

Politics of Vernacular: The "Turkish House," Nationalism and Postmodernity

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Even a cursory glance at the architectural culture of modern Turkey in the 20th. century reveals that Turkish residential vernacular constitutes a recurrent theme to which architects have periodically turned whenever the question of identity arose. Taking issue with essentialist readings of the "Turkish House" which tend to posit identity as something inherent in particular forms with fixed cultural meanings, this paper addresses how architectural form acquires meaning in a specific cultural and political context and therefore, this meaning is always historically constituted, ambiguous and overdetermined. This is not to deny that there are indeed formal and spatial concerns internal to the discipline of architecture which transcend historical circumstances. It is to say, however, that the broader cultural legitimacy of such concerns is inextricably bound with history. As Stanford Anderson has argued on many occasions, the architectural object is neither a purely "autonomous text", nor a "cultural index": its meaning is neither pre-given and inherent in the object, nor exclusively determined by an external zeitgeist.'

REPRESENTING THE "TURKISH HOUSE": THE MAKING OF A CULTURAL CONSTRUCT

Historically speaking, the term "Turkish House" designates a particular vernacular type which exists in the vast territories of the former Ottoman Empire from the Balkans to the Arabian peninsula.

Although substantial variations in size and configuration are possible, its basic features, (i.e. the timber-frame and infill construction, the solidity of the ground floor, reserved for service and storage, above which a much lighter and projecting living floor is raised, repetitive modular windows derived from the logic of the timber frame and a pitched roof covered with round tiles) are fixed by convention and tested through centuries. In the 20th. century, it was codified into a typological and stylistic canon in theory, education and practice by the paradigmatic work of the Turkish architect Sedat Hakki Eldem.² Eldem's monumental three volume *Türk Evi* (Turkish House) is a massive typological matrix of plans classified according to the size, location and configu-



Fig.1. Vernacular house from Safranbolu, northern Turkey

ration of the central hall (sofa) which is posited as the generator of the plan in Turkish residential vernacular. Over the years, it has served not only as an analytical tool in the study and documentation of surviving examples, but also as the underlying design principle of Eldem's own object-type villas throughout his long career.

At the same time, in cultural and historical terms, the Turkish house can be seen as a western construct. The few earliest representations of the "Turkish House" in European publications coincide with the spread of Exoticism, or the discovery and reproduction of cultural "otherness" that was central to the self-definition of Europe in the age of Enlightenment. In contrast to the mostly imaginary constructions of the 18th. century, 19th. century Orientalism marks the proliferation of more accurate visual descriptions of vernacular Turkish houses in highly popular illustrated travel accounts. It is the published work of travelling topographical artists like Thomas Allom or William Bartlett, or of architects like Ignace Melling which give us panoramic and picturesque views of Istanbul's timber houses by the water. That Sedat Hakki Eldem kept a copy of Melling's *Voyage*

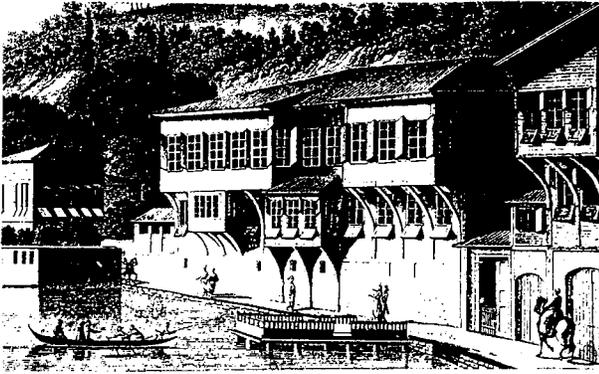


Fig.2 Engraving from I.Melling, *Voyage Pittoresque de Constantinople*, Paris, 1819

Pittoresque de Constantinople et des Rives du Bosphore, 1819 as a most inspirational source for his lifework, bears testimony to the significance of western representations, and to the role of "intertextual" references in the construction of architectural knowledge.

Le Corbusier's *Journey to the East* of 1911 constitutes a last link in this long legacy of orientalist representations produced in the eve of dramatic transformations in Turkey.³ His sketches depict wooden houses which he characterized as "architectural masterpieces", with their projecting upper floors resting upon solid walls along narrow streets, punctured at entrances to secluded courtyards.

The presence of trees and gardens, as well as the overall urbanistic qualities are emphasized both in the sketches and in the accompanying text. What makes his impressions significant for the discussion here is the multiplicity of readings to which they lend themselves. While it is important and legitimate to read them as the romanticizing discourse of an orientalist uttered from a position of superiority, it is also possible to read them as observations anticipating his modernist preoccupations such as greenery/ sunlight/ air (afforded by trees and gardens), lightness of structure (the timber frame and infill), pilotis (the main living space of the house perched upon walls if not on stilts) etc. Notwithstanding its orientalism, the appreciation of architecture in the *Journey* is more experiential than stylistic, spatial rather than

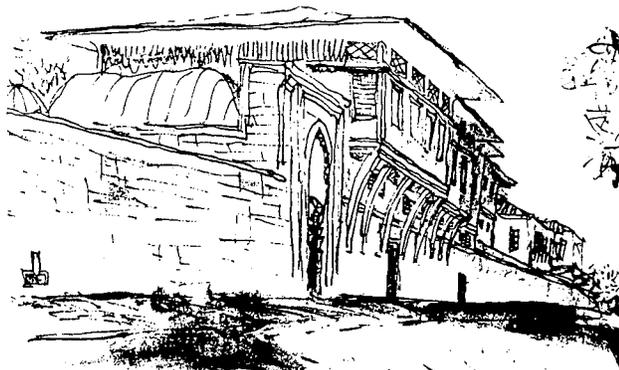


Fig.3 Le Corbusier, sketch from *Journey to the East*, 1911

decorative, and universalist rather than culturally relativist.⁴ As such, it is a precursor to the modernist readings of the vernacular Turkish house that was to be the centerpiece of the nationalist architectural culture of the early Republic.

1930S AND 40S: MODERNIST READINGS IN A NATIONALIST CONTEXT

The institutionalization of the interest in vernacular houses as the primary source of modern national identity in Turkey is intelligible only in the historical circumstances of the transition from a disintegrating Empire into a secular nation-state in the 1920s, under the leadership of Kemal Ataturk, the founder of the Republic.⁵ In architectural terms, references to the high-culture of the Empire were no longer appropriate for the modernizing elites of the new State who sought to dissociate the cultural politics of the new Republic from an Ottoman/Islamic past. Hence when Ottoman motifs like domes, arches and tile decoration, applied primarily to public buildings well into the late 1920s, were abandoned as markers of Turkish identity, they were initially replaced by the stripped off aesthetic of German and Central European modernism as the official image of the Kemalist Republic, especially in the construction of Ankara as a modern capital.

However, given the inherent contradiction of nationalist thought outside the western world between its progressivist modern (identified as western) aspirations and its nationalist anti-western rhetoric⁶, the ambiguity of the Kemalist project of modernity was soon to permeate architectural discourse as well. Modern forms, or "cubic architecture" (*kubik mimari*) as the international style came to be designated in Turkish, were rejected with an increasing nationalist fervor in the late 1930s, as the expressions of an alienated, cosmopolitan society. In this climate, the Turkish residential vernacular was posited as an alternative and a most appropriate source of identity legitimizing the "imagined community" of a unified nation.⁷ First of all, its associations with rural folk of Anatolia were comfortably distanced from Ottoman palace culture and favorably matched the romantic, populist and anti-urban sentiments of the Republic. Secondly, it reflected a new emphasis on issues of dwelling and housing, traditionally underrepresented in the French Beaux-Arts system of architectural education at the Academy in Istanbul which privileged public buildings and monuments well until the radical modernist reforms of 1926.

The Swiss architect Ernest Egli who was entrusted with the task of transforming the educational program of the Academy along modernist lines, offers the first explicit discourse on the modernist appreciation of the vernacular house as a thoroughly rational response to elements of nature.⁸ In a seminal article titled "Architectural Context", 1938 he defined "context", without any reference to culture or history, as simply light, air, sun, wind, topography, terrain, water, vegetation, the qualities of day and night etc.⁹ He praised the introverted character of the traditional Anatolian house with its cool and shady courtyards open to

starry skies above and closed to the dust of the street, concluding that "if designed with modern means for modern lifestyles, this could be a model house for Anatolian towns". However, neither the sketches illustrating the article (especially "a small house for Ankara" with its cubic volumes) nor his built work in Turkey, display any conspicuous connection to traditional vernacular forms, perhaps with the exception of subtle gestures as the use of courtyards or abstract interpretations of traditional window projections.

Egli's successor at the Academy was Bruno Taut, who from 1936 to his death in 1938, followed a pedagogical program of similar ambiguity. While he praised the lessons of the Japanese and Turkish vernacular architecture on every occasion for their simplicity, authenticity and rationality of construction, his own work in major cities of Turkey, or the *siedlung* projects he assigned to his students, bear no formal references to traditional houses (with the singular exception of the House in Ortakoy which was a homage to his Japan experience). Although in an article titled "Turkish House, Sinan, Ankara", 1938 he explicitly stated that "the new Turkish house will be born only when architects abandon "the cubic" which has turned into a mainstream stylistic fashion"¹⁰, it is important not to read this as a quest for national style, but rather as a profoundly anti-stylistic comment expressive of his frustrations with modernist orthodoxy after the advent of the international style." His anti-stylistic and anti-chauvinistic posture is most explicit in his following words:

"It is important to avoid a superficial imitation [of tradition]. Otherwise this tendency can lead to a sentimental romanticism and a misunderstood nationalism resulting in Kitsch. The more fervor with which a misunderstood nationalism is pursued, the worse will be the result...All nationalist architecture is bad, but all good architecture is national."¹²

Sedad Hakki Eldem's early readings of the vernacular houses are also through modernist spectacles, not unlike those of Egli and Taut. In fact, he admits to have "discov-



Fig.4 Sedad Hakki Eldem, "Anatolian Houses", 1928

ered the Turkish house in Europe in the late 1920s, through Le Corbusier and through the Wasmuth publication of Frank Lloyd Wright's prairie houses. His beautifully rendered "Anatolian Houses" of 1928 epitomize this discovery in the form of romantic houses in hypothetical countrysides. His arguments for the modernity of the traditional Turkish *wohnkultur* is paradigmatic in this respect. Equating the use of built-in closets and light furniture with the modern European interiors, the hearth (*ocak*) with modern fireplaces, the traditional *hamam* with modern hygienic baths and the exterior porches on the upper floors (*hayat*) with the wide terraces of Le Corbusier, Eldem wrote:

"The traditional Turkish house is remarkably similar to the modern conceptions of the house. Ample windows and light, free plan, priority of comfort over ostentatious display, honesty of materials, the relationship of the house to nature through porches, courtyards and gardens. Aren't these the very qualities we look for in a modern house?"¹¹

Although it is this conflation of culture with nature, history with present and tradition with modernity that underlies the progressivist, modernist and universalist appropriation of the Turkish residential vernacular in the 1930s, there is a significant distinction to be made. If Egli and Taut represent an argument for the inevitably "national" character of the modern house (since it is, by definition, a most rational response to the particularities of site and program), Sedad Hakki Eldem's corollary position was to argue for the essential "modernity" of the traditional Turkish house. This latter argument was not only more appealing to the nationalist climate in Turkey in the late 1930s, but it was an effective justification for a stylistic appropriation of vernacular. By 1940, the interest in the Turkish house had become overtly nationalistic, epitomized by Eldem's writings in which he declared the quest for a "National Style" in architecture as "a matter of strong regime" and state sponsorship.¹⁴ The study of the Turkish residential vernacular became the norm in architectural education, primarily in the National Architecture Seminar established at the Academy by Eldem in 1934, but also in the recently reorganized Istanbul Technical University where many graduate theses were produced studying the traditional houses of various Anatolian towns. The prominent German architect Paul Bonatz, the closets colleague of Sedad Hakki Eldem in this period and also an influential teacher in Istanbul Technical University, has contributed significantly to the increasing self-consciousness and formalism of the nationalist trend throughout the 1940s.

1980S: NEO-TRADITIONALIST EXPERIMENTS IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT

In the 1980s, after a long period of relative neglect in the heyday of post-WWII high modernism, formal references to the traditional Turkish house has made a comeback, this time

in a dramatically different cultural and political context. The distinct cultural panorama of "postmodern Turkey" can be summed up as a growing reaction to the official ideology and modernization program of the old Republican elite and a radical departure from the universalistic claims of modernity in favor of an emphasis on cultural identity and difference. In economic and political terms, this panorama bears the legacy of figures like Reagan, Thatcher and the late Turkish president Ozal, marking the historical triumph of transnational market forces over nationalist developmentalism everywhere in the world. Ironically and precisely at a time when the country has opened up to a further internationalized and globalized capitalism, the architectural establishment has set out to condemn international style modernism. The "liberation" from the latter's facelessness has prompted various new experiments with vernacular forms, not to mention the increasing demand for Sedad Hakki Eldem's canonic Turkish villas for wealthy clients. Spread over his long career, Eldem's villas testify to the main point of this paper: they can be read (as in fact has been done many times by himself and his critics) as modern but "nationalist" in the 1930s, "regionalist" in the 1960s and "postmodern" in the 1980s.

The first point that immediately differentiates the recent revival of residential vernacular from the early Republican precedent is that it is no longer a totalizing search for "Turkish" forms to represent a unified national identity, but rather, a preference for traditional forms merely as a local accent in a relativistic world. Hence not only a pluralism of traditions is now possible on the basis of regional appropriateness (as in the case of prominent Turkish architect Turgut Cansever's adherence to the stone Mediterranean vernacular versus Eldem's life-long commitment to the timber tradition of the Bosphorous), but also, tradition-consciousness can comfortably exist side by side (sometimes in conjunction) with some of the latest trends in the architectural culture at large from Postmodernism to High-Tech.

Secondly, this recent revival of traditional house forms is now sponsored almost exclusively by private clients and



Fig.5 Sedad Hakki Eldem, Kirac House, Istanbul, 1966

developers, different from the exclusive monopoly of the State over the architectural discourse of National Style in the early Republican period. The "tradition" that inspires architects as well as developers, material manufacturers and interior designers today is associated not so much with an idealized rural vernacular corresponding to the romantic populism of the early Republic, but rather, with the more elaborate houses (*yalis* and *konaks*) of Ottoman towns.

Perhaps most instrumental in the proliferation of vernacular forms are the new residential patterns of upper classes and emerging yuppies in the 1980s, in favor of new villa-type developments or exclusive suburbia outside the city, complete with their cult of nature and health, swimming pools, tennis courts, horseback riding and golf courses. As big cities are saturated with speculative apartment building of the most mediocre standards in reinforced concrete slab block construction, the new ethos of single-family house away from the environmental and aesthetic degradation of the city is increasingly more appealing for the wealthy. The example that I would like to discuss in more detail is such an expensive new suburban development, Kemer Country, just outside Istanbul.

The developers of Kemer Country, who sought out Duany/Plater Zyberk (DPZ hereafter) on the basis of their reputation in TND (Traditional Neighborhood Design) take pride on every occasion, in the fact that Kemer Country was featured in the "Vision of Europe" exhibit by Prince Charles and Leon Krier.¹⁵ Indeed, in a situation very similar to the highly publicized Seaside debate, Kemer Country has aroused mostly controversy or at best ambivalence among the professional establishment in Turkey. Despite its popular success and despite acknowledged qualities of the architecture and environment, it has been an anathema for the architects' traditional contempt for speculative developers and for builder traditions outside the profession.¹⁶

An attractive recent brochure of Kemer Country advertises the design of their third phase development by DPZ with the following introductory words:

"Kemer Country is designed to revitalize an old life-style in which neighborhood (mahalle) was the key word and we all belonged to our neighborhoods. The greatest problem of Istanbul today is not the noise or pollution or traffic, nor is it congestion and high cost of living, with all of which we cope in one way or other. It is however, the loss of our sense of belonging without which we cannot survive...[DPZ] are not the typical architects who design houses as we know architects to do. Their job is to design streets and towns and to restore the lost sense of neighborhood.""

In spite of the developers' repeated claim that the aesthetic qualities of Kemer Country does not reside in a stylistic and formalist appropriation of tradition, but in an administrative plan of codes and regulations fixing the "civic identity" of the place (a term that they have learned from Andres Duany), exterior form and stylistic details of the traditional Turkish

houses do predominate the scheme. The accompanying pastel sketches in the brochure depict houses with "Turkish" tile (*alaturka*) roofs, projecting window bays on the upper floors (*cumba*) supported by wooden brackets (*elibogrunde*), courtyards (*avlu*), traditional terracotta color (*asiboyasi*) among others and an overall ambiance of narrow streets (*sokak*), small squares (*meydan*) and cedar trees to which the historical Ottoman aqueduct offers an appropriate backdrop. It is these images, reminiscent of Le Corbusier's sketches some eight decades ago, that has prompted one commentator to remark: "western architects first devastated our cities with slab blocks, master plans, zoning, concrete and cars and now they are erasing their guilt consciousness."¹⁸

In stark contrast to the laborious studies of the Turkish vernacular that foreign architects undertook in the 1930s, the process of design and development in Kemer Country illustrates the phenomenal speed with which the appropriation of vernacular forms can be accomplished in the postmodern world by a truly international team of designers connected through electronic networks.¹⁹ We are told that, the team of Andres Duany came to Istanbul for an initial charette in which other neo-traditionalist architects have also taken-part, including the Egyptian El-Wakil.²⁰ The charette partici-

pants were given a briefing by the design coordinator in Turkey on "the characteristics of traditional Turkish houses, windows, roofs and the human scale of neighborhoods", which was then complemented by a study tour of Safranbolu, a town of pedagogical significance in northern Turkey with its complete residential fabric preserved. The designs of Kemer country villas bear testimony to the age of computers when it is possible to manipulate a finite number of basic elements within fixed rules to produce numerous different "Turkish houses" instantly.²¹

The individual houses vary along fourteen types, from 246 to 788 square meters, eight of which are attributed to DPZ. In terms of plan and program, they reproduce suburban houses of various sizes that one can find in the U.S., complete with study/library, separate bathrooms for each bedroom (with a large one plus a walk-in closet for the parents), a breakfast room in the larger types, a multi-purpose room in the basement (for kids?), garage and at least in one case, a pedimented entry porch.

It is interesting to note that the developers of Kemer Country place a specific emphasis on their intention to create "not a Turkish house or neighborhood, but a neighborhood for Turkey"²² which is more than a minor nuance. It is one expression of the recent disintegration of nationalist taboos in Turkey, in favor of acknowledging the population's heterogeneity in terms of ethnicity, culture and religious convictions. Yet what remains to be seen is whether the reconstruction of the physical fabric of the traditional neighborhood is indeed a restoration of the relationship between architecture and democracy as claimed (and who can claim that traditional Ottoman neighborhoods were in fact "democratic"?), or an inevitably artificial "public realm" which, in claiming to restore a sense of belonging, still excludes many who do not belong there. The fact that the prices of Kemer Country villas range from 350,000 to 2 million US dollars (not to mention the prerequisite of car ownership to live out there) suggests the latter.

CONCLUSION

Neither the 1930s modernist emphasis on the rationality of

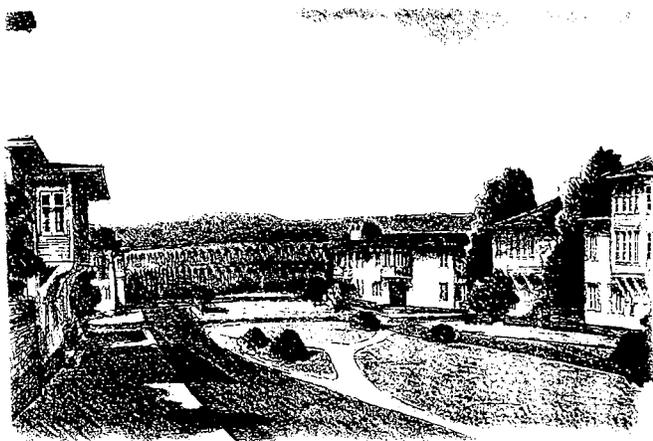


Fig.6 DPZ, sketch for Kemer Country, Istanbul, 1992



Fig.7 DPZ, sketch for Kemer Country, Istanbul, 1992



Fig.8 DPZ. Villa type M, Kemer Country, Istanbul, 1993

design (i.e. form as a most logical response to nature, terrain, utility and construction), nor the 1980s preoccupations with democracy, pluralism and pragmatism (including DPZ's undoubtedly innovative idea of allowing the involvement of different designers, even non-professionals, after the initial identification of heights, set-backs, materials and design guidelines) are adequate as determinants of vernacular house forms. In both periods, there is a margin of indeterminacy between architectural form and the explanations that are claimed to inform it. There is nothing that automatically links modernist principles with the forms of the Turkish house as it was indeed linked by Sedat Hakki Eldem. Similarly, there is also nothing that automatically links "good design" with the "old" as in fact it has been linked by the DPZ dictum of "giving people plain old good design".²³ In both cases the image and idea of the traditional Turkish house is a "relatively autonomous" preoccupation of the architects, as well as a recurrent construct in the discipline. It has however, acquired historical significance and legitimacy, only in the specific contexts of nationalism and postmodernity respectively, as I have tried to illustrate. Informed by recent critical theories about the politics of cultural production (in our case, architectural production of texts, drawings and buildings), this very sketchy overview was intended as a reminder that these products warrant complex and multi-layered readings which take into account, *both* their formal and disciplinary autonomy, and their "worldliness" which connect them to other cultural products and events of a particular time and make them intelligible in a historical context.²⁴ One without the other would be a seriously flawed reading of architecture.

NOTES

- ¹ S.Anderson, unpublished paper for the Postmodernism Conference at MIT, 1985
- ² See S.Bozdogan et.al., *Sedad Hakki Eldem: Architect in Turkey* (Singapore: Concept Media, 1987)
- ³ C.E.Jeanerret, *Journey to the East*, ed.I.Zaknic (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1987)
- ⁴ I had explored this issue in more detail in S.Bozdogan, "Journey to the East: Ways of Looking at the Orient and the Question of Representation", *JAE* (Summer 1988):38-45
- ⁵ For my discussion of the architectural culture in early Republican Turkey see S.Bozdogan, "Modern Architecture and Cultural Politics of Nationalism in Early Republican Turkey", *Artistic Exchange, Proceedings of the 28th International Congress of Art History* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1993):437-452
- ⁶ For a brilliant theoretical exposition of this contradiction see P.Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (London: Zed Books, 1986)

- ⁷ For the creative aspect of imagination in the constitution of modern nations see B.Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983)
- ⁸ For a more detailed discussion of the appropriation of vernacular in the Republican period see G.B.Nalbantoglu, "Between Civilization and Culture: Appropriation of Traditional Dwelling Forms in Early Republican Turkey", *JAE* (November 1993): 66-74
- ⁹ E.Egli, "Mimari Muhit" (Architectural Context), *Turk Yurdu* 301224 (June 1930):36
- ¹⁰ B.Taut, "Turk Evi, Sinan, Ankara" (Turkish House, Sinan, Ankara), *Her Ay* (February 1938):93-98
- ¹¹ This critical position is best expressed in his *Mimari Bilgisi* (Lectures on Architecture), (Istanbul:GSA, 1938) which was started in Japan and published in Istanbul as a textbook for the architectural students at the Academy of Fine Arts. It is republished in German as *Architekturlehre* (Hamburg:VSA, 1977).
- ¹² B.Taut, *Mimarlik Bilgisi* (Istanbul: GSA, 1938),p.333
- ¹³ S.H.Eldem, "Turk Evi" (Turkish House) in *Sedad Hakki Eldem*, monograph on the occasion of his 50th. anniversary in the profession, (Istanbul:GSA, 1983):19
- ¹⁴ Especially in S.H.Eldem, "Milli Mimari Meselesi" (The Question of National Architecture), *Arkitekt* (1939):220-223 and "Yerli Mimariye Dogru" (Towards A Native Architecture), *Arkitekt* (1940):69-74
- ¹⁵ *A Vision of Europe*, International Exhibition of Architecture and Urbanism, Bologna, Centro S.Giorgio in Poggiale, 1992
- ¹⁶ For example, the 1986 Aga Khan Award given to the Cakirhan House, a well-crafted replica of a regional vernacular house designed not by an architect, but by the owner and his local builders, was bitterly resented by many Turkish architects for its nostalgic traditionalism.
- ¹⁷ Publicity brochure of Kemer Construction and Tourism Co., Istanbul, 1993
- ¹⁸ H.Karabey, "Kemer Country'de Bir Pazar Gunu" (A Sunday in Kemer Country), *Arredemento Dekorasyon* 10 (1993):123
- ¹⁹ Listed as designers of the third phase are DPZ Architects, Miami; Murakami Residential Design and Construction, Toronto; M&N Butler Architects, Istanbul; and Alison J. Hainey, Landscape Architects, London.
- ²⁰ A.W.El-Wakil has designed the country club of Kemer Country adjoining the picturesque "village square".
- ²¹ It is interesting to remember the remarks of A.Duany that "...DPZ delivers by computers all the codes and a regulating plan precise to the inch in as long as it takes Peter Eisenman to resolve a corner joint", special issue on Seaside, *ANY* 1 (July/August 1993):32
- ²² "Zamanotesinin Pesinde Kemer Country" (In Pursuit of the Timeless: Kemer Country), interview with the developer E.Edin and design coordinator T.Gencer, *Arredemento Dekorasyon* 10 (1993):121. There is a conspicuous correlation between such remarks and the recent arguments in Turkey for democratization, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic civil society and a diminished domain for the State, championed by advocates of liberalism and private enterprise.
- ²³ E.Plater-Zyberk in *ANY* 1(July/August 1993):12. The point is taken up by Peter Eisenman later in the debate.
- ²⁴ See E.Said, "Politics of Knowledge", *Raritan* (Summer 1991):17-33