

# FROM SEDAD ELDEM TO TURGUT CANSEVER, THE LEGACY OF A SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE

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## ABSTRACT

The theme of this proposal focuses on the concept of "transmissibility" of architectural knowledge unfolding within a School of Architecture. The aim is to highlight the principles that, by the transmission of thought from a Master to a Scholar, have contributed to the development of a Turkish Architecture School. In this specific example, I would like to analyse the influence of Sedad Eldem (1908-1988) teaching method in the work of Turgut Cansever (1921-2009).

The architecture of Turgut Cansever is morphologically distant from that of Sedad Eldem and draws on a very wide semantic repertoire, which cannot be reducible just to the influence of a School of Architecture. However, the experience in the Seminars on National Architectural Style and the academic and professional training with Sedad Eldem had a decisive role in the formulation of the theoretical thought of Turgut Cansever, and this influence is clearly legible in his works of architecture.

Two transmission subjects, which played a central role in the formation of this idea of school, in particular can be outlined; namely the notions of "type" and "building process". Eldem in his texts, as *Türk evi o Yapı*, has deployed a range of possible proposals about the types and the architectural elements. These were part of the same tradition, but at one time made possible the development of a new architecture. "Type" and "building process" are, in this idea of School, part of the same cultural legacy, based not on the imitation of models, but on valuable operating tools to work in the city.

The type has to do with the transmissibility of the settlement and urban facts and is linked to the concept of identity. The very notion of identity admits the variation within a common formal repertoire, therefore the use of types in architecture allows a great operational freedom, in terms of architectural composition. Cansever resorts in his architecture both to the variation on the same type (as in the Demir Village in Bodrum, where the architect works through the investigation of the local settlement types), and to the typological contamination (as in the Turkish Historical Society building in Ankara).

Even more evident in terms of teaching transmission from Eldem to Cansever is the conception of architecture as "building art". The character of the building process, in which standard elements are joined together to create a structurally and compositionally unitary system, is a feature widely developed in the work of Cansever. Thus the reasons that lead the type into a concluded form are above all constructive ones, while the settlement choices are closely linked to the site.

In this sense the effectiveness of a teaching transmission can be evaluated not on the formal emulation, rejected several times by Eldem himself as a matter of fashion, but on the possibility of forming a critical ability, through a working method based on the study of the project in relation to the site, analysing case by case the possible success of the proposed solutions.

## Transmissibility of a School of Architecture

First of all, it is important to clarify what is meant here for "transmission". Education is, by its very definition, "transmission of values", that is "meanings held true in time"; but the values are, in the case of a School of Architecture, intrinsic to the subject of the transmission itself, namely the design.

The generative process of design has the capacity to encompass: the urban facts that formed the city over time; the natural facts, influencing the urban development; the political and social ones, that describe a specific age and finally, the human and anthropological ones, very often transcending the place. This great potential of the project unfortunately remains unexpressed in most of contemporary architecture, which pays less attention to the compositional process rather than to the finished object, or to finished parts of it, refusing to interpret the complex needs of its time and merely accepting ready-made forms, mostly obtained from architectural magazines. The project, in its sense of synthesis, may instead be the bearer of communicable and long-lasting meanings.

The contribution of Sedad Eldem has permitted a whole generation of Turkish architects to make choices, by a change in method: no longer Western spatial models to emulate, but a Turkish city to refer to. The aim of

architectural research is, according to Eldem, to set up the field for a subsequent development of Turkish architecture.

Some researchers wondered how it is possible that a distinguished architect as Eldem, so attentive to the transmissibility of his teaching, has not actually left a detailed written account of his theoretical thinking, despite having published substantial volumes that collect its fruitful academic research (Özkan, 1993, p.56). Probably, it is not a coincidence but a deliberate choice. Could Eldem be considered the "silent Master" of this generation of architects, the one who, working with a sort of maieutics, asked for questions and left them open?

"He never expected his students to create a whole building from a scratch. First they had to master the existing heritage which provide a range of solutions if not for the whole building, then certainly for their component parts. New buildings derive from existing possibilities that have already been thoroughly tested and are known to be architecturally valid, so to design each and every component of a feasible building, his students first had to perfect their knowledge of existing techniques to provide a vehicle for their individual talents." (Özkan, 1993, p.55)

Eldem chose the experimentalism, i.e. the direct verifiability of proposed formal solutions, as working method, and the architectural references as tools. His books, even if they don't expose real theories supplied by principles, represent his theoretical corpus, in the guise of modern treatise (it should be remembered that Eldem studied Vitruvius and Vignola treatise in the Mongeri class at the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul).

As the heterogeneity of Eldem's work, also his teaching gave rise to various examples of architecture. Although it is difficult to identify at first glance the destiny of his legacy – also for some difficulties of Eldem's personality, which made him unpopular with many of his students – we could define Turgut Cansever as the student that "brought a new level of existence to Eldem's ideas" (Özkan, 1987, p.19), chasing a conception of modernity far away from the classicism and the rationalism, but always looking for an expression of identity.

Initially interested in painting, Cansever chose to go on with architecture studies after attending the course of *Yapı* ("Construction"), held by Eldem at the Academy of Fine Arts. The course dealt with the Turkish house in his typological and technological elements, analysing the building process, from the foundations laying to the roof completion.

Cansever graduated in architecture in 1946, with a project for a municipal building in the Beşiktaş district of Istanbul, under the supervision of Eldem, with whom he continued his career, working until 1951 as his assistant, in the *Yapı* class and in some projects. From that year Cansever opened his own studio and undertook an independent research project.

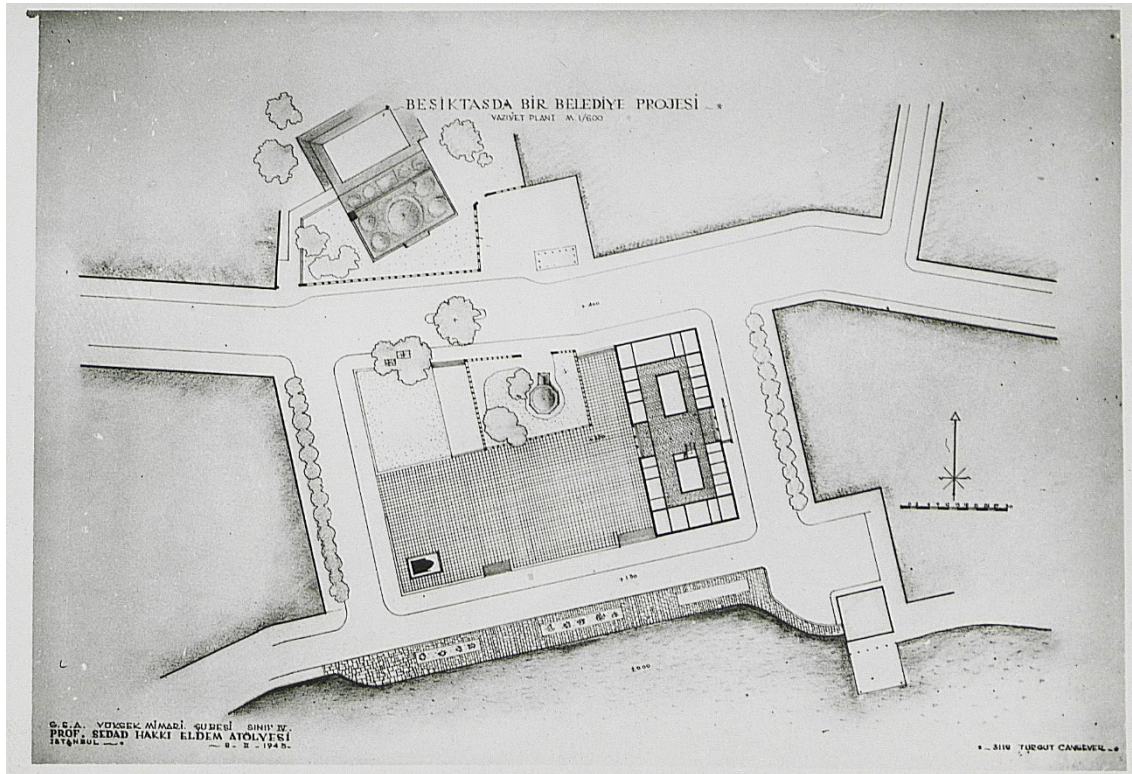


Figure 1. Cansever's municipal building project (1945). Rights holder: Rahmi M. Koç.



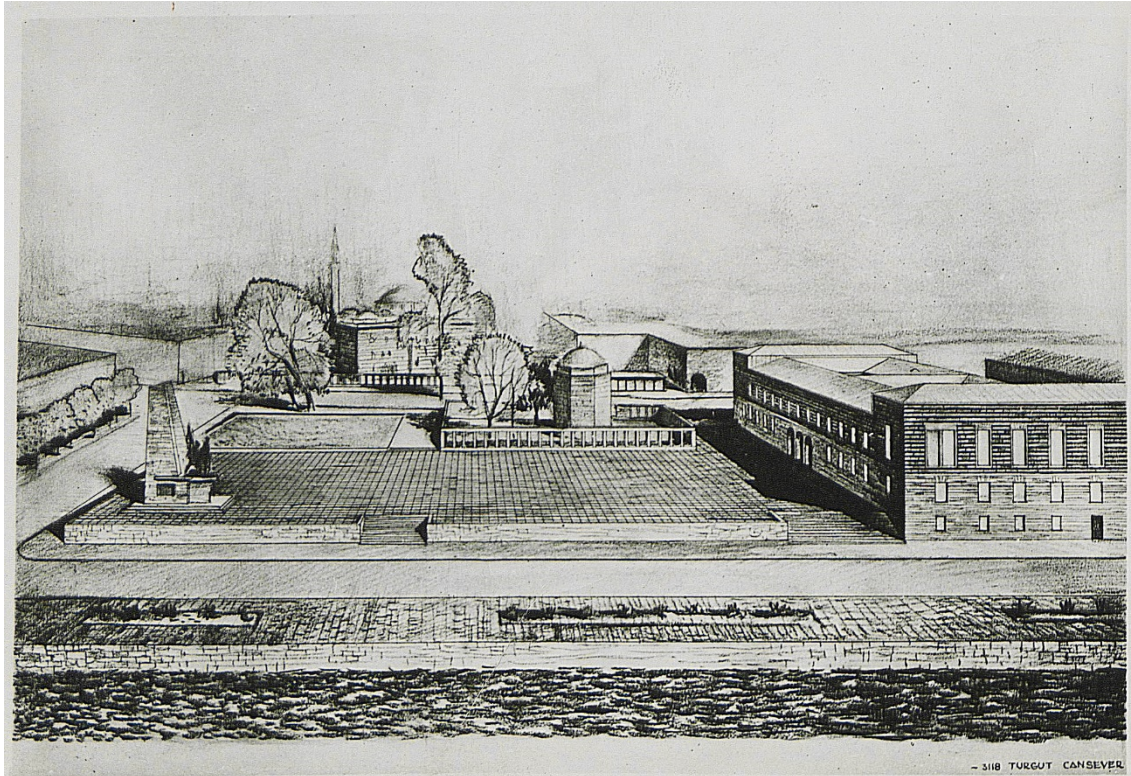


Figure 2. Cansever's municipal building project (1945). Rights holder: Rahmi M. Koç.

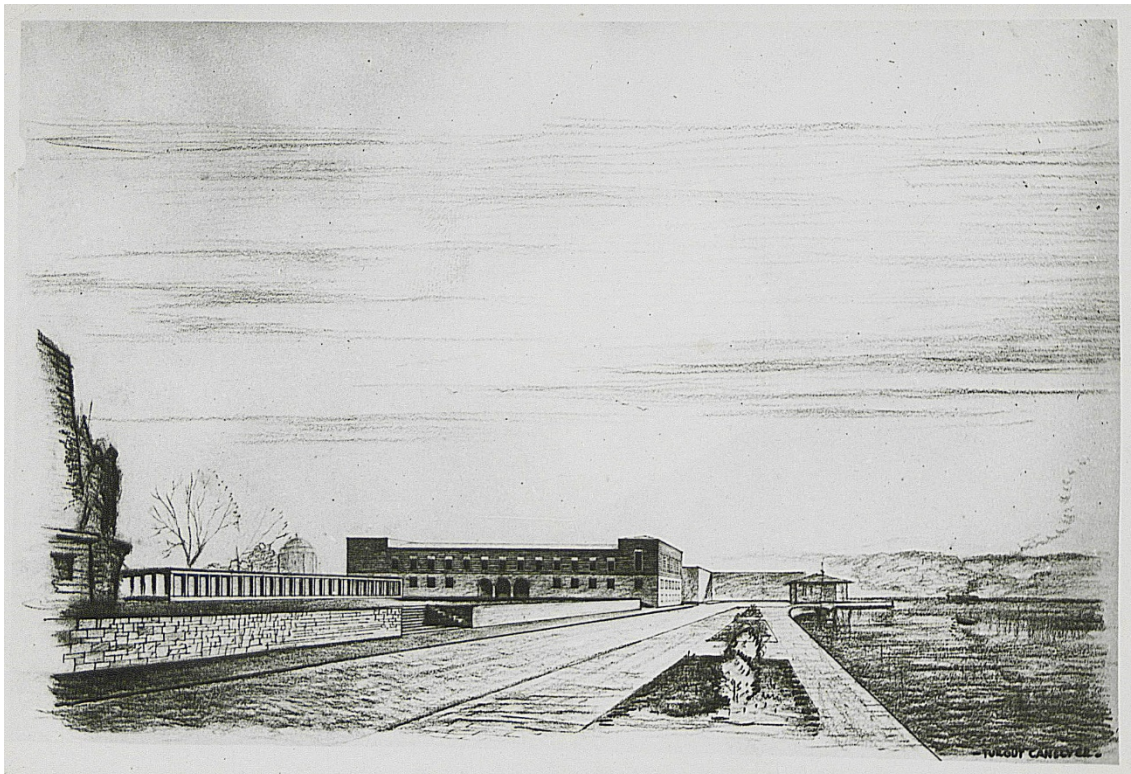


Figure 3. Cansever's municipal building project (1945). Rights holder: Rahmi M. Koç.

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Two transmission subjects, which played a central role in the formation of this idea of school, in particular can be outlined; namely the notions of "type" and "building process". Eldem in his texts, as *Türk evi o Yapı*, has deployed a range of possible proposals about types and architectural elements. These were part of the same tradition, but at one time made possible the development of a new architecture. As Bozdoğan (1987b, p.45) writes, the Eldem's "typological consciousness echoes that of the Enlightenment theorist Quatremère de Quincy in the sense that type is the constructional logic of form derived from reason and use". "Type" and "building process" are, in this idea of School, part of the same cultural legacy, based not on the imitation of models, but on valuable operating tools to work in the city.

### The type

The type has to do with the transmissibility of the settlement and urban facts and is linked to the concept of identity. The very notion of identity admits the variation within a common formal repertoire, therefore the use of types in architecture allows a great operational freedom, in terms of architectural composition. Representing the type a "promise of architecture" (Grassi, 1988, pp.129-141), it expresses some pre-morphological constants, allowing a critical look towards the settlement.



Figure 4. Turkish housing types. From: Eldem, 1984, pp.34-36.

An example is the significance of the *sofa*, the central space of the Turkish house, resulting from the primary arrangement of the *odalar* ("rooms") in the plan. In Eldem's design for a trilogy of houses, it takes on different meanings depending on the location and weather conditions in which the dwelling is located. As Akcan (2012, p.139) summarizes "a summer house had a closed *sofa* at the center; a year-round city residence had a closed peripheral *sofa* along its façades; a city house in a hot and arid climate had open *sofas* and terraces on very floor." The shape and the position of the *sofa* conciliate between the domestic (living space) and the outside (the landscape), between private and public. The essence of the modern Turkish house is expressed in its plan: "Eldem did not follow either Le Corbusier's *plan libre* or Loos' *raumplan*", instead organizing any specific feature of living in a space allocated to it, joined around a core with a symbolic value" (Akcan, 2012, p.140), namely the *sofa*, whose functionality is ambiguous for the modern Turkish family, but whose meaning remains, like a message from the past.

The link existing between house and site is handed down by Eldem and also by other important protagonists of this academic renewal season. In *Das türkische Wohnhaus* (1941), Ernst Egli affirms that the house contains the



most primitive impulses of man and expresses the instinct that binds him to the surroundings. Comparing the development of the Roman house with those of the Greek and Saxon house, he highlights how different building types demonstrate the same approach to the settlement, which comes from the need of a sedentary lifestyle. These types, as they evolve, fill in a compact manner the lot, occupying first the boundaries to create closed and continuous facades, instead leaving open a central courtyard. According to Egli, the Turkish type, by contrast, draws its origins from the nomad tent, which has become, in a subsequent evolution, a wooden pavilion (*Kösk*). But what distinguishes the Turkish embryonic type from other typological examples, from Asian too, is that the pavilion has never directly integrated with the surrounding area, but is located inside a border wall, enclosing a private garden. So the house occupies the lot starting from the middle, and not vice versa.

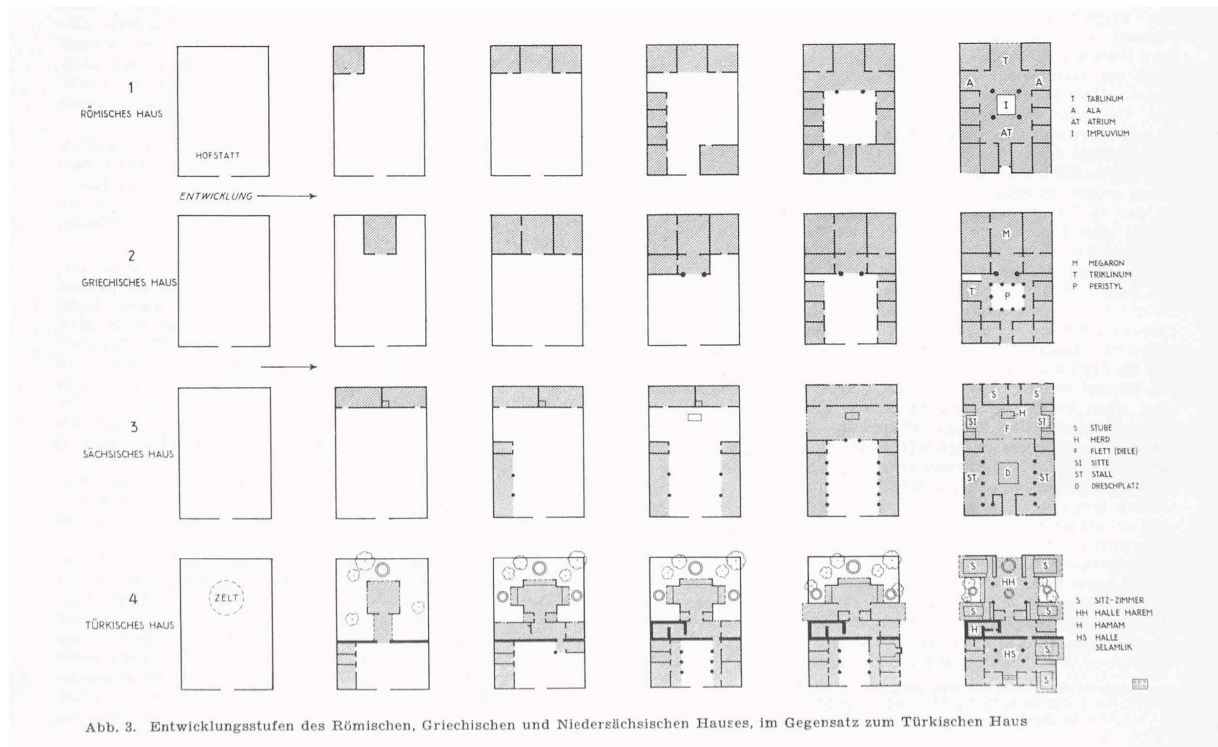


Figure 5. Development of the Roman, Greek, Saxon and Turkish house in comparison. From: Egli, 1941, p.60.

The critical thought of Turgut Cansever is based on these teachings. One of his first projects is the restoration, in 1949, of the Sadullah Paşa *yalı* along the Bosphorus. The building was in deteriorating conditions and had undergone over the centuries many alterations, not always congruent with the original structure. Cansever here had the opportunity to verify by construction the teaching of Eldem and to reflect on the spatiality of the house. In particular, he reached the idea that, like the mosques and the Turkish town, the Turkish house is composed of structurally distinct and functionally independent parts, which together form a unit, but without losing their particular characteristics. The central *sofa* is considered by Cansever as directly connected with the city and the landscape, according to a multidirectional axiality. On this space are leaned different rooms, each one with a coherent size with its function. The composition of the Turkish house spaces, in Cansever interpretation, has similarities with the Mies Van der Rohe design, where space is imagined as a *continuum*, on which are interposed walls and pillars. In this case, however, the interposition on the continuous space of the city is given by the settled tectonics, that enclose in turn the rooms of the house, always maintaining openings on the surroundings. The relationship between the rooms is narrated by the light, understood as a space variable, which, filtered by a careful use of the windows, can interpret the hierarchies.

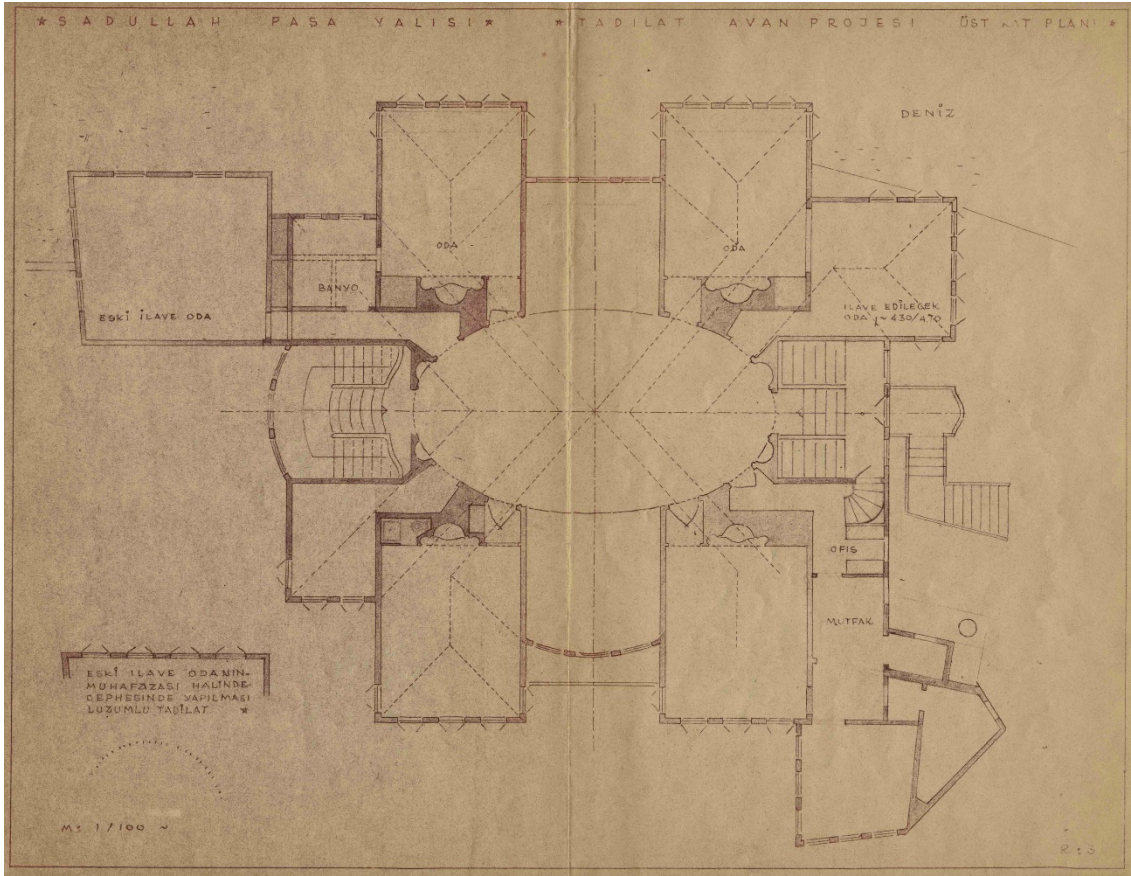


Figure 6. Plan of the Sadullah Paşa yalı (1949). Rights holder: Cansever family.



Figure 7. Foto of the central sofa of the Sadullah Paşa yalı (1949). Foto by C. Emdem. Rights holder: Cansever family.



Istanbul represents the built model of the Ottoman city, the starting point for the modern experimentations on the Turkish type, nevertheless the typological analysis was developed in the whole Anatolia by Eldem, during the '30s, '40s and '50s, through the Seminars on the National Architectural Style. In the following decades, Cansever has continued to work on typological experimentations in his projects, in various regions of Turkey.

In the headquarters of the Turkish Historical Society in Ankara, built between 1962 and 1966 and awarded with the Aga Khan Award in 1980, the architect used, for example, the contamination between different types to build a "house", which embodies the entire Turkish culture in its complexity.

In this case the architect confronted himself with the difficulty of working in a city that had lost most of its original structure, due to an inadequate urbanization. The construction of a new administrative and management centre caused indeed the gradual destruction of the historical urban fabric, still to be largely recovered. When, in 1935, Sedad Eldem wrote *Anciennes maisons d'Ankara*, the city kept still preserved some of its former neighbourhoods. In this text, the description of the Anatolian house, with a specific attention to the materials and construction features, anticipates almost forty years his projects and those of Eldem himself and Cansever for Ankara, but it seems already showing the intentions that will be developed by both the architects.

Cansever's design for the headquarters of the Turkish Historical Society, as a completely closed *Ribat* in the desert, isolates and defends itself from the architectural conditions of the surroundings, allowing to develop inside a narrative made of contamination and interactions between types. When it is not possible to find references in the city of the present, Cansever looks for them in the past. The plan structure reminds us a madrasa, but also a Turkish house. The proportions between the parts are established by the use of a structural grid of 3.20 x 3.30 meters, which refers to the size of the beams of the traditional architecture, the grid that also uses insistently Eldem in his designs for the Indian and Dutch embassies, built between 1965 and 1977.

The compositional focus is the central hall, which like a *sofa* of a home, the madrasa court or the great hall of a mosque is conceived in continuity with the urban space, although separated from it. It is the compositional pivot around which are connected public and private spaces, the house and the city. On this space and on the facades are opened large wooden windows designed in reference to the Ottoman *Kafes*, the jealousies of Topkapı Palace, behind which were kept under close surveillance the successors to the throne of sultan.

A veritable anthology of Turkish architecture is here represented. The building externally looks totally anti-classic, despite the planning recourse to archetypes deduced from the Turkish and the Islamic tradition. It is hard to find a unique point of view to grasp its overall size, it is easier to read the building in parts, pieces of architecture assembled together. Where the city is no longer able to be principle, the architecture of Cansever becomes bearer of a city message.

In designing the Indian (1965) and Dutch embassy (1973-77) in Ankara, the mature architect Eldem will take to an extreme level the theme of the house, from a completely new point of view, which is to represent another country in the typical forms of a Turkish building. In the embassies projects, just after Cansever's Turkish Historical Society, the housing types acquire a new dimension and are made more complex by the presence of spaces not functionally related to the housing. Interestingly, in this period the work of the two architects is combined by operating in the same city and at the same theme, developed from an ancient common research.

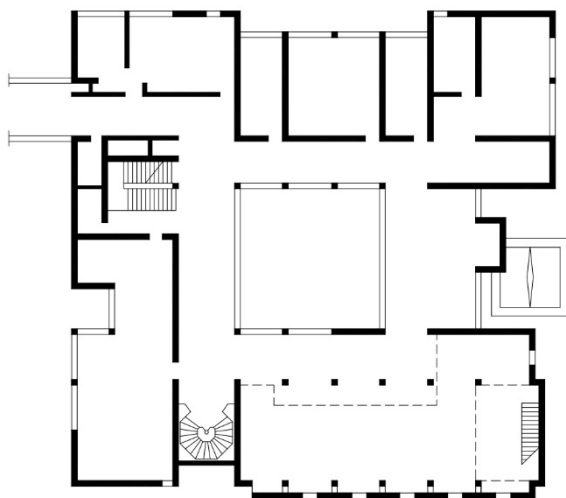


Figure 8. First floor plan of the Turkish Historical Society headquarters (1962-66). Drawing by Eliana Martinelli.

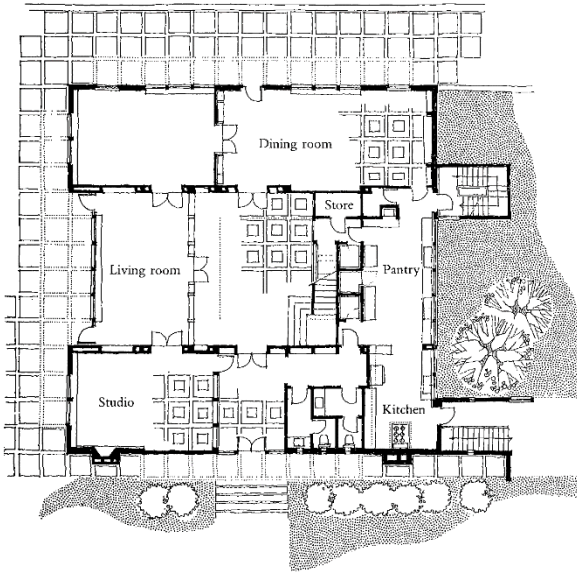


Figure 9. Ground floor plan of the Dutch embassy by S.H. Eldem (1973-77). From: Bozdogan, 1987a, 139.

### Standardization of the building process

In the projects for new urban settlements in Turkey, Cansever uses the principle of variation on the local type. In particular, are noteworthy the Demir village in Bodrum, designed in a first step in 1971-72 and completed in 1987; the Batkent new town near Ankara, designed in 1980-81; the Kaleardı district in Sivas, designed in 1998. In these new neighbourhoods the type seems continuously to conform on one hand to the settlement, landscape and topographical necessities, related to the location of the house, on the other hand to the residential needs of the people who lives in. Rather is the participatory planning with the inhabitants a widely adopted method by the architect. The typological variation, however, assumes the idea of a standard type; the standardization of the plan indeed is a basic compositional criterion in the Cansever designs for new settlements. The layouts are drawn by altering from time to time the orientation of the same plan, while in the facades the position of the windows, even if they have equal size, is never the same.



Figure 10. Partial plan of the Kaleardı district in Sivas (1998). Rights holder: Cansever family.

This consideration is useful to introduce another principle of transmission, in the teaching of Eldem to Cansever, namely the conception of architecture as "art of building", a reference in turn to the *yapı sanatı* of Bruno Taut (1938). The use of both planimetric and constructive standards acquires a central role in the thought of the two architects. In the historic period when both are working, Turkey, and Istanbul in particular, needs a growing number of houses, because of the incessant population increase.



For Eldem, who had the opportunity to visit between 1929 and 1930 the industrial English cities, highlighting the poor housing conditions, and the German *Siedlungen*, the solution can lie in the standardization and use of local materials.

“In his four-step social housing program, he first suggested using local materials, such as brick, stone, wood, adobe, Kütahya mosaics, and tiles, and importing only reinforced concrete. (...) Second, he insisted on using local labor, additionally noting that Turkish construction workers were still inexperienced to build overly elaborate structures, and thus proposing to simplify the unit plans and details. Third, he proposed to standardize not only plans, but also building parts such as windows, doors, toilets, and sinks. And finally, in an unexpected move, Eldem proposed to eliminate the private architect as middle man. The typical plans should be prepared in an office of the municipality in order to remove the fees of the individual freelance architect.” (Akcan, 2012: 127-128).

Following these criteria Turkish architecture, according to Eldem, can emancipate and become a national work. The points promoted by Eldem in its housing program will be implemented by Cansever, who will draw up operational proposals during the '70s, as director of the Greater Istanbul Planning Authority (Cansever, 1981, p.80). It is important to clarify that the meaning of "standard" expressed by Cansever in his essays and in the official documents distances itself from Western modernism positions. Cansever often recalls how in the early republican period in Turkey were mainly introduced urban standards imported from the West, with the disastrous consequence of destroying the characteristics of the Turkish city, that for Cansever are reflection of a set of human and ethical codes, deeply-rooted in the culture of place. The standards legislation is rather important in so far as it is able to respond to the needs of a community. The standard is thus the instrument of expression of a sense of belonging to transmit to the future generations, based on functional requirements, because linked to anthropological questions still valid.

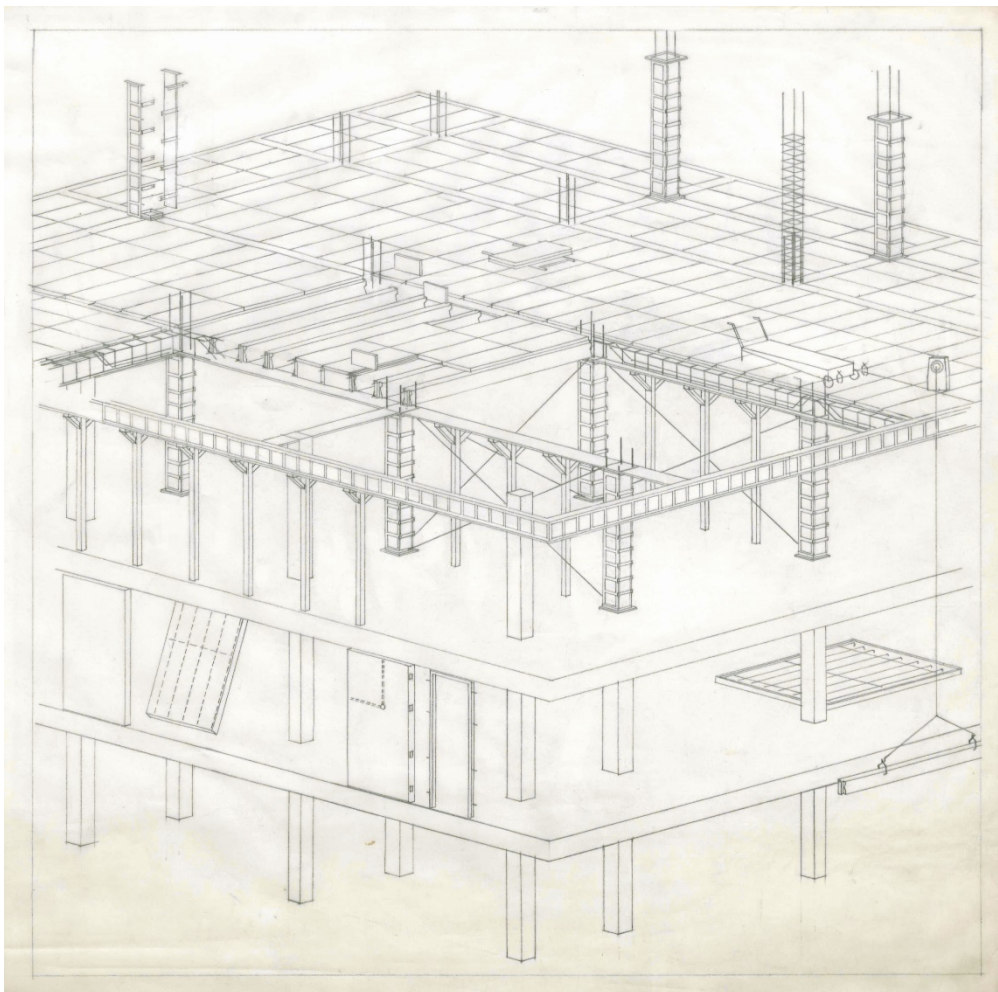


Figure 11. Detail of the concrete structure construction of the Göztepe Apartment (1965). Rights holder: Cansever family.

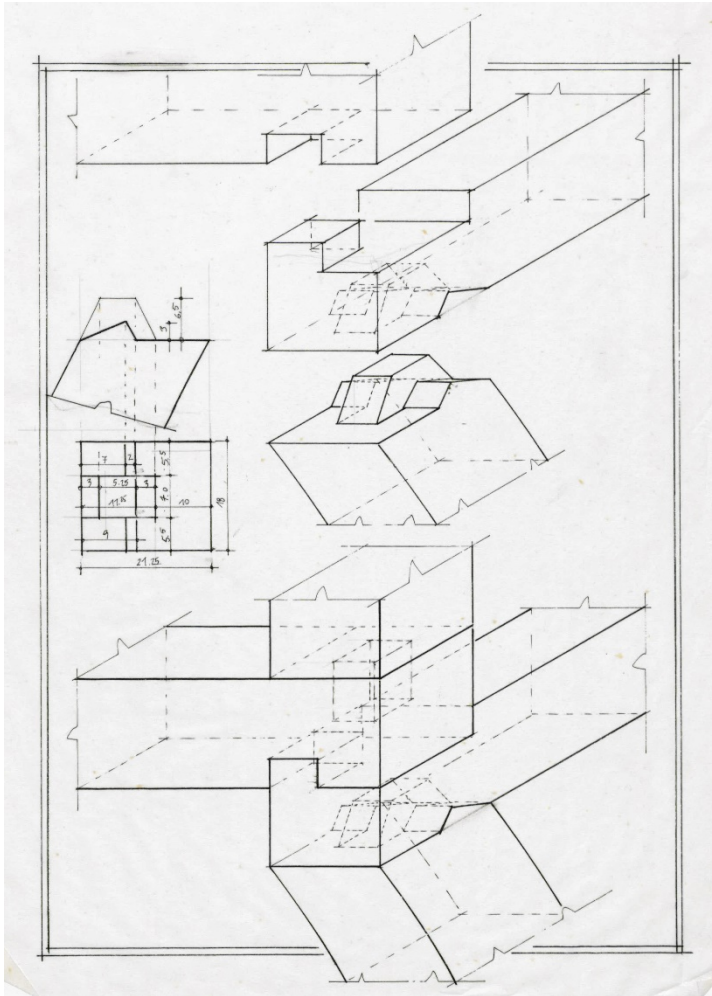


Figure 11. Detail of the wooden structure construction of the Hadi Bey *yalı* (1994-99). Rights holder: Cansever family.

"In his architectural thought, Cansever always raises the question of the relationship between the universal and local. In most of his writings he returns on the idea of "standard", referring to Frank Lloyd Wright: 'We need to develop the standards. It is so that all men may have the pleasure of common things.' (Cansever, 2012, p.21) Cansever gives as example the old windows standard of the Ottoman vernacular architecture: 'The standard of the windows is the same in every city of the empire, in Mostar, in Safranbolu or to Denizli. [...] This means founding on the same point of view the relationship between the inside and the outside of the building.' (Cansever, 2012, p.18) In this way it is possible to create a continuity in the experience of the site." (Otkunc, 2013, p.34)

In this regard, for example, a building element of the *yalı*, treated by Cansever as theme in most of his projects, is the large shutter that opens onto the sea and the garden, establishing continuity with the landscape. The shutters gradually assume in its projects a more complex meaning, combining the formal idea of the Ottomans *Kafes* with the need to have views on the landscape, as in the case of the Anadolu Hotel in Büyükada Island (1951-57), or on an internal space considered part of the city, as in the Turkish Historical Society headquarters in Ankara.

While the thought of Cansever appears far too reverential towards the tradition, especially the Islamic one, his designs express a constant search for innovation. "In each new project, Cansever tried to introduce a new building technology: a rationalised traditional technique, an *in-situ* semi-industrial method, a new use of some local building materials." (Yücel, 1983, p.63-64)





Figure 12. Anadolu Hotel in Büyükada (1951-57). Rights holder: Cansever family.

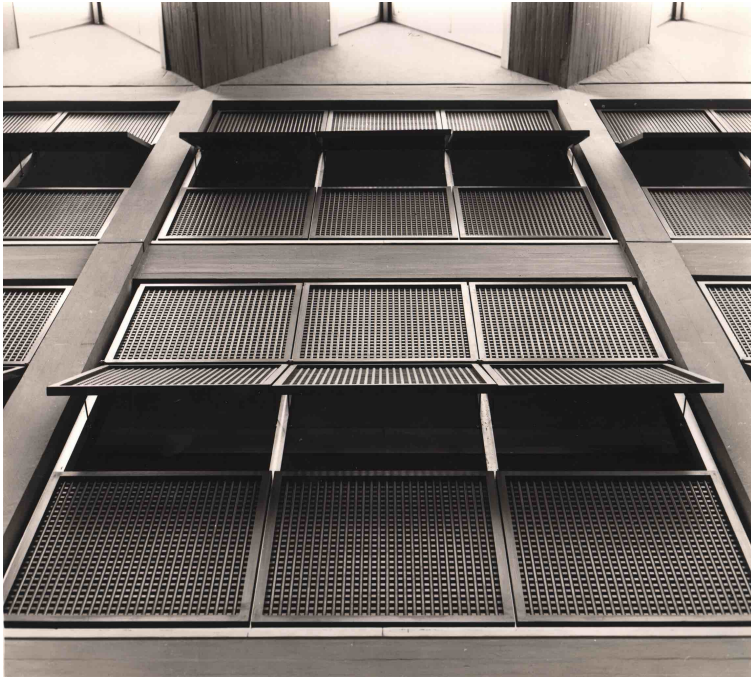


Figure 13. The *Kafes* of the Turkish Historical Society headquarters (1962-66). Foto by R. Günay. Rights holder: Cansever family.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be asserted that the effectiveness of a teaching transmission can be evaluated not on the formal emulation, rejected several times by Eldem himself as a matter of fashion, but on the possibility of forming a critical ability, through a working method based on the study of the project in relation to the site, analysing case by case the possible success of the proposed solutions. By contrast, the architectural theories assumed as irrefutable are reduced, by those who uncritically emulate, to formal bedrocks that produce "trendy building". Affirms in this regard Eldem during an interview in 1987:

"As I explored the origins of authentic Turkish architecture, fashions were sweeping the architectural *lingua franca*. These fashions become major illnesses in the countries they take root in, especially societies that are vulnerable because they lack determination and have no strength of character. Weakness of character leads to imitation, and you can't fight that. It will take generations to understand what I was trying to do." (Özkan, 1993, p.57)

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