

# MODERNITY IN TRADITION



Works of Sedad Hakkı Eldem



by Sibel Bozdoğan

*“The work of Eldem as an architect is rich and diversified: from the early thirties to the present, Eldem has been a key figure and realised the most continuous architectural production during this period covering half a century. He experienced different tendencies which can be identified during these five decades: the so-called “Rationalised Architecture” of the thirties, the following “Second National Style” movement, some internationalist designs, and then his more recent realisations always reflecting a certain historic interpretation.”*

– Atilla Yücel, *“Contemporary Turkish Architecture: A Thematic Overview Through the Work of Eldem, Cansever and Çinici”*, *Mimar: Architecture in Development* 10, 1983, p. 60

*“... Most of the middle-aged architects have been indoctrinated against any kind of historicism; an architecture in the spirit of tradition or in a spiritual kinship with Islam, even in harmony with tradition, might trap them into another period of reaction against modern design. The exception is Eldem.”*

– Doğan Kuban, *“A Survey of Modern Turkish Architecture”*, in *Architecture in Continuity*, 1985, p. 68

How is it possible to talk or write about a cultural product without gravely schematising, reducing or distorting the complexity of its reality, or conversely, without complicating its actual simplicity? In this case, how is one to deal with the difficulty to characterise and textualise an architect’s life-long production; to subdivide and classify his career into distinct “periods” or “styles”? What confronts the historian/critic is a precarious task indeed: searching for the legitimate middle ground between reading too much or too little into the data.

The difficulty is more pronounced for someone like Sedat Hakkı Eldem whose works are overwhelmingly numerous and diversified. His is a career spanning more than half a century and over one hundred buildings/projects which do not lend themselves to any immediate periodisation or taxonomy. Nevertheless, within this diversity, it is perhaps still legitimate to discern an acknowledged and recognisable “Sedad H. Eldem style” unfolding as certain plan types and elevation patterns deriving from the architect’s fundamental preoccupation with the “Turkish House”.<sup>1</sup> This comprises the underlying thrust of the following exposition of works which is inevitably selective. From the vast *oeuvre complète* of the architect, the works emphasised are intended to illustrate what is fundamental and intrinsic to Eldem’s architecture rather than what is merely circumstantial. In terms of their context and content, these buildings and projects most appropriately represent his characteristic preoccupations and major contributions to contemporary Turkish architecture. Furthermore, they connect him to many of the ongoing debates in architectural culture at large concerning modernism, regionalism, rationalism, historicism, eclecticism, etc. In Eldem we find an architect who has anticipated by decades, the more recent critical bend as far as attitudes towards modernism are concerned. His persistent emphasis on tradition and cultural continuity, while still maintaining a commitment to modernism, attaches to him a renewed significance today and a second reading of his work now becomes urgent if not overdue.

Historical time has two indispensable dimensions: a building/project is both the product of a particular historical/cultural context “horizontally” related to other products and ideas of its time; and it also marks a particular episode in the “vertical” development of the architect’s career. The former is

<sup>1</sup> used as a generic term embracing various types of houses spread over the extensive cultural domain of the Ottoman Empire



a *synchronic* investigation of the context while the latter is a *diachronic* reading of the content of architecture. Notwithstanding the importance of both, the following exposition of Eldem's works is primarily concerned with the latter, since the former may lead to a kind of social/cultural history beyond the scope and intention of this book, and perhaps of the other essays in the book, dealing more specifically with the context and cultural background of Eldem's work. The objective here is to describe the works and to mark what is significant in this descriptive content as far as the ideas and identity of Sedad H. Eldem are concerned.

The material is ordered under *thematical* headings, sometimes corresponding to particular building types, but not reducible to a purely typological classification. Eldem's preoccupations frequently cut across various building types, connecting, for instance, a private villa, a hotel and an embassy building under the same personal "style". At the same time, a rough *chronological* sequence is followed to give a sense of evolution, although the existence of overlappings or discontinuities is recognised.