation when Modernist

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thought faced serious criticism. At this important time, although Turkish architects occasionally produced Postmodernist designs, this tactic was no longer effective in protecting the domestic market. The Turkish economy was opening up to the outside world, and altering its strategy in favour of export-driven industrialisation. In such an environment it was no longer possible to defend protectionism in architecture, and thus the system by which architects obtained commissions changed radically. The state ceased to be an attractive employer and was replaced by the private sector; impartial project distribution by means of state-sector competitions no longer defined the degree of prestige enjoyed by architects.

During this period, the number of architectural schools in Turkey had risen to 30, and the number of architects exceeded 30,000. Around 10 high-quality

**Behruz Çinici, Turkish Grand National Assembly Mosque, Ankara, 1989**  
Opposite, top right  
Rejecting all possible past and present traditional elements, Çinici creates a sacred and secular space for a secular parliament.

**Tuncay Çavdar, Cappadocia Lodge Hotel, Urgup, 1990**  
Opposite, bottom right  
Çavdar created an architecture that is integrated with its surroundings, inspired by the fascinating topography of Cappadocia.

**Doğan Tekeli, Halk Bankası headquarters, Ankara, 1993-8**  
Opposite, left  
Suspended loggia-gardens placed in the carved volume of the mass create a human touch.

**Murat Tabanlıoğlu, Doğan Group Printing Works, Ankara, 1995**  
Below left and right  
Tabanlıoğlu used permanent values of Modernism, like functionalism, to guide his design.





Gökhan Avcıoğlu, Philippe Robert and Haluk Sezgin, Adaptive reuse of 200-year-old Esmâ Sultan Waterfront House, Istanbul, 1999  
Top and bottom  
A glass box with a frameless suspended glass system is constructed inside the remaining historical walls in order to prevent the new intervention from overshadowing the old building.

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architectural journals were being published, giving architecture an influential public voice. The success of architects in Turkey was now determined by coverage of their buildings in these journals. This is a distinctive aspect of Turkish architecture, one that is rare among both developing and developed countries. Turkey had discovered a way of creating a system of values and a means of grading recognition within the broader architectural community.

This, briefly, is the story of the development of Modernist architectural practice in Turkey. It is marked both by failures and achievements. However, one significant aspect validates the whole story: while remaining in contact with the outside world, and without rejecting the phenomenal architectural values that evolved within Turkey itself, Turkish architecture continues to compete with the outside world.

A large number of studies have been published by Turkish historians of architecture – particularly since 1973, the 50th anniversary of the republic – about the achievements of contemporary Turkish architecture. Television's cultural channels have broadcast programmes about the major works of modern Turkish architects, and since 1988 the Turkish Chamber of Architects has been holding national architecture exhibitions every two years, and awarding prizes to architects/buildings selected

by juries. Since 1980, Turkish architects have also achieved a notable degree of success in the Aga Khan architectural awards, which are held every three years, and outstanding buildings by Turkish architects have been published in various monographs and collections.

As a result, 10 or so architects have been recognised as pioneers of Modern architecture in Turkey since the 1950s. Among these, not one has sought a direct relationship with the Ottoman architecture of the past or deployed the grammar of Islamic architecture *per se*. All have made use of modern international technology, and employed a rational Western architectural language that reflects the ideology of the Turkish Republic. At the same time, they have endeavoured to create an architectural idiom unique to Turkey, which ranges from abstract international interpretation to a synthesis of national and universal characteristics.

Sedat Hakki Eldem [1908–88] who, for around 50 years, was a leading figure of Turkish architecture – as teacher, researcher and practising architect – interpreted traditional Turkish vernacular architecture with new materials and technology in his attempt to create a modern Turkish architectural language. Several of his waterfront houses [*yalis*] on the Bosphorus, his Istanbul Law Courts, banks and consular buildings are very successful designs, their architecture based on a reinterpretation of the traditional Turkish house, with particular facade proportions and refined details. However, Eldem's architecture may be criticised for its prioritisation of aesthetic considerations over functional requirements.

The Turkish Historical Institute's building in Ankara, designed by Turgut Cansever, a student of Eldem's and for a while his assistant, is acknowledged as one of the finest exponents of the architectural approach that reinterprets the traditional without forming direct relations with it.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the authoritative attitude of the architect in the Western world, Cansever maintains that the role of the architect is that of guide, architecture being a spontaneous building process in which the architect is only one of many components.<sup>3</sup> With this approach, he creates an open-ended architecture, which gives the impression of having formed of its own accord and being capable of evolving and extending. His Demir Holiday Resort in Bodrum, which won the Aga Khan architecture prize in 1992, is one of the best examples of this approach. And the building of the Nautical Archaeological Institute in Bodrum takes shape in accordance with Cansever's proposal to create an alternative form of production to modernity, as in the Arts and Crafts movement. The architect explains that here he has endeavoured to create a sense of open-ended, infinite space in all possible directions, including the sky.<sup>4</sup>

Cengiz Bektas, who seeks the anonymity of folk architecture in his designs,<sup>5</sup> displays a different



approach. He might be called a modern rationalist. He completes his designs based on clear geometrical lines defined by function, complementing them with skilfully arranged facades.<sup>6</sup> What he wished to say in the Kangotan House in Datça and the Sümer Pek House in Ann Arbor is that modern Turkish architecture, from within its contemporary identity, is obliged to reconcile its culture with the constantly evolving world. In his design for the Olbia Social Centre in Antalya, which won the Aga Khan prize in 2001, he displayed an abstract, anonymous approach to forms of vernacular construction, and in reference to the traditional Oriental bazaar linked the detached social units of a Modernist university layout by a street consisting of human-scale spaces.

With his unique, highly sensitive and spontaneous approach to design, Behruz Çinici occupies a distinctive place in modern Turkish architecture.<sup>7</sup> He is widely renowned for his design for the Middle East Technical University campus, in Ankara, and numerous original buildings, particularly the architectural faculty, on this campus. In all of these buildings, and in his later designs, he does not make any local or international references. Since there is no question of predetermined restrictive conditions, design is an instinctive experimental process. The most interesting and well-known example of this approach is his Turkish Grand National Assembly Mosque. Rejecting all past and present traditional elements associated with the mosque, Çinici exhibits a firm departure from the mosque concept. He explains: 'This is a building of faith, but commissioned and built by a secular state. And its essence describes liberty, democracy and equality; all the aspects on which our state is built.'<sup>8</sup>

Konuralp is an architect who follows the universal course of Modernism and, as he has pointed out, there is a duality in his designs: 'Apart from vernacular architecture, references to our cultural heritage, especially in circumstances demanding very advanced technology that essentially dictates its own morphology, cannot go beyond mannerism or an architectural caprice.'<sup>9</sup> The steel and glass building incorporating both printing facilities and offices, which he designed for *Sabah* newspaper, is entirely Western in conception and uses advanced technology. In contrast, in designing his Sagra House and Guesthouse in Ordu, and a residence in Dragos, Istanbul, he has sought a contemporary interpretation of the traditional.

Another representative of international architecture in Turkey is Sevki Vanli, whose designs exclude traditional elements, both in the formal and spatial sense. Vanli frankly admits that he is not a functionalist.<sup>10</sup> He displays a deductive, formal attitude, which embraces the doctrines of classical Modernism in an organic framework: 'I experience design as envisaging a building in an entirely finished image,' he says.<sup>11</sup>

Doğan Tekeli and Sami Sisa represent a milestone in the history of Turkish architecture with their awareness of institutionalisation rooted in rationality.<sup>12</sup> They describe their design process as induction that enables form to come into being as a result of its functional attributes.<sup>13</sup> They have treated industrial buildings within the framework of determining factors laid down by the industry for which they are designing, and with respect for the human requirements of the users. Their Lassa factory attracted international attention,<sup>14</sup> with its curved edges, human-scale windows, and vertical recesses and projections. Despite the building's huge dimensions in a surrounding that provides no reference, the architecture is on a humanly comprehensible scale. In the high-rise buildings the pair have designed recently, the references to the scale of the building have been treated as important elements. Two high-rise buildings in Ankara, designed for Halk Bankası at a 10-year interval, have open, suspended gardens set within the mass of the building, lending scale and a human touch, as well as the requested symbolism.<sup>15</sup>

Tuncay Çavdar, another architect of this generation, exhibits a different approach, with his diversified architectural language. His architecture may be defined as a 'visual festival' and summarised as a search for formal diversity. His approach appears to be a disciplined Mannerism. At Pamfilya Holiday Resort he combines illusionary techniques with elements of Ottoman miniature painting;<sup>16</sup> while at Cappadocia Lodge Hotel he has created an architecture that is integrated with its setting, inspired by the fascinating topography of Cappadocia and an interpretation of it.

After the 1980s, this older generation of architects were joined by a new generation. Partly under the influence of globalisation, this differed from the earlier generation in aiming for a more universal architecture with greater self-confidence, feeling no compulsion to seek a synthesis of international and local. New employers representing Turkey's increasing capital accumulation support the design trends of this new generation. Almost all of these architects aim at breaking out of the narrow confines of Turkey to forge a dialogue with the world, using the discourse and technology of the West.<sup>17</sup>

Among them, Sevki Pekin stays distant from high technology, with a refined, Minimalist architecture that uses universal language. Han Tümertekin says that he begins by erasing all

that he knows, designing in a simple, universal language of architecture that he believes will enable him to achieve originality. Murat Tabanlıoğlu's Doğan Group Printing Works is a major example of the use of permanent values of Modernism, like functionality, to guide his design and achieve an appropriate and clear expression of modern technology. Gökhan Avcıoğlu works with a technology-centred, simple and transparent approach, which also has its counterparts in the Western world. His design (along with Philippe Robert and Haluk Sezgin) for the 200-year-old Esmâ Sultan Waterfront House is an example of this approach. In placing a glass box within the building, of which only the outer walls remain, he has made use of all of the opportunities offered by modern building technology. In this way an optical illusion is created that prevents the new building from overshadowing the historical.

Semra and Özcan Uygur are a young couple working from Ankara who in recent years have attracted attention with their prize-winning competition designs for large public buildings. Their major educational complex for the TED Foundation's Ankara College reflects the qualities summarised above. Other prominent names of this generation include Nevzat Sayin, Emre Arolat, Can Çinici and Boran Ekinci.

And in addition to the above recounted group of architects, newer names and newer generations, strongly in touch with the new trends in the world, are now emerging.

It seems that, while attempting to preserve its own values, Turkish architecture, today, appears to have approached its goal of becoming an integral part of the architecture of the contemporary world. ▽

#### Notes

- 1 U Tanyeli, 'Recent Turkish architecture: a crisis of happiness', *Space Design*, no 346, July 1993, p 51.
- 2 D Kuban, 'A survey of modern Turkish architecture', *Architecture in Continuity, Building in the Islamic World Today*, Islamic Publications Ltd/Aperture (New York), 1985, p 70.
- 3 Tanyeli, op cit, p 52.
- 4 T Cansever, 'Institute of Nautical Archaeology Headquarters', *A+U Architecture and Urbanism*, 2000/7, no 358, p 20.
- 5 U Tanyeli, 'Cengiz Bektas ile Söylesi', *Cengiz Bektas*, Boyut Yayin (Istanbul), 2001, pp 25, 43.
- 6 C Bektas, *Cengiz Bektas Mimarlik Calismalari*, Yaprak Kitabevi (Ankara), 1979, p 7; U Tanyeli, 'Cengiz Bektas ve Yeni Atatürkçü Düşünce', *Cengiz Bektas*, Boyut Yayin (Istanbul), 2001, p 43; D Kuban, op cit, p 72.
- 7 U Tanyeli, 'Behruz Çinici', *Behruz Çinici*, Boyut Yayin (Istanbul), 2001, p 8.
- 8 K Shulman, 'Lowering the veil', *Metropolis*, November 2003, p 140.
- 9 Atilla Yücel, Mehmet Konuralp ile Söylesiyor', *Arredamento Dekorasyon*, no 31, November 1991, p 94.
- 10 S Vanli, *Sevki Vanli Mimarlik Calismalari*, Yaprak Kitabevi (Ankara) 1977, p 10.
- 11 D Kuban, 'Vanli Üzerine', *Arredamento Dekorasyon*, no 33, January 1992, p 82.
- 12 U Tanyeli, 'Doğan Tekeli-Sami Sisa: Bir Kurumlasma Öyküsü', *Doğan Tekeli-Sami Sisa*, Boyut Yayin (Istanbul), 2001, p 17.
- 13 S Özkan, 'Mimarlığa Adanmış Kirk Yıl', *Doğan Tekeli-Sami Sisa*, Boyut Yayin (Istanbul), 2001, p 81.
- 14 Ibid, pp 83-4.
- 15 A Yücel, 'Doğan Tekeli-Sami Sisa ile Konusma', *Doğan Tekeli-Sami Sisa*, Boyut Yayin (Istanbul), 2001, p 44.
- 16 U Tanyeli, op cit, p 52.
- 17 Ibid.