

1986 TECHNICAL REVIEW SUMMARY

Social Security Complex
Istanbul, Turkey

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Date of Completion: 1968

I. OBJECTIVES

The most important objective of the architect was to make a profound statement about urban form in the midst of an area giving way to bulldozers and concrete blocks.

Surrounded by decaying wooden structures, the architect sought to make a gesture in harmony with the past, without imitating it.

II. DESCRIPTION OF SITE

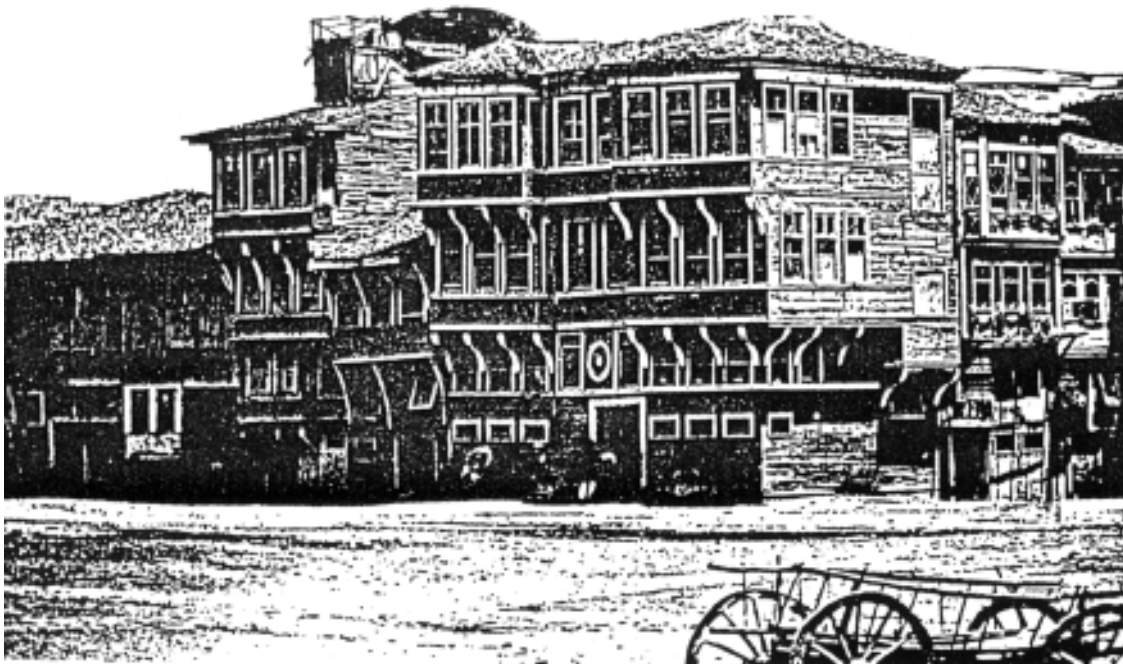
Site Topography

The Social Security Complex is situated in Istanbul in the Zeyrek neighbourhood, which is very old and which was also ripped apart by the new Atatürk Boulevard some twenty-four years ago. The site is a triangular one that abuts the boulevard, and resulted from the bulldozing activities that preceded the paving of the boulevard. Thus, the site faces the new boulevard on its frontal side, and the old quarter on its rear side. The land slopes gently upwards, away from the point of the triangle. The site area is 3,537 square meters (0.8739 acres).

Historical background

The site lies in the heart of an area that has been under change for centuries. It contains Byzantine structures, Ottoman structures, 18th and 19th century wooden houses, and mid 20th century boulevards and commercial complexes. Adjacent to the site are an Ottoman Mosque (Sabsefa), a tomb (Zembilli Ali Efendi), and a bath house (hamam); further up are the rapidly disintegrating remains of a Byzantine Church (Pantocrator). The terraces around this church were at one time surrounded by mansions and the palaces of the Ottoman aristocracy, but a fire devastated this area in the 1940's and subsequently, with the coming of the boulevard, the entire nature of the whole area changed from a rather peaceful, residential neighbourhood to a commercial area with slum pockets lying in between.

Local architecture character



The preceding photograph gives a very clear idea of the character of the wooden houses that cover the hillside above and behind the Social Security Complex. It is a slum area with dilapidated houses that are being bought out by developers who are quietly but steadily replacing these wooden houses with "Jerry built" blocks of tenements. There is no architectural mercy anywhere in the surrounding area, and the Social Complex stands out as a very powerful symbol of appropriateness. Across Mustafa Kemal Boulevard, the Textile Traders Market (designed by Tekeli in the 1950's) is remarkable for its anonymity and ordinariness.

III. DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION

Architect's brief, evolution of design concepts :

The owners of the land- Sosyal Sigortalar Kurumu - originally commissioned a commercial development for either rent or sale. I quote the architect Sedad Eldem in an interview : "Many years later, when I was given this commission... the problem was at a location that had long been of interest to me. It was a complex of some offices... and there was shopping. But it was not clear what would be sold in these shops. At least I wanted to keep the architectural character... of open and covered streets. What I had in mind was the image of old Zeyrek street going up... Particularly in my grouping of the buildings... and the scale I adopted... I maintained the old character. In other words, to continue the idea of old Zeyrek Street uphill (on one hand) and on the other side to form a connection with Atatürk Boulevard. That is how the idea of the complex was formed... and in between two small courtyards (see ground plan) as junctions. As far as style is concerned... it is what I considered modern at the time... But, in its scale, its components, and particularly the form and proportions of the windows, it makes reference to the traditional... It was built right in the middle of the old quarter, which, at that time, had beautiful houses. It often happens with the architect that he tries to get into the milieu... into, how can I call it, the surroundings... trying to find a contact with the surrounding context. And then the surroundings disappear. The surroundings are old wooden houses and, since then, the price of land has gone up, and they have pulled down the houses and built something else."

The complex has four constituent parts :

1. The tall, 6-floor office building and shops
2. 4-floor clinic
3. 3-floor bank and restaurant block
4. 2-floor shop and cafeteria block

At the ground floor level, this complex is tied to the surrounding urban fabric by the use of shopping arcades and courtyards. This shopping arcade also extends to the first floor, and in conception is rather like a modern souk. However, it is impossible to judge the relevance and success of this building as it was never used as it was designed to be used. Instead, it had been brutalised by the most insensitive usage imaginable (see separate plans of building in use).

The only portion of the building being used as intended is the clinic.

The existing use of the building is broken down as follows :

| | |
|--|---------------------|
| 1. Offices for old pensioners and cafeteria for staff | 5,384.57 sq.m. |
| 2. Medical centre | 4,264.21 sq.m. |
| 3. Archives | <u>514.37 sq.m.</u> |
| | 10,163.15 sq.m. |

Formal aspects - use of motifs and massing :

The architect used formal aspects and motifs in the building which form part of his wider vocabulary and which I noted in some of his other buildings. He said to me :

"So I tried to make something 'modern' but at the same time 'different'. Not just a copy of historical Turkish architecture, because I never wanted to make historical architecture. I wanted to make buildings that were modern... but of course I was "enemy number one" in Turkey. They wanted that cubic style, you know. And they wanted to be the only ones."

The complex itself, modern in conception, is a clear statement against the 'Block' which is so characteristic of modern urban forms. Instead, it stands on a sloping site, consists of varying heights and courtyards, and immediately relates to the scale of the traditional wooden architecture that is now decaying, behind, on the Zeyrek hill. The separate masses, with voids and openings, allow constant and porous views to the wooden settlement behind. Its conception, it was a sort of link between the deep tradition of the wooden house culture and the inevitable brutality of Atatürk Boulevard. The volumes are, indeed, extremely skillfully deployed to attain a superb statement of what should be contemporary Turkish architecture with roots.

The complex is 114 meters long and begins at the southern, higher end, at the same height as the adjacent houses. As it proceeds along its length towards the northern tip of the triangular site, the volume reduce from 6 to 2 floors. The culminating coffee kiosk, at the corner of the site, has unfortunately never been built, but has been replaced by some steps and an underground lavatory. The reduction of the 'concentration' of the building as it reaches the corner gives the complex a rather beautiful form.

The accompanying 11 sketches taken from Professor Eldem's various portfolios show studies that play simultaneously with modern vocabulary and traditional scale. This whole complex is, indeed, a very sensitive and beautiful statement in architecture.

Structure, materials and technology :

Not all that much importance is given to structure as an architectural element. It is made of a re-inforced concrete frame with block infill and concrete slabs, and is of typical technology for buildings of these heights in Istanbul. The roof overhangs and the fins on the façade have been done with cantilevered concrete. The construction vocabulary is a very familiar one that is labour intensive. Execution is of a high order. The building services and site utilities work well and are not specifically innovative. The use of the central heating systems was perhaps, ahead of its time when the building was completed in 1963.

Origin of technology, materials, labour force and professionals :

Entirely Turkish :

Structural Engineers : Erdal Erkut
Orhan Gunsoy

Electrical Engineer : Joseph Kansun

Mechanical Engineer : Anus Tekin Tokgoz

Contractor : Ismet Elbirlik

IV. CONSTRUCTION SCHEDULE AND COSTS

For all these areas of information, the user, being an amorphous government body with 16 million files on the premises and other departments spread in other offices over the city, it was difficult enough to obtain what little information we did.

The building, according to the files of the owners, was split into three uses for administration, and the costs and areas were related. Thus :

| | Area in Sq.meters | Area in Sq. ft. | Value in 1983 TL |
|--|----------------------|--------------------|---------------------|
| 1. Offices for old pensioners and cafeteria | 5,384 | 57,937 | 116,227,673 |
| 2. Medical centre | 4,264 | 45,882 | 122,097,520 |
| 3. Archives | 514 | 5,534 | 10,325,802 |
| Total | 10,162 | 109,353 | 248,650,995 |

The figures cited in the 1983 Technical Review show quite different figures for the total area, i.e. 2600 square meters and the cost as 6 million Turkish Lira. The present director indicated a cost of 10 million T.L. The figures of value above are not costs but value of the building on the files. There seems to have been quite a bit of inflation in 6 years. It is best to disregard the cost figures, as did the earlier reviewer. I was not able to make any real head way on construction costs.

The project was started in 1962 and finished in 1970. The architect was involved for eight long years battling with the various directors who headed the organisation. The definition of the brief itself took almost a year.

No figures were available for maintenance costs.

V. TECHNICAL ASSESSMENT

Functional use :

It is extremely difficult to assess most of this building in its current use. Perhaps only the Medical Centre, with its 110 employees, works as it was planned to do. The five departments (general medicine, surgery, pediatry, neurology and gynecology) all work within their planned spaces. Waiting spaces are well used and the doctors are extremely happy and did not offer any criticism of the functioning whatsoever. The Director, who has been there for the last 10 years, finds the place very functional.

The Cafeteria , too, continues to work well. It has been divided into two parts and appropriated as a staff canteen for the Social Security staff, and is not open to the public. However, the kitchen requirements for the Cafeteria were not adequate for its present use, and a staircase has been cut into the level below where a "shop" at street level has been converted into a bulk cooking kitchen. These changes were carried out by the house architect who made no reference to the project architect. A plan of the kitchen squeezed into the shop is appended.

In order to understand the brutal use of the rest of the building, it is necessary to look at the plans of the building as it is being used and to compare them with the original intent.

Ground floor :

The covered shopping arcades, the open courtyards giving multiple access to these arcades, and the spaces for public trading such as the banks, have all been closed off. The covered arcade is a Kafka-esque space with 16 million files vanishing into a point. The open courtyards have been fenced off and enclosed for car parking and garbage collection. The bank is a filing room and all the shops are occupied for files or offices. There is absolutely no link between the designed building and its present use. It is a tragedy for architecture that such a fine building should be used in such an insensitive way and by users who find it awkward to use, as security problems are posed for the valuable archives which nonetheless, are stored in passages.

First floor :

The covered passage has again been cut off from the rest of the building to store yet more files, and the shops are used as offices.

Second floor :

The originally planned supermarket is an office, as is what was to have been the restaurant. The clinic remains a clinic.

Third, fourth and fifth floors :

Not much change. However, a connection onto the adjacent building has been made as the offices have expanded into the adjacent apartment block.

It is, therefore, unnecessary to go into the complaints expressed by the users (such as lack of meeting places, etc.), as there is no way in which a user of this type can possibly fit into a building which originally was intended for urban, public use.

I talked to the architect at some length about this, and it may be well to quote him :

"Well, I have said already that it is in a ruinous state. When you look at the building now, it is very difficult to find the original idea of the architect, because people change the 'destination' of the building so easily. This building, which was built for a specific purpose, is partly used as a 'depot'. The destination has changed. What can you do with it? Opposite to it there is another Shopping Complex (manifaturacilar Carsisi) much simpler... they were right, perhaps. They were not trying to make architecture... It is completely commercial. The decoration on the face change only."

This summarises the tragedy of the building.

Fortunately, the users are moving out! A new building is being built nearby and happily, in about three years from now, the 16 million files and their owners will shift to a new block.

Perhaps then there will be an opportunity to restore this building to its rightful place in the urban context of Istanbul.

Climatic Performance :

Overall is good. The overhanging roof eaves have protected the building from excessive weathering. It is difficult to judge the adequacy of lighting because of the partitions which have sprung up all over the place and because of curtains, which are drawn, to the accompaniment of tube lighting.

Ageing and maintenance :

At one time the building was covered with slogans on its street façades. But, as the vestiges of these democratic expressions have been mopped up, the building has been restored with a clean elevation. For its age, its public use, and poor maintenance, it has stood up remarkably well to wear and tear.

VI. USERS

The users of the building are almost all old-age pensioners. In this sense, the building has a social use which primarily services the aged, poor population of Istanbul.

VII. AESTHETIC ASSESSMENT

To my mind, the most significant aesthetic symbol that the complex represents is its effort to restore the scars of modern bulldozing. One had to see Bursa and what is happening there to fully understand how the architect has resisted the insensitivity of some contemporary developments in historical Turkish cities.

The architect has close associations with Bursa. I quote from my interview with him.

"I made long surveys in Bursa. I measured houses and made drawings... which have completely disappeared... I have an idea of Bursa... of what it was... I hope to be able to write something on Bursa... and put all the pictures and sketches I made for it at that time. I stayed there a hundred days. There are old photographs of Bursa... but real photographs... not engravings... views of the valley, with beautiful chestnut trees... and far away, at the end of the valley you see this projection of the land with mosques on it."

If one looks at the adjacent three images it will be easy to understand what the architect was trying to do and how, in fact, this very triangular corner site at Bursa inspired him. The middle photograph shows what has happened to that very corner at Bursa to-day, with a hotel block. Curiously enough, the corner kiosk remains. When I asked the architect why he had left the kiosk out of the Social Security Complex, he replied : "So, you know" (with a twinkle), and said that there was a proposal for a coffee pavilion that did not materialise. When we scrutinised the municipal drawings in the government office, there was a note on them :

"On the corner of the boulevard for the coffee kiosk, we have to negotiate with the Director of construction works - Municipality."