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Research, Writing, and Practice in the formation of Turkish Modernism

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“Eldem published numerous books and articles in which he translated the tacit knowledge (...) of master builders trained in the workshops and in the building site to architecture students trained at the architecture school.”

Fatma Taniş



Fatma Taniş trained as an Architect in Istanbul and Stuttgart. She holds Master's degrees in Architecture History (ITU), and Conservation and Restoration of Cultural Heritage (MSGSU). After living in Bodrum, İzmir, Porto, and Hamburg, where she deepened her interest in port cities, she has started her doctoral research on port city culture in İzmir in the Department of Architecture at the Delft University of Technology.

Sedad Hakki Eldem as a Cosmopolitan Individual: Research, Writing, and Practice in the formation of Turkish Modernism

Sedad Hakki Eldem (1908-1988) was an important exponent in defining Turkish modern architecture as well as in forming and consolidating the architecture pedagogy in Turkey. Eldem was a practicing architect and professor in the State Academy of Fine Arts (SAFA) in Istanbul. Sedad Hakki Eldem had vast interactions with Europe. His exchanges with European experts continued in Istanbul. Eldem was an assistant of Ernst Egli, who radically reformed the architecture education in the SAFA in line with the modern movement. In this respect, the intellectual exchanges between Egli and Eldem led to the establishment of the research project based on learning from vernacular architecture. The project had Janus-faced ambition: first, it aimed to define Turkish Modernism over the vernacular architecture, second, the goal was to define “Turkish House” as a part of the nationalist ideology of the government. The method applied for this project was surveying traditional houses in the former lands of the Ottoman Empire that covers Balkans and Anatolia in present-day Turkey. In scope of this project, Sedad Hakki Eldem lectured at the SAFA “National Seminars”, ordered studios by applying the principles of the research project. Moreover, Eldem published numerous books and articles in which he translated the tacit knowledge embedded in the vernacular architecture into technical drawings to transmit the knowledge of master builders trained in the workshops and in the building site to architecture students trained at the architecture school. Surveying vernacular buildings also largely informed Eldem's architecture practice. Bouncing the knowledge through the architecture pedagogy, Eldem displayed the elements derived from the research project in his practice as a substantial part of his long professional life.

In the lights of these information, this article aims to explore underlying patterns that were present in the agency of Sedad Hakki Eldem during the formation of Turkish modernism through focusing on Eldem's cosmopolitan character. The notion of “translation” as a family concept of the cosmopolitanism allows further elaboration on Eldem's role in the creation of a context defining the “Turkish house” over building surveys and its translation to another new context into the Turkish modernism. This process covers a research project, a constitution of the architecture pedagogy and a publication of the findings. In conclusion, this article points out that an architect, who was also a writer, used the historical research different than architectural historians. The case of Sedad Hakki Eldem shows not only can (vernacular) buildings can be understood as an expression of the history within the socio-spatial context, but also analysis of the physical construction, spatial composition, building materials in relation to their environs can directly inform the architect at various levels during the design process. Moreover, the importance of the personal experiences in formation of architecture also came to front. Under the guidance of his cosmopolitan character that was developed in between cultures, he had a clarity on resources and simultaneous developments to act promptly in line with the demands of the era, particularly around the mid 20th century. In addition to his experiences and knowledge, Eldem used his authority in the field of architecture to develop the architectural pedagogy and guide the Turkish modern architecture that has informed further generations of architects in Turkey through consulting architectural history.

