# Western Culture as Role Model: The Westernization of Turkish Society and Architecture in the Early Years of the Republic as Evident in the Work of Ernst Egli

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## INTRODUCTION

Globalization is not only an economic but to a significant degree also a social and cultural phenomenon in that western societies and "Western Culture" are perceived as role models by many non-western countries. This, however, is not a recent phenomenon. Setting aside forceful means – imperialism and colonialism – of impressing social and cultural characteristics of the West onto large parts of the globe, there is a number of cases in which countries voluntarily tried to adopt a specifically western way of life.

One of the most remarkable examples of such a project of social and cultural modernisation and westernisation is Turkey. When on October 29, 1923, the National Assembly proclaimed the Turkish Republic and elected Mustafa Kemal as its president, one of the most ambitious programs of national and social reform in the twentieth century took its course: the transformation of the basically pre-industrial Ottoman sultanate – or rather what was left of it – into a modern nation-state shaped after leading western examples.

The reforms contained in this program followed the six principles of Kemalism, written down in the constitution of the republic: nationalism, laicism, and modernism as principles of action; republicanism, populism and etatism as principles of organization. Each of these principles meant a radical shift for the entire society: the Caliphate was abolished, the Islamic clergy stripped of its secular and social power, and Islam was no longer named state religion; the Ottoman dress code was lifted; language, especially in its written form, was reformed, the Latin alphabet replacing Arabic calligraphy; a jurisdictional body patterned basically on Swiss civil law, the Italian penal code and German trade laws replaced centuries-old Islamic law. The social liberation of women played a particularly prominent part: polygamy was officially abolished, women were for the first time allowed to vote and exercise professions.

The architects of the program tried to bring the country in one bold move up to par with the western role models of France, England, and Germany. There is an obvious ambiguity associated with this plan: Clearly, the leaders – Mustafa Kemal and his elite – felt that their country lagged severely behind some of the most modern, advanced, and powerful nations in the world; quite as obviously, however, they felt that the country – despite its delay – should be able to catch up with the West, if only it would put its whole energy behind this task. That was the not-so-modest ambition: to give Turkey its proper place among the leading nations in the world.

The new program meant a radical shift, a break with tradition, but not a complete "reorientation" in every aspect. As a matter of fact there is a long tradition of relationships between the Ottoman empire and the West, particularly the great port cities of Northern Italy, Venice and Genoa, who for centuries had trading posts in Istanbul. With the decline of the empire in the nineteenth century, the connections with Central Europe only grew stronger, acquiring a cultural and technological dimension where once the focus had been primarily on trade. In order to strengthen their slipping grip of the countries at the fringes of the empire, the Sultans were looking for a transfer of know-how in military as well as engineering and industrial technology. The main partnership was with Germany, partly because Germany was only a small-scale colonial power and posed no threat to the hegemony of the Sultan. Where culture and education was concerned, however, France was the example followed by the Ottoman elite. This was of particular significance in architecture, in that architectural education as well as Ottoman architectural style were strongly influenced by the Beaux-Arts movement.

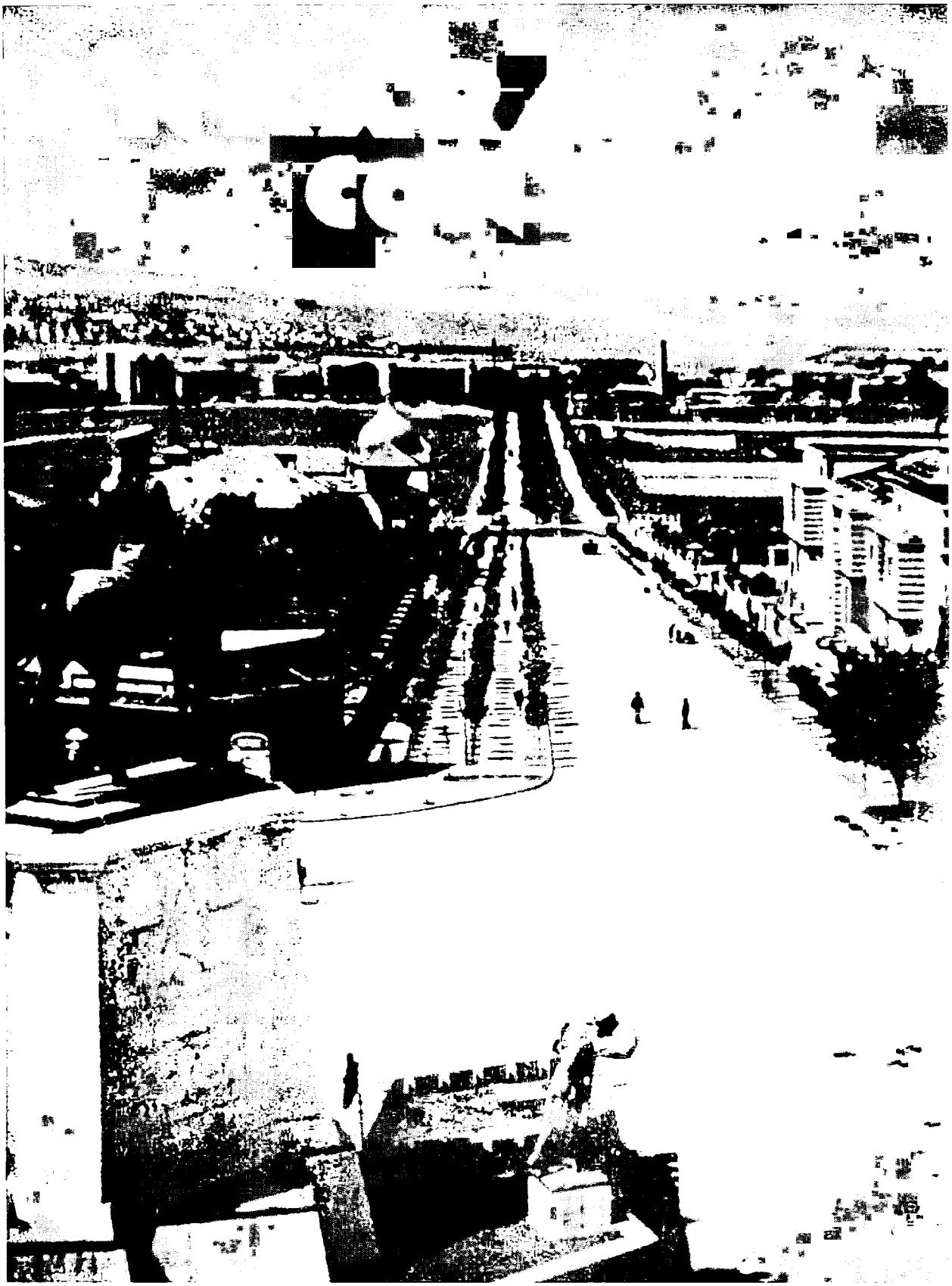

*Fig. 1. View of Station Avenue with the Court of Financial Appeals (right).*

The intensification of relationships with the European powers, and the reforms in education – especially the establishment of schools patterned after western examples providing higher education in the military sciences, in medicine, and in public administration – fostered the emergence of a progressive middle class, a hitherto inexistant stratum in Ottoman society. It also led – again a parallel to the west – to the development of a strong national (but at the same time Islamic) sentiment among the graduates of the elite schools, and of the new social class in general. Furthermore, many of the young elite were sent abroad – especially to France – from where they took home new patterns of domestic and public life. Thus, in the new, progressive bourgeoisie of the Ottoman empire, the seeds for the modernization project of Kemalism was already laid.

World War I saw the Ottoman Empire – severely weakened after the loss of the two Balkan – at the side of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Bulgaria against France, England, Russia, and ultimately the United States. The defeat of the Central European alliance was also the demise of the Ottoman empire. The successful resistance of the nationalist movement led by Mustafa Kemal against the Greek invasion of the Anatolian homeland, however, helped preserve the integrity of the country and establish the republic.

## ERNST EGLI IN TURKEY

When Ernst Egli came to Turkey in 1927 upon invitation of the government, the first phase of the Kemalist project had basically been completed. After the establishment of the republic, particular emphasis had been placed on making the break with the old, and the new beginning, visible in all aspects of life.

The son of a Swiss engineer, Egli was born and raised in Vienna where he also received his education as an architect. He had studied at the Technische Universität under Max Fabiani, a disciple of Otto Wagner, and Leopold Simony. The architectural debate in Vienna of the years between 1910 and 1925 was dominated by the activities of the Austrian Werkbund, by the large-scale public housing projects of the leftist city government, and by Adolf Loos. Loos was of particular influence on Egli, who was personally acquainted with him. Less clear are Egli's connections to the Werkbund. Egli – with the help of Loos – became involved in the Siedlung movement, where the Werkbund was particularly active. In any case, the doctrines of the Werkbund – utility, functionality, and the purposeful integration of design, manufacture, and industrial production – also played a primary role in Egli's architectural concepts developed later during his years in Turkey.

In the early twenties, Egli became head assistant to Clemens Holzmeister – another influential figure in Vienna who was himself a disciple of Peter Behrens – at his Meisterklasse at the Academy of Fine Arts. Receiving the call to Turkey at the age of 34, stepping in for Clemens Holzmeister, to whom the post had been offered first, Egli did not have a particular oeuvre yet. He had won a second prize in the international competition for the design of the Topschieder Park in Belgrade, and he had participated, together with Clemens Holzmeister, in the international competition for the Palace of Nations in Geneva.

Egli's architectural style at the time when he left Vienna for Ankara followed the example set by the non-avantgardist Viennese modernism of architects like Max Fabiani, Clemens Holzmeister, and Josef Frank. Upon arrival in Ankara, Egli was thrown right into the debate going on between conservative and progressive groups, when a project designed by the renowned architect Kemalettin Bey was transferred to him to turn it into "something modern". In the following, three particular projects of Egli will be discussed to illustrate the task at hand, the architectural strategies, and results. Two of the projects are public buildings, the third is to show the impact of the new concepts of living on the private realm, particularly that of the elite.

When the National Assembly convened for the proclamation of the republic, Ankara was but a small provincial town at the foot of the ancient citadel. The decision to make it the capital of the new republic was primarily based on its central location in Anatolia. Furthermore, this was again to emphasize the break with the Ottoman empire and its capital, Istanbul.

A masterplan for Ankara was quickly devised. Broad avenues were laid out across the valley. "Ankara construit" – Ankara is building – an illustration in the April 1937 issue of the periodical "La Turquie kemaliste", shows two icons of the early republic: on the left Ankara Palas, a fashionable hotel built around 1927 in the Ottoman revivalist First National Style, facing Eglis "Sayistay" building from 1930 – the Court of Financial Appeals. The two buildings mark the city center's edge at the time. The avenue between them continuing towards the train station out on the plain stretches across a no-man's-land yet to be urbanized.

## THE COURT OF FINANCIAL APPEALS

The Court of Financial Appeals was one of the first major commissions for Egli. As a matter of fact, Egli's task was primarily to extend and give a modern appearance to an already existing building from the mid twenties. Through characteristically cubic projections and recessions repeated in regular rhythm, Egli achieved a design which was both modern in its pure, barely ornamented stereometry, its interlocking volumes, and its play of light and shadow, and "traditional" in its quotation of the classical Turkish house. Already, the main preoccupation of Egli can be found: the combination of a "classical", that is non-avantgardist, modernity with a strong

*Fig. 2. Court of Financial Appeals, 1928.*

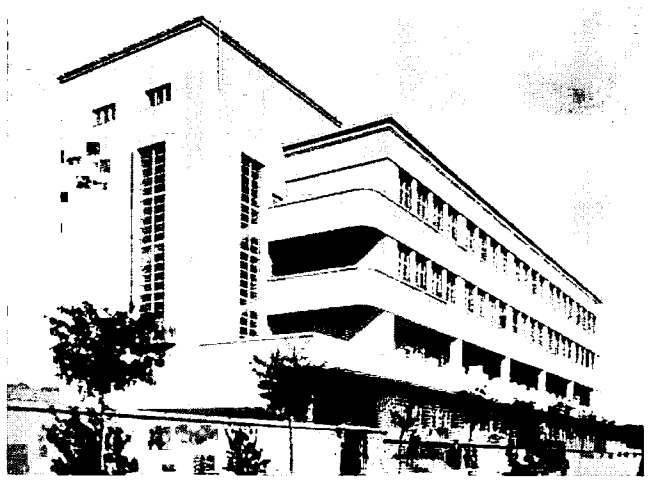

*Fig. 3. Ismet Pasha Girls' Institute, 1930.*

interest for the vernacular – the Turkish architectural heritage and climate-adapted regionalism.

Bernd Nicolai writes: "In this design one can observe – on one hand – the greatest affinity of Egli to the buildings of Holzmeister; on the other, Egli also walks a path largely defined by his own experiences and investigations. His respect of the original building as well as of tradition are equally well visible." (Nicolai, 1998: 48) Indeed this is what set Egli apart from many other foreign architect-experts that came to the country in the twenties and thirties: his unrelenting interest for the local culture and the national patrimony of Turkey, which he seeked to combine with a timely rationality and functionalism.

## ISMET PASHA GIRLS' INSTITUTE

As chief architect of the Ministry of Education, Egli received the commission to design a school for young Turkish women. Two programmatic aspects made this building particularly important: Education was of course a key element of the Kemalist program necessary to sustain the reforms and to thoroughly infuse society with the concepts of a westernized nation. In addition, this building epitomized the new role attributed to women in Turkish society: "The ideologically charged contrast between the old and the new was nowhere as strong as in the image and position of the new Kemalist woman in society, in the aftermath of the new civil code of 1926. In spite of the code's inadequacies and double standards from today's perspective, it was as progressive as its western models were at the time." (Bozdogan, 2001: 80)

The building, upon completion, received widespread publicity and media coverage: it was hailed as one of the republican milestones of modernity. What appears today as a straightforwardly sober, somewhat unobtrusive design – with many style elements from the classical repertoire of modern architecture of the twenties – was indeed revolutionary for the time and place: a four-storey building with symmetrical plan and elevation devoid of almost any ornament; a flat roof without projections; facades accentuated horizontally by long ribbons of windows, with two vertical stair shafts at opposing ends; rounded corners of balconies and of the main entrance suggesting a spatial continuity and flow; the interplay between stereometric volumes and horizontal plates; filigrane window grills on the front and the balcony railings on the rear facade.

The plans of the upper levels show the functional layout of a typical school building of the twentieth century: class rooms on both sides of a large central corridor; vertical access areas at opposing ends grouped together with all the serving spaces.

## VILLA RAGIP DEVRES

The third example for Ernst Egli's contribution to modern Turkish architecture presented here is in several respects an exception: The villa designed for Ragip Devres, a wealthy engineer, and his family was among the first modern single-family houses in Turkey and one of the few significant residential works by a foreign architect. As a matter of fact, the design of modern houses for the Kemalist elite and the wealthy business clientele was the primary field of activity of young, foreign-educated Turkish architects, because they were largely excluded from the more prestigious and significant public works entrusted to the foreign experts.

The site of the Villa Devres in Istanbul Bebek is particularly spectacular. It occupies a rather narrow but deep lot separated from the Bosphorus waterfront only by a narrow road. The two-story house is characterized on the waterfront side by a large terrace and a balcony cantilevered on five slender columns which continues around the northern side of the building to the rear. The entrance is slightly recessed. The front is marked by

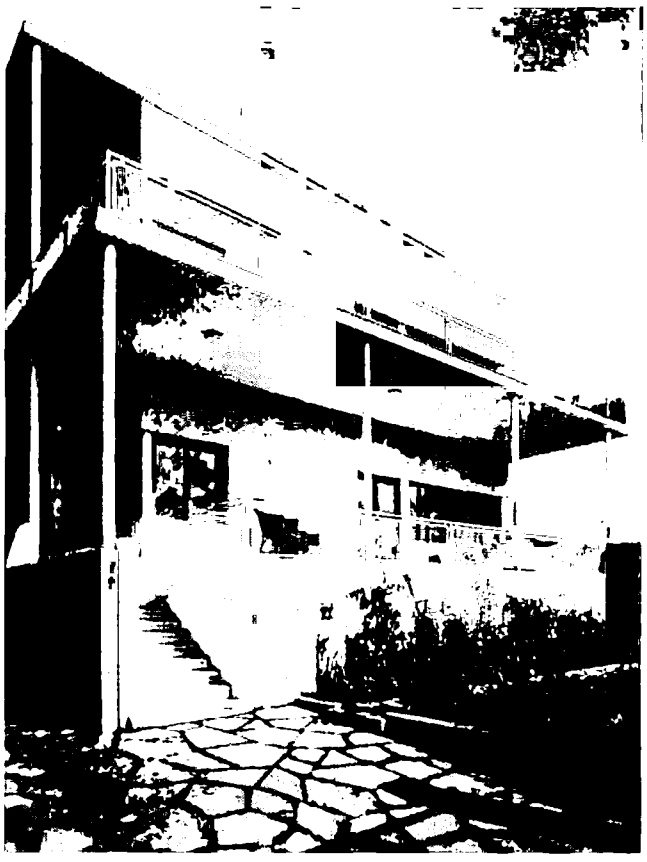

*Fig. 1. Villa Ragip Derres, 1932.*

large windows on both ground and upper floor that wrap around the corners.

The plan is rational: On the ground floor, a large continuous space containing the salon and the dining room connects front and back of the building. The other half of the floor is occupied by smaller units: an office room overlooking the entrance as well as the kitchen and other servicing rooms On the upper floor, the main bedroom and bathroom, as well as the bedrooms for the children, are grouped around a central corridor; in the southwestern corner, two other rooms and a second bathroom can be accessed from the stairs' landing. Both the exterior (particularly the garden facade) and the restrained decoration of the interior contain reminiscenses of Vienna and of Loos, although the complexities of Loos' Raumplan – the split levels, the twisted procession through the interior, etc. – are largely absent.

The building type of the "villa" was new to Turkey. Its appearance was a symbol for the changes in society, the westernization and democratization of the family, the new role of women, and generally the organization of domestic life. But these changes were not altogether triggered by Kemalist reforms. "The transformation of upper-class domestic culture and family life along European models predated the Westernizing reforms of the Kemalist republic by at least half a century," Sibel Bozdogan writes. And furthermore: "As the image of the small nuclear family (with a working husband and father, an enlightened wife and mother, and their healthy child and children) was elevated to a national ideal, the physical space of the home, too, was represented in a more unequivocally modern (read Western) expression." (Bozdogan, 2001: 195-196)

According to his own testimony, Egli was very much aware of the disparity in living conditions between the upper class and the Kemalist elite and the rest of society. The limited financial means of the state were almost entirely reserved for public buildings and investments into infrastructure. In stark contrast to European countries, there was no large-scale public housing program in Turkey. But despite these discrepancies and the irrelevance of such residential types as the villa for a great part of the population, their impact was considerable. Popular magazines of the day featured reports on the "beautiful houses" designed by modern architects: these houses were "to represent the all-encompassing aesthetic and scientific progress of the era because of their simplicity and matter-of-factness". (Bozdogan, 1996: 318)

## EGLI AS TEACHER AT THE ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS, ISTANBUL

In 1930 Egli was appointed Dean of the Faculty of Architecture of the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul, the only school of architecture in Turkey at that time, founded in 1883. The name already hints at the program, for the Academy strictly followed the western Beaux-Arts tradition. Many of the teachers at the Academy were European and Levantine architects. At the core of the curriculum were classical composition, drawing, and rendering. The first year's focus was on art history, the second on Greek and Roman style studies. The third year was devoted to Neoclassic and Neorenaissance design, almost exclusively for large institutional buildings. The fourth and final year saw the students doing measured survey drawings of classical Ottoman buildings and a diploma project designed according to the doctrine of Ottoman Turkish nationalist architecture, also referred to as "First National Style".

Like its counterparts in Western and Central Europe, the Academy was criticized for its style pluralism and its preoccupation with the superficially decorative. More problematic than a controversial architectural discourse, however, was the fact that its program and curriculum clashed with the dogmas of the Kemalist reform project. As mentioned before, education was one of the keystones of the revolution. The conservative Academy of the 1920s was in many respects completely at odds with the concepts of the Kemalist project. In order to match the architects' education to the requirements of the times, it had to be revised from the roots up.

This task was entrusted to Ernst Egli. Since many of the old teachers had left voluntarily or had been forced out of office, Egli was able to assemble a cadre of teachers and assistants matching his intentions. Key posts such as architectural design and building construction were filled with German and Austrian experts; Egli's assistants, however, were young Turkish architects educated abroad. Among these was Sedad Hakki Eldem, who would become one of the most prominent and outspoken architects in the 1940s to 1970s in Turkey. The role model for the educational program was of course no longer the Ecole des Beaux-Arts, but another staple of Western European higher education, the Technische Hochschule or Polytechnic Institute. However, the program of the Technische Hochschule was reinterpreted and adjusted. The duration of study was prolonged to five years, from four as was common at German and Austrian schools. Accordingly, the program was named "Higher Architectural Studies", and consequently the diploma awarded corresponded to a Master's degree.

Despite the country's high demand for qualified architects, the school was not open to anybody with a college degree. Instead, the number of students was limited to 35-50 per year through a rigorous test of skills which included the drawing of everyday objects out of memory – an examination of the candidates' sense of form, space, and proportion. The education at the reorganized Academy was divided into two periods. The first two years were devoted to the preparation of the students through lectures on art and on technical aspects of the profession. After a preliminary diploma examination, the successful students advanced to the upper semesters, where the education was focused on design supplemented with further theoretical and technical knowledge.

In addition to design classes, some students also had the opportunity to work on Egli's own projects for the Ministry of Education. Egli had established an architect's office at the Academy where some of his public commissions were executed. He did not only teach design, but also gave lectures on the theory of architecture and other subjects.

At the end of each year, a selection of student projects was put on public display. These exhibitions triggered positive as well as negative reactions from the architectural profession. According to S. Bozdogan, these reactions show "the mixed feelings toward the modernist reforms" and are "indicative of the underlying ambivalence of attitudes regarding the importation of a radically abstract European discourse devoid of the representational power that classical buildings historically possessed". (Bozdogan, 2001: 161-163)

One of the most important and – for the development of a Turkish national modernism – influential additions to the curriculum was the seminar on Turkish vernacular architecture initiated by Egli and held by Sedad Hakki Eldem. The seminar was devoted to the assessment and survey of outstanding examples of the Turkish house. The underlying purpose, however, was to mine vernacular architecture for concepts alternative to the Westernized aesthetic both of the Ottoman First National Style and of imported modernism. The impact of the seminar on the architectural debate in Turkey was considerable, for it underlined the importance of a people's cultural heritage in nation and identity building.

## CONCLUSION

Despite Egli's goal of incorporating regional and Turkish national elements into his design, many of his buildings are primarily modern and "international" in that they – at least on a superficial level of examination – could as well be found in Berlin, Prag, or Vienna. Hanno Walter Kruft points out that "Internationality is one of the key words of architecture of the twentieth century. 'International' architecture since 1920 started to look the same everywhere despite different climatic, political, and economical conditions." (Kruft, 1995: 419) The international style, however, was only one strand of development among many others. In many countries architects tried to develop a particular national or regional brand of modernism. This was often a reaction to what was perceived as a form of imperialism of the "International Style" – as was the case in Turkey in the 1940s. Egli was very sympathetic towards the development of a particular Turkish modernism, even considered it his primary task.

Mustafa Kemal's slogan for the reform called for Turkey to "be western in spite of the west". By this he meant that Turkish society, on its path into the future, ought to avoid the traps and shortcomings of modern society and culture. The slogan also hints at the dilemma that Egli and the Turkish architects of the time faced: being modern but not "international", or, from the opposite side, being national, monumental, and regional and at the same time modern. Sibel Bozdogan writes: "Sharp binary oppositions between 'international' and 'national', 'modern' and 'historicist' do not do justice to the fact that, throughout the 1930s, the picture was far more blurred. Whether they worked with the 'cubic' modern forms of the New Architecture or with the classicized, stripped-down official buildings of the 1940s, Turkish architects wanted to be 'modern' yet grounded in tradition, 'national' yet simultaneously part of Western civilization." (Bozdogan, 2001: 279)

To achieve a plausible synthesis of all the demands was indeed a big challenge which Egli, himself, did not fully master. Still, functional and stylistic elements from Turkish vernacular architecture made their way into contemporary Turkish design from 1940 onwards. Among the numerous foreign architects working in Turkey between 1925 and 1950, Ernst Egli occupied a special position for his role in introducing new architectural concepts to the country both by the example of his works as well as through his teaching.

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