III. Early Dialogue with Modernism

Eldem’s devoted interest in cultural continuity derived from the Turkish House, and his campaign in the 1930s against the so-called kübik style then prevailing in Ankara, should not be mistaken as signs of anti-modernity. On the contrary, it was through an essentially modernist perspective that he has viewed tradition. As already discussed, the Turkish House has been the source of inspiration of his work and ideas precisely because in it he has discovered the potential for modern qualities of lightness, openness and modular logic. Hence, his dialogue with modernism, sometimes even to the extent of approaching the kübik style he loathed, needs to be viewed within the context of a wide cultural spectrum between tradition and modernity. The ever-present cultural conflict of modern Turkish architecture — or for that matter of modern Turkey — is beyond the scope of this exposition. It is important to note, however, that Eldem was particularly prone to this tension between tradition and modernity given the cultural duality of his formation.

At the same time, for historiographic purposes, it is important to demystify the myth of unity and consistency in an architect’s career, which, for most of the time, responds to diverse and frequently conflicting circumstances. However paradoxical it may seem, this often does more justice to the architect, portraying the complexity of the real picture, rather than oversimplifying it and reducing it to a single theme.

In the 1930s, while primarily preoccupied with the Turkish House and the National Architecture Seminar, Eldem has built two buildings, a house and an office, which remain outside his native/national architecture paradigm, significant in depicting the impact of the prevailing cultural milieu upon its severest critic.

Bayan Firdevs House in Maçka (1934) is a three-storey apartment building, squeezed between two adjoining higher buildings and facing the street with horizontal bands of windows. Its asymmetrically placed entrance is further accentuated by a rounded corner. It is curious to note that, the multiple readings of this building range from a praise of its “… Turkish domestic architecture character” in the 1934 issue of Arkitekt, to a more recent designation of it as “… one of the first examples of international style”. Since the building displays nothing of the characteristic Eldem leitmotifs — i.e. the reference to tradition in terms of plan type and window arrangement, it is not easy to substantiate the former view, except perhaps, by the intention

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1 Aslanoğlu, Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi Mimarlığı, 1980, p 162
“In this typically purist building, one can read Le Corbusier’s principles of modern architecture: i.e. reinforced concrete skeleton and free plan, cubic mass, flat roof, horizontal band windows and the building raised on pilotis. The purist attitude which Le Corbusier has adopted in housing in France between 1925 and 1935 is, in this case, applied to a warehouse, with the characteristic rounded corners of the 1930s at the entrance.”

— İzi Astanoğlu, Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi Mimarlığı, 1980, p. 136

The seminal work of Eldem’s dialogue with modernism is the offices/warehouse of the Electric Company, known as the SATIE Building (1934) demolished in 1960. It was a reinforced concrete frame structure infilled with brick and plastered over. The open plan concept, the cubic overall mass of the building, the flat roof and the horizontal band windows all make reference to early 20th century modernism. For many critics and historians, the SATIE Building is a milestone in Turkish architecture, with its purist principles reminiscent of Le Corbusier. In terms of the major thrust of Eldem’s production, however, it remains isolated. It is perhaps possible to also pose a typological explanation to Eldem’s occasional divergences from his major path. While detached small structures, individual houses, villas or yalıs lend themselves more easily to an interpretation after the Turkish House, multi-storey apartments, and more specifically, office buildings seem to be “modern types” by definition. It may even be legitimate to assert that the office tower is the expression par-excellence of the so-called “international style”. Eldem has also periodically engaged in the question concerning the high-rise office block. Rather than the “glass-skin” idea of the international style, however, his solution has turned out to be the logic of the reinforced concrete skeleton expressed as a uniform grid on the facade. A comparative glance at Eldem’s SATIE building and his later Akbank Headquarters in Findikli (1967–68) illustrates, on the Turkish scene, how the avant-garde modernism and purism of early 20th century has evolved into the established neutral grid of the reinforced concrete skeleton.
In the design of Akbank, various studies and wooden models were made experimenting with the facade grid. In the case of the even later Alarko Office Towers (1976–79) the office concept is further rationalised, both in plan and in facade treatment, conforming to the imperatives of corporate image interpreted until very recently, as the antithesis of character and identity.

Back to the 1930s, one building stands out as the epitome of Eldem’s particular brand of modernism, different from his untypically *kübik* SATIE Building and, more strongly, from the official *kübik* of early Republican architecture in Ankara. The State Monopolies General Directorate in Ankara (1934–37) was Eldem’s first major work with the state as his client. Commissioned after winning an international competition, it is designated by Eldem as “…the first modern building in Turkey”.  

The project consists of a large quadrangle — a courtyard surrounded on all four sides. Two opposite sides are taken by five-storey office blocks with doubly-loaded corridors. The remaining two sides are closed off by blocks containing larger spaces: entrance hall, auditorium and meeting rooms and garage in the front block, services and cafeteria in the rear one. The play of masses by the composition of different blocks, raising some above the ground on columns and making projections on the upper level, lend the building its particular quality, also subtly alluding to traditional architecture, in this case, reinterpreted for a public building. The repetition of 1:2 vertically proportioned windows further reinforces this allusion. The reinforced concrete structural frame of the building is infilled with brick and stone, and faced on the exterior by 4 centimetres thick artificial stone of a pinkish colour. The original scheme is not completely built; but the existing part effectively serves as the Prime Ministry today, distinguishable from the other surrounding government buildings of the early Republic, executed in the *kübik* style and plastered in grey.

Finally, the building is significant also as a showpiece of Eldem’s interior design work: his fine details and finishes, the design of fixtures, ballustrades, fixed furniture, etc. and his choice of materials — mostly wood, marble, artificial stone, leather and glass. Similar interior design features and fine detailing has been applied in his Thermal Hotel in Yalova, built during exactly the same years.

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2 S H Eldem, “Ellî Yıllık Cumnurîyet Mimariği”, *Akalımlı Deresi*, n 8, July 1974, p 10
State Monopolies General Directorate

Ankara, 1934–37

Ground floor plan

Section and elevation

"Although arranged symmetrically, this building does not adopt the neo-classical attitude characteristic of the other public buildings of the period. Different blocks raised above the ground, the projections, and the window sizes yield a mass and elevation effect which escapes the prevailing monotony of the public buildings. The facade proportions and the details make it a notable and consistent building."

– İnci Aşkaoğlu, Erken Cumhuriyet Dönemi Mimariği, 1989, p. 87

Views of front block