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**On The Cultivation of Avant-Garde within the  
Turkish Architecture Context, 1960 - 1980**

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'Avant-garde', within the domain of art and architecture, is characterized as a provocative search for the shock of new; a radical formation for the redefinition of artistic conventions; a courageous experiment utilizing new artistic tools and techniques; and a unique statement delineating the nature of art object. Thus, 'avant-garde' refers not only to “a coherent group of creative-subjects,” but also to “the characteristics of their productions through the dissociative and productive imperatives”. Having an inherent energy for transforming the pre-established aesthetical and social values, avant-garde creates 'the new' with a social function, and constructs 'the new' for a revolutionary culture. Proposing a controversy or a critical stand, the medium for 'avant-garde' could be anything, introducing a new thing, venturing an objection, or being appropriate for de-familiarization. In the light of this definition, the positions of these creative-subjects, the contents of their works, the social backgrounds of their receivers and the context, within which all of them operate, are the parameters for the designation of 'avant-garde'.<sup>1</sup>

Within the framework of this conceptualization, this study inquires into the im/possibility of the cultivation of avant-garde within the Turkish context. The aim is neither to make solid statements about the im/possibility of avant-garde, nor to judge architects or their productions. Intended not to be a mere archaeology, this paper digs deep into the reasons behind the obstructions for - or the receptions of - an avant-garde projection. It proposes to understand the ways of thinking concerning avant-garde. It could lay a ground for not only exposing several questions from within the domains of art and architecture, but also figuring out a panorama of the political, cultural, and social structure.

Dwelling on the avant-garde formations during the 1960s, the projections and receptions of these formations within the context of Turkey could be traced in the architectural expressions of the following two decades. These expressions vary from the ideational activity to the physical productions, including the discursive, representational and physical productions. Indeed, the

inquiry could be twofold: The former deals with the objects of architecture and the attributions to these products; whereas, the latter engages in the subjects of the scene of architecture and their conceptions of the issue. It should be noted that this study is a part of an attempt not only to decipher the concept of avant-garde, but also to map the construction of this concept in the Turkish architectural context. However, within the limits of this paper, it is proposed to focus on the present receptions of the avant-garde within the context of Turkey.

### **The Interviews**

The interviews have been structured in three phases: After a preliminary work on the architectural context between 1960 and 1980 has managed, the relevant subjects of the Turkish architectural scene have been highlighted.<sup>2</sup> The intended subjects for these interviews have been chosen among the students of architecture, the prominent academicians (architectural historians, theoreticians, educators), and practicing architects of the period between 1960 and 1980. A pre-interview text had been sent to the architects for describing both the structure and the focus of the intended interview. In that text, the objective of this interview is designated as "Projections of the Avant-Garde Formations during the 1960s into the Context of Turkey: Receptions of Archigram, Japanese Metabolists, Constant, Yona Friedman, Archizoom, and Superstudio within the Context of Turkey". After a brief introduction of these avant-garde formations, the focus of that study is described in three key points: reflections on the concept of 'avant-garde'; resonances of these formations within the context of Turkey; and projections of these avant-garde formations on the architectural practice, education, and criticism in Turkey during the 1960s and the 1970s. As the second phase of the study, the interviews with these Turkish architects have been realized. Having a consistent attitude and position in the Turkish scene of architectural theory, history, criticism, practice, and education, thirteen architects have contributed to this study since April 2006.<sup>3</sup> As the last phase of that study, the statements of the architects have been deciphered.

This paper debates on the interpretation of these interviews, and it focuses on the receptions of the avant-garde formations by these Turkish architects: Their receptions of the concept of avant-garde and the receptions of these avant-garde formations. In other words, the study gives us an idea about "how we (the Turkish architects) understand the concept of avant-garde" and "misconceptions, distortions, or variances about those formations". When the interviews are inquired thoroughly, a number of significant points can also be revealed. These are 'definition and conceptualization of avant-garde, 'delineation of avant-garde and utopia', 'questions concerning avant-garde itself'. Therefore, these issues can help to lay a ground for understanding the reception of avant-garde. Regarding the receptions of those formations, a retrospective appraisal of the context of the 1960s, including the social and architectural structures, comes to

the scene. The receptions of those avant-garde formations bring into light both the ways of acceptance and the reasons for obstruction. In addition, the interviews allow us to elicit also the issues on 'general approaches at the foremost educational institutions', as well as 'legitimization of position' and 'identity construction' of the architects. Moreover, the concluding remarks include the questions exposed on the ways of thinking and the statements revealed about the cultivation of avant-garde in the context of Turkey. All through these interviews, it could be stated that the focuses defined above are directly related with the ways of thinking, or the frames of reception. Here, the keyword is 'reception' that also refers to the 'receivers'.

### **Receptions**

The expressions through the interviews explicitly indicate that avant-garde refers to the qualifications of subject and object, as well as ways of understanding. These architects understand avant-garde in the meaning of leader, forerunner, pioneer, trailblazer, marginal, radical, extraordinary, beatnik, offbeat, unorthodox, critical, revolutionary, and Promethean. They conceptualize avant-garde as an engaged subject, who opens up new directions, frontiers and perspectives with pulsating previsions. Avant-garde is also understood as a work of architecture, new, experimental, utopian, fantastic, absurd, different, odd, and fanciful. Avant-garde is also conceived of as an instantaneous, critical and contradictory attitude, which also requires courage, willingness, interest, endeavor, passion, and open-mindedness. Moreover, it is also expressed that avant-garde is an advanced idea intended to be carried out.

When the statements of the architects are read thoroughly, it could be realized that architectural avant-garde is also conceptualized as a phenomenon. The architects identified avant-garde with a movement, with the 'historical avant-gardes' at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; whereas, some architects understand avant-garde as a branch of either modern or a modernist project. Moreover, some architects understand avant-garde as utopia. Avant-garde is described as a minor reserve for architecture, and it is believed that architectural avant-garde could merely be either in the modes of expression or in the ways of ideation. Avant-garde is delineated as "a stand, a re-position, a cutting-edge position, an enthusiasm in undergraduate days, an inner-enthusiasm during the professional life, a strategic position that not only tries to say a new word while performing the optimal".

Defining avant-garde as "forerunner movement, course, or event", some architects question the concept of avant-garde itself. One expresses that "in addition to avant-garde, rationality and modernism should be questioned". Besides, the Turkish architects pose some questions on "the

delineation of avant-garde and utopia", "the possibility and the reflections of avant-garde within the domain of architecture", and "meaning of talking about avant-garde today".

The interviewed architects use the word utopia in the following meanings: "beyond avant-garde", "advanced idea not ready to be carried out", "fancy dream of a time in the distant future", "product of a hopeful end with a specific aim", "ventures kindling the passions for revolution", "redefinition of the limits through the proposals mostly impossible". That is to say, utopia, as a qualification of an architectural product and a way of understanding, is mostly confounded with avant-garde. Regarding, the delineation of avant-garde and utopia, it is underlined, "avant-garde houses a hopeful rejection, a belief in the possibility, and a positive proposal to the criticized; as utopia bears a joy for the fantasy of impossibility". Therefore, the delineation of avant-garde and utopia is as follows: Being as a response to the criticism and rejection, avant-garde is a positive proposal of the belief in the hopeful future. Contrarily, not being as a response to a specific criticism, utopia is a hopeless proposal for nowhere / never ever. It is proclaimed that "utopias could not produce legitimacy though they offer opposition. However, utopias should satisfy the legitimacy of the opposition; avant-garde should emerge from the dynamics of Turkey within a new framework of legitimacy contrary to the modernist templates of the West."

During the interviews, it is asserted that avant-garde is an experimental and luxurious flame of enthusiasm. This sort of enthusiasm is unnatural for the profession of architecture and avant-garde is appropriate for not architecture but art. It is claimed boldly that "there would not be any avant-garde that strikes its context (Turkey) and that turns out to be a utopia as a reference". Besides, it is noted that "there would never be the 'historical avant-gardes' of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; as those borders have already been passed over. Today's concern is alternative globalization and reformation of a context appropriate for the utilization of technology. Therefore, imagining a newer life and life style appropriate for these concerns is important." It is also added that "rather than 'utopia of total end-product', 'utopia of political process' and 'participatory democracy' are much more important. Architecture and city are the consequences of social process and democratic process realized through the participatory democracy.

The architects define these formations during the 1960s as avant-garde, utopia, movement, or professional flow. For the Turkish architects, they are merely 'triggers and motivators of imagination'. Therefore, there was no time for this kind of fanciful formations during the 1960s and 1970s; although they tried to keep up-to-date through professional periodicals and books. The means through which those formations came into the Turkish context were the professional periodicals like AD (Architectural Design), JA (Japan Architecture), and Mimarlık; the

academicians that had been keeping abreast of current international events and reading Marxist and Critical Theory, Existentialism, and Phenomenology, namely Marx, Gramsci, Marcuse, Sartre, and Hegel.

The architects explain the reasons behind the obstructions for the reception of these formations as follows: These formations have not been welcomed for the reason that avant-garde and utopia are not utilitarian but ideational endeavors. In other words, these formations were all ideational, yet not effective in terms of contesting for a prize, or gaining money. Another reason claimed is that the Turkish people could not experience and follow the intellectual development that the West had already been experienced. It is also added that the architecture itself could not examine its own existence, or locate itself, or produce a philosophy over its own power of practice. In another point of view, these formations have not been accepted; although the scene of Turkish architecture was very well aware of them.

### **Sub-topics on the Issue**

The tendencies within the educational institutions during that period could also be comprehended through the statements of the interviewed architects. The causality was very important, and theoretical issues were not on the agenda. Although, the ambiance was appropriate for destroying some pre-established ideas and values; it was unsuitable for avant-garde or such formations. The characteristics of the architectural education at the topmost three universities have been defined as follows: the Middle East Technical University was founded in an American system and the influence of Louis Khan had been feeling through the whole education. It is argued that avant-garde could only be carried out within the domain of art, and those formations were not allowed to take part within the education at the Middle East Technical University. İstanbul Technical University had been more conservative, rationalist and not yet ready for novelties. Besides, İstanbul State Academy of Fine Arts had been under the influence of Sedad Hakkı Eldem; although the education had become more critical during the 1970s.

Re-reading the interviews between the lines gives a hint about the 'legitimization of position' and 'identity construction' of the Turkish architects. Throughout the interviews, most of the architects made some statements that reveal endeavors to legitimize their positions within the domain of architecture, particularly within the Turkish context. Some architects estrange themselves from their professional colleagues. The Turkish architects either feels alone within the domain of architecture that could never understood the endeavors; or see himself different and ahead of his colleagues. Anyway, the presence of colleagues with similar ideas and positions gives courage and feeling of not being alone. Contrarily, some architects define themselves as 'rational and

practicing architect' and legitimize their positions as being parallel with the prevailing discourse of Modern Architecture. Some architects, carrying on their job abroad, do not share the responsibility of the poor quality of architecture. Therefore, it can boldly be stated that the statements of these architects reveal estrangement from the Turkish context and otherization by bringing the dualities of 'West – us', 'others – I'.

The architects either try to keep a distance to avant-garde, or to make auto-attributions. They mostly define themselves as avant-garde and try to support this assertion by a number of anecdotes. Though they do not accept a direct emulation to these formations, their statements reveal that these formations had an influence on them.

Some architects make self-attribution or descriptions about the characteristics of their architecture, which could let us interpret their identity constructions. They do not abstain to make auto-attributions as "rebellious, skeptic, inquisitive, inquiring, and open to newness". Some architects believe in the supremacy of 'creative subject; whereas, some others claim that the subject is as much as his/her production, not more than that. Besides, diversity of opinions on the superiority of either 'idea' or 'final product' of architecture could also be noticed through the interviews. The context, within which these formations projected and the Turkish architects received, is the most valid ground for debating on the reflections of architectural avant-garde in Turkey.

### **Context**

Although the word avant-garde is ascribed both to the architect and to the work of architecture; the issue of 'context' is critically important for conceptualizing avant-garde. It refers both to the set of circumstances and facts surrounding the 'avant-gardeness' of either subject(s) or object(s), and to the one surrounding the receivers. The issue of reflection is twofold; projection and reception. This study is a retrospective appraisal of the context of the 1960s by the Turkish architects and an endeavor to pore over the present frames of receptions within the Turkish context.

The significant events around the 1960s, which would influence the course of history and the character of the decade, could be summarized as follows: the complex of inter-related cultural and political events in Western countries, the social upheaval in a larger scale context, the liberalistic movements, all the new, exciting, radical, subversive and dangerous events and trends, the youth subculture. The 1960s, in a way, became the decade of scandals, riots, mass civil conflicts, civil rights movement, and anti-war movements. The 1968 student protests, the worker

uprising in the United States and France, the political agitations. The universities became the centers, at which all aspects of life were in question, and from which anarchy, liberalism, pop culture were grown. The protests in the West incited the students in Eastern Europe, including Turkey.

On the one side, the youth cultural radicalism by the hippies and the counter-culture was very significant. The youth, who would in later years be referred as the *68 Generation*, engaged in liberalization in every aspect of life. The conventional notions, as sexual morality or religious thinking, were broke down. Therefore, pop culture, rock and blues music spread over the whole decade. With the rise of an alternative youth subculture, "the world had only recently begun facing the fact that young people could develop existential and expressional preferences independently of adults."<sup>4</sup> In spite of many changes in different aspects of life, the most drastic advancements that would soon shape architecture were in science and technology.<sup>5</sup> Accompanying these political, cultural, social upheavals, the scientific and technological achievements were popular references for art and architecture.

On the other side, the statements of Turkish architects reveal that their retrospective appraisals converge at two points: the general characteristics of the period, and the comparative reminiscences about the Turkish context. Here, the analysis of their expressions could help to understand the issue, such that the former imply an affirmation of avant-garde; while the latter constructs itself on apologetic arguments about the absence of avant-garde within Turkey. The affirmative statements of the Turkish architects are as follows: The 1960s was a liberalization period within which limits were questioned, urged, and redefined. Motion and visuality were two keywords of the time. Another dominant characteristic of the 1960s was comparative way of understanding, accompanying with the new feelings and perceptions, and the new ways of experiences. Marxism, Existentialism, and Phenomenology were influential systems of thought. Contrarily, the retrospective glance of the interviewed architects expose some apologetic statements as follows: Technology and science became popular all over the world. However, technology was not internalized in Turkey, or even there was no technology in Turkey. Avant-garde could not exist within the course of life, as it could only be found in the theoretical texts. Due to the socio-political affairs, there was no time for debating on such issues as avant-garde. The era was described as provocative, political, and full of the Left-wing social criticism came out by the military coup of 1960. Overflowing with the social oppositions, it was a time for questioning the legitimacies, or even the self-legitimacy. There is no ambience for developing, supporting and encouraging ideas. The context was not appropriate for intellectual or ideational expressions; contrarily, most of the expressions were based on emulation.

Digging deep into the interviews, the statements of the architects could reveal the social and architectural structures of the 1960s. The general context described by the Turkish architects, it could easily be claimed that their statements could be summed up in two groups: the accounts defining the general structure of the Turkish society and the ones that make some generalizations about the Turkish society borrowing the personal characteristics. The general social structure is defined as "remote from the origin", "deficiency in demand and substructure for avant-garde", "closed, unprogressive, enclosed with iron curtain", "low level in prosperity", "having floating culture", having cooperative minds", "standing out with degeneration, lack of culture and qualification". Moreover, the personal characteristics generalized for the society are as follows: apathetic, visionless, "barren of courage, interest and excitement", "imitator, "tracer having the courage of being individual", "miserable by its very nature", "capable of extricating from difficulties", "lack of self-confidence", "shy that could be related with 'being Anatolian'", "lack of reading habit", and "having phobia about trying something new".

The architects described the architectural structure of the 1960s as follows: The rational, realist, and functionalist architecture was the mainstream, while there were some pathways like 'chemical architecture', 'fantastic architecture'. The context was unproductive and limited with physical productions. Though the air was highly political, categorized, and agitated with the slogan of "architecture for society"; the social dynamics could not be operative. The context was not ready or appropriate for avant-garde and could not provoke the vision for avant-garde. Avant-garde was not on the agenda, and it could not find a market for itself due to the fact that there was no excitement and interest for avant-garde. The discipline of architecture could not go beyond to be seen as a daily activity. Without any discourse or discussion, the mainstream architecture based on some stereotypes and did not support any search. Therefore, the Turkish architecture, compared to the international scene, was not in the mainstream. The architectural products bore resemblance to the imported patterns in appearance. The potential of architecture for transforming life could not be benefited. The period is not convenient for constructing a theory, rather for developing the existing ones slightly.

### **Concluding Remarks**

It could firmly be claimed that 'avant-garde' is a novel word in Turkish; the use of this word has been ambiguous, gaining diverse meanings in different contexts. Even the architects themselves have no consensus on either the spelling or the meaning of the word. Likewise, it could be asserted that the criticism of architecture in Turkey has recently become conscious of avant-garde; so the architects have not long been familiar with the concept.

It could frankly be stated that the concepts of utopia, modern, modernism, and modernity have their own domains in various disciplines, and they have an autonomous realm within the theoretical studies on avant-garde. Hence, the relationships between these concepts are mostly comparative rather than inclusive. That is to say; avant-garde does not necessarily mean utopia, utopian, modern, or modernist. Yet, avant-garde surely means utopian or modernist for the Turkish architects. They believe that 'to be avant-garde surely means to be utopian or modernist'. However, the interviews show that the conceptualization of avant-garde, as well as other concepts, in Turkey is different from the common meaning accepted in the international scene of theory, criticism, or practice. In other words, the statements of the architects reveal that the idea of avant-garde is totally different from the idea in general due to the reason that the frames of reception differ from culture to culture, and context to context.

In Turkey, avant-garde always refers to a technologist point of view. The interviews show that there are a number of excuses regarding not having been avant-garde, or regarding the impossibility of avant-garde within the domain of Turkish architecture during the 1960s and the 1970s. The architects always speak apologetically about the context of Turkey, regarding the destitutions as economical poverties, political hardships, and cultural repressions. They also try to legitimize their position within this context. The excuse is mostly that the technology in Turkey did not compete with the others; that's why, they could not manage to be avant-garde, or to produce avant-garde works of architecture. However, it could be noted that in spite of the lack of high technology, the architectural history witnessed a number of avant-gardes and their ground shaking statements that never require technology, but need 'idea', courage, and critical attitude. Therefore, the statements of the Turkish architects as "the context has not been convenient for avant-garde" or "there was no technology for the emergence of avant-garde" are not explications but excuses.

Focused on the Turkish architectural context during the 1960s, it could be claimed that the dynamics have influenced the receptions of an architectural production and the attitude of an architect. A building can be taken as 'avant-garde', when it is interrelated with the other buildings within the Turkish context. Besides, it is mostly possible that the architect cannot be aware of the definition of avant-garde while designing it; as he could experience 'avant-gardenes' at hearth. There could be a number of examples to point up this issue. As the contexts change, the dynamics, parameters and references shift. The contextual variations for the Europe have never been the same for Turkey. Thus, if one searches for a direct reflection of those avant-garde formations in Turkey, it would be misleading. As the interviews show us, the dynamics have been particular and different in Turkey. For Turkey, a proposal for upgrading the slum housing ('gecekondu'), a courageous attempt for altering

the architectural templates, an innovative detail, an alternative life style or a discursive positioning for the rapidly changing situations could be named as avant-garde.

As the Turkish architects always try to relate avant-garde with the architectural practice, they conceptualize avant-garde as 'an obstacle for the professional progression'. These architects believe that one could merely have a place within the scene of architecture when the avant-gardeness is scraped off. During the 1960s and the 1970s, the architectural competitions organized by the Ministry of Public Works have mostly based on 'adaptability' of the projects. Hence, most of the project proposals were rationalist. Though the juries for the architectural competitions have been changed, this point of view has not been broken down. Yet, if the competition rules permit or the jury deems worthy, some avant-garde ideas and novel perspectives can be awarded for the prizes or the honorable mentions. For the Turkish context, avant-garde is a track that is only preferred during the undergraduate years. Therefore, avant-garde is always a retrospective issue belonging to the former years of the architects. What is paradoxical is that the architects understand avant-garde as an appellation and as an obstacle; as the reception of avant-garde leads either to affirmation or to negation. It is also interesting that some architects make auto-attribution pertaining avant-gardeness, which is a rare situation in the international scene.

In the light of these interviews, the panorama drawn by the architects about the concept of avant-garde is as follows: It is boldly stated that avant-garde within the context of Turkey is rare or absent. The reason behind this rareness or absence could be interpreted in two different ways. The first assumption, extremely solid and irreversible, is that there have been no avant-garde in the Turkish context, since there have been no avant-garde subjects. Between the lines of this excuse, we could grasp that avant-gardeness is a fateful state of being for the Turkish architects. That's why; most of the architects try to explain "why they could not become avant-garde" by setting forth the argument that the Turkish context has never been proper for avant-gardeness. The second assumption is more reasonable such that the definition and conceptualization of avant-garde in Turkish context is different from its designation through the theoretical frameworks.

Lastly, it is worth exposing some questions on the ways of thinking and the im/possibility of the cultivation of avant-garde in Turkey, which could be more effective than giving answers. Why the Turkish context cannot produce, or support, avant-garde? In such a context familiar with a lot of provocations, ruptures, and agitations, how avant-garde, opposing and critical by its nature, cannot operate in Turkey? Do we have no courage to propose a controversy or a critical stand, or no energy for transforming the pre-established values? Is there no need for 'the new' or avant-garde? To what extent does Turkish art and architecture endure to be 'arri re-garde', or follower? There would be

many other questions raised pertaining the changing conditions of the context. Similar questions to the ones posed above could be relevant for a number of countries and for their architectural scene. The answers to all of these questions highlight one point such that critical thinking, which is both destructive and creative, can ignite avant-garde culture not only in Turkey but also in general.

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<sup>1</sup> For further elaboration of 'architectural avant-garde' historically, conceptually, and contextually, please refer to the ongoing dissertation, with the advisory of Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ali Cengizkan. Gökçeçiçek Savaşır. 2007 (tentative). *Re-thinking the Limits of Architecture through the Avant-Garde Formations during the 1960s: Projections and Receptions in the Context of Turkey*. Ongoing PhD. diss., Middle East Technical University, Ankara.

<sup>2</sup> For the delineation of the framework for these interviews, I am grateful for my advisor Assoc. Prof. Dr. Ali Cengizkan, and my jury members Prof. Dr. Uğur Tanyeli and Assoc. Prof. Dr. Abdî Güzer, who have been cultivating the study by their significant ideas and suggestions.

<sup>3</sup> These architects are Gürhan Tümer, Şevki Vanlı, Tekin Akalın, Ragıp Buluç, Haldun Ertekin, Doğan Tekeli, İlhan Tekeli, Doruk Pamir, Atilla Yücel, Adnan Kazmaoğlu, Ersen Gürsel, Selahattin Önür, Suha Özkan.

<sup>4</sup> Tanyeli, Uğur. "Archigram in Context of its Time," in *Archigram November 22 – December 31 2005 Exhibition Catalogue*. İstanbul: Garanti Galeri, 2005. 2-6.

<sup>5</sup> The space program, Project Apollo, with the mission of "landing a man on the Moon", was completed in 1969. American automobiles, the jumbo jet, Concorde, and the QE2 ocean liner were famous transportation means of the decade. Yapp, Nick. *Getty Images 1960s: Decades of the 20th Century*. Germany: Könemann, 2005.