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Traveling Words and Images: The Question of “Foreignness” in the History of Modern Architecture in Turkey

Elvan Altan Ergut

- 1 *Yeni Mimari* (The New Architecture), written by a Turkish art historian Celal Esad (Arseven) and published in 1931, was one of the most significant media through which architects in Turkey became familiarized with “modern architecture.” Introducing to Turkey the contemporary modernist tendencies in architecture mainly as it developed in the European context, the book’s approach was in accord with the modernization attempts of the new Republic, which was founded in 1923 after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War. Architecture in Turkey then transformed by the development of a modernist framework. The Turkish state reoriented the country towards the “West” in all fields, including the construction of the built environment.
- 2 Similarly, Celal Esad asserted that Turkish architects should be trained in line with the new architectural understanding resulted from contemporary developments so as to rival their European colleagues; and his stated goal in writing the book was to provide such an understanding. The title page of *Yeni Mimari* stated that it was written by adopting the French architect Andre Lurçat’s book about the new architecture. Although the full reference was not given, the book under concern was *Architecture* that had been published in 1929. Hence Celal Esad discussed the contemporary approach of the European modern movement as explained by Lurçat by also including illustrations of contemporary buildings and explanations about architecture in Turkey in order to justify the relevance of the European case in Turkey. Examining *Yeni Mimari* in detail with reference to Lurçat’s *Architecture*, the presentation will analyze “foreign effects” in early Republican architecture in Turkey. The aim is to evaluate how ideas on and forms of architecture “travel” across defined boundaries by exemplifying a hitherto

overlooked case about the inter-national spread of the modernist thought and practice. I will emphasize the problem of defining the 'other' in such "overlapping and interconnected experiences"—to remember Said once again—and discuss the limits of writing architectural history by referring to the dichotomous concepts of "culture / civilization," "traditional / modern," "national / international," and "East / West" that define boundaries.

- 3 Architectural publications were still rare in Turkey during what is called the early Republican period, i.e., the couple of decades following the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War. In such a context, in 1931, the Turkish art historian Celal Esad (Arseven) published a book titled *Yeni Mimari* (The New Architecture).¹ In the title page of the book it was stated that the book was written by adopting the French architect André Lurçat's book about the new architecture. Although the full reference was not given, the book under concern was *Architecture*² that had been published in 1929, two years before Celal Esad's book. In this study, I examine the contextual characteristics of the production and reception of *Yeni Mimari* by Celal Esad in detail, and with reference to Lurçat's *Architecture*. My aim is to evaluate the "travel" of ideas and forms of architecture across defined boundaries by exemplifying a hitherto overlooked case about the inter-national spread of the modernist thought and practice.
- 4 Lurçat's book explains the contemporary developments in European architecture starting from the Weissenhof Siedlung of 1927 and the CIAM Declaration of 1928. It also describes the changing techniques and the related new architectural elements used by the new movement that defined a "program," a proposal for the future of architecture. Hence, it seems an appropriate choice for Celal Esad to base his own book on Lurçat's because he asserted that his goal in writing the book was to provide Turkish architects with "the understanding of the aim towards which architecture all over the world [was] directed today as a result of the new developments of the century."³
- 5 The emphasis on the "newness" of the "modern" architecture is the first difference we can observe between Lurçat's book *Architecture* and Celal Esad's *Yeni Mimari* (The New Architecture). For the case of early Republican Turkey, the "new" seems to have referred to contemporary Western architectural developments in general. Introducing to Turkey contemporary modernist tendencies in architecture mainly as it developed in the European context, the approach of *Yeni Mimari* was in accord with the modernization attempts of the new Turkish Republic. The foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923 represented the attempt to transform and reconstruct the society in order to create a new "modern" nation out of the heterogeneous unity of the Ottoman Empire. As the state identified modernity with the "West," the aim was to found in Turkey a Westernized system.
- 6 Celal Esad's book *Yeni Mimari* was instrumental in the approval of the "modern" in Turkey. As almost a one-to-one translation of Lurçat's *Architecture*, Celal Esad's edition discusses the contemporary approach of the European Modern movement as explained by Lurçat, although Celal Esad sometimes summarizes the arguments by omitting some parts and illustrations of the original text. On the other hand, he also adds information about the change towards the new in architecture in Turkey. He introduces the part on Turkey as follows: "It is a pleasure that the new architecture that we explain to have spread all over the world has also arrived in our country."⁴ Then Celal Esad continues by explaining new architectural developments in Turkey such as the contemporary

modernist transformation in architectural education, and the new legislations about practicing architecture. He also includes illustrations of contemporary buildings that exemplify the existence of the "modern architecture" in Turkey and in order to justify the relevance of the European case in the country.⁵

- 7 It is worth noting here that, the only contemporary architectural journal, *Mimar*, published the review of Celal Esad's edition, criticizing the book for not including projects by Turkish architects as exemplary of the new trends in architecture.⁶ The illustrations that Celal Esad chose to exemplify contemporary architecture in Turkey were those of buildings by the Swiss architect Ernst Egli, who worked in Turkey from 1927 until 1940. The inclusion of his works in the book by Celal Esad was in line with the author's assertion that Turkish architects should initially be trained about the new architectural understanding so as to rival their European colleagues; and his stated goal in writing the book was to provide such an understanding.
- 8 Local architects were trying to modernize architecture while they were also resisting the "foreign-Western" effects on "traditional" characteristics and this resulted in the problem of identity, as in other non-Western contexts. Emphasizing the relation of the "new" with the "old" and the "modern" with the "traditional" was a common approach in contemporary Turkey to overcome the supposed dilemma between the foreign and the local, and to undo the "foreignness" by making it appropriate to the local context. The approach was to create a "national and modern" architecture, and hence attempted to formulate an "identity" for the new state and its people in between the two poles of conventional rigid dichotomies, as not only rooted in traditions of the country but also in line with the universalizing approach of the "progressive" "Western civilization."
- 9 Celal Esad's adoption of Lurçat's work can be examined as exemplary of such a double-sided attempt. In order to validate the "modern" movement for the local audience, Celal Esad added remarks here and there in the text and hence attempted to mediate between "past" and "future," and "East" and "West," whereby a relation was formulated between the new architecture and the traditional characteristics of the country.
- 10 The adoption of Lurçat's book by Celal Esad adjusted its modernist approach to the local context of nation-building in Turkey. Celal Esad's book is a hitherto overlooked case about the inter-national spread of the modernist thought and practice. It brings together histories of seemingly distant geographies, and reminds us the problem of defining the "other" in such "overlapping and interconnected experiences"—to remember Said once again—and the limits of writing architectural history by referring to the defined spatial boundaries of dichotomous categories of "East / West", and the related dichotomous concepts such as "traditional / modern" and "national / international."

NOTES DE FIN

1. Celal ESAD (Arseven), *Yeni Mimari* (The New Architecture), Istanbul, Agah-Sabri Kitaphanesi, 1931.
2. André LURÇAT, *Architecture*, Paris, Sans Pareil, 1929.
3. Celal ESAD, p. 13.
4. Celal ESAD, p. 8.
5. Celal ESAD, p. 13.
6. Anonymous, "Yeni Mimari (The New Architecture)," *Mimar* 11-12, (1931), p. 381.

INDEX

Index chronologique : époque contemporaine

Index géographique : Turquie

Mots-clés : modernism, modernisme

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