

THE MODERN TURKISH INTERIOR AS A POLITICAL MEDIUM

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ABSTRACT

The modern interior in Turkey has always been political; communicating the essence of modernism through its physical form. As we celebrate the 100th year of the Turkish Republic, research on the past 100 years of the modern interior unveils not only the effects of the Turkish Republic in 1923, and direct reflections of Atatürk's *revolutions* as the founder of the republic, but also a *gradual evolution* of the interior in what can be described as, slightly differentiated time frames, both incorporating considerable change. The acceptance of *continuous evolution movement or change of the interior space* comes readily and naturally compared to the larger enclosure, architecture. However, this recognition also carries challenges in terms of defining and framing, as well as preserving and archiving. This may also suggest that the interior may be more responsive to cultural and political change, *demanding almost a cultural activism*. History of interior design, therefore, simultaneously inhabits these traits, and socio-political, socio-behavioral, and socio-spatial analyses are necessary in order to reach a comprehensive overview. Politics are closely knitted with defining and framing as they relate to the "activities associated with the governance of a country or area", and help shape all that fall within those activities, including cultural production and interior design, what it means to be "modern" and consequences on interiors. This paper focuses on the evolving modern Turkish interior, presents a brief overview of the Docomomo Turkey Committee's works, and highlights three papers from the committee members.

Keywords: Modernism, Modern Interiors, Modern Interiors in Turkey, Modern Furniture in Turkey.

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POLİTİK BİR İFADE OLARAK MODERN TÜRK İÇ MEKANI

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ÖZET

Türkiye'deki modern iç mekan modernizmin özünü fiziksel biçimiyle ileterek her zaman politik varlık göstermiştir. Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin 100. yılını kutlarken, modern iç mekanın son 100 yılı üzerine yapılan araştırmalar, yalnız Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin 1923'teki etkilerini ve Cumhuriyet'in kurucusu olarak Atatürk devrimlerinin doğrudan yansımalarını değil, her ikisi de önemli değişiklikler içeren, biraz farklılaştırılmış zaman dilimleriyle, aynı zamanda iç mekanın kademeli bir evrimini anlatılabilecek şekilde ortaya koymaktadır. Sürekli evrim hareketinin veya iç mekanın değişiminin kabulü, daha büyük ölçüğe, mimariye kıyasla beklenti içinde ve doğal olmalıdır. Bununla birlikte, bu kabul, tanımlama ve çerçeveleme, koruma ve arşivleme açısından belli zorluklar taşır. Bu aynı zamanda, iç mekanın kültürel ve politik değişime daha duyarlı olabileceğini ve neredeyse kültürel bir aktivizm gerektirebileceğini de gösterebilir. Bu nedenle, iç mekan tarihi aynı anda bu özelliklerde yaşar ve kapsamlı bir genel bakışa ulaşmak için sosyo-politik, sosyo-davranışsal ve sosyo-mekansal analizler gereklidir. Siyaset, "bir ülkenin veya bölgenin yönetimiyle ilgili faaliyetlerle" ilgili oldukları için tanımlama ve çerçeveleme ile yakından örülür ve kültürel üretim ve iç tasarım dahil olmak üzere bu faaliyetlere dahil olan her şeyi şekillendirmeye yardımcı olur. "modern" olmanın anlamı ve iç mekanlar üzerindeki sonuçları. Bu makale, gelişen modern Türk iç mekanına odaklanmakta, Docomomo Türkiye Komitesi'nin çalışmalarına kısa bir genel bakış sunmakta ve komite üyelerinden üç makaleyi vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Modernizm, Modern İç Mekan, Türkiye'de Modern İç Mekan, Türkiye'de Modern Mobilya.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The significance of the modern interior lies in its unique relation to how one must conduct one's daily life and oneself as a member of an improved society, reaching a vision of a better life (Rajguru, 2022; Parr, 2002; Prakash, 2008). The modern Turkish interior, distinguishing itself from a colonial discourse, and deriving traits from European as well as American modernism, is unique in the sense that it has both appropriated traditional interior components, as well as production methods and materials, aligning with the political development of the Turkish Republic. Despite this quality, and partly because of this quality that invites a parallelism to policy, documentation is scarce and non-systematic. This presents challenges in design history in Turkey and shakes the grounds for more unified discussions. This paper aims to expand upon these issues, with particular examples from efforts to reach these aims.

The modern interior in Turkey has always been political; communicating the essence of modernism through its physical form. Research on the past 100 years of the modern interior unveils not only the effects of the Turkish Republic in 1923, and direct reflections of Atatürk's *revolutions* as the founder of the republic, but also a *gradual evolution* of the interior in what can be described as, slightly differentiated time frames, both incorporating considerable change. Essentially from the same stem of the word; "-volution" from Latin *volvere*, which means "to roll" or "the act of revolving", defining a sense of movement. While evolution is rolling out, revolution is rolling back. In addition, while a revolution can be defined as, "a forcible overthrow of a government or social order, in favor of a new system" being a change taking place in a relatively short period, evolution consists of, "changes in the heritable traits of a population of organisms as successive generations replace one another", pointing to a longer time. However, this does not mean that "modernism just happened", and embodying a process as well, both are valid and refer to change, reflecting the transformation of the nation, society, and individual. Placing revolution within the longer course of evolution, just as in its biological counterpart, it is not possible to identify, "the first modernist interior", because the process is complex, shows slow, gradual, and incremental changes, there are intermediate phases, several variable aspects of the interior, and therefore presents grounds for discussion in terms of classification. Moreover, a focus on individual characteristics of the modern interior, such as the function/typology, furniture, artwork, patterns, materials, or lighting, sheds light on the fact that evolution itself also presents itself at varying paces at different scales.

The acceptance of *continuous evolution movement or change of the interior space* comes readily and naturally compared to the larger enclosure, architecture (Havehand, 2004; Huppertz, 2012). However, this recognition also carries challenges in terms of defining and framing, as well as preserving and archiving (Hasırcı, Tuna Ultav, Örnekoğlu Selçuk, 2022 a, b, c). This may also suggest that the interior may be more responsive to cultural and political change, *demanding almost a cultural activism*. History of interior design, therefore, simultaneously inhabits these traits, and socio-political, socio-behavioral, and socio-spatial analyses are necessary in order to reach a comprehensive overview. Politics are closely knitted with defining and framing as they relate to the "activities associated with the governance of a country or area", and help shape all that fall within those activities, including cultural production and interior design, what it means to be "modern" and consequences on interiors.

Due to the mastery of revolution engineering in its establishment, and the fact that, according to Baltacıoğlu, Atatürk enabled the revolution not by declaring war against the backward forces, but in a way that did not leave them a fighting chance, the Turkish Revolution carried the significance and characteristics of “civilization design” (Ozankaya, 2001; Tazegül, 2005). Moreover, the revolution has been recognized as a secularist one at the international scale. The French head of state, Prof. Herriot has declared his appreciation for Atatürk, as such;

“Pasha, how can I not admire you? I created a secular government in France. This government was overthrown by the hands of the Pope and his representatives in France. You have gotten rid of the caliph and established a truly secular nation. Within all the bigotry, how did you get the society to accept a secular lifestyle?” (Ozankaya, Atatürk ve Modern Türkiye, 2001: 395)

This statement shows that, due to the increased determination necessary, the Turkish Revolution is one that not only matches but also surpasses certain aspects of Western examples. Afet İnan (1981) explains the Turkish Revolution stating that revolution carries value not when it destroys everything, but when it is constructive. She refers to Atatürk’s statement; “The human being is the embodiment of movement and action, meaning the representation of dynamism” (1981: 123), where he explains the flexibility and advancement of the principles of the day requiring amendments with regard to the social, scientific, and technical progress of the nation.

Within the course of history, Atatürk emphasized that it was not possible to infinitely preserve the dogmatic characteristics of any principle. The Turkish people were expected to prepare for a dynamic future then, adapting continuously to the civilization of their day, but at all times preserving the integrity of the nation (İnan, 1981). A revolution that characterizes its base as change, appears to describe itself also exemplifying an evolving nature -an evolution and an evolution of culture. Regarding the role of culture concerning the revolution, Atatürk has stated;

“The fundamental basis of the Turkish Republic is *culture*. I do not wish to explain this comment here. Because, this can be observed in several schools of the Turkish Republic in many instances... Culture is reading, understanding, being able to see, carrying meaning out of what one has seen, being enlightened, thinking, training the mind... What I wish to express is that, today’s children of the Turkish Republic are cultural human beings. They are both themselves cultural, but they are also convinced that they need to spread this virtue to their surrounding and the whole of the Turkish people...” (İnan, 1981: 44)

Concerning the reflection of culture to society within a framework of secular and contemporary living, Atatürk adopted all that was forward-thinking and exemplified these choices in his contact with the public, as well as his daily life. In a participatory meeting on the future of Turkey, with the public in İzmir on the 2nd of February, 1923, he invited questions from the public on women’s rights, education, and being a free and modern republic, he gave countless examples of modern living infused in daily life, beginning with a critique of his upbringing and reflections on aspects of culture (Borak, 2004). Atatürk knew the significance of cultural products such as architecture, and even his first discussions with Austrian architect Clemens Holzmeister, winner of the third Grand National Assembly building competition reflect this. The competition was finalized in 1936, however, the building would only open its doors officially in 1961, after

the hardships and challenges that the war had brought (Hasirci and Tuna Ultav, 2019). Atatürk, wished the third GNAT building (to be completed and opened in 1961), to reflect the ideals of a modern, secular, and powerful nation, and the finely crafted main building that still houses interior components drawn at the 1/1 detail scale successfully fulfill this aim. The interiors of the GNAT followed this ambition and could be defined as modern in its truest sense, being designed through a competition, having selected the best of modern Turkish interior designers, artists, and architects of the day. Carrying both cultural qualities and international style features, the interiors and furniture showcase an interpretation of modernist features as well as, for instance, making use of traditional kilim patterns on the walls, utilizing local textures on the floors as inspiration, and using the religious “rahle” (holy book holder in Islam) (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Grand National Assembly of Turkey, newspaper stand and coffee table, inspired by the “rahle” (holy book holder in Islam), 1960s, designed by Gazanfer Erim; in (Tuna Ultav, Z., Hasirci, D., Borvalı, S., & Atmaca, H., 2016; DATUMM).

The strength of the revolution can be observed in that its effects could be followed without interruption in the skeleton of all aspects of the national identity, including interiors -both public and private (Kurtbek, 1939). The development of a cultural base necessary in all areas and a distancing from prior habits and ways of life were required and interiors were and continue to be one of the most expressive products of that culture. Being a charismatic leader, Atatürk knew that, first his close friends and then the public would

follow his example (Başbuğ, 2023). Therefore, he showed utmost significance to the interiors he was photographed in. Often photographed at his desk, reading or working, his spaces were modern, sleek, and undecorated, leading the way on what public and private spaces needed to look like in modern Turkey. An analysis of the interiors Atatürk lived and worked in, especially after the Republic, shows a shift from the more decorated interior furnishings of the pre-republican era to the more stylized, and what can be defined as modern. The modern interior also involved novel spaces like the new trains or seaside mansions such as Florya Atatürk Sea Mansion, that required minimal and concise design and clever detail solutions, in a unified design language and quality craftsmanship, not only with new styles but also incorporating new materials. Since as head of state and leader of the modern revolution, Atatürk's furniture is expected to reflect some of the utmost progressive criteria, it is quite rewarding to investigate photos of interior and exterior spaces that frequently display aspects of furniture (Figures 3, 4, and 5).



Figure 3. A detailed look at the sideboard designed by Fazıl Aysu and Seyfi Arkan for the Florya Atatürk Marine Mansion, 1930s (Tuna Ultav, Z., Hasırcı, D., Borvalı, S., & Atmaca, H., 2016; DATUMM).



Figure 4. Information on form, material, texture, and textiles can be derived from Atatürk and his wife Latife Hanım's photographs and interiors depicting a variety of contemporary modern furniture. Hanri Benazus Archive with special permission for DATUMM, 2023.



Figure 5. The ladies' compartment in Atatürk's private train. Hanri Benazus Archive with special permission for DATUMM, 2023.

2.1. Modernisms of Interior Space

Although solely observing the interior spaces themselves may exhibit a similar result, around the world, the modern interior has come into being following different paths. One can compare the American, Italian, and Japanese modern interiors in the 1960s, and they may present an approach, layout, color, texture, and other interior components to be parallel. However, the means by which they came into being not only alter their meaning then and there, but also shape their respective forthcoming paths for the future.

The modern Turkish interior is shaped hand in hand with the Turkish Republic. As an extension of culture, the interior is a direct and indirect reflection of not only the socio-cultural but also the socio-political development of a nation. The first 20 years of the Turkish Republic showcase interiors in which several different types of furniture all together, with a focus on İstanbul. The eclectic furniture in these spaces exemplified the composite use of European palaces and the Art Nouveau style (Uzunarslan, 2010). It was mostly towards the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s that what can be identified as cubic or modern furniture began to present itself in interiors. Modern furniture was influenced both by Art Deco as well as the modern movement and reflections of the time. The Early Republican period beginning with 1923 and continuing up until the 1950s, has had a great effect on interior space as well as shaping how the contemporary Turkish people live today. Thus, plural modernisms that coexisted and showed variation in their manifestation could be observed which currently enable multiple layered readings on Turkish interiors (Hasırcı, Avcı Hosanlı, Tuna Ultav, Örnekoğlu Selçuk, 2023).

2.2. docomomo Turkey – Interiors Committee

With an emphasis on modern interiors in Turkey, the members of the docomomo tr_interior committee, have been organizing defined themed panels in significant events such as this one; 4T Design and Design History Society Conferences. The current theme in the 100th year of the Turkish Republic -Design, Populism, and Politics- is significant today as ever. Identities, realities, voices, require discussion, with regards to acceptance (and not tolerance), and understanding pluralities, multiplicities, as well as physical and social nuances regarding the modern interior.

In this session, the docomomo tr_interior committee has prepared a panel discussion emphasizing the civil revolutions and evolutions that have taken place within the context of politics regarding the public, private, and “in-between” interiors of the republic with three separate research papers by members of the committee. The panel will be moderated and introduced with a background on docomomo international, docomomo turkey, and docomomo tr_interior, and its identity as an association of documentation, preservation, as well as, resistance, policy, and politics. It is believed that the discussion will contribute to the recognition and awareness of modern interiors, their components, and relevant literature which may be seen as a substantial effort in the race with time due to the lack of knowledge and resources leading to the disappearance of this significant part of interior design history.

Based on the values and structure of docomomo international and Turkey, and having established the docomomo tr_interior committee in 2019, with the joint efforts of Deniz Hasırcı, Zeynep Tuna Ultav, and Umut Şumnu, with advisor Elvan Altan, the committee has at present organized two symposiums led by Özyeğin University (led by committee member, Pınar Sezginalp) and Yaşar University (led by committee members, Gülnur Ballice and Zeynep Tuna Ultav), published related symposium books, took part in national and international conferences through organized committee panels, and published books. Hasırcı was selected in 2021 as an International Specialization Committee-Interior Design (ISC-ID with 12 members) member, to represent the preservation of modern interiors at the global scale. This enabled closer ties with ISC-ID, Hasırcı becoming interiors special issue co-editor with Zsuzsanna Böröcz (docomomo ISC-ID co-chair) for docomomo journal as well as organizer and one of the keynotes for the “Modernist women interior designers and artists: to deepen the reading of the different expressions of female creativity” conference held in March 2024. Şumnu has edited books such as, “The Modern Interior in Turkey Through Lines” (Çizgilerle Türkiye’de Modern İç Mekân) (Şumnu, 2023) and “Starring Architecture” (Başrolde Mimarlık) (Şumnu, 2024) that resulted in books to which several members of the committee contributed. The docomomo tr_interior committee is an active one focusing of dissemination of research in academic, as well as larger public circles. This is realized through books, and active website and social media accounts (<https://www.docomomo-tr-interior.org/>; https://www.instagram.com/docomomo_tr_interior/). This has enabled heightened public awareness as well as inclusion of younger audience into the modern interiors community.

3. PANEL PRESENTATIONS

Within the framework of this 4T panel;

Güliz Öktem Taşdemir-TED University, presented her work titled; “Modern materiality with regard to politics: The Economy Politics of Modern Interiors in Turkey: An Examination Through Materiality”. In her research, Taşdemir has focused on the economy politics that have influenced the shaping of the materiality in modern interiors in Turkey, looking at economic, political, and societal values, through an extensive chronological archival search.

Efsun Ekenyazıcı Güney-Bahçeşehir University and Hande Tulum Okur-Bahçeşehir University presented their paper entitled; “Modern public interiors concerning politics: Tracing the Interiors in Alternative Institutions for Girls in Turkey: Refia Övüç Maturation Institute”. With a focus on the educational institutions for the new modern and secular women of the Turkish Republic, after John Dewey’s report in 1924, the methods include the collection and analysis of historical photographs and archival documents of the case study, analyzing the interior spaces as well as specific interior components of the institute, as well as contacting graduates and teachers of the institute.

Lastly, Selim Sertel Öztürk-Başkent University presented his research titled; “TİMLO: Reading Post-War Construction and Architectural Policies Through a Company (1950-1980)”, where he discussed, the works of TİMLO (Türkiye İnşaat ve Malzeme Limited Ortaklığı, Turkey Construction and Material Limited Partnership), in shaping construction practices and modern interiors in especially the larger cities in Turkey through their production of building materials. The methods included extensive archival research in government documents and public media.

All three papers emphasize the significance of external factors influencing the modern interior in Turkey, such as, economics, construction industries, and educational policies. The modern interior has never been far from being directly influenced by peripheral dynamics as such, especially as interior design is a cultural practice and one that deals closely with individuals and human affairs.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper presents a brief discussion regarding the need for more unified platforms in Turkish design history, with a special focus on the modern Turkish interior in terms of the means by which it relates to daily life and political evolutions. The role of a collective stance is obvious, especially, in perspectives that present themselves as significant resources for the future of design history in Turkey. There is still scarce research-based knowledge created regarding the modern Turkish interior and its components, and within this, only a smaller part is accessible internationally. This presents limitations on the understanding of modern Turkish interiors that have a unique place in world design history, with its methods of appropriation of traditional aspects as well as its tight relation to Turkish politics, which urges fast-paced and continuous change.

Moreover, Berman (1988) has stated that modernity began as a reality in Western Europe, turning predominantly into a fantasy as one moves to the East. According to Ozankaya (2001), the Turkish

Revolution is not “fiction”, and there is only one truth. The person who has to live as a nation. This person is mentioned to be advantageous on two accounts; on the personal level and on the communal level, and these two advantages are equivalent to one another. Choosing to prioritize one over the other does not provide a free, independent, and happy life (2001: 397).

This being the case, design history literature, focusing on interiors, often aligns with either the Western or the colonial discourse. Turkey has been facing the West and the colonial East is different than the case in Turkey. Atatürk has clearly underlined that modernity could only be possible through complete independence, which could in turn could only take place through political independence. On the 10th anniversary of the Turkish Republic in 1933, Atatürk speaks to the colonial Eastern nations, saying, “Look at the sun that will now rise from the East. Today, as I see the brightening of the day, I see the Eastern nations’ awakening as well... Colonialism will be erased from the world and a new era will begin; where nations will be indistinguishable from one another in terms of color, religion or race, which will lead to an era of harmony and collaboration...” (Türk Tarih Kurumu, 1959: 40). On the 100th anniversary, this vision appears to be achieved.

Distinguishing itself from the aforementioned stances, a multitude of revolutions are contained in the Turkish Revolution. The layered and nuanced discussions that might be found in the related literature contribute greatly to the understanding and development of literature on the modern Turkish interior. The related literature on modern Turkish interiors can effectively grow through a collective approach, adopting interdisciplinary methods, the use of a variety of resources inside and outside of the field, and cross-referencing.

The many developmental stages of the Turkish Republic already invite the elaborate study of the evolving nature of the Revolution and how it contributes to interiors and their components. That being the case, the history of interiors is in its growth period, with much to look forward to. Collective approaches like docomomo aiming to raise awareness is necessary for the intellectual growth, documentation, and protection of modern heritage in Turkey as well as around the globe. Education is key at this point, requiring credible written, oral, and visual documentation and resources which docomomo has been striving to create. Docomomo tr-interiors has widened this approach with its existence on social media and several oral, written, video, and other publications.

Understanding the cultural aspect of the modernization of interiors and the constantly adapting and changing nature of interior space is key, and has much to contribute to the understanding of republic history as well. In this manner, since its establishment, the docomomo tr-interiors committee has been creating literature on modern Turkish interiors, as well as constantly reinventing itself, following the beacon of the Turkish Republic itself. In its 100th year, the framework of the Turkish Republic and related revolutions are increasingly relevant and valid, today and in the foreseeable future.

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