

TYOLOGICAL APPROACH AS A TOOL FOR AN OPERATIONAL DESIGN METHODOLOGY

Eldem's Social Security Agency Complex

by Ayse Ozbil

What renders a study on Eldem's architecture difficult and open to discussion is that it is almost impossible to trace his ideas through his words since Eldem chose to communicate his architectural tenets via his designs. "Unlike his contemporaries, Hassan Fathy of Egypt and Rifat Chadirji of Iraq, Eldem did not present his personal philosophies in written form."¹ Thus, all proposed and stated in this paper is to a great extent a personal re-interpretation of Eldem's architectural theory based on one of his major works: the Social Security Agency Complex. First, a confession on the part of the author: I am prejudiced for the building. Being not so much an architect but a sensitive inhabitant concerned with the continuous erosion of the historical products of her own culture, I have a predilection for the particular work of architecture. Thus, my overemphasis on certain aspects of the building derives from my cultural bias. Sedad Hakki Eldem's Social Security Agency Complex has often been interpreted as one of the early champions in Turkey representing contextualist sensitivity. (Fig.1.) The contextualist approach in design process had emerged as a reaction to the deterioration of the historical fabric by the devastating forces of the international style, whose debilitating effect was heightened due to the rapid expansion of the post-World War 2 cities.

From the late 1960s onwards, it was not only the "facelessness" of the international style that was subjected to severe criticism, but also the "placelessness" resulting from a disregard of context, i.e. of the imperatives of site, topography, climate, culture and tradition.²

¹ Suha Ozkan, 'Echoes of Sedad Eldem', *Sedad Eldem Architect in Turkey*, (Concept Media Ltd.: 1987), 21.

² Sibel Bozdogan, 'A Contextualist Experiment', *Sedad Eldem Architect in Turkey*, (Concept Media Ltd.: 1987), 91.

At the same time, most of the international institutes were primarily preoccupied with the conservation of the monuments, not taking the traditional urban fabric into account. Within this kind of an intellectual milieu, Eldem's preoccupation with the issues of cultural continuity and urban morphology in his Social Security Agency Complex was regarded as a precursor of contextualism in the contemporary Turkish architecture and Eldem was instantly placed under the category of "regionalist". Ozkan classifies Eldem's architecture in the category of "abstract regionalism" together with Raj Rewal and Charles Correa.

Eldem is a devoted regionalist in search of an architecture which is primarily Turkish, but the references he makes in his designs, (to what makes it Turkish), are abstract.³

Here, the word abstract should be read in the sense that though Eldem integrated certain forms of the traditional "Turkish House" into his designs, the way he interpreted these forms was of abstract models rather than stylistic imitations. He was not interested in decorative or stylistic features of the precedent's works but in the universal compositional principles inherent in these products. And this is what makes his architecture modern. Yucel, on the other hand, defines Eldem's regionalism as a synthesis of historical, regional and economic-nationalistic identities.⁴ However; Eldem's so-called "regionalist" attitude is denied by many critics, who point out that the timber-frame "Turkish House" on which Eldem's architectural roots depend is only a particular house type in the vast category of the Ottoman Empire. Kuban criticizes the one sidedness of Eldem's interpretation of the notion of the "Turkish House":

If national architecture is to be grounded in the past, which of these are you going to take as a paradigm? Today there is the fashion of Turkish house, although a largely discursive category. Our model for this is the traditional timber-frame house type. What about the thousand years old tradition of mud-brick houses; of Erzurum houses, Rize houses, Bodrum houses and Urfa houses? Are these to remain outside what is national?⁵

³ Suha Ozkan, 'Regionalism Within Modernism', draft for translation written for *Architecture and Behavior*, (October 27 1992), 18-20.

⁴ Atilla Yucel, 'Contemporary Turkish Architecture: A Thematic Overview through the Work of Eldem, Cansever and Cinici', *Mimar: Architecture in Development*, no:10, 1983, 124.

⁵ Dogan Kuban, 'Bizde Rejyonalizm Uzerine (On Our Regionalism)', *Mimarlik ve Sanat*, no:1, 1961, 8.

While engaging themselves with a particular term, these critics overlook a significant point: what is crucial to the architectural discourse is not the meaning of the “Turkish House” that Eldem refers to; rather it is his intention in introducing it to the agenda. Eldem’s life-long studies on the “Turkish House” led him to a rational architectonic interpretation of the traditional Turkish architecture –an interpretation that is far from being a temporary fashion. It is in this sense that Eldem’s architecture is “classic” –not only because of their forms or symmetry, but merely because they are monumental and atemporal. Peter Eisenmann defines “classic” as:

That which is classic invokes the idea of ancient and exemplary and suggests ‘authority and distinction’; it is a model of what is excellent or of the first rank. More importantly, it implies its own timelessness, the idea that it is first rank at any time.⁶

The Social Security Agency Complex is “classic”. (Fig.2.) Since it is beyond any constraint of period or place, it has the capacity of being transmittable in time. Meanwhile, the designation of Eldem as a “regionalist” turns out to be merely confusing. Regionalism aims at providing meaning and content under specific local conditions and searching how the architecture of a particular region ought to be. Eldem does not have such an insistence. Instead, his architecture, based on the idea of a “national tradition”, surpasses any type of regionalism. He was always and still is criticized for imitating certain components of the “Turkish House” and repeating himself, but he had a larger task in mind. Now I suggest that we can see him addressing this problem with various means in the Social Security Agency Complex. The following arguments will try to reveal this ‘bigger problem’ in an attempt to persuade the reader that Eldem’s approach was not contextualist but was rather modernist through a judgmental assessment of the Modern itself.

My first step would be to place the reckless labeling of the building as a ‘contextualist object’ into detailed scrutiny. Located in a historical district in Istanbul, it acts as a buffer between the old, traditional residential quarter and the wide Boulevard. The complex is constituted of blocks with varying heights and dimensions enclosing paved courtyards

⁶ Peter Eisenmann, ‘The End of the Classical: the End of the Beginning, the End of the End’, *Perspecta*, no:21, 1984, 155.

and a two-level interior arcade. (Fig.3.) The pavilions sit in harmony with the hilly topography, enlarging in size and height as they step up the slope. (Fig.4,5.) The meticulous concern paid for preserving the basic pattern of the existing urban residential fabric is reminiscent of the sensibility showed by the Smithsons to *street life* in their Economist Building (1959-1964). In this project, the architects' response to the context was to remain loyal to the Doorn Manifesto of Team X in 1954, which claimed that "habitat should be integrated into the landscape rather than isolated as an object within it"⁷. In terms of urban morphology, they grouped their blocks around a courtyard, woven into a whole by interior streets, passages and arcades. (Fig.6.) The sensitivity observed in the planning of the building is also evident in terms of built form, presenting itself through the façade treatments of the blocks and the building heights. The Economist cluster was built along the same time with Eldem's complex: in the epoch of the international style.

The highly contextualized solution appeared radical when set against its contemporaries in which the International Style was being implemented as an autonomous art with little or no reference to the actualities of the site.⁸

Even though they share similar concerns, classifying the two works under the same label –'contextualist'– would be misleading. The two buildings break away from each other in two points. While the Economist's polite response to its urban context was through the adoption of reinforced concrete to create simple, neutral façades, Eldem chose to refer to the existing fabric by articulating his elevations via a wide range of archetypes he decomposed from the traditional "Turkish House". (Fig.7.) Thus, while the Smithsons' facades are about *retreatment*, Eldem's elevations are concerned with *replication*. Yet, the most significant difference between the two lies in the social domain they belong to. The Economist Building is about contextual sensitivity in a western city, where the effects of Industrialization have been long ago stabilized; whereas, the Social Security Complex still carries the burden of maintaining the historical heritage that is threatened by the unstable socio-economic dynamics of a developing country.

⁷ Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), 273.

⁸ Helena Webster, 'Modernism Without Rhetoric', *Modernism Without Rhetoric*, ed. Helena Webster, (Maryland: Academy Editions, 1997),60.

Even though Eldem's complex introduced a set of values that was neither praised nor respected at the time, they are not adequate to label the building as a contextualist work. While the complex is sensitive to context and topography, some inconsistencies seem to emerge upon its careful analysis. After searching vigorously for numerous documentations of the building, one is struck by the fact that there exists no data about its interior: neither a single illustration, nor a single drawing. It is as if the blocks are formed merely of outer coverings, whose interior is nothing but a large cavity. A secondary problem is produced by the uniform treatment of individual facades, which lack any clearly defined front and back. The building seems to take no account of the fact that its four facades are facing different conditions. Indeed, any hierarchy between the designs of the elevations is so well eliminated that it is almost impossible to find the way to the entrances. This, I would argue, is a deliberate attempt in order to achieve the 'absolute idealization' of the building, whose existence is claimed by Rowe to be destroyed by the deforming pressures of entrance and orientation.⁹ Accordingly, the high solid bases of the blocks deny any interaction with the Boulevard. This structure can be compared to the stone walls of the ground floors in the traditional house type; however, it does not suffice to clarify the architect's intention in cutting the building's dialogue with the main artery. Another explanation can be brought to this architectural preference. Having the building turn its back to the heavy traffic of the noisy Boulevard, Eldem may have aimed to create an introverted complex that would direct people to the back alleys he had carefully structured. Yet, this reasoning, too, does not compensate for the indistinct directionality of the building. Within these questions in mind, I argue that Eldem's main intention in the design was not to create a contextualist building but rather to produce an aesthetic sculpture. Just as Piero's *Baptism of Christ* offers a sense of the material reality of the picture as an object¹⁰, so does the Social Security Complex reflect a sense of the object as a picture. Though the reader could find it exaggerated and incoherent, it is my assumption that Eldem wished for the participator to experience his art by looking at it while walking through the arcades and interior streets but not actually by occupying it. This kind of a viewpoint may offer an explanation of the architect's overemphasis on the skin of the building rather than its planning. As a result, this choice led him to abandon the international style. Most of the criticisms directed towards

⁹ Thomas L. Schumacher, 'Contextualism: Urban Ideas and Deformations', *Theorizing a New Agenda For Architecture*, ed. Kate Nesbitt, (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996),302.

¹⁰ Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 134.

Eldem's preoccupation with the "Turkish House", which regard him as a single-faceted architect, seem to elude the fact that he was up to date with contemporary progresses (maybe more than any architect of his time was) and was in touch with his foreign contemporaries. In 1952, in cooperation with Skidmore, Owings and Merrill he designed the Hilton Hotel in Istanbul: a building that can be claimed to closely follow the ideas of the International Style. This design alone suffices to prove that Eldem was aware of the architectural developments of his time, keeping in close contact with his contemporaries. He was also well aware that he would have not achieved the effect he desired via a prismatic box. Besides, and more importantly, he was in the pursuit of addressing a bigger issue, which, I strongly argue, underlies his entire professional career. Eldem was constantly in search of modern architecture that was critical of the monochromatic approach of the orthodox modernism. The essential ideology lying in Eldem's architectural discourse was his concern for 'type' and 'typology' that is implicitly identified as an active element in his design intention.

Eldem's life-long emphasis on the inherent typological principles of the traditional house was due to his consistent search for creating an alternative to the dissolution of aesthetical and conceptual philosophies that took place under the banner of Modern architecture, and "...to direct students of architecture away from the dominant, undisputed pivot of architectural development –Western architecture–"¹¹ toward a contemporary architecture that was capable of maintaining cultural continuity. Following the ideas of type and typology, Eldem aimed to create an operative design methodology and a modern vocabulary from the abstracted codes of the traditional in order to produce a sound architecture. In this "generative process", he did not adopt a historicist approach rather he went on generating significant architectural design principles using the precedent as a source for appropriate ideas.

When we re-examine or discover this or that aspect of earlier building production today, it is with no idea of repeating its forms,

¹¹ Sedad Hakki Eldem, 'Son 120 Sene Icinde Turk Mimarisinde Millilik ve Rejyonelizm Arastirmalari' (Studies on Nationalism and Regionalism in the Turkish Architecture of last 120 years), *Mimaride Turk Milli Uslubu Semineri (Seminar On the Turkish National Architecture)*, (Istanbul: Kultur ve Turizm Bakaligi yayini, 1984),11.

but rather in the expectation of feeling new sensibilities that are wholly the product of the present.¹²

This typological consciousness brings Eldem close to Aldo Rossi, who, in his seminal work *The Architecture of the City*, attempts to produce a critique of the city of modern architecture.

Into this new idea of process Rossi introduces the elements of history and typology, but not as a nostalgia for narrative or a reductive scientism. Rather, history becomes analogous to a 'skeleton' whose condition serves as a measure of time and, in turn, is measured by time...The skeleton and its measuring apparatus [typology] become the process and ultimately the object of the autonomous researcher. History and type, as components parts of research, allow for transformations of themselves which are 'prearranged but still unforeseeable'.¹³

Rossi's principles of the city can be matched with Eldem's theory of architecture. For Eldem, the "Turkish House" stands complete and ready to be decomposed. He dismantles the "Turkish House" and the traditional Ottoman architecture into their basic irreducible elements. He then synthesizes these archetypes –*sofa*, pavilion, courtyard, *cumba*, etc.– through his personal filter and re-combines them to form complete ensembles. This generative typological approach is evident in the Social Security Complex, reflected both in the use of typical elements of the "Turkish House" and his adoption of distinct compositional principles with reference to the traditional Turkish architecture. However, the implementation of a typological repertoire does not necessarily entail a contextualist approach. These typical structures are present in most of his designs, independent of their particular context. (Fig.8.) Common to all is his dedication to modern architecture that would convey the preservation of cultural patrimony. Yet, Eldem's proposal is flexible to the changing presences over time. The paradox between the contextualist approach and the inevitable tendency of change caused by growth is observed in the historical site of Zeyrek, where "the architect's

¹² Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Architecture Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1958), 3.

¹³ Peter Eisenmann, 'Introduction' in *The Architecture of the City*, (Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1982),5.

deliberate effort to respond to the context has been irreversibly undermined with the rapid disappearance of the very context to which he wanted to respond.”¹⁴ Thus the question emerges *per se*: will Eldem’s design be stripped off its meaning and stature and thus lose its permanency when the existing residential fabric is obliterated once and for all in the near future due to speculative processes? My ultimate answer to this question, as the reader would have inferred by now, is negative. The building is capable of being synchronized with the ever-changing progress of the growing city neither because of its functional compatibility nor due to its contextual sensitivity but precisely because of the generative principles underlying its form. In fact, this quality has already been verified in the building’s history. In spite of all the drawbacks –modification of its original use and its poor maintenance– the complex has encountered during a period of 40 years, the form of its mass is still intact. Regarding type as an abstract model rather than as an answer (an image of a typical outcome), Eldem lent his building the capacity of adaptability to contemporary circumstances. Thus, the complex stands as a record of time.

From the start my basic endeavor has been to insist that Eldem’s Social Security Agency Complex, despite all the assertions of certain authorities, is not a work of contextualism but a modern building that is evolutionary, if not revolutionary. In his design, Eldem is critical not so much of the loss of collective memory of the existing historical background but of the narrow-minded perception of modernism. The deployment of traditional elements within a modernist framework is an intentional attempt to reveal the diverse paths within modern architecture; to publicize that the office building type needs not to be confined to a point block but can assume any shape; to demonstrate that the application of universal principles of tradition does not preclude a “new architecture” suitable to a new way of life. In the case of the Social Security Agency Complex, the resulting intellectual structure, woven with reviving ideas, generated awareness of people’s own culture and provided significant stimuli for architects in the years to follow. One day, upon reading an article in a newspaper, which appreciated the works of some western architects and denigrated the contemporary Turkish architecture, a friend of my mother –a lady with no architectural background– came up to me with a frown. Her first response was to describe Eldem’s complex (she neither knew the name of the building nor for which it was used) as a counter-argument to this unjust condemnation. This

¹⁴ Sibel Bozdogan, ‘A Contextualist Experiment’, *Sedad Eldem Architect in Turkey*, (New York: Concept Media Ltd., 1987), 91.

anecdote reveals the process through which a certain type of form is imprinted into the collective memory of the city – materialized through the recollection of its citizens. Once a work of architecture is stripped off the relation between its form and function, it is no longer bound to a particular context. Thus, despite the fact that Social Security Agency is sensitive to its context, it is by no means a simple catalogue of site pressures. Rather, it conveys *modernism without rhetoric*. The image of the building as a sculptural object reveals the valor of simplicity and self-esteem; while, the typological methodology pursued in the design process reflects the architect’s dedication to the continuity of the traditional heritage.

Unfortunately, the works of Eldem and issues related to his architectural discourse have either been kept out of the limelight or reduced to certain categories. This hapless condition is owed to the misleading perception that regards typological issues as restricting the architectural creativity and precluding the architect from progress. Within this perspective, Eldem’s works have been identified as “regressive” by certain authorities of architecture. In an interview on the Social Security of Agency Complex, Eldem has referred to these denunciations:

I never imagined my architecture as regressing. I conceived it as modern and still do!..It is a cultural issue. Folklore is being executed at every station, at every dock but is being restricted in architecture. My architectural discourse has the intention to overcome this restriction and to teach architecture to the public.¹⁵

In fact, the works of Eldem should be more deeply appreciated at present, when the architect –lost in the prevalent architectural plurality– is confused with the questions of how to produce architecture that is capable of sustaining several realities simultaneously –authentic, imported, new, historical, i.e. Rather than regressing, Eldem introduced progress by a modern interpretation of the traditional –not as ornament or style but as a set of universal structural principles– to fulfill contemporary aspirations. Yet again, his tenets are often overlooked as just another *ism* among the vast categories of architecture.

¹⁵ Interview with Sedat Hakki Eldem quoted in Engin Yenil, ‘Eldem’i Yitireli on yil oldu!’ (It has been ten years since we lost Eldem!), *Mimarlik*, no:283, October 1998, 45.



FIG.1. The resulting structure is tied to the context in a manner that conceals the actual limitation of the lot.



FIG.2. "It is classic in the etymological meaning of the term as the 'best possible' abstracted from the real world of artifacts and experience."

[Sibel Bozdogan, 'Modernity in Tradition', *Sedad Eldem Architect in Turkey*, (New York: Concept Media Ltd., 1987), 144.]

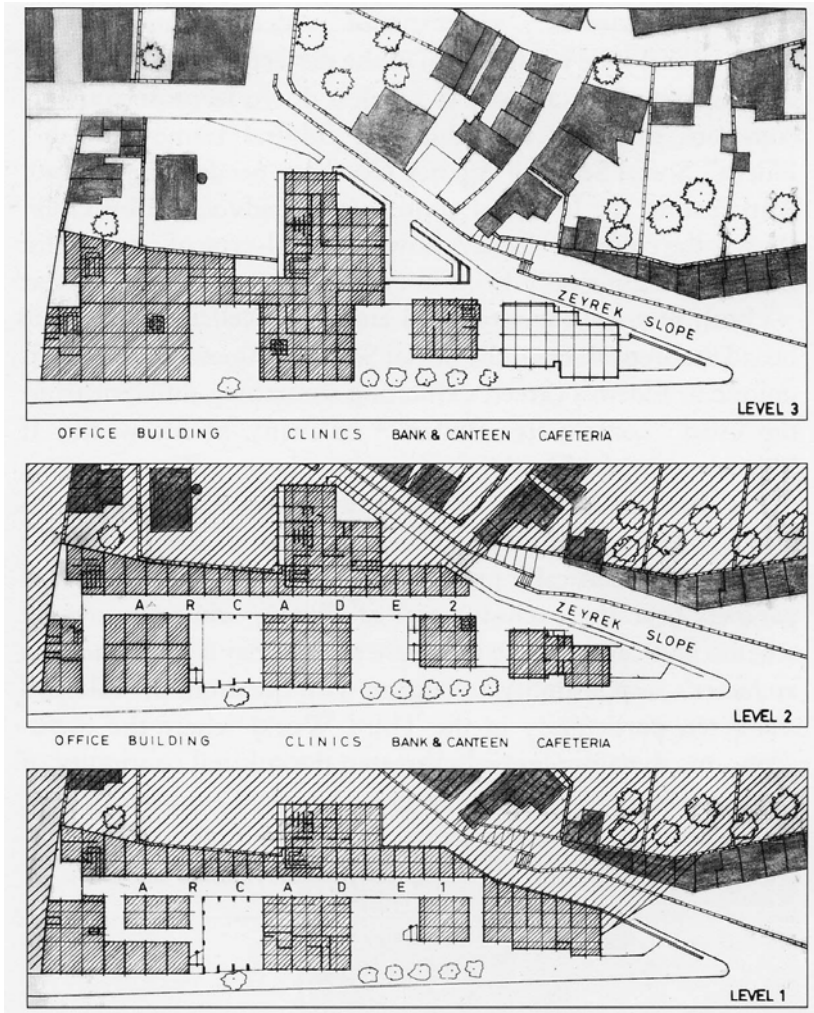


FIG.3. The layout of the overall project represents an intricate interpretation of the existing context of the Ottoman urban fabric with an emphasis on narrow open spaces.



FIG.4. Blocks of varying height break the monotony of the long façade, creating a vivid effect along the Boulevard.



FIG.5. The lowest part of the site is occupied by a two-story coffee kiosk, while the multi-story office blocks are aligned along the sloping Boulevard in a dynamic arrangement.

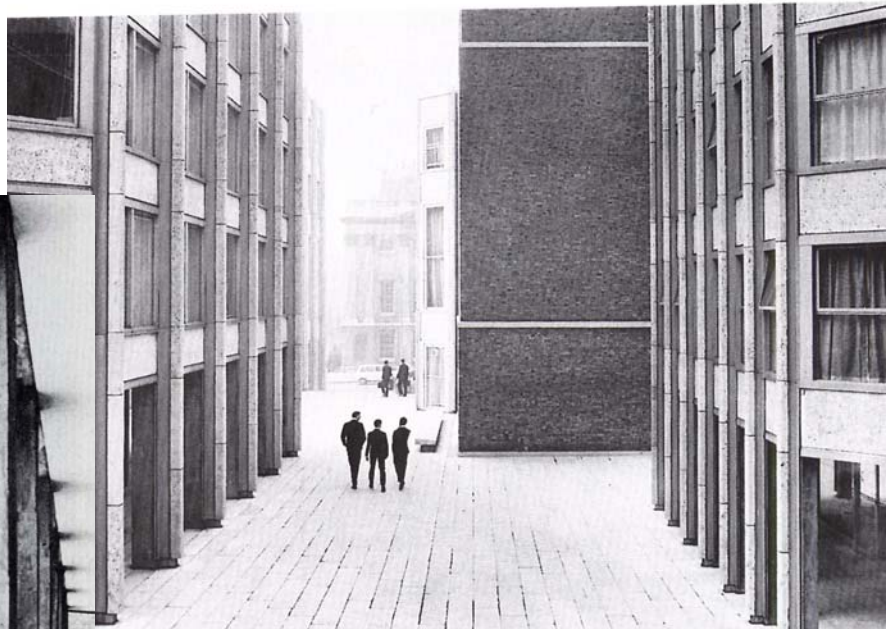
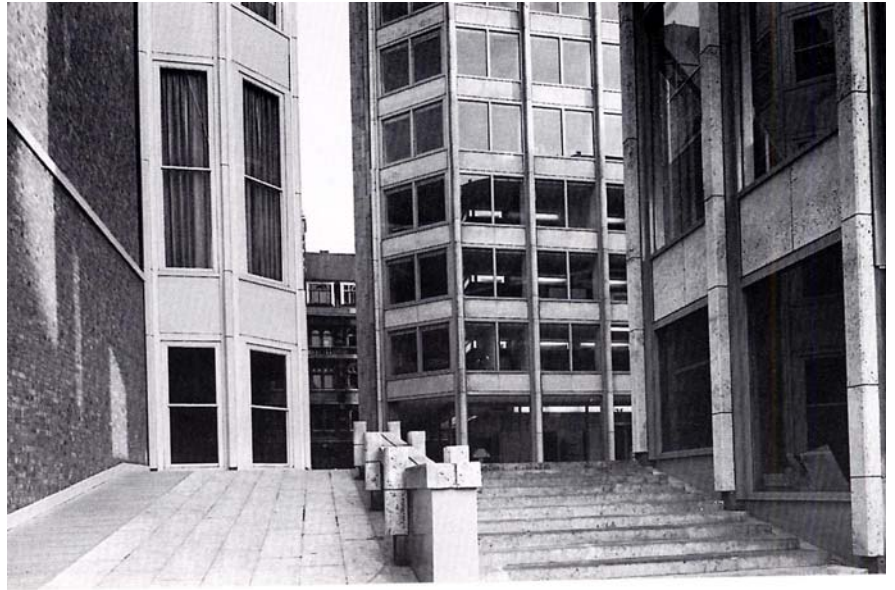
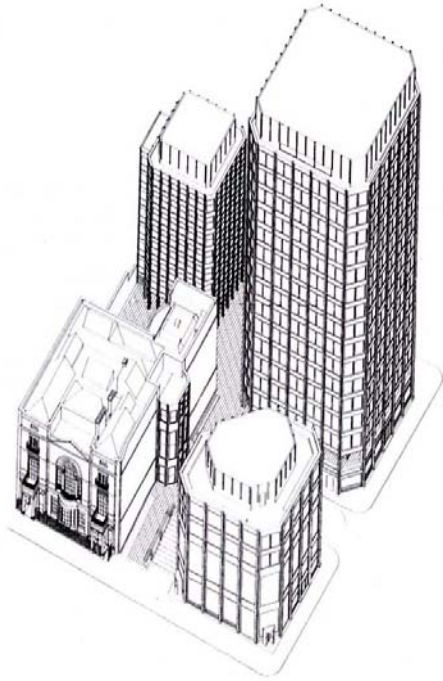


FIG.6. "The Economist cluster is a work of 'studied restraint'...looks to the future where it incorporates successfully industrialized products and processes, and conversely that it legitimately looks to the past in the classicism of its simple geometric order."

[Kenneth Frampton, 'The Economist and the Hauptstadt', *Architectural Design*, February 1965, 62.]

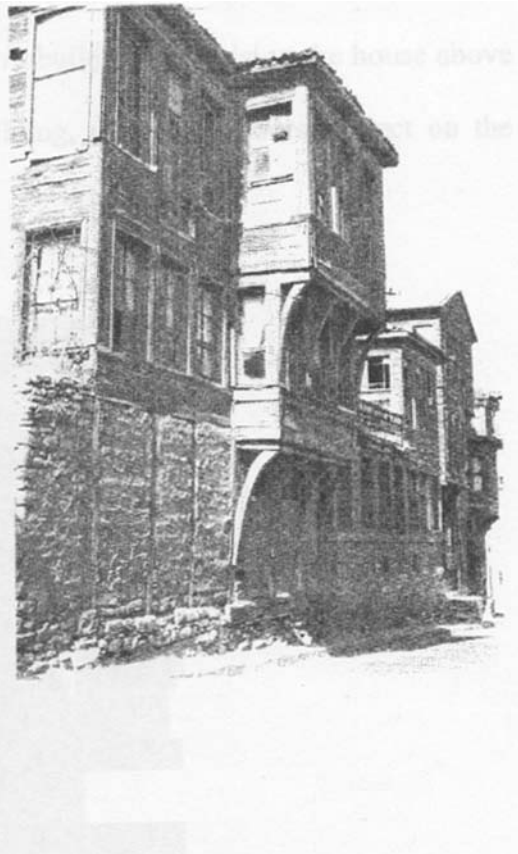


FIG.7. The different façade treatments of the two buildings bear the same kind of respect towards their contexts. The Economist Building –on top–; Social Security Agency Complex –at the bottom–.



Social Security Agency Complex, Istanbul, 1962-64.

Indian Embassy Building, Ankara, 1965.



The Embassy Building and Embassy Residence.



FIG.8. The interpreted typological components and design principles of the traditional “Turkish House” are present in most of Eldem’s works.