TURKISH ARCHITECTURE TODAY!

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In a conversation with two prominent Turkish architects, Han Tümer Tekin, member of the Steering Committee since 2008, and Murat Tabanlioğlu, member of the 2013 Master Jury, Sarkis points to the significant changes that have occurred within Turkey recently and the architects explore them and try to put them into perspective.

The Turkish construction company has become the new paradigm of efficiency, scale and reliability in the construction sector of the Middle East and Central Asia. After the soap opera, it is perhaps one of the best known of Turkish exports. Over the past 15 years, these giant companies have become gargantuan, growing both horizontally, to buy out their competitors, and vertically, to include real estate, design and the building industry. They have also generated major exchanges in terms of building and development culture for Turkish engineers. How has this affected Turkish architecture? Have these skills been developed within Turkey and then exported? Are issues of the scale of development reflective of this capacity to build big?

Turkey has gone through a boom period during which construction has been a major signifier, even the leading sector of the economy. The increasing rate of urbanisation in Turkey during the 1950s led to a huge shortage of housing and consequently to uncontrolled development, especially in the form of squatter zones. The housing projects of Emlak Kredi Bank, a state agency aiming to control housing development by providing long-term, low-interest loans to middle-class families, especially for housing construction, include projects such as Istanbul Ataköy (sections I–II, 1957–62 and 1959–64), a new suburb on the outskirts of the city that reflects the political and economic situation of the period. This was a modernist urban-planning exercise, but, in the following years, and as a result of radical shifts in both Turkish politics, society and culture and the government’s aim to integrate with global markets, such projects increasingly took the form of gated communities or residential high-rises in suburbs throughout Turkey, such as the Bahçeşehir and Ataşehir communities in Istanbul. TOKI (the Housing Development Administration) has since gained considerable power in the construction sector.

Starting in the 1980s, the beginning of the period of liberalisation and privatisation in Turkey, thanks to Turgut Özal’s policies, huge investments were made in the build-operate-transfer model. Hayati Tabanioğlu’s Ataköy Tourism Complex is one of the leading examples, including the first shopping mall, Galleria (1986). In the meantime, construction also became a good business investment for previously industrial sector investors or textile producers. The preferred investment was tourism on the Mediterranean coast, Antalya being the favoured location. The shore was filled with clusters of hotel buildings while no plans at all were drawn up for the hinterland. Due to this practice, there is an increasing emphasis on matters relating to fashion linked to this particular type of built environment. The weekend papers abound with advertisements, marketing a “life style” of new luxury residential towers with shopping, sports and recreational facilities.

Following the competitions for several new international airports, launched by Turkey’s General Directorate of State Airports Authority in the 1990s, the build-operate-transfer model was applied to several airports (Istanbul, Ankara, Izmir, Bodrum, Dalaman) after 2000. One of the main reasons for privatisation was the need to invest in terminals, since passenger numbers have increased dramatically in the last decade and terminal facilities were inadequate and the
In the last two decades, Turkish contractors have acquired the “skill” of building big and fast. Benefiting national practice, Turkish construction firms have applied their experience worldwide, mainly in the CIS countries and MENA. Turkish architects designing projects overseas can count on the efficiency and reliability of these firms to get their designs built. In countries such as Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, the presidents are directly involved in construction projects. In the case of Astana, a master plan was developed by Kisho Kurokawa at the behest of President Nazarbayev, and then world-renowned architects were invited to take part in competitions proposing significant buildings for the newly established capital. Turkish architects and contractors also worked on many other projects in the region. As in the Kazakhstan example, several Turkish contractors have worked efficiently with international and Turkish architects all around the world, having already proven their practicality, enforceability, adaptability, speed of construction capacity and reliability to international investors.

The current government has taken the role of the state as developer to higher levels, particularly with the instrument of TOKİ (the Housing Development Administration) and its siblings. This controversial tool and its consequences are being monitored by financial and housing experts. TOKİ towns have undoubtedly drawn major criticism from the architectural and urban design world as well. Beyond the immediate and obvious criticisms, could you reflect on the impact that TOKİ has had on the architectural make up of cities in Turkey and on the means by which the profession has been responding to this phenomenon.

TOKİ has been operating directly under the Prime Ministry since 2003 and is said to have contracted more than 420,000 housing units. According to TOKİ sources, the stated level of activity of the agency corresponds to an investment spending of approximately $35 billion, the equivalent of “20 new cities, with 100,000 population each” (2010 data). TOKİ builds on the outskirts of cities, regardless of the “place” and actual needs; indeed, the results are all similar high-rise apartment buildings, encouraging spread-out, car-dependent living – human depots – despite the fact that TOKİ aims primarily to contribute to earthquake-resistant infrastructure in a healthy urban environment, granting equal rights for housing for all. Very recently, and departing from a line of projects with no thought for good design or planning, nor even the employment of architects, TOKİ is now launching architectural competitions. And, although rare, good examples, like the Bio Istanbul project, are underway. It may be an auspicious omen that the recently established Ministry of Environment and City Planning is headed by Erdoğan Bayraktar, former TOKİ chairman. The most recent and excellent news is that master planning will be enforced before the start of all urban renovation projects in derelict zones and regions at the risk of earthquakes.

The government’s large-scale urban renewal projects, meant to complement the centennial celebrations of the Turkish Republic in 2023, have been cautiously received by urban planners, architects and the general public. Indeed, three of these “magnificent” projects are controversial: namely the “Second Strait”, the third bridge over the Bosphorus and the airport to the north of Istanbul.

Furthermore, the lack of any impact evaluation is one of the worst aspects of TOKİ policies. TOKİ’s impact on the economy and urban landscape should be evaluated carefully. If we have a better understanding of TOKİ and its impact, we will have a better understanding of the Turkish economy and social policies in general.

The current design scene in Istanbul has caught the world’s attention. There is a growing design consciousness among the younger generation. Once again, Turkish industry has played a major role in channelling its production and products to the building industry. As architects, you have worked closely with the design industries of Turkey and you have tried to innovate through them and with them. Has this industry been responsive to the demands of the new generation of designers in Turkey?

In the 1960s, when the Atatürk Cultural Centre was first built, its aluminium lattice facade had to be made in Germany because the building industry in Turkey was not capable of providing it. In 1969, the building burnt down but was rebuilt and reopened in 1977. This time the facade was produced locally by Arçelik, a leading producer of household appliances and electronics in Turkey.

During the last decade, Turkish labour and production have enabled the Turkish building materials sector to compete throughout the world. Local productions respond to international associations’ choices and uses of contemporary materials. Moreover, competent local labour makes “tailor-made” production possible, thus sustaining the design and building industry. For example, the steel infrastructure for a building in Astana is now produced in Ankara and transported to Kazakhstan, together with all the sanitary ware and furniture. Unique mesh applications and glassware produced in Turkey is compatible with world standards, as the industry is highly responsive to new design requirements; these are designed by architects as one-off pieces and the prototypes are manufactured and applied accordingly. It is also very common for architects to collaborate with furniture manufacturers. For example, during the construction of a project in Istanbul, Paşabahçe Glass Industry and
The Aga Khan Award for Architecture has engaged with Turkish architects and architecture from the beginning and has responded (rather rewardingly) to the different experiments in Turkish architecture over the past three decades, while also awarding other attempts at experimentation and reinventing regional types and national styles. However, it is not until the last three cycles that projects that have distanced themselves from investing in conscious iconographies have made it to the foreground. Could you highlight the impact that the Award has had on the Turkish design scene, the messages it sends in terms of valuation, and whether, in the midst of the recent wave of the Turkish construction boom, some quality can be extracted from the sheer quantity being produced.

In the first cycle of the Aga Khan Award for Architecture in 1980, three projects from Turkey were amongst the winners, two by Turgut Cansever, one of the most prominent architects of his time. In 1983, the Award ceremony took place in Istanbul and when it was announced that Nail Çakirhan, a poet and a journalist who had built a series of summer houses using traditional techniques with the aid of two local carpenters, had been awarded a prize for the only Turkish project selected, the local architectural community was much surprised and a debate about the role of architects ensued. Since then, the works of many prominent Turkish architects have been premiated – Sedad H. Eldem, Behruz Çinici, Sedat Gürel, Cengiz Bektas – with the Award for Han Tümertekin’s B 2 House (2004) being a milestone, standing out as a good and representative sample.
of contemporary Turkish architecture. A balance has been achieved between consciously national styles and projects that have pursued different iconographies. The judging body now recognises the progress and capacity of Turkish architects, and, in particular, the work of young architects in Turkey worthy of notice.

The confrontation between historical preservation and urban regeneration has become headline news recently through the Gezi Park demonstrations in Istanbul. It may be very difficult at this moment to bracket off the political and social implications of this confrontation but could you reflect on the role that architects have played in reconciling these two tendencies.

“Now” is the crucial link between past and future. Architecture should claim the “now”, linking the other two. In the Gezi Park issue, the past is also now, because the park is still used intensively, and has been since 1943, by many people.

As part of the republican urban development plans for Istanbul, the French urban planner Henri Prost was commissioned in 1939 to produce a master plan. A larger landscaped area was intended to provide a green promenade, leading to Gezi Park, consisting of about 30 hectares of open green space between the zones of Taksim, Nişantaşı and Maçka, including the Dolmabahçe Valley, but this plan was never entirely carried out. In later years, the Park was further eaten into by the construction of hotels around it. However, even though it is now one of the smallest parks in Istanbul, Gezi Park is a very valuable and much used area in the heart the city.

Today there is a proposal to erase the current use of the Park and replace it with an obsolete icon of the military barracks, built in 1806 and demolished in 1940. There are no physical remains of these barracks, only a story and a few pictures. This is not what the public would like at all but it is being enforced by the city administration. No clear plans have been drawn up for a larger urban study, only rough renderings of the replica of the military barracks.

Taksim Square is framed by Gezi Park on one side and by another landmark on the other, namely the Atatürk Cultural Centre (the AKM). This multi-use cultural centre and opera house was built in the 1960s to a design by Hayati Tabanlıoğlu. Like the square, Atatürk Cultural Centre is a 20th-century project, an example of modern architecture; together, Gezi Park, the AKM and Taksim Square represent different phases and aspects of the Republic of Turkey’s vision of those years and its new civil society.

Atatürk Cultural Centre is one of the most important architectural and cultural landmarks in Turkey. The modernist structure has housed Istanbul’s state orchestra, opera and ballet since it first opened in 1969. It has also been at the centre of a major controversy ever since the government announced plans to demolish the building and erect a more contemporary complex.
Besides being a listed building, the Cultural Centre is part of the city’s socio-cultural heritage. Like every building, it needs renovation and, as a public building serving the citizens via arts and culture, it should be updated from the 20th to the 21st century with new infrastructure, contemporary materials and a functional reorganisation, although such an upgrade should, of course, remain faithful to its original design.

The growth in size of the design “projects” has in many cases entailed the inclusion of urban designers and landscape architects in the team of consultants. This has invariably led to importing these skills from outside Turkey with very mixed results. It may be too early to tell, but could you describe the interactions with such experts and the impact that this kind of import has had on Turkish cities and landscapes.

Istanbul has been rather isolated from the international architectural scene since the days of Bruno Taut in the 1930s and Gordon Bunshaft’s Hilton Hotel in the 1950s. However, more recently, with Suha Özkan’s involvement, and benefiting from the advantage of having an architect-mayor together with renewed interest in architecture following the 2005 UIA Congress in Istanbul, international competitions are now being held in the city at various scales.

For example, in 2006, Istanbul Municipality selected Zaha Hadid for a public recreational development project for the Kartal district (the Anatolian side of Istanbul) while Ken Yeang was awarded another large urban transformation project for the Küçükçekmece district (the European side of the city). Jury members were Suha Özkan, Hüseyin Kaptan, Michael Sorkin, Sumet Jumsai, Elías Torres Tur and Necati Inceoğlu. Neither of these projects have been realised yet, but the competitions and the emerging concepts have motivated a trend for bettering the city.

Neighbouring Zaha Hadid’s Kartal master-plan zone, a competition for the Maltepe-Dragos Industrial Zone Urban Design Project was launched in 2008, with the involvement of a public initiative composed of landowners. The project made a strong comment on the rehabilitation of the landscape.

Similarly, in 2011, the Cendere Valley Urban Development Project organised an architectural competition with the aim of reviving the region and re-establishing its historical credit as a green and lively valley. The idea was supported by the revitalisation of the Kağıthane River, which would engender a natural living environment within the city centre.

As a rare example, since it is a private investor, Zorlu Holding launched an international competition, again under the leadership of Suha Özkan. One hundred and seventeen offices submitted projects for the Zorlu Centre Architecture and Urban Design Competition, which began in June 2007 and was concluded in 2008. Thirteen international offices were then invited to participate in the second stage. After the final evaluation, the projects by Tabanlioğlu and EAA were selected as joint winners and their combined project was then developed and will be completed by the end of 2013. For the competition, Tabanlioğlu Architects consulted the landscape designers Martha Schwarz Partners and Craft:Pegg, who designed hard and soft landscape compositions that interface with the landscape-roof, which in turn acts both as public space, an urban terrace opening out to the Bosphorus, and as a basis for the construction of the Centre, creating an extension of Istanbul’s green and urban fabric.

In 2012, the city organised an international competition around the Yenikapi Transfer Point and Archaeopark Area. During the excavations for the transportation projects, the remains of the 1600-year-old “Theodosius Port”, together with the remains of “35 antique ships” from the world’s largest fleet and more than 10,000 archaeological finds were unearthed; 8500-year-old settlements of the first Neolithic Age were also found in the same excavation area. As a result, the landscape, together with an open-air museum concept, became the core of the project. However, no clear decision has yet been made about the results of this competition.