

Experiencing Regionalism: Turkish Paradigms

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The School of Architecture at the University of Maryland is committed to study abroad as a way of broadening students' knowledge and experience of architecture and urban design. In addition to programs in Europe, which explore the Western heritage, the School offers programs to cultures outside the Euro-American sphere with which students are most familiar. Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Turkey are countries that have provided students with an appreciation of a rich variety of human settlements.

Turkey is the country we have returned to most often for many reasons. The layers of civilizations over millennia offer unmatched resources for the student of architecture. The emphasis of most programs is on the Ottoman period, with the Selçuk, Byzantine, Classical and earlier periods forming the background. Istanbul is, of course, a city that must be known to any educated architect. However, the cities and towns of Anatolia, such as Bursa, Afyon, Amasya, Safranbolu, Akşehir and others, are more easily understood because of their limited scale and because they represent purer examples of Ottoman attitudes toward making settlements. A regionalist theoretical perspective guides the programs, and students, therefore, examine both monumental and vernacular traditions in attempting to achieve a rich and holistic understanding of Turkish culture. In this regard, Ottoman houses are of particular interest as sophisticated examples of vernacular traditions and as models for urban living. Indeed, the "modernity" of Ottoman houses is impressive, as has been noted by many architects, including Le Corbusier. Fortunately, individual houses and, more importantly, assemblages of houses from the Ottoman period remain, facilitating study at the scales of houses, streets, neighborhoods, villages, and towns.

Turkey's long history of contact with Europe and America provides opportunities for cross-cultural discussion and insight. While for most students the experience in Turkey represents the "other," there is also much that is familiar. Thus, there is a sense of initial accessibility that smooths the path to understanding what is less so. It must also be said that Turkey is an ideal venue for study because of the extraordinary hospitality of the people we meet. In universities and agencies, faculty and administrators have graciously facilitated our studies. In bazaars and residential neighborhoods, our students are understood to be more than casual tourists, and we are made to feel welcome and comfortable with traditional offers of friendship, such as drinks, food, home visits, and exchange of photographs and addresses. The personal warmth of the Turkish people is a significant factor in students' enthusiasm for the country, which, in turn, makes them want to learn more about the culture.

REGIONALISM AND VERNACULAR LANDSCAPES

The pedagogic framework for our programs in Turkey has been an interest in "regionalism," which has many advantages as a conceptual framework for design education, not the least of which is its emphasis

on process over style. Regionalism requires that architecture reflect its time, place and culture and that it link the past, the present, and perhaps the future. In terms of education regionalism encompasses not only an architectural theory, but a study of culture as well. The skills specific to a regionalist approach include the ability to "read" and analyze vernacular landscapes, urban forms and building typologies and the understanding of technological choices based upon climate, material availability, economics, and the expertise of the labor force. A skill of a different kind is the ability to "read" culture, particularly as it is manifest in built form, and to develop a cross-cultural viewpoint. Many students who participate in study abroad experiences also take a seminar in regionalism taught by the author, but even those that do not are exposed to discussions of regionalist concepts during their travels.

Examination of existing vernacular building traditions is a starting point for theoretical considerations of regionalism, insofar as architecture is seen to embody values and processes particular to a culture. The history of interpretation and transformation of indigenous traditions reveals its persistent timeless qualities as well as its ability to sustain change. One need only study the work of an architect like Sedad Eldem of Turkey to understand how long-established attitudes toward landscape, climate and shelter may be reflected in buildings which have no literal architectural precedent in the past. Eldem found inspiration for his work in Ottoman houses, themselves the varied products of many Asian and European influences. Indeed, a more holistic treatment of architectural history than is normally presented to students would view world architecture and urbanism as a continuum, with many traditions overlapping and influencing each other over time, and with buildings seen as inseparable from their contexts. It would also include studies of the vernacular, for it is in this realm of architecture that society demonstrates its common sense and wisdom. Unlike the traditions of admired monuments, the traditions of the vernacular are often still alive, albeit under siege. For a world increasingly interested in the efficient use of material and energy resources, vernacular building processes provide important insights into the intimate relationship between nature and our built environment. And for teachers of architecture, James Marston Fitch, who has long advocated the values to be found in vernacular architecture, offers this suggestion:

The central problem which we confront in teaching the young architects of the Western world lies in convincing them of the experiential reality of the raw terrestrial environment in which they are submerged.... The massive application of mechanical energy to every task is so pervasive that the student takes it as the sine qua non of all architectural design.... Given their cultural milieu and economic status, they may by choice have exposed themselves occasionally to the stresses of alpine snows or tropical beaches. But such forays are always of limited duration, made from the securely controlled base conditions of heated ski lodges and air-conditioned resorts.... The extreme formalism which

characterizes today's architecture derives directly from its state of sheltered isolation, in both theoretical and experiential terms. It is for this reason that the study of the architectures of pre-industrial and pre-literate societies should prove to be productive for architectural students everywhere, in the advanced countries of the West and the developing countries of the Third World alike.¹

The ability to "read" and analyze vernacular landscapes, urban forms, and building typologies is implicit in the discussion above. A skill of a different kind is the ability to "read" culture, particularly as it is manifest in built form. To read culture one must first have a cross-cultural viewpoint. With a cross-cultural viewpoint one recognizes that even in the United States the sub-cultures of Maryland, California, Texas, and Iowa are distinct from each other, despite commonalities. As Amos Rapoport points out: "Given a certain climate, the availability of certain materials, and the constraints and capabilities of a given level of technology, what finally decides the form of a dwelling, and molds the spaces and their relationships, is the vision that people have of the ideal life."² The ability to understand this vision becomes a critical skill of the architect interested in regionalism. There are numerous writings which facilitate cultural understanding for students. For example, the work of psychologist Edward T. Hall illuminates cultural differences in spatial perception and interpersonal behavior, and J.B. Jackson is adept at reading culture as manifest in the shaping of landscape. Economist E. F. Schumacher provides insight into the relationship between economic systems and culture, while Edward Said and Janet Abu-Lughod explain the complex tensions that are expressed in the increasingly problematic dichotomies of East/West, traditional/modern, and Third World/First World. In addition, Christopher Alexander's pattern language is an excellent tool for analyzing how people use architecture.

CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING

Because architecture schools in the United States have traditionally focused students on the architectural traditions of European and North American cultures, there has been little exposure to other traditions. Indeed, even our own Western tradition has become generalized, with relatively little attention given to sub-cultures. It is, therefore, inevitable that architects and students of architecture might ask whether the kind of cultural sensitivity required for a regionalist perspective is within the capability of an outsider to a culture. How successfully can an American architect practice in Saudi Arabia or how successfully can an Arab architect practice in America? Indeed, can a New York architect practice successfully in California? It is a fact that in an age of instant communication, easy access to virtually any part of the world, and international economic markets, architects practice wherever their interests and abilities take them. Architects often simply bring their own style of building to the new context, and it must be added that local architects and clients, too, associate themselves with imported styles seen to be fashionable. The result is the all too familiar homogenization of architecture throughout the world.

On the other hand, the number of European and American architects who have been recipients of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture, for example, suggests a more hopeful outcome, attainable in part through breaking down artificial dichotomies such as modern/traditional, East/West, and professional/vernacular. As architecture critic Robert Campbell notes:

...surely a homogeneous built world is the ultimate horror. That's why the Aga Khan Awards...are so interesting. They are the only serious efforts to discover and cultivate a kind of design that will retain its cultural language without copycatting the past. That's not an easy job, and it requires deep attention to the essence of a culture,

as well as a sensitive response to whatever is genuinely local: climate, materials, building traditions, perceptions, and what Spanish architect Rafael Moneo calls "the whisper of the site."³

Edward W. Said, in his book *Orientalism*, summarizes the challenge:

*"Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly? By surviving the consequences humanly, I mean to ask whether there is any way of avoiding the hostility expressed by the division, say, of men into "us" (Westerners) and "they" (Orientals)."*⁴

While Said's context of orientalism is specific, the issues are more general. The tendency to generalize and categorize in the definition of cultural characteristics can lead to a static conception of society rather than to the more factual view of a society in continual evolution. The regionalist response must be to recognize the vitality inherent in indigenous conditions and values and to enlist universal architectural ideas and personal vision in the search for regional expression. A cross-cultural viewpoint requires that the stance of the professional as one of assumed superiority, an attitude of "I", needs to be replaced by a more flexible, open, and cooperative stance, an attitude of "we". In an academic context, the development of a cross-cultural point of view can be facilitated through discussion and field experiences, and the ability to "read" an environmental context is the particular analytic skill that study-abroad experiences cultivate.

FIELD STUDY IN TURKEY

While regionalist thinking may be applied to any project anywhere, there are pedagogical advantages to taking students abroad. In an unfamiliar context students will have sharpened perceptions of the environment as well as of themselves in relation to it. Furthermore, free of the distractions of customary routines and habits, students may focus their attention in a way not possible at home. Finally, in many countries with older cultures than the United States there is a more fully developed and defined attitude toward building, which facilitates clearer understanding of the processes which brought about the shape of the environment.

The first Maryland School of Architecture program in Turkey was in the summer of 1987. The program was led by Profs. Kaya Arikol̇lu, Lindley Vann and William Bechhoefer. Prof. Arikol̇lu is a Turkish architect and an alumnus of the School who joined the faculty after further study at Cornell and practice in the United States and Europe, including Turkey. His network of connections in Turkey, as well as his knowledge of both monumental and vernacular Turkish building traditions, were pre-conditions for the experience; he now lives and practices in Adana. Prof. Vann is a classical archeologist with many years experience in Turkey at Sardis. For the past several years he has directed a University of Maryland program of archeological surveys at Aperl̇ae. Prof. Bechhoefer provided the regionalist design perspective, as well as many years of experience in the Islamic world. More recent programs have been directed solely by Prof. Bechhoefer. While the first programs were six weeks in length and included studio work in Istanbul, current programs are three weeks long — a time frame which better suits student schedules and which still offers a solid field study experience. Programs are limited to twelve students to facilitate a seminar format of instruction.

Field research requirements include the documentation and analysis of urban forms, street types, building types, architectural details, and construction methods. Equally important are analyses of use patterns, private and social rituals, and non-visual sensations such as noise and

smells. Furthermore, students are urged to investigate language, food, art and craft traditions, and other cultural manifestations, always recording their reactions. The personal reactions are most important, as they change over time and lead to their own special understanding of the place. The format of study is an annotated sketchbook, which is critiqued regularly. Independent observation is encouraged, and discussion sessions are preferred over lectures, of which there are few. Most students are at the graduate level, and undergraduate participants tend to be those who have some prior international experience. Even though the few weeks of a typical summer program abroad is hardly enough time to become comfortable in a foreign culture, it is enough time to begin to understand the principles guiding the creation of spaces and buildings.

Among our favorite cities for field study is Amasya, which has an abundant historic background, a dramatic setting, historic neighborhoods and important monuments reflecting more than two thousand years of its existence. One of Amasya's attractions is that it is a "real" Turkish city, where the historic neighborhoods have not been gentrified, and the monuments function for the local population on a daily basis. Although the modern parts of town are not very handsome, the scale is comfortable and Turkish life goes on in an unaffected way. Tourists are to a large degree still "guests" and the recipients of traditional Turkish hospitality. An organization which exemplifies this hospitality is The Amasya Riverfront Houses Project, YABEP (Amasya Yalıboyu Evleri Projesi), an informal group of concerned citizens who have come together because of their pride and love for the city of Amasya. The members include the Governor and Mayor of Amasya, as well as leading citizens from the business and professional communities. The director is Ali Kamil Yalçın, an architect of exceptional motivation and experience with traditional housing as well as new development practices. YABEP is dedicated to continuing Amasya's long tradition of hosting cultural activities, and the original motivation for YABEP was the improvement of tourism compatible with the city. YABEP has been particularly influential in the preservation of Amasya's historic neighborhood on the river that defines the city center. Working with Ali Yalçın, and living in a restored 18th century house, students are always enthusiastic about Amasya. More specifically, Amasya demonstrates to students the power of a natural and cultural landscape on urban form. Furthermore, its stock of Ottoman housing is among the best in Anatolia, although it is fragile in the face of modern development pressures. Amasya's squatter housing also provides lessons in the ability of the informal sector to build better than private or public contractors, as well as lessons in cultural politics.

Subsequent to our field study in Amasya, in 1996 two University of Maryland students prepared the plan for the new river terrace and amphitheater facing the historic district, and in 1997 the author participated in setting planning and historic preservation goals for the city. A book, *The Ottoman House*, co-edited by the author and a British colleague, was the result of an international symposium held in Amasya in 1996. The book includes a chapter by a PhD student who had been introduced to Amasya on one of the Maryland trips, and who later received a Fulbright Research Fellowship to work on her dissertation there.

DESIGN STUDIO

While the focus of work in Turkey is on field study and analysis, we have done conceptual design work in short workshops. We do not feel that students should spend much time in a studio when the most valuable lessons are in the streets. However, we have produced design proposals in some depth when the students have the opportunity to take graduate design studios back home in Maryland based on their field work. Thus, lessons from the summer analytical work may be followed by synthesis in the study of a contemporary urban design or architectural problem.

The studio provides the context for the synthesis of regional analysis, architectural problem solving, and the personal interpretation which each student brings to the design process. On the level of urban design, understanding of the fabric of a traditional city as a two-dimensional pattern and as a system of three-dimensional spaces is a precondition for its transformation. Design proposals are made in light of concerns about transportation, economics, and politics, as well as about historical continuity and social amenity. Solutions are expressed in terms of conceptual diagrams, design guidelines, and illustrative plans.

At the level of architectural design, each student inevitably has a different attitude about the organization and vocabulary of his/her building. Solutions usually include relatively literal representations of indigenous styles and contemporary interpretations of local forms, materials, and details. The most ambitious projects are generally the most abstract in expression, relying upon historical principles of spatial typologies and architectural composition, and upon subtle adjustments to the city and its movement patterns. Avoidance of a nostalgic or sentimental view of the past is a common goal, to be achieved in part by dealing with the buildings in a real physical and socio-political context at scales ranging from urban design through construction details.

Although the program of field study in Turkey examines vernacular architecture and its processes of design and construction, students almost always approach their design work in the role of the professional architects they are aspiring to be. Thus, their perspective is shaped by the more or less universal modernist design methodology taught by most schools and practiced in most offices throughout the world. Nonetheless, a cross-cultural viewpoint does shape their decisions and contribute to their understanding of how their work relates to its context in more than simple visual terms.⁵

The first graduate design studio about Turkey concerned the Eminönü district of Istanbul, which followed the study-abroad programs in 1987 and 1988. The project was directed by Prof. William Bechhoefer, in collaboration with Prof. Kaya S. Arikol lu and Prof. Lindley Vann. Mimar Sinan University, Istanbul, provided the use of its facilities and the invaluable assistance of its faculty. Faculty from Bolu aziçi University, Bebek, contributed significant and influential commentary on the work in progress. We also received encouragement and guidance from Prof. Sedad Hakkı Eldem in the first season of our work.

One proposal responded to the barrier that traffic presents between the water and the city, attempting to recall the traditional relationship of the city to the Golden Horn. The trace of the old city walls was used in a scheme that bridged the highway and brought the city closer to the water. A "campus" of public buildings on the water was proposed at this "gateway" site, while the parks to the west were to be left as green spaces. In addition to the sheer complexity of the problem, the students dealt with an urban intensity that was well beyond their prior experiences. They became particularly aware of the meeting and clash of Eastern and Western ideas that is so characteristic of Istanbul, as well as of the vivid continuity of history that can be an inspiration for design.

Another graduate design studio examined Akşehir, a small city situated on the eastern slopes of the foothills of the Sultan mountains in Konya province of central Anatolia. Akşehir is much more manageable in scale and complexity than Istanbul, while still exhibiting a richly layered history. The image of the traditional city is formed by numerous historical monuments, mosques and mausoleums, with the organic fabric of housing that joins them. A number of buildings from the Byzantine, Selçuk and Ottoman periods, along with residential neighborhoods can be seen today. The most important monument of the city is the mausoleum of Nasrettin Hoca, the fourteenth-century folk hero and master of satire who was a native of Akşehir. The city gained its current urban character as the result of continuous development during the Republican period. Of particular interest are the regional variations of Ottoman house types, as well as the unresolved fault line between old and new parts of the city. Students were assisted by Prof. Dr. Aykut Karaman, a native of Akşehir who teaches urban design at Mimar Sinan

University, and who came to Maryland as a visiting critic during the studio. Their work focused on housing and involved design of a new neighborhood between the old and new parts of the city. In developing design proposals for new housing in Akşehir, students were asked to respond to climate, cultural patterns and historic context. Because the context is more modest than Istanbul, it is also more easily grasped and more deeply comprehended. One proposal that was submitted to the ACSA-Otis Elevator International Urban Housing Student Design Competition in 1995 was published as a noteworthy project.

CONCLUSION

Students come to a better understanding of themselves as architects in a multi-cultural world by observing and studying in a culture outside their normal American or European experience. Regionalist theory provides a framework for study by looking at architecture and urbanism as culturally based and responsive to intensely local climate, geography and material availability. At the same time, the layering of traditions that is so evident in Turkey illuminates the fact that no architecture has ever been immune to imports and influences from outside its immediate geographic limitations. Turkey provides an ideal laboratory where the multiple cultures of the Middle East, Central Asia, and Europe have been meeting for millennia. Because American students can find some

points of reference in Turkey, their intellectual and emotional access to the culture is facilitated. The rich architectural heritage and the genuine and extraordinary hospitality which is extended by Turks reinforces and deepens this access and makes Turkey an inspiring, as well as delightful, venue for study.

ENDNOTES

¹James M. Fitch, "Vernacular Paradigms for Post-Industrial Architecture." *Vernacular Architecture*, Mete Turan, editor, pp. 267-268. Brookfield, Vermont: Avebury, 1990.

²Amos Rapoport, *House Form and Culture*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969, page 47.

³Robert Campbell, "Is There an American Architecture?." *Architectural Record*, April, 1999.

⁴Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*. New York, NY: Random House, 1979, page 45.

⁵At the post-professional level, certain students have proposed strategies for housing based on vernacular processes of design and construction; however, their interest was encouraged by the author's seminar in regionalism, rather than by participation in the Turkey program.