
Local Report
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Landscaping of the M.E.T.U. Campus

Ankara, Turkey
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I would like to avoid evaluating the project from a utilitarian and, thus, inevitably biased expert point of view. In answering the questions posed by the jury, I will try to approach the project from a stance that is "devoid of all interest and yet by no means indifferent." My position may rightly claim to be disinterested because, for more than 20 years, I have taken delight in the flourishing landscape of the campus, and not merely considered the way in which it might respond to recreational and other needs, i.e., its practical worth. This does not mean that I disregard the significance of functional criteria in evaluating this project, nor do I assume a mere aesthetic or ecological approach.

In fact, particularly from the aesthetic and ecological points of view, the landscaping of METU seems to be a success. It may be that certain decisions are being disputed. Sevki Vanli, in 1972, claimed that it was meaningless to plant pines in recreational areas since they grow slowly and never provide ample shade. Thus, for him, planting conifers in Atatürk Orman Ciftligi, METU and their immediate surroundings was a mistake. The project landscape architect stated that planting horse chestnut trees along the roads was not his choice. He would have preferred a species that came into leaf early in the spring and remained green late into the autumn. The small trees that separate the parking areas in front of the Faculty of Architecture from the corridor, displeased him because of their unnatural forms. He had reservations about the oleanders between the Faculty of Architecture and the Library. All these selections have their pros and cons, but these controversies by no means degrade

the value of the overall concept. Instead, they reveal a collaboration between the project participants that is not without tension, and yet is fruitful in the realisation of the whole, in the light of a shared initial perspective.

I think that the real worth of the project is beyond the success of its functional organisation, its aesthetic appeal and its ecological appropriateness. The essence of the project lies in a daring vision of retrieving the lost forest, as several documents attest. In a booklet published on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the university, the significance of reforestation is emphasised. It is written that:

"Nobody approaching METU can fail to be impressed by the number of trees planted on the hillsides and in the valleys of the campus, surrounding the university buildings. It is obvious that within a few years the whole campus will be very attractive because of this immense reforestation."

The university campus, which covers an area of 4,200 hectares, was mostly barren land until 1960. The soil was exposed to erosion, evidence of which was obvious. A report was prepared and presented to the administration regarding possible anti-erosion measures. Likewise, as an initial step, a soil classification map of the area was prepared, as well as a plan for the reforestation of the campus. The reforestation campaign began on December 3, 1961. The first pine trees were planted that day at the main entrance to the campus, on the hill on the right-hand approach.

So far, more than 12 million trees, mostly oak, pine, almond, prunus mahlep, and poplar have been planted. There is also an

orchard where 4,500 morello cherry, pear, and apple trees grow.

The reforestation project seems to be one of the main concerns of the president. He says that the first half of the project was an experimental period of initial establishment, while the second half has been an era of dynamic creativeness. Bearing in mind that only 5 years ago, on this very campus, there was nothing but vast wheat fields, one can easily get some idea of what has been achieved so far. Approximately 40 modern buildings, with 7 or 8 new buildings added each year, extremely modern laboratories and libraries, various student facilities and a reforestation campaign of 13,317,500 trees of many species, as well as the revival and beautification of Lake Eymir, are the core of this dynamism and of this invaluable endeavour.

Again, in the same booklet, we find a quotation from a report by the Ankara correspondent of *The Times*: "one of the most important aspects of the university is its encouragement of forestry. The Middle East, as a region, is almost barren of trees and one of the worst disasters suffered by the Anatolian plateau over the centuries, is the disappearance of its great forests of the past, mostly under the woodcutter's axe and through the depredation of voracious goats."

Kurdas has a strong personal interest in this work. The reforestation of Anatolia, with its 260,000 square miles of land, is a big job, but the students and staff of METU have set off to a good start on it by planting no fewer than 12 million trees in the last five years, both broad leaves and conifers.

The attempt to restore this forest

is not just for its own sake, but also to create a veritable boundary for the newly established university. A clearing was not made in the forest; rather, the restored forest created a clearing for the campus, and thus intensified its impact. The site plan of METU was included in the 1965-66 General Catalogue and was helpful in conveying the initial concept. It emphasised that from 1962 to 1965 METU concerned itself with building the campus and also creating a vast forest. It is estimated that more than 10 million trees were planted during this period. The truth is that it is improper to regard the significance of this growing forest of *pinus nigra* as mere decoration. It should be pointed out that it does not constitute a recreation area. Rather, it defines the recreational areas, in the same way that it defines the open area in which the campus is built and constitutes a basis for the landscaping of the campus.

In the 1984-85 General Catalogue, it is stated that approximately 23 million trees have been planted since 1962. Curiously enough, in the subsequent catalogue this figure remained unchanged. Reforestation campaigns have continued, but it seems that the initial concept has tended to be forgotten in these subsequent actions. During the late 1980s and in the 1990s, the boundaries of the campus were altered, clearing space for new buildings. The campus began to grow haphazardly, gradually losing the harmony between forest and university. It is during this period that utilitarianism began to threaten the wholeness of the project. There emerged an urge to bring a functional definition to many areas because of the pressure

in land demand made by public and private institutions. The dignity and serenity of the campus were threatened by the recreational needs of the popular culture. The main concern seemed no longer to care for what is valuable, maintaining it and allowing it to unfold, but to take maximum advantage of it.

Despite these developments, the METU landscape preserves something from the initial perspective. I have already asserted that this is not a mere reforestation project and that the forest constitutes the grounds for the landscaping of the campus. The carefully selected species have flourished in harmony with the university buildings, creating unique, memorable places. The corridor itself is a learning ground.

Throughout the project, poetic sensitivity is more evident than technology. Its preservation during those years seems to have been less poetic. It is, perhaps, an unusual combination of an initial poetic vision with technical knowledge as the art of cultivating and preserving, that distinguished METU landscaping from similar projects, particularly other campus projects in Turkey. Literature on these projects attests the lack of any poetic concern, and the domination of strictly technological criteria. METU is the first campus that has grown with and within a man-made forest, with all the poetic connotations ensue.

In response to the question "How do the members of the architectural profession in Turkey view the project, and has it had, or does it continue to have, a noticeable influence on the way in which landscape architecture is practised today in Ankara and elsewhere in

Turkey?", it may have been a source of inspiration for several projects; but, whether these were implemented with the same impetus, that sprang from the dedication of all the related parties to a shared poetic vision, is another question. It is in smaller projects that we may find a comparable sensitivity.

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