

Learning from Turkish modern furniture design

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Abstract

Furniture, as a design element is an important part of design theory as well as design history. It has acted both as a part of the architectural context and individually in history. It reflects the context of the time, lifestyles, choice and behavior. The manifestation of modernism at the beginning of the 20th century can be indicated as a milestone regarding the whole history of furniture. However, when the history of furniture in Turkey during this time is analyzed, it is observed that one can only come across limited literature. Departing from this lack of historic writing and rewriting, a scientific research project, "DATUMM: Documenting and Archiving Turkish Modern Furniture", was initiated based on exhibiting, documenting and archiving the history of modern furniture design in Turkey. The aim of this project is to highlight the modern furniture designed and produced in Turkey in the modern periods that can be defined as 1930's "Cubism" or "Functional Architecture Period", and the period of "International Style" in 1950s, 1960s and the 1970s. The sense of a comprehensive experience was needed to tell this story, and that is why it is composed of a variety of methods and related outcomes. With the array of outcomes planned to take its place in memory, the aim is to enable a remembered and developing process filled with significant moments to not only put together a collection, but to provide an inclusive impression. The methods and products -online archive, documentary film, catalog, colloquium, and exhibition work together to fulfill this aim. The first stage of the project has now been completed and has brought

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designers as well as furniture designs of the time together. The paper includes the assessment of the process, as well as the strategies for the future to enable the continuation of the success of the project.

Keywords: Turkish modern furniture design, design heritage, design history, archiving, documentation, exhibition

1. Introduction

The aim of this project is to highlight the modern furniture designed and produced in Turkey in the modern periods that can be defined as 1930's "Cubism" or "Functional Architecture Period", and the period of "International Style" in 1950s, 1960s and the 1970s. These design works are considered to be significant pieces of "collective memory". Highlighting these products will help to create awareness in relation to the preservation as well as analysis of them. As Walter Benjamin states, "every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably" (as cited in Curthoys & Docker, 2010)".

Turkey became a republic on the 29th of October, 1923 after the War of Independence that began 4 years prior. The new country with Ataturk as the first head of state, underwent a transformation that was spread to all areas. Utmost importance was given to different areas of design and the arts, as symbols of the new republic and great effort was spent on creating awareness around Turkey, starting with the capital Ankara, the cultural center Istanbul, followed by other larger cities. New symphonies were composed, ballets were choreographed, and graphic design definitely showed reflections of a growing, proud nation. Artists and designers worked resourcefully to spread the ideology (Arnold, Altan & Turan, 2006; Bozdogan, 2001; Kasaba & Bozdogan, 2007; Madran & Alptekin, 2011).

At this time, architecture was among the most significant fields for this aim, with the products of architecture being easily visible and having profound effects on people. Government buildings were the first to show this modern, new, unembellished style that was a stark contrast to the palaces and other cultural products of the Ottoman Empire. Parallel to more Nationalist approaches as such, the effects of the International Style were being felt. Unlike the case in architecture, identifying these approaches in furniture is rather difficult (Gurel, 2009; Lewis, 2002; Turan, 2010), however, the formal characteristics can be more readily identified. After the 1940s, Modernism in Turkey and its reflection on architecture and furniture was different than the ideological occurrence of the early times. It was a social transformation starting with the elite, and can be identified as bottom-up and Western oriented (Karakuş, 2011; Ozbayraktar, 1996; Ozkaraman, 2004).

Modernism had several influences, and thus gave way to a variety of products in terms of outcomes (Hinchman, 2009; Lucie-Smith, 1993). As significant integral components of buildings, during this time, furniture was immediately affected from this new era, and due to its close relation with the human body and its comparatively flexible nature, carried special meaning. As Charlotte Perriand who worked with Le Corbusier and his cousin Pierre Jeanneret stated; "While our chair designs were directly related to the position of the human body, ... they were also determined by the requirements of architecture, setting, and prestige" (Perriand, 2003).

Plain, stylistic, rational lines became the reflection of Modernism in the West. After WWII, as Turkey leaned politically and culturally towards the West even more, this showed in all products of the time. After this period, the distribution of Western publications introduced Turkish designers about happenings abroad, and helped to lead to a more international approach. Meanwhile, Western influenced national publications gave way to an approach that valued a style that was a product of the Modernist movement. Although formal effects were easily reflected onto Turkish furniture of the time with the search for a new Modern identity, the lack of a technological base, material and know how to produce these, led to creative explorations that resulted in unique furniture that carried not only

influences of the International movement, but also characteristics of the culture and environment in which they were produced (Gurel, 2009; Karakuş, 2010; Turan, 2010).

However, this distinctive era has not been extensively studied. With this need in mind, the project entitled “DATUMM: Documenting and Archiving Turkish Modern Furniture”, undertaken between September 2013 and March 2015, was begun with the endorsement of a fund by the İzmir University of Economics (A1308001/BAP-A024-K). This study brings together furniture that carries the essence of Modernism, the logical and rational avant-garde, breaking from the past, not only in the underlying subtext in the stories they tell and functionality, but also in terms of solely aesthetic value. The aim is also to make a connection between this significant time and producers of then as well as now.

1.1. Aim of the Project

Searching for the furniture pieces and listening to their background also enabled a view of historical development. While some furniture pieces could be defined as falling within the exact definition of Modernism, some could easily be defined as contributing to the Modernist movement, in their designs, use of material and the general approach to Modern furniture.

The goals, methods, and outcomes of this ongoing research project aims to highlight the modern furniture designed and produced in Turkey and to contribute to filling the gap in the literature of the field. While creating this project, the important issue was to provide an overall rich experience of Turkish modern furniture.

With the literature survey, roundtable discussions, transcriptions, online website and archive, catalog, graphic identity, interviews, photography, documentaries, internet site, legal work and furniture arrangements completed, the groundwork is already finished. This will be followed by an exhibition and colloquium.

Being informed about the historical references sheds light on the furniture design of design of today, in that, a more knowledgeable approach may be adopted, replications may be made due to the era’s timeless quality and for awareness and the fact that documentation and is valuable for the understanding the relations between furniture in Turkey as well as abroad. As pointed out by Praz, “Perhaps even more than painting or sculpture, perhaps even more than architecture itself, furniture reveals the spirit of the age” (as cited in Rice, 2007).

In the end, the project aims to propose a historiographical approach / methodology in presenting; archiving and analyzing the collected data about modern furniture produced in Turkey and initiate the first phase of a larger academic study in order to construct a grander history of the work. It is believed that an in-depth research about the topic will also help to reveal the design approach of the periods of history of modern furniture in Turkey.

There is an urgent need to document modern furniture in Turkey since throughout the research it is realized that these pieces of furniture are not being preserved consciously even by the original owners or has not been documented. Today, although difficult, it is still possible to find historical furniture from these significant periods. However, especially if the owner of furniture has changed, or it has not been preserved by the state, it will be next to impossible to track and preserve them in the future. The furniture, context and related persons were tried to be found through just a few key sources among a scarce collection (Ozkaraman Şen, 2004; Turan, 2009; Turan and Odekan, 2009; Uzunarslan, 2002; Yılmaz, 2005). A comprehensive documentation based on the already produced works, will help the formation of historiography about modern furniture in Turkey designed and produced in the 20th century.

The history of furniture is dominated by the Western approach. The lack of documentation of this particular period in Turkey creates a big gap in this part of furniture history. It is hoped that this

attempt will help create awareness, the exhibition and archive will be both a significant base as well as an educational tool as well for design schools, and the conference papers will act as a platform for sharing with other scholars. Other aims are, to increase documentation on Turkish modern furniture, to shed light on these cultural products that are significant key elements forming a “Collective Memory”, to connect related persons who are working on this topic, and to create awareness at the international scale with publications.

1.2. Scope

The inadequacy of the work realized about the history of modern furniture produced in Turkey can be easily observed. Thus it can be stated that there is a need for a well-organized information and analysis about the topic that will create a broader academic debate. The historiography of modernist culture in the development of Turkish Republic has been a prevalent subject within the discourses of history of architecture. However, furniture, as being an important component of interiors has not been decently appreciated. These design works are considered to be significant pieces of “collective memory”, necessitating their preservation. The project, outlined with this aim, has three tracks: a well-attended exhibition that will include modern furniture, a printed catalogue, and a digital archive. The project aims to present (through the exhibition) and archive (through a catalogue, and a website) modern furniture in Turkey as its end products. The steps within the data collection stage that includes round-table discussion transcriptions, interview transcriptions, a documentary, jury reports, and the presentation stage that includes analysis on exhibition boards, and colloquium transcriptions will also add to the analysis of the whole project. The exhibition will include the furniture obtained through the information out of literature review, the round-table discussions with the experts. The presentation of furniture will be realized in two ways: The professionally taken photographs through a mobile photography studio and what began as 15, but through increasing contacts, 75 pieces of modern original furniture themselves.

For the exhibition, an exhibition catalogue has been prepared and a website is developed in order to provide the digital archiving of the products. Through this website we aim to achieve a comprehensive archive that will allow transmission of information as well as expansion as the research continues in the future (www.datumm.org). Providing a museum experience is possible in many more ways than it used to, with media such as the internet and the opportunities it provides. Internet collections provide not only easy access to interested people all around the world, but also a chance to have a continuous and updated collection that can be visited at any time of the day. The difficulty in having a permanent collection due to space, legal rights and ownership is quite prevalent in furniture collections. When they are brought together in this context –the exhibition and the archive-, they will be opened up to new interpretations through diverse readings of critics. The analysis of the furniture exhibited and archived will be realized with an approach of writing the history in relation to the socio-spatial phenomena. For the analysis of the context of the time, we have chosen to look at, designers, companies, artisans’ stories, individual pieces, to give feedback to the furniture sector, developing a culture on documentation, questioning the socio-cultural context (users, processes, differences between cities in Turkey), investigating the cooperation of artists/ designers and architects, analyzing the materials used in the making of the furniture and popular materials of the time, to bring about the technological differences, and to investigate the formal characteristics (see Table 1). The project, while concentrating on the furniture, also examine their broader context related to architecture and interior design, touching upon the changes within Turkish society.

The current debates about the historic factor of modern architecture show us that modern architectural design work is not considered as historic and worthy of preservation. Besides the issue of preservation, since the culture of archiving is not very well established in Turkey, any academic attempt of this sort will help to contribute both the discussion of the historic value and the tools of archiving about these design works. The attempt is also to analyze furniture in terms of their carrying

local characteristics, materials, and to emphasize the originality of the works as opposed to the belief of their being copies of Western contemporaries of the time. For these reasons, highlighting this era is seen very essential in terms of the production of a broader literature. The research will itself represent the first of these attempts, and is planned to grow with the increasing of awareness in the field.

Table 1. Key designers and institutions of the time who are contacted

Contact	Company	Role
Baki Aktar (Contact Person: Sadık Aktar)	Moderno	Designer
Sadi Oziş (Contact Person: Neptun Oziş)	Kare Metal	Designer
Onder Kuçukerman	Individual	Designer
Sadun Ersin	Individual	Designer
Danyal Çiper (Contact Person: Arıl Cansel)	Individual	Designer
Fikret Tan (Contact Person: Yalın Tan)	Form	Designer
Bediz Koz and Azmi Koz (Contact Person: Bediz Koz)	MPD	Designer
Yıldırım Kocacıklıoğlu	Interno	Designer
Babur Kerim İncedayı	Individual	Designer
Yavuz Irmak	Individual	Designer
Mehmet İrfan Dolgun	SİM Mobilya	Artisan/ Producer
Minas Boyacıyan (Contact Person: Artun Boyacıyan)	Minas Mobilya	Artisan/ Producer
Mustafa Plevne	Metal Mobilya	Artisan/ Producer
Metin Atabey Ata (Contact Person: Erol Ata)	ERSA	Artisan/ Producer
Adem Yılmaz	Metal Mobilya	Producer
Florya Ataturk Marine Mansion	Various	Institutional
Turkish İş Bank Furniture	Various	Institutional
Grand National Assembly Furniture	Various	Institutional
Merkez Bank İzmir Branch Furniture	Various	Institutional
Çınar Hotel Furniture	Various	Institutional
Ankara University Furniture	Various	Institutional
Middle East Technical University Furniture	Various	Institutional
Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University Furniture	Various	Institutional

2. Method

The method contributes to the originality of the study. It involves the documenting and archiving of modern furniture through a variety of paths. The aim was not only to create a collection of furniture, but to try to give the whole picture of the time with witnesses, and designers' points of view, anecdotal pieces of information, a variety of media and an intellectual discussion environment to develop in time (See Figures 1 and 2).

In the beginning, effort was spent on drawing the relation between the furniture pieces and what later turned out to be initially a small group of people of designers and craftsmen. There was also a difficulty in reaching the furniture, in that; very few were preserved well, if at all. Most were built and sold and there was little record of the pieces.

There are mainly four stages defined for the project. Each necessitated different methods. The steps related with these stages reveal the methods employed in each stage.

a. Collecting the Data

- a1. Literature Review: Related articles, books, theses
- a2. On-site research and recording related to individual pieces
- a3. Meeting experts individually for information gathering

- Prof. Onder Kuçukerman: Head of the Department of Industrial Design in Haliç University. Was the founder head of the Department of Industrial Design in Mimar Sinan University. Has books, and articles on the History of Furniture in Turkey as well as his furniture design projects.
- Prof. Dr. Ali Cengizkan: Instructor in METU and Dean of the Faculty of Architecture). He is one of the experts of the field and has various articles on Modern Architecture in Turkey.
- Asst. Prof. Dr. Şebnem Uzunarslan: Instructor in Mimar Sinan University. Wrote a PhD thesis entitled “Erken Cumhuriyet Donemi Konutlarında Mekan ve Mobilya” (Space and Furniture in Early Republican Period Houses).
- Assoc. Prof. Dr. Meltem O. Gurel: Founding Chair, Department of Architecture, Bilkent University, Ankara. Wrote a PhD thesis entitled, "Domestic Space, Modernity, and Identity: The Apartment in Mid-20th Century Turkey," Wrote several articles on Turkish modernism.
- Asst. Prof. Dr. Meltem Ozkaraman Şen: Instructor in Mimar Sinan University. Wrote a thesis entitled, **“Turkiye’de 1800-2004 Yılları Arasındaki Değişim Sureci İçinde Tasarımı Etkileyen Faktorler: Ve Bir Ornek Olarak Mobilya Üretimi Modeli” (The Factors that Influenced Design in the Period of Change Between Years 1800-2004: Furniture Production Model Example).**
- Gokhan Karakuş: architectural critic, theorist and designer. Wrote the book “Turkish Touch in Design”.

a4. This step consisted of contacting people or institutions that own the furniture listed and recording the furniture. A roundtable discussion and participants’ transfer and accommodation was organized, and the transcription and translation of the discussion was realized.

a5. Interviews with the actors of furniture history in Turkey (designers, craftsman, producer, academic experts, etc.) and their filming was realized. This step entailed, finding original pieces through collections, auction houses, and any other miscellaneous sources possible, creating a mobile photography studio, and recording the pieces.

a6. The photography step includes, collecting and photographing advertisements in design journals, creating a research blog documenting the activity and inviting input from other people, announcement via social media tools (digital and printed newspapers, magazines, Facebook, Twitter), a call via mail groups (E-mailing to all instructors of IAED; ID and ARCH of all universities in Turkey), an announcement in DOCOMOMO Turkey group, invitation of the Jury (formed by the experts), organization of the transfer and accommodation of the jury, and the jury reports.

a7. Interviews with the actors of furniture history in Turkey (designers, craftsman, producer, academic experts, etc.) included filming and editing and turning it into a short film, transcribing and turning it into a written text, and translations and having the text both in Turkish and English

b. Presenting the Data

b1. One of the most important outputs of the study is a high-quality website in both Turkish and English, of the study, exhibition and other materials that are not exhibited. This archive is one that will reach many people. It will include information on designers, historical references, furniture pieces, interview films, photographs and written information on the pieces of furniture.

b2. Exhibition: The exhibition was an influential way to publicize the research and broaden the appreciation of “historical” furniture for the design world and for the public. It helped create an awareness of modern furniture designed and produced in Turkey and can act as a basis for other researchers. When the exhibition and archive were brought together in this context, they were opened up to new interpretations through diverse readings of critics.

The exhibition brought together the original furniture pieces, their photographs, history and analyses within a context, and documentary screening of the interviews with the designers, artisans, and witnesses of the time. This step includes, curation of the exhibition, exhibition hall reservation and preparation, preparation of the exhibition material (formatting the photographs, preparing text boards), transportation of the exhibition material, insurance of the exhibition material, announcement: invitation cards, posters (graphical and textual preparation, announcement in design journals, and via mail groups), and press relations.

c. Archiving was realized in two ways with the exhibition catalogue that brings together the photographs of the original furniture, and their analyses, as well as the digital archive which is related with the website mentioned above. This archive aims to help create an easy access to Turkish modern furniture, companies, history and papers related to the work with the Photography archive, Articles, and Documentaries.

d. Analysis involves, organizing a colloquium that includes the experts in the exhibition opening. This step necessitates, organization of the colloquium, organization of their transfer and accommodation, and transcription and translation of the colloquium. Another outcome is, presenting academic outcomes of the research within several media, of which the documentary film is one of the most significant.

Presenting the work at a conference and journals are also important for sharing the process with academia.

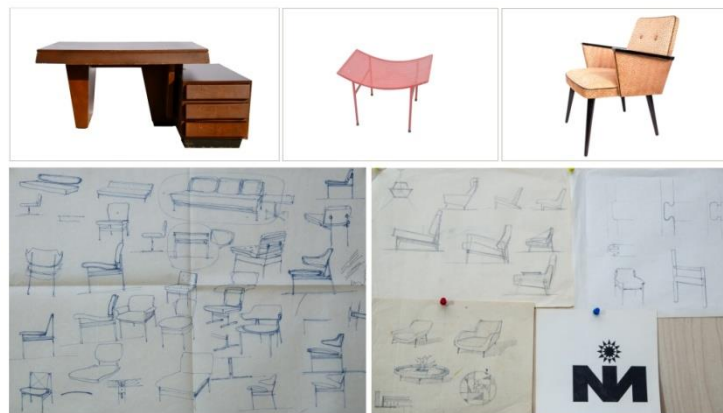


Figure 1. Clockwise from left: Desk designed by Danyal Çiper, stool designed by Sadi Oziş, chair designed by Mehmet İrfan Dolgun, sketches by Sadun Ersin [Photography and documentary by Ali İnceoğlu, İzmir University of Economics archive]



Figure 2. Visuals from the process [Photography and documentary by Ali İnceoglu, İzmir University of Economics archive]

3. Conclusion

Until now, the project has helped connect the related designers, producers and researchers of the field. A knowledge base has been established and more networks that are formed each day are helping the development of the field. Each connection who has been contacted has informed the team of new connections. This has enabled the team to be informed of new persons who have been included in the video interviews as well as the unraveling of long lost furniture pieces. The digital archive and exhibition have been enriched and have reached more and more people.

Besides the initial aims, two incidental outcomes of the project have been realized: The first is, the Sadun Ersin lecture and exhibition, titled “Sadun Ersin: Traces”. Ersin is one of the first interior designers in Turkey and winner of the furniture competition for the first Grand National Assembly). The second is, the inclusion of Danyal Çiper’s prominent furniture pieces as a permanent collection in the university body. Çiper is a prominent architect in Turkey known for his Modernist style, who lived between 1932 and 2008. Both attempts have helped disseminate knowledge on the designers’ approach, material use, utilization of technology and perspective of the Modernist era.

Future directions of the study entails, finding new original pieces of furniture from private collections, auction houses and other sources. as well as reaching related design departments in Turkey via an open call. Moreover, setting up a network and a travelling exhibition is also among the aims. With every contact and furniture piece, the digital archive is improving day by day. In the following years, the furniture exhibitions will be organized according to themes. Examples of themes are, furniture of institutions such as, banks, schools and universities; particular types of furniture; furniture produced with a particular method or with special material.

It can be stated that, there is a need for well-organized information and analysis about the topic of Turkish modern furniture that will create a broader academic debate and a more comprehensive understanding. It is aimed that this project will initiate the first phase of a larger academic study that will construct a substantial part of the historiography of furniture in Turkey in the 20th century. Being a forerunner of this initiation will add to the original value of the project. Future generations of designers and researchers will benefit from having a substantial knowledge base to establish their knowhow and their current designs upon. It will be a great advantage to be informed of a heritage that was until now largely unnoticed.

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