

Evolution of 20th-Century Architecture in Turkey: A Comprehensive Technical and Historiographical Study

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The architectural landscape of Turkey during the 20th century represents a complex synthesis of cultural identity, political ideology, and technical innovation. As the Ottoman Empire transitioned into the Turkish Republic, the built environment became a primary canvas for the expression of modernity and national sovereignty. This evolution was not merely aesthetic but was deeply rooted in changing engineering standards, the introduction of new materials, and a shifting historiographical perspective championed by scholars like **Afife Batur**. To understand the trajectory of Turkish architecture from 1923 to the end of the millennium, one must analyze the interplay between domestic traditions and international modernist movements, as well as the documentation processes that have preserved this legacy.

The Theoretical Framework of Turkish Modernism

The study of 20th-century Turkish architecture is often framed through the lens of **historiography**—the study of how history is written. Scholars such as Afife Batur, particularly in her seminal work *A Concise History: Architecture in Turkey During the 20th Century*, have argued that the architectural output of the Republican era cannot be viewed in isolation. Instead, it must be analyzed as a series of deliberate responses to global trends, filtered through a local socio-political lens.

The Role of Historiography and Afife Batur

Afife Batur's contributions provided a structured taxonomy for an era that was previously undocumented in a cohesive manner. Her work focuses on the **chronological stratification** of movements, identifying key periods of transition. Historiographical representation in modern Turkish architecture involves more than just cataloging buildings; it involves analyzing the **discourse of modernization**. This includes the tension between the "National" and the "Universal," a theme that dominates the first half of the century. The documentation of these periods—ranging from the First National Architecture Movement to the International Style of the 1950s—serves as a technical blueprint for understanding how a nation-state constructs its identity through reinforced concrete and spatial organization.

Chronological Evolution: From Empire to Republic (1900–1950)

The early decades of the 20th century were marked by two distinct movements that attempted to reconcile traditional motifs with modern construction techniques. These movements are essential for understanding the technical baseline of Turkish architecture.

The First National Architecture Movement (1908–1930)

Initially emerging in the late Ottoman period and continuing into the early Republic, this movement sought to create a "national" style. Technically, this involved using modern masonry and early reinforced concrete structures while adorning the facades with classical Ottoman elements such as **pointed arches**, **tiled eaves**, and **ornamental stonework**. Key figures like Vedat Tek and Mimar Kemaleddin utilized these elements to bridge the gap between old-world craftsmanship and new-world industrialization.

The Second National Architecture Movement (1939–1950)

Triggered by the global shift toward nationalism during World War II, this movement moved away from the eclectic ornamentation of the first movement and focused on **monumentality** and **rationalism**. Influenced by the work of Paul Bonatz and Sedad Hakk Eldem, the architecture of this period emphasized regional characteristics—such as the "Turkish House" typology—but applied them to large-scale public buildings. The technical execution focused on local materials, heavy stone cladding, and symmetrical plans that conveyed stability and power.

Movement	Period	Key Technical Features	Material Focus	Primary Influences
First National	1908–1930	Pointed arches, dome integration, decorative tiles.	Cut stone, brick, early concrete.	Classical Ottoman, Islamic motifs.
Modern/Rationalist	1930–1940	Flat roofs, horizontal windows, lack of ornament.	Reinforced concrete, steel, glass.	Bauhaus, International Style.
Second National	1940–1950	Symmetry, heavy massing, regional eaves.	Local stone, timber accents.	Vernacular Turkish houses, European Neoclassicism.

The 1950s Paradigm Shift: Expo 58 and Internationalism

The 1950s marked a radical departure from the state-led architectural narratives of the previous decades. As Turkey aligned itself more closely with Western economic and political structures, the architecture shifted toward **Modernist Internationalism**. A critical turning point in this evolution was Turkey's participation in the **Expo 58** in Brussels.

The Turkish Pavilion at Expo 58

The Turkish Pavilion, designed by Muhlis Türkmen, Utarit İvrensoy, and Ateş Tanyman, is frequently cited in technical literature as a masterpiece of late 1950s modernism. The structure was characterized by its **transparency** and **structural lightness**, utilizing a modular grid and expansive glass surfaces. This represented a shift from the "heavy" stone architecture of the 1940s to a "light" and "dynamic" form that prioritized flow and openness.

- **Structural Innovation:** The use of advanced steel framing allowed for larger spans without internal load-bearing walls.
- **Materiality:** Increased reliance on industrial glass, mosaic tiles, and plastic-based finishes.
- **Aesthetic:** A move toward the "International Style" which eschewed nationalist symbolism in favor of functionalism.

Technical Breakdown: Structural Components and Engineering

The transition into the mid-20th century saw significant advancements in engineering calculations and the standardization of building materials in Turkey. These technical shifts enabled the construction of taller, more complex buildings like the **Assembly Buildings of Turkey (TBMM)** and various "People's Houses" (Halkevleri).

Reinforced Concrete and Modern Grid Systems

By the 1950s, reinforced concrete (RC) had become the primary structural medium. Architects began implementing **orthogonal grid systems**, which facilitated the standardization of construction and reduced costs. The technical execution involved:

1. **Seismic Considerations:** Given Turkey's geographic location, early seismic resistance strategies began to be integrated into column-beam connections.
2. **Brise-Soleil (Sun-Shading):** To manage the Anatolian climate, modernists utilized permanent sun-shading devices integrated into the facade, a hallmark of Le Corbusier's influence.
3. **Open Plan Concepts:** The plan libre became standard for administrative buildings, allowing for flexible interior

configurations.

Case Study: The Izmit People's House

The **Izmit People's House** (İzmit Halk Evi) serves as a poignant example of the "Modern and Vulnerable" status of 20th-century architecture. Built to serve as a cultural hub, its design features a clean, horizontal orientation and functionalist spatial layout. However, modern assessments highlight the **vulnerability** of such structures. The technical challenges include carbonation of concrete, corrosion of reinforcement due to coastal proximity, and the lack of heritage protection compared to Ottoman-era monuments.

The Proliferation of Printed Mediums and Auto-Monographs

From the 1950s to the 1980s, the dissemination of architectural knowledge in Turkey underwent a transformation through **printed mediums**. Architects began producing **auto-monographs**—self-published records of their work that served as both portfolios and historical documents. This period is critical for the **archiving of private practices**.

Architectural Historiography through Media

The rise of architectural journals (such as *Arkitekt* and *Mimarlık*) and monographs allowed for a peer-review culture to emerge. These documents provide a technical record of:

- Construction Details: Detailed sections and plan drawings that show the evolution of joinery and cladding.
- Site Photographs: Capturing the "as-built" state before decades of urban sprawl altered the context.
- Theoretical Manifestos: Explaining the logic behind the shift from stone to concrete and from ornament to function.

Conservation and Preservation of 20th-Century Heritage

A recurring theme in the work of Afife Batur and other contemporary critics is the **preservation of modern heritage**. Unlike the historicist architecture of the 16th century, 20th-century buildings are often viewed as "disposable" or "obsolete."

Technical Challenges in Conservation

The restoration of modern buildings presents unique technical hurdles:

- Material Degradation: 20th-century materials like early-grade concrete, asbestos-based products, and thin-profile steel frames degrade differently than stone.
- Authenticity vs. Performance: Upgrading a 1950s building to meet current thermal and safety codes often requires replacing original components, leading to a loss of architectural integrity.
- Historiographical Value: Determining which buildings from the 1960s or 70s deserve "monument" status is a subjective process that requires rigorous academic criteria.

Summary and Broader Implications

The architecture of 20th-century Turkey is a testament to a nation's rapid modernization and its ongoing dialogue with its own history. From the early efforts to establish a national identity through the First National Movement to the bold internationalism of the 1950s and the later introspective period of the 1980s, each era contributed a unique layer to the urban fabric. Scholars like Afife Batur have been instrumental in ensuring that this history is not lost to the forces of urban renewal and neglect.

The technical evolution from heavy masonry to light steel and glass reflects broader global shifts, yet the Turkish

context remains unique due to its specific socio-political pressures. The archiving of these works, whether through monographs or physical preservation projects, is essential for future generations of architects and historians. As we move further into the 21st century, the challenge remains to balance the demands of modern urban development with the preservation of these 20th-century milestones. The vulnerability of sites like the Izmit People's House underscores the urgency of this mission. By treating 20th-century architecture as a technical and cultural legacy rather than mere infrastructure, we can ensure that the narrative of Turkey's modernization remains visible in its built environment.

Tags: #Turkish Architecture #Afife Batur #Modernism #Historiography #20th Century Design #Urban Conservation

