

Slenderizing Turkish Modernism | Façade Mosaics in Levent Neighbourhood

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Visual and sensual communications with a building becomes impossible in today's city percept. However city sometimes reveals its secrets. Mosaics from 1950's are obscured "ruins" that are one of those secrets waiting to be revealed.

Background

Levent Residential Project is one of the examples of Garden City movement proposed in 1902 by Ebenezer Howard which suggests healthy, comfortable satellite towns and can be taken as a rebellion against industrial areas which prohibits humane living conditions.

The modern neighborhood of Levent was formed in 1947, when Emlak Kredi Bank (a Turkish bank which was established to finance housing projects) choose Levent area for constructing a well planned residential compound, formed mostly of villa type houses with gardens. The project Prof. Dr. Kemal Ahmet Aru and Prof. Dr. Rebii Gorbon designed, is one of the first modern congregate housing project in Turkey. 420 dwellings in 100 hectare are designed regarding the general manifesto of modernism. All the cold, strict, universal, pure, brutalist language of the modernist approach was reflected on the project.

By the time, Turkey in 50's had a multi-party period, immigration to West and nation excursions end up with a struggle between vernacular and universal. To find a way through this discrepancy, municipal authorities took a step under the idea of "modernization". Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Eren Eyüboğlu, Sabri Berkel, Ferruh Başağa, Ercüment Kalmık were the protagonists of this movement. These artists -who become masters in mosaic arts- were all struggling to find their own path in modernism, trying to establish the balance between the universal and the vernacular. The authorities announced a competition for the façades of the Levent Residential Project. 23 mosaics were designed by these artists for the façades, however by the time 2003, 5 of them were somehow gone, still existing 17 are in a corrupt condition.

Architect-Artist Relationship

Rather than being the first modern congregate project of Turkey, Levent Residential Project is also important for tracking the first architect-artist collaboration. Kemal Ahmet Aru, the architect who insisted on having mosaic designs on the concrete dull wall he designed because he thought "painting was a great element to define a space".

Maybe it wasn't that powerful as Anish Kapoor and Herzog de Meuron collaboration and didn't have any tectonic apprehension as they did, but it was the collaboration itself that was important which we shamefully lack today.

"One thing is for certain. When a painting gets the best light, lives the longest life, attracts the largest audience or simply obtains the power to become a part of life, it is because of architecture. Without the touch of an architect, the painting will either be confined to live the life of a nomad, get buried alive or fall asleep under the dim lights of museums." Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu "About Mosaics"



Figure 1,2. Levent Residential Project in 1947

Façade Articulation and Tectonic Relation

It is interesting to see the obvious contradiction between the international strict language of modernism and the Anatolian forms done with a vernacular material, mosaics. However this was an intended contradiction in order to slenderize the dull walls of the modernism and somehow to turn the heads back to warm West in the cold big city.

The articulation of a building must reveal how the parts fit into the whole by emphasizing each part separately. However this tectonic approach is a deadlock concerning the dull walls. One of the ways to articulate and diversify the dull façade can be murals. Oscar Niemeyer had the same concern while designing the Ministry of Education and Health Building in 1936. How dull wall is interpreted in the urban space and how to diversify it? On the south view of the main entrance of the building, a modernist azulejo(a Portuguese or Spanish painted tin-gazed, ceramic tile work) mural exists.

Probably with the same concern Levent neighborhood's dull walls began to diversify. However these attempts of diversification can be criticize with the scale and resolution difference; the relationship between the dull walls' dimensions and the mosaics dimensions and how this is scaled poorly. In order to diminish the dull walls' effect on urban space, they made it more apparent with the scale difference. Maybe the dull walls became to familiarize with the citizens however it didn't lose its dullness.



Figure 3,4,5. Eren Eyüboğlu

Is ornament a crime?

Starting with Louis Sullivan “It would only benefit us if all time we were abandon ornament and concentrate entirely on the erection of buildings that were finely shaped and charming in their sobriety”, ornament was “banned” due to modernism’s sobriety. Does ornament contribute anything meaningful to objects today?

Adolf Loos said “Since ornament is no longer organically linked with our culture, it is also no longer the expression of our culture. The ornament that is manufactured today has no connection with us, has absolutely no human connections, no connection with the word order.” He was advocated for simplicity because simple objects never go out of style and therefore would be treasured all the time. But wouldn’t something that is this simple that it becomes universal, makes us cultureless?

It’s a sure thing that mosaics of the Levent Residential Project are pure ornaments that couldn’t go any further than being a façade covering- a covering in which no relation with the covered surface is regarded. However what made it “meaningful” was the purpose it served and no matter what Adolf Loos said about ornament having no connection with us, these very specific mosaics somehow created that relation that was intended in the first place between the “sobriety” of the building and the citizen who is eager to find a twist in his dull technologic industrial big city life. Maybe ornament is a crime but in this case each of these ornaments are treasured art works and culturally important that cannot be unvalued.





Figure 6,7. Façade articulation, scale and resolution problem clearly seen

Tectonic Culture

In tectonic reading, the last products of this art/architecture relationship aren't just limited with a superficial approach of a façade. It does not only relate with the material's sensual, tactile relationship but also it stresses the tectonic culture because it becomes a vernacular application on a universal apprehension.

Kenneth Frampton considers this cultivation of the tectonic tradition in architecture as an essential element in the future development of architectural form, casting a critical new light on the entire issue of modernity. Painting in traditional materials and painting a traditional concept on a contrary modern structures is ironic yet an efficient way to cast a critical light on the issue of modernity.

The cultural past is put into question in the move towards modernization by Paul Ricoeur. He questions "how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization." I think maybe mosaics in Levent are not the best way to answer this question but are certainly a good way to start answering and debating. However there often exists, as Ricoeur states, the requirement to abandon a whole cultural past in order to take part in modern civilization. If critical regionalism is a solution then one would want to know how a region is to be (re)defined under the circumstance of whole cultural abandonment and therefore its shifting boundaries. I think Levent mosaics are just in the middle of this thin line between abandoning and adopting, interiorizing it.

Lack of Respect

These mosaics are inherited from well-known artists Bedri Rahmi Eyüboğlu, Eren Eyüboğlu, Sabri Berkel, Ferruh Başağa, Ercüment Kalmık for the future generations. However how pathetic is that before 2012, 7 of these art works were under the exterior thermal sheathing, 6 of them were covered with signboards and billboards, 2 of them damaged because of chimney, shed, air conditioner and such mounting. The mosaic that is created by Nurrullah Berk was demolished in order to build a glass case. In 2012 Beşiktaş Municipality started to find and restore the lost mosaics with the campaign "You Might Have The Piece We Are Looking For" inventing the citizens to find the obscured mosaics. "We believe that with this collaboration, our neighborhood will become an open-air museum." says the mayor İsmail Ünal.

Despite this late attempt of preservation, it's really hard to comprehend why cities such as Barcelona, Paris, Rome persists on conserving their history, where in my city it is seen as unnecessary. Is it because it's recent history? Does it have to be old as Ottoman's ruins to be precious enough? Isn't it shameful to find an architect saying "I wandered around the area recently and couldn't stand how miserable the complex looked. Unfortunately that is what you get for lack of manners, knowledge, culture and being stuck in the past." (Prof. Dr. Kemal Ahmet Aru 2013, interview with Ferda Çağlayan)

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