

Latent Locale: Architectural Identity in a Vertical Region

HEINRICH SCHNOEDT

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Turkey as any other nation is and has been concerned with the proper articulation of identity. The search for identity can be found in many aspects of man-made constructs, but like in any other defined domain like state, country or people, architecture is chosen to be one of the prime modes of representation and charged to be the ambassador of an identity projected through its tangible form. One architectural identity of Turkey emerges through buildings and artifacts belonging to its prolific past, its powerful expansion and control of a domain which returned wealth and new ideas to its cities. The Hagia Sophia, the Sultan Ahmed Blue Mosque, or the Topkapi Sarayi of Istanbul are the quintessential icons of the embodiment of Turkey's past imperial culture. In today's Turkey, we can observe the struggle of a nation toward a complex unity which will have to acknowledge and accommodate the iso-cultures of Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic, Christian, Jewish origin, and numerous others, who have settled within the current boundaries. At the base of this convergence lies the geographical location of Turkey as a natural gateway between East and West, drawing from both the European and Asian continents. Its prospective membership in the European Community denotes the latest efforts to stake out the contemporary political and intellectual ground.

For architecture, the absence of a clear belonging toward Europe or Asia is crux and raw potential at the same time. Until now, modern architecture in Turkey has received merely peripheral attention. Only few architects and their works have visibly advanced into the architecture culture of the industrialized West. Most notably is perhaps Sedad Eldem, who carefully studied Frank Lloyd Wright's approach in the Wasmut Publications and subsequently attempted to employ Wrightian principles directed toward a Turkish locale. In his Social Security Agency in Zeyrek, 1962-64 authors Bozdogan, Oezkan, and Yenal credit Eldem with sensitivity and eloquence in his response to a difficult urban context. They clearly point Eldem's leap from an International Style beginning into a sound architecture of a region which embraces, replies and interprets the extant conditions.

Although Eldem's contributions to architecture are without question, it remains an isolated instance. His work however can be taken as indicative of the ongoing desire to find an identity also through architecture which reflects the massive commitment of Turkey's societal change of the 1920s¹. The decisive move of the capital from Istanbul to Ankara in 1925 augmented the reorientation of society and it was intended to become symbolic of the severing from the Imperial Ottoman Empire.² Despite a colossal building agenda to make the ideas of change a tangible part of the new capital, the constellation of economic powers and investment did not allow for a similar decisiveness in architecture. Not unique to Turkey, the reluctant embracing of an architecture potential to accompany changes and progress was not able to generate a paralleling of a decisive identity through its buildings to date.

The example of Turkey raises the universal question of how an architecture can be conceived which not only supports in all its dimensions the identity of a culture but also contributes to the culture directly as a positive catalyst. Of the two possible positions, a radical change of architectural space will certainly embody a notion of progress, but its typically ahistorical basis renders a utopian conception of a society which is often difficult to accept in light of a desired continuity. The other position often taken by architects attempts to bridge between a pure intellectual spatial construct and an existing deep structure of a place. The core of this position aims essentially at the propositional transforming power of architecture as the Mannerist link between commonly understood traditional form and the potential of radical progress.

This approach of straddling two worlds often can act as a transitory element of a culture, which, by necessity, demands and exists through continuity. This presupposes that every culture seeks physical evidence of its existence through memory embedded in its artifacts. In theory, this argument is easy to grasp. It assumes the construing of history not as a juxtaposition of a disjointed aggregate of events but as perceivable continuum. Transposed into the field of architecture, the means to address intelligently a cultural continuity as a spatial construct is often based on the sincere comprehension of a domain and its values.

In numerous cases, for example the Third-Reich Germany, or the Post-Revolution USSR, or the emerging USA, the difficulty of developing an identity with architecture was focused on the projection an image. But in these and many other cases, a forced conception of culture, power and grandeur virtually rendered the initial locale as unimportant. While the embracing of radical innovation has proven itself sometimes as successful, in the previous examples the architectural identity search defaulted to a commonly known classical or classicist language. Although traces of an originating cultural realm usually can be detected, the visually imposing aspects of this architecture took precedence over any other form potential which could have been perhaps more deeply rooted in a respective domain. The result of this approach is often inconclusive in light of a desired spatial and material ideal which potentially could have arisen from the constituents of a contemporary culture.

For all architects today, including the emerging young architects of Turkey who struggle with the question of unpretentious identity, one of the key engagements will have to be concerned with the succinct definition of a modern region or domain, a clear understanding of its structures, and its values which support it.

For an architect, the complex search for an identity through architecture presupposes a life-long study. Respectively, the education of an architect regardless of domain or country plays an important role. In the forming years of an architect, it is important to employ a pedagogy which recognizes that not only the tools of the trade need to be exercised, but more importantly, a viable avenue of research needs to be offered by which a broad and complex constellation of domain values can be

understood and ultimately made operational in spatial terms. The particular pedagogical challenge lies in providing a universal education which is conducted *through* the discipline of architecture. Critical in such an approach is the guidance toward the discovery of the multi-dimensional simultaneous presence of explicit and implicit circumstances denoting the phenomenon 'culture' as the consequence of a domain history.

For young architects of Turkey, at least two conditions are confronting them. One is the reminiscent of a past high culture embodied in the architecture of the Ottoman Empire and its predecessors. Spatial ideas and constructive abilities have led to architectural artifacts with great significance for Turkey as a locale. The other condition is the ongoing influx of Western cultural fragments which presents them with an *ageographical* region. In Turkey, this Western stream of thought was equated with progress and has favored an often average Modernist vocabulary in common Turkish buildings. For many countries, the icon of Capitalist wealth and success has been the primary catalyst for an import of industrialized building system components to construct architectural artifacts without local roots. As a consequence, buildings infiltrated the major cities of Turkey bearing the signatures of international firms but with little concern to define a proper environment for the modern people of Turkey and their traditions. Social circumstances and social structures became minor considerations in the formation of architectural space.

Granted, a sober argument could be made that the circumstances and the receptiveness of a culture for outside influences result inevitably in an artifact which is largely untarnished by tradition. Also, in light of increased speeds in communication and transportation, a geographical boundary can only remain as an antiquated pretext for the reality of a modern region. In an progressive global dissemination of goods and services, the fabric of a universal homogeneity overtakes the structures, which were traditionally derived from the locales, which coincided with a geographically bound region. The difference between today's region and previous concepts of regions are mainly characterized by the decrease in the geographical dependence. What still holds is the definition of region as the accessible source for knowledge. In the case of geographically fluctuating historic Turkey, it becomes clear that a decrease in geographical dependence in the definition of a region is not a recent phenomenon. Moreover, the thoughtful integration of the newly acquired knowledge of other cultures has proven to be extremely successful, perhaps vital for past Turkish societies who subsequently could develop a clear identity through their architectures.

As ascertained before, the most significant difference in what denotes a modern region today is the fast increasing *ageographical* expansion, which imports rapidly foreign elements of knowledge and artifacts. Figuratively speaking, for the education of an architect it is important to learn that the traditional horizontal perception of a 'region' is no longer sufficient to identify a significant basis for architecture. As a result, the emerging vertical dimension of the architectural region will require significant rethinking and an innovative integration of ideas and values which are globally dispersed and likewise contracted from sources different from what we often romantically call 'local'. The real challenge lies in the definition of a sensible tectonic decision which accounts for both progress and tradition and yields a cultured spatial idea.

From a similar perspective, Kenneth Frampton hints in his discourse on 'Critical Regionalism' that one "potential" for the architect may lie in a sophisticated "interstitial" rather than "global" constituents of architecture.³ The anarchic undertone of this proposed mannerist approach is correctly qualified by Frampton's earlier assessment of the short-term goals of economic thinking. His austere account states that architectural achievement today is only possible at smaller scales where potential qualities have not totally been extradited to the stringent profit maximization of materialist societies.⁴ Throughout this important manifesto, many critical conditions are exposed which continue to

contribute to insightful discussions on the state of architecture and its possible direction. Since the appearance of the article in 1987, it has become more clear that the inadvertent homogenization of culture has gained more momentum. Furthermore, a weight shift can be observed toward a universal typology defying the traditional synergy with topography. While communication and transportation continuously improve their efficiency, the domains of influence restructure themselves accordingly.

For the architect, Frampton's position of the 'interstitial' will be possible until the net of homogeneity bridges those gaps of a region. It may even be reasonable to assume that the opportunities of the interstitial will always be available within a large structural domain. But it is important to remember that its architecture will categorically define its contribution through the very articulation of these gaps. And by necessity, this kind of architecture will remain notable as it leads a meaningful transition between past and present.

In summary, Frampton leaves us essentially with three prospects for architecture today:

1) The mainstream of architectural work will adhere to a conservative position, under which under the cover of apparently safe traditional forms a function-driven progress will slowly tiptoe into the tectonic.

2) The second is a radical break with historic forms and traditions, perhaps best exemplified in Orthodox Modernism, where innovations and progress in materials and systems are charged with the delivery of new architectural space. In this case, the desire for expression often seduces to a mere formal proposition, without the integrity and cultivation of progress.

3) The third, and most complex position is a mannerist idea which needs to conduct a search for a new mythology. It needs to take on the obligation to decipher the noise of a multi-cultural homogeneity implied as the vertical dimension of the emerging region. Between the information and syntax-dominated universality of technologies and the respect of integrity of traditional artifacts, an intelligible pattern may be deciphered from which a new and intrinsic clarity of architectural forms can be derived.

From this perspective, it can be argued that the education of an architect once more must address reality, not only through a simulation of a building process but equally through the development of sophisticated cultural reading techniques from which significant deductions can lead to adequate contributions in architecture and its sustaining culture.

In architectural education today we can often observe a 'romantic' sentiment in the process of allocating cultural values. At its core is often a silent, but obvious disengagement of a given structural relation of a thing, reducing its initially sound *form* to mere *shape*. It results in a perception of a phenomenon which is disjuncted from its original paradigmatic setting. While it could be argued that shape by itself holds significant iconic value in bridging paradigms, the use of shapes without supporting structure is often a fragile layer to suggest previous paradigmatic values.

Key to a sound architectural education is to develop a 'channeling' of initially ambiguous forces. The field of knowledge from which proper judgment can be formed requires a particularly sound structural base, as the only resistance to ambiguity. The ideal framework for architectural progress includes all circumstances which surround a cultural domain regardless of their direct applicability. In this ideal framework, informed and conclusive decisions should be possible. Aspiring to such an ideal, a critical operational necessity is the serious accounting of a contingent knowledge domain, and an awareness of the tendencies we might have to define the ideals of architecture in part through a romanticized stereotypes instead of real tradition.

Reality today offers us three remaining universal constants, gravity, climate, and politics as significant formative forces in architecture. Aside from undisputed gravity, the influence of climate which often spawned architectural form is increasingly tamed with portable technological inventions to equalize the natural differential. Politics, the remaining factor, is perhaps the strongest human sphere of influence often bound by geography. The political process results in the expression of desires, in local regulations and codes which are said to reflect the sensibility of a community. The success of a building is ultimately dependent on the sophistication of an architect to develop a reading of expressed desires and its underlying values. Between those ideas, a course needs to be charted to either augment or counteract through an architectural proposal.⁵

Although implicit in climate, the notion of site as a 'locale' deserves special focus. In architectural education, the explanation of 'site' often ends in the propagation of Norberg-Schulz's Heideggerian interpretation of the phenomenal dimension of a place.⁶ While Norberg-Schulz's discussion recognizes directly the difficult parametric conditions of the influences which horizontal and vertical regions might have, his conclusions emphasize a kind of 'academic vernacular', dominated by a romanticized existential geography. Norberg-Schulz's discourse is insightful as a retrospective on the notion of place, but difficult when applied to the stark contrast of mass output of today's building construction methods, their global availability, and their tendency to generalize. With a diminishing horizontal dimension of a region, 'site' alone no longer carries the same importance in the definition of a domain. It is not possible to ignore for example the phenomena of large international economic corporations and their desire for recognition. Their prosperity based on a projection of identity becomes the role model for marketing strategies which thrive on the expansion and redefinition of a cultural domain. The homogeneity of fast food chains is perhaps the most vivid example of how successful the interrelation of sign, building, and its offering can be with minimal subscription to a geography or locale.

In conclusion, much of the previous discourse argues that the recognition and acknowledgement of the vertical dimension of a region combined with a structural understanding of tradition through its artifacts can be a sound prerequisite for architectural making. To make such a premise operational in education, the study of architecture has to increasingly focus on two ideas. Unencumbered spatial potential based on technological progress denotes the first avenue of research. Tectonic imagination and the exploration of its realization is a necessary aspect of any young architect who intends to make a contribution to its time. The second is the study of history, not as chronology, but as a complex story of structures which have resulted in specific forms.

NOTES

¹A thorough account of Eldem's work can be found in **Bozdoğan, Özkan, Yenal**, *Sedad Eldem*, Concept Media, Singapore, 1987.

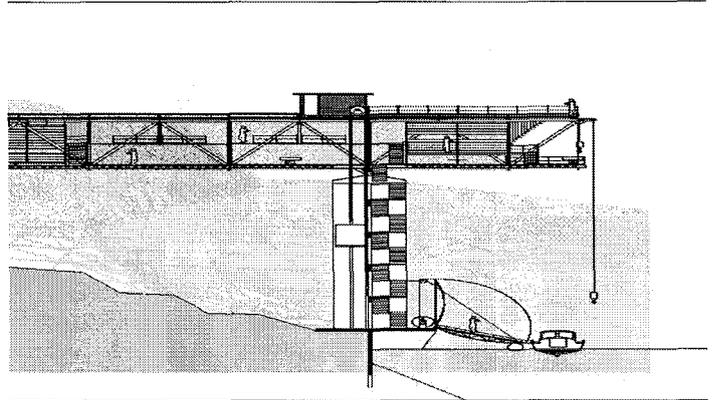
²Yavuz and Ozkan, "Finding a National Idiom: The First National Style", in **Holod and Evin**, *Modern Turkish Architecture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984.

³Frampton, K., "Ten Points on an Architecture of Regionalism: A Provisional Polemic", *Center: A Journal For Architecture in America*, Vol. 3, (1987): 20. The essay builds on a line of thinking preceded by Mumford and Tzonis.

⁴Ibid, p. 20.

⁵Perhaps Norman Foster's design for an 'ecological' high-rise in Frankfurt could serve as an example of a 'regional' response to the demands of the political establishment. The building's form is a direct resultant to the initial rejection of a high-rise construction rather than an acute interest in ecology.

⁶Norberg-Schulz, C., *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*. New York : Rizzoli, 1980, c1979.



POSTSCRIPT

In an attempt to experiment with an interstitial mannerist position based on a complex new region of Turkey, the design research of Turkish student Esra Şahin combines industrialized prefabrication of steel parts with traditional architectural place-making notions of Turkish architecture. The building proposal supports a crew of nautical archeologists at Ulu Burun, on the Mediterranean coast who live and work during the majority of the year in a remote self-sustaining location. The study of *Sofa*, a porch-like place, *Kafes*, the pattern-based screens, and notions of the female domain *Haremlik*, and its counterpart male *Selamlık* form the major traditional base from which transformations toward the identity of a contemporary can be initiated. The proposal seeks firstly to articulate proper places for the research activities. In this sense, *sofa* and *kafes* have always been allies in the mediation of climatic conditions. In the proposal continuity through their evolution in contemporary materials is suggested. Within the modern steel framework, a highly private and conditioned space contributes to a further articulation of traditional living patterns which are derived from Turkish wood frame houses advocating a layered mediation of privacy. The idea of sustainability embedded in traditional Turkish architecture became the ordering principle for the proposal overall.

