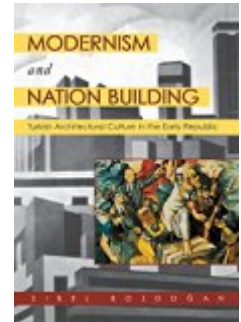


**Sibel Bozdogan.** *Modernism and Nation Building: Turkish Architectural Culture in the Early Republic.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001. xii + 367 pp. \$60.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-295-98110-9.



**Reviewed by** Ayhan Akman

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*Modernism and Nation Building* is an interesting and engaging book that promises to become a cornerstone of our course syllabi for modern Turkish art, history and politics. This is interdisciplinary work at its best; it utilizes architecture, history, political science and cultural studies in a creative mix that is fresh, insightful and stimulating for further debate. Sibel Bozdogan's book looks at the architectural culture in Turkey and specifically focuses on how architecture was influenced by nationalism and the project of nation building that the Republican regime was engaged in. The book covers a long historical span: From the Young Turk Revolution of 1908 to the end of the single party rule (of the Republican Peoples Party) in 1950. Within this time frame, Bozdogan is especially interested in the 'long 1930s' when architectural discourse and practice went through a number of critical transformations.

Bozdogan does a deft job of handling multiple audiences (art historians, architects, social anthropologists, political scientists, sociologist, Middle East experts etc.) and makes its contribution in multiple fields such as architectural history and

studies of nationalism. The book deserves praise both for the rich empirical material that it offers on architectural culture in early Republican Turkey and also for stimulating a theoretical debate regarding the linkages between architecture, nationalism and high modernism. Bozdogan's extensive use of postcards, popular magazines, illustrations, architectural drawings, posters and photographs in this lavishly illustrated volume is helpful and rewarding for the reader. In addition to the intellectual stimulation that the book's arguments offer, the care with which illustrations and photographs are prepared, the quality of the paper used, careful typesetting all contribute to the possibility of deriving a certain tactile pleasure in browsing through this beautifully produced book.

The originality of Bozdogan's text is that rather than being a conventional history of the architectural styles and fashions of the early years of the Turkish Republic, it explicitly and systematically attempts to articulate the relationship between architecture and the Kemalist nation-building project. Thus, instead of a 'merely' formal analysis of the history of architectural conven-

tions and styles, the reader gets a complex picture of the evolving relationship between an art form on the one hand and political and ideological dynamics on the other. The functional and technical aspects of architecture are supplemented in the book with the symbolic and representational dimensions. Indeed, it is her approach to architecture as a form of visual politics that makes Bozdogan's book a highly original contribution to scholarship on Turkish nationalism, architecture and history alike.

Bozdogan's book is also helpful in supplanting the heavy political focus of the studies of Turkish nationalism with cultural representations and practices. In addition to analyzing the intentions and policies of state-elites, one also needs to look at other cultural contexts and media where the project of national identity construction is registered and negotiated (e.g. architecture, literature, posters, graffiti, cartoons etc.). In other words, supplementing the common focus on state-centered, institutional politics with more cultural media, one can discern the actual, imperfect and sometimes even contradictory workings of modernist and nationalist policies at the level of everyday life. Bozdogan's work aims to do this by concentrating on architecture. In this endeavor, she is careful to establish linkages between architecture and state ideology without simplistically reducing the former to the imperatives of the latter. Thus Bozdogan's text succeeds in rendering a rich account of the interaction between architectural culture (with its own idiosyncratic logic and characteristics) and the larger political agenda of nation building within which it operated. Her account convincingly demonstrates how the architectural culture in the formative years of the Republic, rather than being a simple reflection of the imperatives of a state-centric project of nation building, worked to interpret and to some extent even transform the latter. The book traces the way in which architecture articulates the dictates and vectors of the nationalist project, registers its ambivalences and contradictions, interprets and

contributes to the nationalist project's representation and self-understanding.

*Modernism and Nation Building* begins with an account of the legacy of the Ottoman revivalist 'national' style that preceded modernism in Turkish architecture. Chapter 1 locates an incipient modern (and not yet modernist) perspective in this legacy. In making issues of style and representation central concerns of architecture, Ottoman revivalist style displays a modern consciousness: It is motivated by an attempt to use architecture in the service of the construction of a new imperial, 'Ottoman' identity. Later, this architecture becomes the target of a modernist aesthetic which rejects its ornamental, beaux-arts characteristics that are observable in the use of domes, pointed arches, wide roof overhangs, crystalline capitals and the like.

Chapter 2 looks at the idea of revolution as it informed Kemalist nationalist policies and the architectural culture of the period (İnkılap Mimarisi). Particular attention is paid to the way in which binaries of old/new, modern/traditional, rational/obscurantist, progressive/reactionary are construed and employed. The changing identity and public visibility of women, importance accorded to education and educational buildings, proposals for a new village architecture and the contrast between Istanbul (as the capital of a decadent and bankrupt multi-ethnic empire) and Ankara (the new, uncontaminated capital of the young Republic) are themes explored in this chapter.

The significance of technological and industrial icons for the modernist imagination (witnessed both in architectural culture and in the broader nationalist project of the Republic) is elaborated in Chapter 3. Bozdogan observes that while Turkey at the time was a relatively poor, agricultural and war-weary country with little industry and advanced technology, the icons of industry and technology (such as skyscrapers, grain silos, bridges, railroads, airplanes, assembly lines and

an 'ocean-liner aesthetic' in general) nonetheless created a favorable context in which the polemic for modern architecture was successfully made. The contrast between a 'backward' agricultural country and the fascination with the 'architecture of the future' is explained by the identification of progress and rationality with advanced industrial and technological forms.

The educational and professional milieu of architecture and the evolution of the aesthetic discourse of the 'New Architecture' (Yeni Mimari) are the issues tackled in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 deals with residential architecture and the ideal of the modern house. Republican valorization of the nuclear family (raising children through submission to secular and national rather than traditional and religious authority) is a motif frequently encountered in 1930s. The chapter does a good job of demonstrating the deep ambivalence that the modernizing elites experienced regarding certain forms of modernism such as 'cubic houses'.

The final chapter titled 'Milli Mimari: Nation- alizing the Modern' explores precisely this ambiguous and ever changing relationship between the 'national' and the 'modern' in the architecture of early Republican years. This was a critically important relationship for defining the project of nation building which involved the creation of a new, modern society at the level of 'contemporary civilization.' Bozdogan traces a number of different articulations of the axial imperatives to be simultaneously modern and national in the architectural grammar of the early Republic.

The potential tension between the ideals of modernity and nationality was pacified by generating two arguments which became prevalent in the architectural as well as political landscape of the early Republic. The first argument was that the modern is necessarily national. Many modernist architects articulated a vision of the modern as the search for the appropriate, functional response to context; what kind of materials, building techniques, structural features are appropri-

ate to the climate, topography, vegetation etc. of the country. Therefore, it was argued, the requirement to be modern naturally led to being national. As Bozdogan points out, it was critical in this regard that 'context' was taken to mean primarily natural, not cultural, context (p. 259). Bracketing culture made appeals to context sufficiently 'neutral' for Republican architects so that it could be immanently tied to modernity as an ideal. Understanding context culturally, instead of naturally, would have been problematic because it would necessitate invocation of the Ottoman and Islamic components of Turkey's heritage. The new Republic's double rejection of Ottoman and Islamic cultural traditions caused the center of the new 'national culture' to be remarkably empty. Without a concrete referent (derived either from its imperial past or from its present peripheral, folk culture), the national culture that Kemalist nationalism endeavored to create was founded on a conspicuous absence.

The second argument used to pacify the tension between modernity and nationalism was that Turkish national culture and architecture is already modern and rational because it embodies the same qualities valorized by modernism (such as simplicity, functionality, austerity and lack of ornamentation). In other words, the national was justified on the altar of the modern and rational. It was argued that once Turkish culture is successfully stripped of layers of Oriental civilization imposed upon it during the Ottoman centuries, the distinctively rational kernel of Turkish culture would resurface. The recovery of the pure, simple, unadorned, proportional, functional and rational features of Turkish architecture would necessitate the exorcism of the Arabian or Persian influences which encumbered it with Oriental ornamentation, confusion and excess. Turkish nationalists adopted an Orientalist trope and used it against the 'Oriental Other' of the Turkish nation in its Ottoman, Islamic, Arabian and Persian guises: 'Turkish architecture already possessed many qualities exalted by modern architects in the

West, whereas other Islamic architectures were "oriental" (p. 248). It is noteworthy that Turkish nationalist discourse distanced and differentiated the Turkish nation from the 'Orientals' (i.e. Arabs and Persians) by referring to its rational and ultimately Western properties. The question of national distinctiveness that preoccupies so many nationalist movements in the post-colonial world was translated in Turkish nationalist discourse into a question of difference from the 'Orientals'.

It should also be noted that to the extent that an attempt was made to incorporate vernacular architecture into 'national architecture', it was based less upon a claim for expressing a distinctive Volkgeist and more on a rationalist account of how vernacular architecture's 'utility, simplicity, constructional honesty, conformity to local materials, climate and resources' represented 'the same basic qualities and criteria that modern architecture sought after' (p. 255). One can conclude that the early Republican era's central problematique was not primarily about the formulation of a truly distinctive and unique architectural style to represent the nation. Rather, it was about Turkish state's mission to create a modern, secular, rational new society. On the whole, vernacular architecture remained, at best, at the margins of Republic's new architecture. The main interest instead was in symbolizing state's power through a rationalist/classicist style that remained predominant at least until 1950s.

It is within the modern/national nexus that Bozdoğan presents her case against the conventional understanding of Turkish architecture of this period. Bozdoğan's contention is that rather than explaining the shifts in architectural style as a result of changing architectural fashions, one has to understand them as different articulations of a continuous, underlying nationalist agenda. While the manifestations of this fundamental agenda varied (e.g. vernacular, international, classicist architectures), the underlying motivation continued to be the desire to express the simulta-

neously revolutionary, modernist and national character of the young Turkish state. Bozdoğan's point is that in the final analysis, it was not the autonomous dynamics of the architectural profession but the broader context of a modernist nationalism that was decisive for the changes in architectural styles and preferences.

While Bozdoğan's point regarding the underlying continuity and motivation provided by nationalism is sensible, the fact that such political will did not have a clear-cut, unambiguous expression in the realm of architecture should be kept in mind. Being modern variously meant being national (rather than imperial/Ottoman), secular (rather than Islamic), contemporary (rather than traditional) and progressive (rather than backward). How the project of creating a modern nation was to be represented in architecture did not admit a single, unequivocal answer.

In several chapters Bozdoğan explicitly refers to a well-known lacuna that exists between modernist precepts (i.e. form should follow function) and the orthodoxy of style that emerged to become definitive of modernism (i.e. flat, geometric, devoid of ornamentation). She perceptively notes the formal indeterminacy of modernist style and how it clashes with its historically specific articulation into an 'international style.' Yet, in addition to this lacuna within modernism, Bozdoğan's account also testifies to another one between nationalist political will and modernist architectural representation. Explicitly thematizing and investigating this second lacuna (which remains implicit) would have no doubt enriched Bozdoğan's text.

The deep ambivalence that Republican elites displayed regarding the stylistic attributes of architecture hints at a lacuna that interspaces political will and architectural expression in the context of a state-centered, modernist nation-building project: Experimentation in the field of architecture (revivalist, international and national styles), in politics (single-party, corporatist, multi-party models) and in history and language (the 'sun-lan-

guage theory' and 'Turkish history thesis') was not accidental but fundamental to the process of constructing a modern nation. The continuous shifts in architectural style and the rapid pace of its transformation points to the importance of the debates and practices within the architectural field. One could argue that instead of architecture simply registering the nationalism of the elites, it has to be understood as a dynamic field of interaction between political will on the one hand and the specific grammar of architectural expression on the other. Attempting to explain the latter by referring to the logic of the former would run the risk of impoverishing our understanding of the matter. Further, one should keep in mind the ambivalent character of nationalism of this period (1908-1950): Rather than treating nationalism as a given, unproblematic factor whose properties remain the same throughout, it would be more insightful to treat it as a variable whose changing character is itself in need of explanation.

On the whole, Bozdogan's work is successful precisely because it refrains from the temptation to give a reductionist account. Her analysis is rich with the nuances of the debates in architectural community which reveal the historically contingent and limited options, ideas and styles that were available and the eclectic and sometimes inconsistent way in which political will was translated into architectural discourse and actual buildings. Unless one recognizes the lacuna that critically intervenes and separates political will and architectural representation, one would have difficulty in explaining how nationalists can embrace 'international style' with such enthusiasm in 1930s only to radically turn away from it in the following decade. Similarly, the story of how cubic houses became the ideal, modern homes for the families of the young nation at one point and became prime targets of criticism as foreign and alienating architectural forms soon afterwards can not be explained by referring to a nationalis-

tic ideology that was present throughout both of these periods.

Finally, Bozdogan's study lays down the parameters for a comparative study of high modernism in a number of different countries. There are obvious parallels with the socialist Soviet Union and fascist Italy which Bozdogan briefly alludes to in her text. Yet, she does not pursue them further, perhaps for fear of distraction from her main topic. However, now that the study of the Turkish case is published, we can hope that she is contemplating the writing of a comparative book which would extend her analysis to other experiences of modernity outside of the Western context. Being the excellent work that *Modernism and Nation Building* is, we have a right to expect that it will be only the first book in a series.

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