

## Rethinking Public vs. Private: “The Istanbul Hilton and Its Beyond”

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In the theatrical season of 1955-56, a play written by Cevat Fehmi Baskut, *Harput'ta Bir Amerikalı* (An American in Harput)<sup>1</sup> was first performed both at the City Theater of Istanbul and the State Theater in Ankara. The first scene of the play was staged in a suite of the Istanbul Hilton occupied by a Turkish emigrant from Harput—now an American millionaire—during a visit to Turkey forty years after moving abroad. As a whole, the set of the main room in the suite is unpretentious and minimalist, as are the props themselves: a sofa and some armchairs standing on the left, a bookshelf and chairs on the right, a desk and a telephone in the middle, and a long drapery the full width of the backstage, suggesting the full-height windows opening to the veranda beyond.

Taken into the guest room at the Istanbul Hilton, the audience of Baskut's play is confronted with a set of contradictions that affect their everyday lives. The Hilton was opened in June 1955, only a few months before the opening of the play, and was appropriated by the inhabitants of the city not only as a real image of modernization, but as a mirror image, as well, through news and publication of the Hilton in the mass media. Though the audience might have heard and read some news of the opening of the Hilton, or would at least have likely seen it from outside, the set of the first act of Baskut's play would for most of them have been their first confrontation with the interior of a guest room. Nevertheless, this was not their first encounter with the ideology of Americanization. Long before the opening of the Hilton, Americanism had begun finding its way into Turkish culture and social habits—especially in the practices of inhabiting and consuming. Accordingly, the dialogues in Baskut's play clearly display that familiarity with the “American” in terms of consumer products was already so deeply embedded in the consumption practices of the “ordinary” [Turkish] man that it was

possible to present them as satirical realities to the audience.

The assertion made by the owners, developers, and designers of the Istanbul Hilton—which included the Turkish government, the Turkish Pension Fund, Hilton itself, the American design firm SOM, and the Turkish architect Sedat Hakki Eldem—was not only that it would provide modern living spaces to its guests, but also that it would allow its American guests the illusion that they were at a “home-away-from-home,” equipped with all their familiar technologies, such as telephones, air conditioners, radios and others. Reminiscent of “American” practices of consuming, moreover, was the “mini-mall” situated in the hotel lobby, to which branches of some well-known stores from the Grand Bazaar were “transplanted.”<sup>2</sup> In this respect, the Hilton represented both the interrelatedness of “the interior” and “the market or bazaar” generated by consumerism, as well as the problematization of the dialectics between private and public.

### THE HOTEL LOBBY: AN “URBAN INTERIOR” TO CONSUME

Both political and popular forms of media underscored the modernization and the democratization of space that the Hilton was said to embody. In introducing the striking new building to the city's inhabitants, these media made note that the hotel had been a cooperative, public/private venture, and that this “ultra-modern” building was public property—accessible to everyone in the society. In his article “New Hotels for Old Countries”—published in *Reader's Digest* in October 1955 after the opening of the hotel that same year—J.P. McEvog reported on the opinions of ordi-

nary people and on their eagerness to appropriate the hotel as a modern, democratic space:

How do the Turks feel about this ultramodern building dominating a hilltop in their ancient city of crumbling walls and historic mosques? "Proud and happy," they will tell you. "It is *our* building, owned by us, co-designed by a Turkish architect, financed by the Turkish Republic Pension Fund and staffed more than 95% by Turks. It is the most dynamic showcase in this part of the world of the modernization we are desperately trying to achieve. This is not a Communist-propaganda promise of better things to come—this is a Free World achievement here and now. We can see it, walk through it, eat in it, drink in it, sleep in it. Here we can entertain distinguished visitors from all over the world and be proud of it."<sup>3</sup>

In fact, the emphasis on "ultramodern" was common to both the popular discourse—represented in the *Reader's Digest* article above (what David Boorstin refers to as a "pseudo-article")<sup>4</sup>—and the political discourse, as in a guidebook published by the tourist department of the Turkish state:

...Principal towns are building modern hotels. Istanbul has already her 300-room hotel, "The Istanbul Hilton," of worldwide reputation, built on one of the beautiful slopes overlooking the Bosphorus, a happy and artful combination of ultramodern Western accommodation and Turkish luxury and splendor.<sup>5</sup>

David Boorstin has reservations about the reliability of articles published in popular magazines such as *Reader's Digest* and argues that these articles take real events and places and fictionalize them in order to suit their audiences.<sup>6</sup> If this distortion for the American audience is not sufficiently apparent in the passage above, consider the translation and re-publication of McEvog's article shortly thereafter in the popular monthly *Bütün Dünya*—a Turkish version of *Reader's Digest*.<sup>7</sup> In taking the text from one context to another, the sensibilities of the Turkish readers of *Bütün Dünya* were taken into account, and any controversies of history, politics or culture were avoided—as is suggested by the fact that McEvog's article was neutralized in translation. The original title, "New Hotels for Old Countries" was changed to "The Istanbul Hilton and Its Beyond," the phrase "crumbling walls and historic mosques" was removed from the description of the ancient city, and references to modernization and Communist propaganda were omitted.

Beyond these minutiae, the possibility of staying at the Hilton for the ordinary American traveler—not to speak of an ordinary Turk—was a fiction of both the political and popular discourses. Instead of celebrating the spread of American hotels around the world, David Dodge, a self-proclaimed professional traveler, travel writer, and novelist, took a resolute stand against the consumerist use of space in American "de-luxe" hotels, including the Hiltons. Satirically referring to the Statler-Hilton as the "Stilton-Hatler Oriental" in his writings, he avoided the Hilton chain while abroad.<sup>8</sup> Whereas the Istanbul Hilton topped the lists of best hotels in most politically motivated and popular travel writings, Dodge did not include it in his recommendations of places to stay in the city at all.<sup>9</sup>

Dodge's criticism of the Hilton hotels was essentially directed at two "urban interiors" and the social practices encouraged by them: the lobby and the guest room—denoting respectively the most public and the most private spaces in the hotel. We deal first with the lobby:

The comprehensiveness of the public facilities in the hotel lobby—from eating to shopping to strolling idly and viewing the scenery inside or out—can indeed hold travelers in its custody rather than freeing them to explore the real city. Dodge held this totality itself in contempt, arguing "there is much more to the Orient than what is to be seen from the lobby of the Stilton-Hatler Oriental."<sup>10</sup> But a travel article originally published in the *Harper's Bazaar* offered another perspective. It praised the hotel lobby as a mirror image of the real city. As it was later reprinted in the *Turkish Travelogue*:

The newly built *Hilton* is a brilliant blend of Turkish traditional and contemporary architecture; home away from home for the transatlantic visitors who congregate here, enjoying soda fountains disguised as kiosks and beauty parlors in harem décors. There is a street of shops and *souks*, for exhausted or unenterprising travelers. *Abduls*—all antiques and jewelry—is transplanted from the Great Bazaar; some of the finest merchandise in the city is here: connoisseurs' stuff, in a wide price range."<sup>11</sup>

Just as this interior street of shops was a displacement of a "mini-mall"<sup>12</sup> into the context of a hotel lobby—a shopping court arranged as it was around an atrium to the right of the entrance hall—its specific content, i.e. the old historic stores, was displaced, as well, from its original context of the Grand Bazaar. But looking beyond mere appearances, Dodge realized that the very act of displacing the stores from Grand Bazaar into the

Hilton mini-mall precluded the re-creation of the “wonderland-for-shoppers”<sup>13</sup> atmosphere of the Grand Bazaar, as it was described by foreign visitors and travel critics alike.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, the “constructed” public space of the hotel lobby in general is more problematic than other, happenstance public spaces like the city square or even the Grand Bazaar itself. In the former space, Siegfried Kracauer points out in “The Hotel Lobby,” a “pseudo-life”<sup>15</sup> is played out, whereby people become “detached from everyday life” and “displaced from the unreality of the daily hustle and bustle.”<sup>16</sup> For him, the hotel lobby is “an undetermined void,” the space of which lacks purpose:

The lobby, in which people find themselves *vis-à-vis de rien*, is a mere gap that does not even serve a purpose dictated by *Ratio* (like the conference room of a corporation), a purpose which at the very least could mask the directive that had been perceived in the relation.<sup>17</sup>

Precisely on this point, Kracauer’s understanding is relevant to “urban interior” of the Hilton’s lobby. As this gap or void or “open space” (as it is termed in contemporary architectural jargon) at the entrance to the hotel risks becoming a tensionless dead end, a concrete purpose is contrived for the space adjacent the lobby to mitigate this risk. Hence the space of consumption: “the mini-mall” or “the market.”

This “transcendental homelessness,”<sup>18</sup> inscribed in modern space does not differentiate between public or private spaces. As long as the space becomes subject to the capitalist means of production and consumption, neither “the market” nor “the modern interior” provide any real liberation. Dodge’s criticism points at both the hotel lobby and the guest room — i.e. at the “urban interior” in its various forms — where the contradictions of modernization and Americanization, both, were so ambiguously reflected and so uncritically received beginning in the 1950’s.

#### THE GUEST ROOM: AN “URBAN INTERIOR” TO INHABIT

The American hotels in general and the Hilton Hotels in particular promised American travelers a “home-away-from-home” atmosphere, but used technology and design as the means of differentiating their home-like “modern interior.” In this respect, while the comforts in the guest rooms of the new hotels reflected the very latest advances in American technology and design,

they were presented to guests as services and absolute necessities.<sup>19</sup>

In his travel book *The Poor Man’s Guide to the Orient*, David Dodge envisioned an “indoctrination course”<sup>20</sup> for his readers, in which he would teach them to avoid the economic manipulation and control imposed upon travelers in every space of consumption: in Dodge’s words, “in bedrooms, dining rooms, drawing rooms, train compartments, ship’s cabins and the strap-in seats of flying machines.”<sup>21</sup> In criticizing the absurdity of American hotels for confounding “de-luxe” services with modern comforts, he urged travelers to be awake to the many pitfalls of consumption as well:

It is a fault of “American” hotels throughout the Orient that they equate “de-luxe” with a hot-and-cold air blower (which is a modern comfort, not *luxe* at all), or with a radio “in every room” (How many travelers visit Bangkok to listen to singing commercials in Siamese?) or electronic billing machines that scientifically work their own cost off on the customers like mechanical toys whose sole operating function is to shut themselves off once they have been set in motion.”<sup>22</sup>

The fact that most of these comforts were lacking in most of the European hotel rooms at that time — not only the telephone, radio, and air-conditioner, but even “a private bathroom”<sup>23</sup> — suggests how everyday American design raised them to the level of luxuries. But supposedly these innovations — particularly providing every room its own private bath — were done for the sake of the democratization of space. Ironically, as Sigfried Giedion shows us, the idea of a private bath did not originate from the home itself, where it arguably makes more sense in term of actual practices of inhabiting, but from the American hotel. He cites the Mount Vernon Hotel built in 1853 in Cape May, New Jersey, as the earliest example where “a bath with running water was installed in every bedroom,”<sup>24</sup> but relegates the democratization of the hotel bath — one which was truly inexpensive and available to anyone — not surprisingly, to a *Statler* hotel. “A Room and a Bath for a Dollar and a Half” was the effective motto of a new hotel in Buffalo planned by Ellsworth M. Statler, which opened in 1908.<sup>25</sup>

The rationality and accessibility of this solution ensured the adoption of “the private bath” from the hotel where it originated into the contexts of the apartment and home — i.e. into the “modern interior” — where it became “a cell and an appendage to the bedroom.”<sup>26</sup> But if a private bath was still considered as a luxury in Europe by 1948, how does one explain the change in

the perception and reception of a private bath that gradually draws back from luxury into modern comfort? In his article "Europe and American Design," Reyner Banham explains the reasons for the universality of the American design by arguing that "Americans have usually understood that for them technology has always set the pace of culture."<sup>27</sup> He underlines two features of American design — the favoring of a "neat engineering solution" and the avoidance of "cultural references" — which became apparent in the material manifestations of the modern interior as a private bath, a telephone, a radio or an air-conditioner. In fact, only through these two features could everyday American design generate such uncritical fascination among users in general, and hotel guests in particular, in so many different cultures around the globe.

Having said that, however, we cannot ignore the fact that the guest rooms of the Istanbul Hilton were not a mere creation of American design, but a combination of American and European design. While the features in the room such as a private bath with running hot water, a telephone, and a radio were asserted to be in line with American standards, the design of its modern furniture was not imported from the United States, but from England. All the guest room furniture, except the chairs, was made of dark, oiled teak and was manufactured by an English firm. The radio cabinet with its perforated Formica front and the teak dressing table with its brass feet and handles stood out as the most conspicuously "designed" pieces of the modern interior.<sup>28</sup> But at the same time, these highly designed objects were also intended to be integral to the "home-away-from-home" theme of the interior—the radio cabinet reminiscent of the living room and the dressing table of the bedroom. But in the standard guest room — which served as both living room and bedroom, all in a single area of approximately five by six meters — there was neither an independent bed nor even a independent couch,<sup>29</sup> but ironically, a folding sofa-bed—a solution *in-between*.

#### THE MODERN INTERIOR AND THE MARKET OR BAZAAR

In the history of modern architecture, both the "interior" and the "market or bazaar" — spaces of inhabiting and consuming, respectively — were subjected to both modernization and democratization, and to manipulation and control, as well. The modern interior — whether the "hotel room" for tourists (either in reality or as contrived, a "home-away-from-home") or the "home" of the local people — was manipulated and controlled by technology, efficiency and design. And these cyclically, through consumption, generated the further fascina-

tion and desire for the modern interior. The market or bazaar, on the other hand — whether the mini-mall at the Hilton, or the real Grand Bazaar, or the "American Market" — suggested a true democratization of space, available to everyone, but nonetheless manipulated by capitalist designs on leisure and desire. The city generated such distinctive places of consumption for everyone — in both their real and fictional forms. The Grand Bazaar, an everyday shopping location for the locals was a "wonderland for Alice" for the tourists. The "American Market," on the other hand, became the wonderland for the locals.

For the inhabitants of Istanbul, the fascination with the modern interior was generated by the ideology of Americanization and consumerist modernism. From the 1950's on, the degree to which the common person enjoyed this modernization was dependent on the degree of its occupants' access to consumption goods such as telephones, air conditioners, radios, electric appliances and others. These goods were found neither at the local markets nor at the Grand Bazaar, but at the transient "American Market." Started at the end of 1950's under the walls of the old town, it became the prime location for locals to buy imported goods (essentially American products) illegally, but at affordable prices. But the emerging shifts in patterns of consumption made possible by markets such as the "American Market" prompted a rift between nationalism and Americanism, as well. Indeed, a national campaign to buy domestic rather than foreign products—which since 1929 had promoted the second week of December as the "Week for Domestic Goods" — was interrupted for the first time in 1954. In time, however, the conflict turned into communication and interaction, whereby even the American Market quickly became a legal form of consumption and was established in a row of storefronts — not unlike a "mini-mall" — in the business district of Karaköy. It is still known today as the American Market.

In the 1950's, while the tourists staying at the Istanbul Hilton were ostensibly exploring the indigenous character of the city, locals were stimulated and alienated by American alternatives to their ordinary ways of living and consuming. The absurdity of the contradictions could be made visible to them only on the stage of *An American in Harput* through the representation of the modern interior:

CELILE: I am a woman who is taught in American manners, Sir. I studied in college, as did my daughter. I brought the first chewing gum to this country. I taught the exciting American dances to all Istanbul... My home is decorated like American

homes... Every Christmas I decorate a tree. On American national holidays, I give parties for sure. I love American music. But don't Americans have faults? Yes, they do. They don't understand paintings; they don't like the opera; their theatre is only about nudity. But who doesn't have faults? My dear Americans...<sup>30</sup>

## CONCLUSION

No historical fact or explanatory theory is able to account for all the dynamics or complexity of a change in a social structure and the ways in which architecture responds to this change. Accordingly, no single social and economic process, such as modernization, Americanization, bureaucratization or globalization, nor any one political ideology, such as nationalism, Americanism or internationalism, can be considered complete of itself to justify such a change.

Rethinking the dialectics between public and private as embedded within this complexity requires, then, a look beyond single explanations of causality. The Istanbul Hilton, besides being a "result" of Americanization in Turkey, is a complex, contradictory "urban interior," which cannot be glossed over as merely commercial or public space, but must be considered as a critical juncture of public and private. If the Hilton is subjected to becoming a "pseudo-article" in *Reader's Digest*, a "pseudo-event" in Baskut's play, or a "mirror image" in the popular discourse, it is because of the remarkable interaction between the ordinary citizens of Istanbul and the real/mirror images of this new building through various, everyday social practices, mainly, as argued, through inhabiting and consuming. Cevat Fehmi Baskut observed these social changes manifest in the inhabitants of the city as occupants of interiors and as consumers of goods, and wove this complexity as a social critique again, on the very space of this critique — on the Istanbul Hilton and its beyond.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Cevat Fehmi Baskut, *Harput'ta Bir Amerikaly* (Istanbul: Inkilap ve Aka Kitabevi, 1956).
- <sup>2</sup> Lesley Blanch, "Travel Bazaar: Turkey — the sweet airs of Asia," in *Turkish Travelogue* (New York: Turkish Information Office, 1959), 24.
- <sup>3</sup> J.P. McEvog, "New Hotels for Old Countries," *Reader's Digest* 67 (October 1955): 141-145. Also cited in Annabel Jane Wharton, *Building the Cold War: Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 36.
- <sup>4</sup> David J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (New York: Atheneum, 1977), 133.
- <sup>5</sup> *Your Holiday in Turkey* (Ankara: Turkish Ministry of Broadcasting, Press and Information, 1955), 20.
- <sup>6</sup> Boorstin, 135.

- <sup>7</sup> J.P. McEvog, "Istanbul-Hilton ve Ötesi," *Bütün Dünya* 94 (November 1955): 569-571.
- <sup>8</sup> David Dodge, *The Poor Man's Guide to the Orient* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 13.
- <sup>9</sup> Dodge, *Poor Man's/Orient*, 309.
- <sup>10</sup> Dodge, *Poor Man's/Orient*, 13.
- <sup>11</sup> Blanch, 20.
- <sup>12</sup> Wharton 27.
- <sup>13</sup> Sydney Clark, *Turkey for the Best* (New York: Turkish Information Office, 1952), 26.
- <sup>14</sup> The Grand Bazaar proved to be a "wonderland" for Dodge, as well. He writes in detail on his visit to Grand Bazaar in 1947, where together with his wife they met a few US Navy soldiers from the American battleship Missouri. The Dodge's were looking for specifically for a native doll to add to their daughter's collection. For his description of the Grand Bazaar and their shopping experience, see David Dodge, *Time Out for Turkey* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1955), 173-9.
- <sup>15</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 184.
- <sup>16</sup> Kracauer, 176.
- <sup>17</sup> Kracauer, 176-177.
- <sup>18</sup> Neil Leach, ed., *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997), 51.
- <sup>19</sup> Dodge, *Poor Man's/Orient*, 14.
- <sup>20</sup> Dodge, *Poor Man's/Orient*, 14.
- <sup>21</sup> Dodge, *Poor Man's/Orient*, 14.
- <sup>22</sup> Dodge, *Poor Man's/Orient*, 179.
- <sup>23</sup> Sigfried Giedion clearly underlines the fact that "in Europe, even today [1948], the combination of a room with private bath borders on luxury." See, Siegfried Giedion, *Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to Anonymous History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 697.
- <sup>24</sup> Giedion, 693.
- <sup>25</sup> Giedion, 694-695.
- <sup>26</sup> Giedion, 698.
- <sup>27</sup> Reyner Banham, "Europe and American Design," in *Lessons from America: An Exploration*, edited by Richard Rose (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1974), 90.
- <sup>28</sup> "Hotel in Istanbul," *Architectural Review* 118 (1955): 294-296.
- <sup>29</sup> Wharton, 28-29.
- <sup>30</sup> Baskut, 45-6.

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