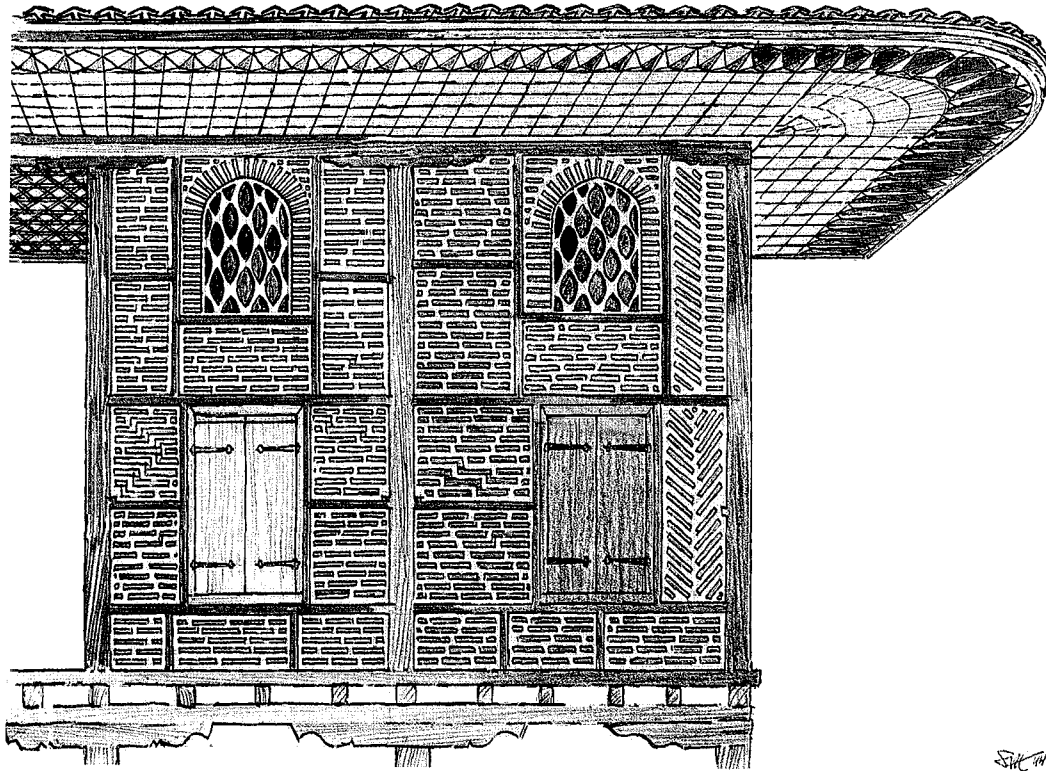


FOREWORD



by Hans Hollein

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There are few places in the world where one has as rich an architectural heritage — an heritage which is both an obligation and a burden — as one finds in Istanbul. Istanbul-Constantinople-Byzantium, which covers not only one single period or one civilisation isolated in history, has left its mark to be admired by later generations. There have been superior manifestations in terms of building by successive cultures, each drawing from the previous one, but still creating an identity and character of its own; an architectural identity which not only resulted in regional specifics but in global masterpieces — masterpieces which influenced and steered the course of architecture in the world through centuries.

In the shadow of the Hagia Sophia and the Süleymaniye Camii only an extreme responsibility towards one's own work and towards history can be the basis for continuity into the present and the future: continuity of thought and belief, continuity of the structure and fabric of the built environment, and continuity of excellence in architecture. This continuity forms the basis of today's goals and statements, of an architecture rooted in the local heritage and at the same time encompassing and projecting a global search and development.

An architect who responded to this challenge convincingly is Sedat Hakkı Eldem. A biased architectural history, concentrating on self-determined avenues rather than the search, analysis and report on situations, manifestations and results as they evolve and develop has bypassed the endeavours of Eldem (and others) until recent times.

Only now are we beginning to acknowledge the work of architects whose emphasis is concentrated on historical and spatial contexts, based on an understanding of the materials, techniques and forces which constantly shape an environment of characteristic authenticity and individuality, fitting with the social and cultural situation of a place.

The simplistic polarity between tradition and modernity, between regionalism and internationalism, which separated endeavours in architecture, partly on a qualitative basis — considering the latter good and important and the former second-rate and parochial — excluded important figures, movements and results from the attention and appreciation of serious critique and analytical history. The arrogant emphasis on modernity and internationalism in modern architectural history (as important as those schools of thought are) pigeon-holed figures such as Eldem as peripheral. Only gradually are we recovering from these unjust judgements.

Eldem's position in this respect was particularly problematic. While figures like Hassan Fathy, with their singular obsession, did at a certain moment catch the attention of a new emerging audience eager for their message, heterogenous work like Eldem's was harder to discover and discern. Starting to look at Eldem's work from the viewpoint of the international style (and that's where observation usually started), centring on buildings like the Hilton Hotel in Istanbul, one could easily consider him just an interesting local variation of global currents. Appreciating his enormous involvement in the recording of traditional architecture one could also be tempted to see him mainly as a historian, researcher and scholar.

The key to Eldem's importance and his complex personality and work are however a few buildings which form a synthesis (as Kapfinger has labelled it) of his attitudes and positions which reveal a convincingly authentic approach.

When I first saw — by accident — the Istanbul University Faculty of Sciences and Letters (1942–44), I was immediately taken by its appearance, its subtle and unobtrusive monumentality, its dignity and quietness. It encompassed all what seem to me to be the qualities of historic Ottoman architecture, yet in a contemporary idiom. A self-centred and self-settled tranquility emanates from this building; the cantilevered roof having just the right tension between a sheltering protection and an eloquent communicative gesture. The silhouette and the facade in keeping with its surroundings, make a subtle statement about the importance of its content and function. The structure occupies its site in a dialectic with the topography and the corner situation. It is an oriental building and a western building at the same time.

Another building-complex which exemplifies Eldem's concerns and the creative input of his lifelong occupation with the record of indigenous Turkish architecture is the Social Security Agency Complex in the Zeyrek district of Istanbul (1962–64). Long before “contextualism” became an “issue”, here is a modern building which is in perfect keeping with its environment, both in scale and character. The existing traditional urban fabric is taken up and the size and shape of the new structures correspond with the old. Buildings as responsive as this help to reinforce an existing urban pattern and thus the mood of a neighbourhood.

During this century it is clear that we are confronted with a duality in our life and environment. On the one hand there is something specific to and inseparable from a given cultural and geographic situation (which we could call regionalism), whilst on the other hand there are developments which are global and uniform for all areas and mankind. For example, there are no specific Turkish aeroplanes or airports, TV-sets or light bulbs. There is an overlay of local and global utterances and an architecture of today has to reflect this situation. It is also now impossible not to be influenced by international developments and to base an architecture strictly on a regional tradition. Supra-regional exchange of ideas — and this is aptly demonstrated in the history of Istanbul and Turkey — is not only a phenomenon of this century and to me the efforts of Eldem try to come to terms with this necessity are reflected in his life, in all its ambiguity.

Eldem as a rich cosmopolitan from an old family, educated abroad and versed in many languages (and cultures), part of the ruling elite, reacts against foreign influences (mainly German) be it the “Vienna Cubic” or others. As a consequence of the “Second National Movement” a national architecture is envisioned. Few presentations in written form of his philosophies exist and his main scholarly contribution, the research on the traditional Turkish house, is part of his academic role and he exerts great influence in Istanbul and Turkey in general. Despite sometimes authoritarian leanings and nationalistic priorities, his way and work is also accompanied by foreign influence, be it Frank Lloyd Wright or Lutyens in his early years, or Poelzig and later Bonatz who came to work and live in Turkey. It should be mentioned however, that some of these foreigners (such as Egli, who headed the Istanbul Architecture School in the early 1930s) had a profound interest in the Turkish architectural heritage.

Having understood the Turkish house as *type* — of structural clarity and beauty — a departure point for an architecture of his beliefs and intentions was established. The

Ayaşlı Yalı (1938) on the Bosphorus is the first mature example, followed by the already mentioned Istanbul University. The Taşlık Coffee House in Istanbul of 1947–48 is an almost literal return to the traditional roots of the *sofa* type house. A further transposition of these principles is the Istanbul Palace of Justice (1948–78), a realised competition project for which Bonatz and Dudok were jurors. A “modern” streak is developing, exemplified most prominently in the Istanbul Hilton Hotel (1952). This building, done in collaboration with Skidmore Owings and Merrill (SOM) must be considered as Eldem’s biggest compromise with his beliefs and a complete departure from his fundamental position. It shows few of the concerns he has demonstrated so persuasively so far.

That “Modernism” could be accommodated under the principles of the regional Turkish house in a convincing way, exemplifies the Şemsettin Sirer House (1967) — a similar task on the Bosphorus as the Ayaşlı Yalı and very much in the spirit of the Social Security Agency Complex.

Eldem has executed numerous buildings, some of uneven quality, but in his excellent work he has demonstrated a *path to follow*, and that makes him very important. This path is not just a personal architectural statement, but also an approach which can be adopted by others; a dialectic between the traditional and the contemporary, rooted both in Regionalism and the International movement.

His Social Security Agency Complex has been awarded a 1986 Aga Khan Award for Architecture, and I as a member of the Master Jury, consider his position of great importance to the current architecture debate, not just as an example of good architecture, but of a way of addressing the fundamental issues facing us.