

A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT DESIGN STUDIO IN USA AND TURKEY

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Abstract: Despite widespread availability of information across the world, immediate distribution and availability of various media on architecture and its education, certain local realities are highly effective in shaping the design education in Turkey. Having taught architectural design both in USA and Turkey during my 15 years of teaching, I come to observe that pedagogical differences in design studio are strongly tied not only to the general architectural culture and practices of built environment in two countries, but they are actually shaped by deep underlying attitudes to research and experimentation, thus knowledge production and larger educational system in general. Even if there is a certain globalism to architecture in today's world, where common forms of architecture are produced everywhere in the world, the degree of originality and innovation shifts dramatically between the professionals of different countries, and these qualities not only determine the shares of the architectural world market, but also construct the present discourse on architecture and its education. One of the sobering observations to be made about architecture in Turkey is that our professionals are not recognized beyond our borders, and Turkey still suffers from the lack of a strong architectural culture beyond a very limited number of universities. Based on personal experience of being an educator in both countries since 1999, I will identify the differences in architectural education, specifically in design studio, and tie these findings to practices of built environment and broader cultural attitudes towards knowledge production in the two countries.

INTRODUCTION

I started teaching architecture in Turkey in 1999 at Orta Dogu Teknik Universitesi [ODTU], one of the top schools of architecture in the country. One main difference of this school from other programs of architecture in Turkey is its pronounced affinity to global architectural culture. With its curriculum based on models from North America, with the language of instruction being English, it is the closest school to American and European architectural education in Turkey. Most of its faculty, if not all, have degrees from USA or Europe.

I came to USA in 2002 and started teaching studios in 2003. I started at University of Florida [UF], and am currently teaching at University of South Florida [USF] since 2010. Between 2011 and 2013, I had the chance of teaching back at OTDU as a visiting professor for three semesters. In the mean time, I was also involved in the curricular development of newly established TED Universitesi [TEDU] and had opportunities of studio reviews there. In addition to education, I was also able to practice, and had the opportunity to design projects both in USA and Turkey.

In what follows, I will present my observations about studio education in USA and Turkey, and speculate on the reasons for the vast differences both in viewing architecture as a discipline / profession and the quality of work and research produced.

PROFESSIONAL DEGREE REQUIREMENT

One main difference between USA and Turkey in architectural education is the length of study for professional degree. In Turkey, a four year undergraduate degree is sufficient for professional licensure. Graduate study is mostly pursued as a matter of academic development, and usually involves a research based thesis. In USA, a two year graduate

degree in addition to a four year undergraduate degree is the requirement for professional licensure. While there are some variations to this, the professional degree is a graduate degree, which is usually a combination of further design studios and a form of a thesis project, which is mostly a design based research.

This difference in the length of study for professional degree not only translates into less number of design studios, but also less number of support courses. Less number of design studios means a narrower and more building oriented design education, whereas less number of support courses means narrower knowledge base to sustain the technical and intellectual aspects of architecture. The longer term of study for the professional degree allows the programs in USA to establish a notion of design research discipline, explored hands-on in the studios, and technically and intellectually fed by a larger number of support courses along the curriculum. The shorter study in Turkey limits the education almost to the degree of a vocational school and does not leave much room either for development of design as a research discipline or for cultivation of some sense of architecture as an intellectual field ¹.

CURRICULAR STRUCTURE

While the curricular structures look similar on paper, as the design education starts with fundamental design studios and advance towards architectural design studios throughout the years of study, how these studios are conducted in two countries are vastly different. In USA, the fundamental studios span at least a year and a half, where the students are taught basic structures of design thinking in the form of systemic making of space and tectonic resolution without really discussing buildings at all. The exercises in the foundational studios are usually rapid and fragmented exercises that underline again and again systemic makings in various modalities spatial and tectonic order. Heavily immersed in hand making of models and drawings and a variety of other presentation techniques, the students cultivate a distinct ability to think and speculate in spatial and tectonic terms. The tools of making is almost elevated to a level of second language where spatial and tectonic ideas take tangible shape in phenomenal experience. And this all happens before any discussion of buildings that are out there in the real world occupied by real people. Foundational studios in USA establish design thinking as a form of research into human experience by the ability to modulate spatial and temporal structures. This design thinking is beyond making buildings, it is an intellectual endeavor into the very notion of making itself.

Similarly in Turkey, there are foundational studios, or basic design studios, that aim to establish a sense of systemic making as the core discipline of architectural making. However, in Turkey, this notion of systemic making is derived from and remains in the domain of making buildings, thus operates at a very elemental level of pattern and order relations distant from deeper possibilities of spatial experience or tectonic resolution. Thus the basic design exercises rapidly fold into simple habitable structures and site relations of small scale settlements. So, rather than letting experiential, hands-on makings develop into a way of thinking in broader possibilities of spatial and temporal structures, these become only intermediary tools for understanding what *good* architecture is deemed to be at any given moment in the cultural system of education. Born in and developed by a prior sense of architecture as making buildings, foundational curriculum falls short of establishing an intellectual discipline of thinking through making ².

¹ See Harriss and Froud 2015 for how the length of architectural studies determines a programming of the curriculum and the recent discussion in Britain.

² See Chedwick 2004 for a discussion of the importance of research aspects of design education and its implications for shaping the profession.

Beyond the foundational studios, differences continue to follow this initial split of seeing architecture as making of buildings versus an intellectual discipline of thinking through making. While the students meet with the buildings as early as the second term of their first year in Turkey, in USA it takes at least two years to get to the point of dealing with questions of buildings as entities that are built somewhere to serve a use. From simple structures to large and complex buildings, design studios advance on scale in Turkey. Simple or complex, there is some kind of a program, and some kind of a site. Exercises mimic real world scenarios. From small to big, the way the thinking is challenged does not change. It is some kind of problem solving, of a program on a site, with increasing requirements of structural and technical skills. In USA, not only students start the talk of buildings late, it is usually very fragmented and partial at the start as well. Design studios introduce notions of program and site, very gradually with focused, thus fragmented, exercises, dealing with only a certain set of issues at once. Design studios in USA advance not only on scale, but more importantly on the degree of intellectual speculation on various aspects of spatial and tectonic making, which then eventually finds its way to making of buildings. Making of buildings is freed from a narrow notion of problem solving, becomes a research into making of human experience ³.

PRACTICES OF BUILT ENVIRONMENT AND PROFESSION

In addition to the short term of study, the professional life of architecture in Turkey is also with its own challenges. Losing the initial impetus of the new republican ideals around 70's, which emphasized art and culture as part of the building program of the new Turkey, the institutional structures of country shifted towards consumerism and easy consumption of media, especially after 80's. With the housing boom of late 80's, the urbanism favored contractor built apartments lacking any character or notion of place. Architects were relegated to facade design. Stuck in a narrow market of institutional projects, mostly acquired via design competitions, the professional field became a small arena with only a few important figures. Defined in such small and narrow frame, architecture as a profession in Turkey did not see the freedom of experimentation or research it did in the West in the late 20th century. While USA, Europe, Japan, and even the developing countries of South America, were advancing the modern architectural ideas in a more diverse world, Turkey kept repeating what it saw as good in the West, unable to bring its own professional impact on the global architectural scene. Thus lacking a cultural and economic support from the larger society, architecture in Turkey never really became the profession it is for West. Limited to academia, most architectural discussion, that otherwise could impact the profession, remained abstract and baseless in the lack of a sustainable building practice.

Next to the widely spread attitudes of producing built environment reduced to a mechanical senseless pragmatism, Turkey also saw rather unique ramifications of Post Modernist speculation in architecture. What was only a brief period of hiccup for the West, became a defining period for architecture in Turkey. The Post Modern critique of singularity and universalism of architectural making gave way to a richer modernism in the West, advancing research and experimentation on spatiality and materiality in the service of phenomenal experience ⁴. But Turkey got stuck in the idea of representational symbolism, just an anecdote in the larger critique. Possibly, never really had established architectural design as material research into spatial and temporal experience, architecture in Turkey saw an easy escape in

³ See Temple 2011 for the disciplining of thinking in making in the foundational studios and its ramifications for later years of design education and practice.

⁴ See Frenzen 1999 and Holl 2007 for how an internal critique of modernism, both in education and practice, is also tied to its very proliferation into a richer and complex experimentation in spatial / material research.

the symbolism argument of Post Modern critique. Given the religious and cultural sentiments of the country, and the great heritage of centuries of establishments, architecture in Turkey completely left the modern school of architecture after probably a very brief period of affair in the early years of the Republic. This last statement may sound inaccurate when you consider that most new architecture in the country, apart from the ones built by the state, *are* modern buildings. As a designer, my view is that they are not. They only *look* modern, *mimic* modern, without any palpable attitude on space. They are designed for easy consumption. Their forms are derived from what is trendy. The references of symbolism change, symbolist attitude is the same.

DISCUSSION

The professional practice of architecture and its education in a country are always necessarily in a constant dialogue. This dialogue is not one of apprenticeship in societies where academia actually produces and advances knowledge as does the profession. Education and profession constructively challenge each other, and answer challenges posed by the other ⁵. For this to happen, the institutions of knowledge production and research need a widely supported social and economic background. In the absence of a culture of knowledge production and research, architectural education in Turkey is more a form of apprenticeship, a vocational training. The challenge to education from the profession is development of skills to make *proper* buildings where the proper is what is already done properly according to the professional norms set by competitions, commissions, architectural magazines. As the profession itself is unable to find a breathing space of research and experimentation in a field of practice very narrowly structured by the cultural and economic systems, it simply cannot pose a research challenge to the academia. Similarly, burdened by training architects in four years with the ability to make proper buildings, next to being unable to see a promise of contribution to the making of the built environment, academia is also helpless in bringing research to its educational agenda.

While it is easy to blame both sides of academia and profession for the lack of an architectural culture in Turkey, this will be missing the larger social frame where actually there is no such demand for an architectural culture in Turkey. Happy with its mediocre built environment, sustained by consumerist traditionalism, Turkey sees built environment first and foremost an economical instrument rather than place of life. Reduced to a commodity, built environment does not need to be designed with the interest of enriching life and culture of a society. Numbers of square meters, in kitsch make up, of some reference, are the determining agents of meaning in such a built environment. This is evidenced once more in recent years with the advent of what is called 'urban renewal' projects. A cursory look at the new residential and commercial architecture produced in Ankara and Istanbul shows either a kind of traditionalism with symbols blended from all parts of Turkish history and Islam, or a kind of high-end look that mimics Western facades, both basically enclosing the same kind of mediocre habitats lacking humanist values of place making. In the absence of an informed demand for designed environments enriching life, even the symbolisms become fake, and neither academia nor profession can meaningfully intervene with this crude state of affairs.

⁵ See Nicol 2000 for a discussion of how education can respond and shape a new reference frame for professional practice.

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