COMMENTS ON THE SPECIAL ISSUE

"Ambivalent architectures"

Dana Arnold

The essays in this special issue aim to renegotiate the boundaries of architectural history, to critically engage with past and present histories and disclose latent assumptions about "East" and "West" through the biases and absences in the writing of architectural and cultural histories. Together these combine to produce an archive of systems of regulation and resistance in a transcultural context that help us understand the dynamics of flow across geographical and intellectual regions. The geographical focus of this volume is on the Black Sea and Mediterranean Littoral in the late and post Ottoman periods and the socio/political history provides an important backdrop that has resonance with the geopolitics of the region today. The authors interrogate a range of architectural instances of the import and export, dialogue and exchange between the architecture and architects of the Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic and their European and American counterparts. The specific instances address important historical moments both in the displays of otherness and of cultural assimilation that span from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. We see how, in the eighteenth century, the loss of Ottoman control of the Black Sea during the Russian-Ottoman conflicts opened the Mediterranean to Russian ships so enhancing the strategic importance of the Bosporus. This in turn influenced the design of foreign embassy buildings that bordered the Bosporus that both engaged with Western classical traditions of architecture as well as indigenous traditions. This highlights the theme of European Ottoman exchange as observed through the analysis of the comparative uses of and responses to ancient Greek architecture in the design of national museums: the British Museum and the Ottoman Imperial Museum, *Müze-i Hümâyûn*, in İstanbul.

Dana Arnold is Professor of Architectural History and Theory at Middlesex University, London and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London. All communication by e-mail, d.arnold@mdx.ac.uk.

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The uses of architecture and urban planning in the projection of national identity are explored further in the influx of foreign architects into Turkey and Turkish architecture built abroad in the Republican period. The engagement of foreign architects in the development of İstanbul and more broadly in the use of foreign experts (usually academics) were important in forging the modern Turkish state. The French architect Henri Prost is a key figure as his "Prost Plan" for İstanbul was partly executed between 1936 and 1950. The large-scale demolition that made way for modern urban infrastructure recalls the nineteenth-century improvements in European cities. The Western urban aesthetic was used here in the setting up of the new Turkish state. The complexities of the East-West-East dialogues are brought to the fore in the national identities projected by the Embassy of Turkey in Tehran and the Turkish pavilion at the New York World's Fair in relation to their respective geographical locations.

The step change between architecture as the projection of national identity and architecture as propaganda is apparent in two exhibitions on British architecture and town planning held in Turkey in 1944 and 1947. These displayed "Britishness" and proselytized the use of British design in the creation of a better world; ideas that were welcomed in Turkey. During the Cold War, it was propaganda rather than dialogue that typified cultural exchange between the United States and Turkey. The modernity promoted by the American and Turkish governments in this period presented Americanism as "common sense". Here the dialectics between East and West inherent in this architectural dialogue call into question both the grand narratives of architectural history and the historiography of the discipline itself.

The discourses in this volume add to and benefit from a burgeoning area of academic enquiry that examines exchange between different intellectual and geographical/cultural traditions and practices and in so doing presents a challenge to canonical architectural histories and historiographies. In these dialogues, Turkey is placed center stage and this opens up new ways of thinking about the established canonical binaries of East and West that can act as restrictive forces upon historical enquiry. More broadly, the intellectual positions expressed in these essays endorse a productive interaction between different disciplines and theories that provides new perspectives and conceptual grounding for architectural history. Of particular interest here is the study of architecture produced in "distant" and "different" geographies previously relegated under the totalizing rubric of the "non-West". This helps us understand how architecture that results from such interactions either enhances

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cultural understandings or perpetuates misunderstandings. The historical processes of orientalism, colonialism, Westernization and nation-building that provide settings for inter- and trans-cultural encounters also work to unify cultures and dissolve the boundaries between them. If instead we choose to problematize geographical difference, we find that transregional flows of cultural traffic become complex categories that may operate in unexpected and ambivalent ways. This change in the discipline's geographical frames of reference has defined new objects of study and scopes of inquiry and enables us to go beyond the trope of East vs. West that not only dominated the earlier colonizing projects but also casts its shadow on some recent discourses that aim to dismantle the legacies of colonialism.

Many of the essays in this volume are based on contributions to workshops held at METU over a three-year period that were part of a larger British Academy funded research project entitled "Ambivalent Geographies."[1] The activities included a series of themed workshops that facilitated exchange between academics from across the Middle East. The architecture and urbanism of the Ottoman and Republican periods in Turkey remained a central component of each of these thematic dialogues as a means of reorienting the geographical compass of architectural discourse. The methodological thrust of "Ambivalent Geographies" was to fracture the "consolidated vision" that privileges the "West" through essentializing and dualistic perspectives, and perpetuates the misrecognition of the totality and unity of cultures. The intellectual aim of the project was to open up the boundaries between putative totalities of culture in order to write different histories, particularly the intertwined histories of seemingly distant geographies. Instead of colonizing the "non-West" by mapping it using Western narrative structures, we must appreciate its complexity and diversity, as well as the different sets of values that operate within its various cultural frames. The essays in this volume rise to this challenge to reconfigure the ambivalent geographies of the architectures of Turkey

1 See http://archweb.metu.edu.tr/disbaglantilar/archist/ambivalent/index.html. The project was supported for three years by a British Academy Middle East Capacity Sharing Partnership Scheme grant, 2009-11 (Arnold D MEP 2008) and initiated by Dana Arnold with the assistance of Elvan Altan Ergut and Belgin Turan Özkaya. The project funding supported themed workshops, archival research, and postgraduate seminars. The scope and approach of "Ambivalent Geographies" was inspired by earlier collaborations between Arnold, Altan Ergut, and Turan Özkaya including a number of seminars and a conference funded by the British Academy Black Sea Initiative (BABSI) and the British Archaeological Institute in Ankara (BAIA). These combined research interests have also informed several publications, including Dana Arnold, *Reading Architectural History*, (London: Routledge, 2002); and Dana Arnold, Elvan Altan Ergut and Belgin Turan Özkaya, *Re-thinking Architectural Historiography* (London: Routledge, 2006).

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with import not only for their own history and historiography but also for the geopolitics of today.

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