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The image of modernity: An examination of early republic housing projects in Turkey 1930–1939

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Abstract

Modern heritage encompasses not only the physical structures but also the narratives, ideas, and socio-historical dynamics associated with them. This study explores the multifaceted aspects of modern heritage in Turkey, focusing on early republic housing projects built between 1930 and 1939. Tracing the signs of being "modern" in residential architecture, this research proposes that Kemalist reforms affecting social life served as tools to alter appearances, and behind that image, the persistence of the cultural and social life was hidden. Analyzing projects in Arkitekt journal, it identifies traditional living patterns in so-called modern houses, emphasizing the impossibility of copying-and-pasting modernity. In Turkey, modernity was neither unequivocally endorsed nor rejected; instead, it intertwined with existing social structures, creating a unique entity. Thus, it concludes that the value of early republic Turkish modern residentials lies not in formal similarities to European forms of modernism but in a transcultural understanding that embraces diverse expressions of modernity.

KEYWORDS
early republic, modern heritage, modernity, multiple modernities, residential architecture, Turkey

INTRODUCTION

The status of modern heritage in Turkey has been a subject of ongoing discussion for several decades. The most contentious issue concerning modern heritage centers around their demolition (Salman, 2018). Demolishing these structures has often been justified in the name of constructing newer and earthquake-resistant buildings, but these arguments have also been criticized as attempts to erase a significant part of history (Altan Ergut, 2013). The act of erasing historical elements demands careful consideration, especially in light of the recent earthquakes that occurred in Turkey in February 2023, and with the looming possibility of a major earthquake in Istanbul. Therefore, it is imperative that the situation of modern heritage in Turkey should be discussed with greater care, taking into account all facets of the heritage.

Modern heritage encompasses not only the physical structures but also the narratives, ideas, and sociohistorical dynamics associated with them (Vawda & Denison, 2022). In the Cape Town Document on Modern Heritage, conservation is defined as "all efforts designed to understand cultural heritage, know its history and meaning, ensure its material safeguard, and, when necessary, its presentation, restoration, and enhancement" (Vawda & Denison, 2022, p. 504). With this understanding in mind, this study can be seen as a part of an endeavor to comprehend the history and cultural significance of modern housing projects built during the early years of the Turkish republic. Through a historical investigation using the lens of multiple modernities and by exploring the sociopolitical dynamics of the time, this study aims to build a case for an understanding of modern residential heritage from a perspective that recognizes the diverse expressions of modernity.

Inherently intertwined with the broader concerns surrounding modern heritage and modernity, this study examines modernization attempts and expectations within Turkey during the early republic period with an emphasis on its impact on the architectures of housing. Drawing on the Kemalist[1] reforms of the early republic, which influenced social constructions and daily life, this paper traces the signs of being "modern" in residential architecture between 1930 and 1939. The selection of this period arises because of its significance as the "nation-building era" in Turkey, positioned between the "arrival" of an awareness of a European form of modern architecture in Turkey, and Kemal Atatürk's death at the end of 1938 and the start of World War II in 1939 (Bozdoğan, 2001).

Modernization in the Ottoman Empire had begun in the 19th century. It continued vigorously following the establishment of the Turkish republic, when there were stronger ideological and legal grounds for the process. Many reforms were introduced between 1923 and 1938 (from the republic's establishment to Kemal Atatürk's death), which were regarded as the most important aspects of Turkey's experience of modernity. The distinctive feature of Kemalist reforms was their permeation into many aspects of people's everyday lives, habits, and attitudes, aside from the organizational changes in state administration (Göle, 1996). Compulsory education for girls and boys, wearing hats instead of the fez, overruling the Islamic Sharia rule, and changing the regulations of marriage were only a few of them (Duben & Behar, 1991). Mahmut Esen, who was then Minister of Justice, stated that after the new civil code, Turkey would "close the doors on an old civilization, and will have entered into a contemporary [here read, European] civilization" (Duben & Behar, 1991, p. 213). These reforms were clear attempts to Europeanize Turkish institutions as well as family and personal lives with the intention of creating a modern secular state (Duben & Behar, 1991).

Modernity in Turkey was neither endorsed nor directly refused by people; rather, it blended with existing social patterns and structures and formed a unique entity. This study explores this unique entity as reflected through drawings and photographs of the architecture of residential buildings in the early republic era. The primary source is the online archive of *Arkitekt* journal, which was the first and the only architectural journal in Turkey until 1941. It therefore

contains comprehensive information on architectural production during the early years of the republic.

THE IMAGE OF MODERNITY

Since the late 19th century, there has been a degree of frustration regarding establishing a Turkish national identity, with some viewing Europe as the liberating source of modernity (Ahiska, 2003). Europe was the ideal that had to be reached, but at the same time, aspects such as individualism or selfishness were seen as potentially dangerous to Turkish national values (Ertürk, 2011). This anxiety of balancing between two ideals continued following the establishment of the Turkish republic. Aside from that, Kemalists refused to be associated with Ottoman inheritance and wanted to separate the state from Islamic culture (Bozdoğan, 2001).

While the notion of dissociating from the empire was primarily championed by the bureaucratic elite, it is important to recognize that this does not negate the desire for change among the general population. Between 1912 and 1922, Ottoman people lived under war conditions. Millions of people had died; those who survived were angry, weary, and defiant of wartime policies. The crisis on the home front, and the trauma experienced both physically and mentally broke people's bonds with the empire (Akın, 2018). Drawing on the country's social and psychological context, Tanyeli argues that the general public shared a desire for change similar to that of the Kemalists. People were eager to move away from their traumatic memories and their dilapidated houses (Tanyeli, 2018). The shift from traditional wooden houses to modern concrete apartment blocks held significance beyond just Europeanization; it symbolized a break from the past and a sense of liberation from haunting memories. However, it is important to note that while people sought change, their cultural traditions and identities remained largely intact. As Tekeli points out, the establishment of the republic brought both discontinuity and continuity. The political regime had changed, but the cultural underpinnings of society remained unchanged (Cengizkan, 2007). Therefore, the transformations primarily manifested in people's external circumstances, providing them with a psychological sense of relief. Consequently, both the leaders of the republic and a substantial portion of the population shared a common desire to distance themselves from certain aspects of the Ottoman legacy, albeit driven by different motivations. These differences eventually brought up a disparity between public expectations, the objectives of the Turkish authorities, and the actual unfolding of events.

The top priorities of Atatürk's Republican People's Party (RPP) were modernization and progress, which were mentally linked to Europeanization (Bozdoğan, 2001). Since the standard was Europe, the level of development of the country was determined in regard to Europe. Through a comparative perspective, it was believed that progress would be made so long as the conditions for being European were met. Therefore, being perceived from the outside as "European" held significant importance. Reforms such as the adoption of the Latin alphabet, transferring to the Gregorian calendar, changing clothing styles, and the status of women in society were all signs of being civilized. When declaring clothing reform and foretelling the "Hat law", Atatürk made a speech in 1925,

> … Turkish public is civilised. … But I am compelled to give notice that the people of the Republic of Turkey have to prove that they are civilised with their ideas and minds. People of the Republic of Turkey who call themselves civilised have to show that with their actions, even with their appearance from head to foot. … Is there any meaning to liquidate a very precious ore with mud and show it to the world? … Civil and international clothing is a very precious dress

for us and worthy for our nation. We will wear shoes, trousers, waistcoats, ties and hats.

(Kılıç, 1995, p. 539, author's translation)

As can be seen, creating an image to be perceived from the outside as modern equivalents of Europeans was important. The western way of dressing was not only a matter of fashion but also a means to erase one's Ottoman appearance.

The image of women was especially central to the republican modernity project. Bozdoğan (2001) argues that starting from 1930 "modern architecture, modern Ankara and modern women" were glorified for being beautiful, young, healthy, and progressive. Especially after the enaction of the 1926 civil code, women were the primary objects of the constructed binary between the old and the new (Bozdoğan, 2001). Ongoing feminist discourse criticizes Kemalist reforms for instrumentalizing women in the nationalist modernization project (Bozdoğan, 2001). Arat (1997, p. 100) quotes a woman discussing her experience as a female worker in the early republic: "It was to be of use, to fulfil a service, to show success. Atatürk liberated woman by making her responsible." Participation in social and business life was expected from women as patriotic missions; they were to be an example of Turkish women to the world. Their images as liberated, hard-working professionals were proof of the modernizing state.

Consequently, it can be argued that the Kemalists were profoundly interested in the perception from the outside. Creating an image was an essential part of the reforms and the modernization project. People wearing European clothes and spending time together as women and men were the ideal representations of public life. Even though the culture remains the same, the photographic scene of society would represent a "civilized" nation.

The question that arises is, if attempts to modernize public life remained superficial, what was the case in architecture?

NEW ARCHITECTURE OF TURKEY

In the first years of the republic, since there was an effort for building a nation-state, determining the "true Turkish national architecture" was essential. Ottoman revivalism had been underway since 1908 through combining Western technology with Ottoman decorative elements (Basa, 2015). It continued during the 1920s under the name of the First National Architecture. However, by 1930, associations with the Ottoman legacy had become unfavorable, and European forms of modernism were seen as the accepted contemporary style (Bozdoğan, 2001). Turkish architects embraced the "New Architecture"[2] for two closely linked reasons. First, it was aligned with the state's ideology, which viewed modernist architectural forms as a visible representation of a modern, secular nation, distinct from its Islamic and Ottoman histories (Bozdoğan, 2001). This led to the expectation that new buildings should reflect the ideology of the new republic. The second reason was linked to the presence of a considerable number of European architects in the country during that period. This presented a challenge to Turkish architects, as they had to compete with their European counterparts for the opportunity to design major government buildings (Cengizkan, 2007). In general, Turkish architects worked on relatively smaller projects, such as houses and apartments, while European professors and associates secured the prestigious commissions (Bozdoğan, 2001). European architects were influenced by the European version of the Modern Movement, which required Turkish architects to showcase their ability to create a similar aesthetic. As a result, designing modern-looking buildings became a necessity for Turkish architects, both ideologically and financially.

In architectural texts, Turkish architects upheld European designs as being rational and functional. Two writers of the journal *Arkitekt*, Behçet and Bedrettin, wrote:

> While the great Turkish nation was reforming the outfit, they did not think about making the fez contemporary, accepted the hat. While they were reforming the letters, they did not think of revising the old, they adopted the Latin alphabet. Likewise, Turkish architects of today left domes, flowery and tiled decorations. They are walking on a new and logical path.
>
> (Behçet & Bedrettin, 1933, p. 265, author's translation)

The parallel drawn between the selected reforms and modern architecture indicates that replacing the existing patterns with "logical" ones was seen as necessary in both instances. They regarded the replacement of established architectural patterns with contemporary ones was not just a stylistic preference but was intrinsically tied to the broader modernization agenda. It indicates that they believed in the instrumentality of architecture as much as the reforms in the modernization process.

Technical limitations, however, posed significant challenges for the early republic's construction industry. The availability of skilled labor for concrete construction and the necessary construction equipment, as well as suitable materials for the process, were in short supply (Bozdoğan, 2001). The historical progression of urbanization linked to the emergence of modernity in Europe was markedly shaped by capitalism and the capitalist economy, and it was initiated by the Industrial Revolution (Mbembe, 2021). However, unlike Europe, where the industrial and economic foundations for modern buildings were established, Turkey in the 1930s lacked these resources. Up until 1937, Turkey had to rely on importing iron and steel, and the number of cement factories was limited (Aslanoğlu, 1986). Without the intellectual or institutional background and without experiencing the same industrial transformation, Turkish modern architecture inevitably reflected the individual understandings, cultural appropriations, and local constructional limitations (Bozdoğan, 2001). Consequently, due to these constraints in materials and techniques, despite the discourse on the "logical path of modernism," Turkish architects primarily relied on importing the image of modern architecture.

Motivation to appear modern was the prevailing feeling of the era; therefore, architects worked hard at playing their roles in the project of modernization. This could be seen to the greatest extent in residential buildings as they served as a platform for domestic and daily life where cultural crises could be observed easily. Housing plan schemas and the organization of private and public life created by Turkish architects still had strings attached to traditional living habits. Despite the promotion of the new houses and apartments as the New Architecture from the outside, the internal planning reveals a different narrative.

INNER SELVES OF THE MODERN RESIDENTIALS

The patterns of social life, transformed by reforms, generated new requirements and aspirations that were expected to be met by living spaces. Where people lived became as important as creating a civilized society. Issues rooted in the family structure were problematized in a broader national frame. Although the "image of the imaginary modern family" had been under discussion since the 19th century, the symbolic importance of women in the eyes of the Kemalists made family-related issues an integral part of the national agenda (Yasa Yaman, 2006). Thus, houses, serving as the spatial equivalents of family discussions, became stages for performing modern living and raising a civil generation. The desired modern domestic life could no longer exist in Ottoman mansions and therefore had to be relocated (Özbay, 1999).

Traditional houses in Turkey were distinct in two aspects: the segregation by gender and the use of *sofa*. Gender segregation divided the house into two parts, *harem* and *selamlık*. In a study on gendered spaces, Özbay (1999) explains *harem* as the domain for "back-stage" dwelling such as eating, cooking, and sleeping. The management of domestic life was conducted in

harem by the women of the family. Besides family members, this space was open only to female guests. Men, on the other hand, spent their time in *selamlık* where they dined and entertained male guests (Özbay, 1999). Typically, there was only one door connecting *harem* and *selamlık*, allowing family members to move between them. The separation between *harem* and *selamlık* was essentially the divide between the private and public spheres within the house, serving as both an indicator and a determinant of social norms within the home.

Both *harem* and *selamlık* consisted of several rooms depending on the size of the house (Figure 1). The most important space among them was *sofa*, which was a space for gathering and distribution. Whether situated in the center of the rooms or flanked by rooms on both sides, the rooms opened not to each other but to *sofa* (Ögel, 1981). This space was where the family came together, talked, dined, lived, hosted guests, and spent most of their time each day. It implied an element of communal living rather than individual presence.

Özbay (1999) suggested that during the modernization period, *harem* transformed into the living room, while *selamlık* became the guest/reception room. However, the situation is not as straightforward as a simple transformation. Both *harem* and *selamlık*, along with their respective *sofa*s, have evolved into different entities in different houses. The *harem's sofa*, served as an intimate multipurpose space where the family gathers and occupied a place in most modern homes under different names. The *selamlık's sofa*, on the other hand, served as a public space used to accommodate guests or as the main circulation area where household members crossed paths. Moreover, the interchangeable use of room names further complicates this issue. For example, the term "*salon*" is employed for both guestrooms and living rooms on different occasions, making it necessary to analyze each floor plan individually to draw meaningful inferences.

In summary, public/private segregation and the use of *sofa* are two elements that were unique to traditional housing and reminders of the past. They symbolized the secrecy of domestic family life, gendered spaces, and a sense of communal living. During the early republic, there was a growing desire to involve women more actively in public life, which extended to increasing their presence within the home itself and eliminating the segregation of living spaces by gender. The modern woman of the Turkish republic would be different from its "Other," a Muslim woman hiding behind closed doors (Bozdoğan, 2001). Architect Behçet Ünsal (1939, p. 60) succinctly encapsulated this sentiment, stating "our large wooden houses with spacious *sofas* are no longer appropriate."

Therefore, the move from wooden houses to concrete buildings, from "the traditional" to "the modern," raised expectations of transforming the living styles and social constructs within family life. Consequently, the transformation in domestic organization should have been readily apparent when analyzing the layouts of the residential buildings constructed during the early republic. However, the reality did not entirely align with these expectations. Instead, we observe the persistence and repetition of these traditional elements in many of the residential spaces.

Arkitekt journal published 188 residential projects designed by Turkish architects between the years 1931 and 1939, of which 133 were houses and 55 were apartment blocks.[3] 85 of the 133 houses and 30 of the 55 apartments had *sofa*, although each of these was interpreted uniquely. In total, 61% of the published residential projects included a space functioning or labeled as *sofa*, and public–private segregation can be seen in many of them. This suggests that family structures and relationships had not changed as desired by the early republicans. But a differently mixed version of modernity emerged. This study employs five projects from *Arkitekt* to explain this phenomenon.

First, Figure 2 illustrates a plan drawn and promoted by Aptullah Ziya (1931, pp. 14, 15) as "a solution that can meet today's needs in the best possible way." In this article, in the first issue of *Arkitekt*, Ziya exemplified an ideal plan for a modern flat. Ziya assigned the entrance space as "guest room and hall" and noted "we accept the guests in the hall as soon as they enter the house, it is not right for them to wander in the house or see our corridors.
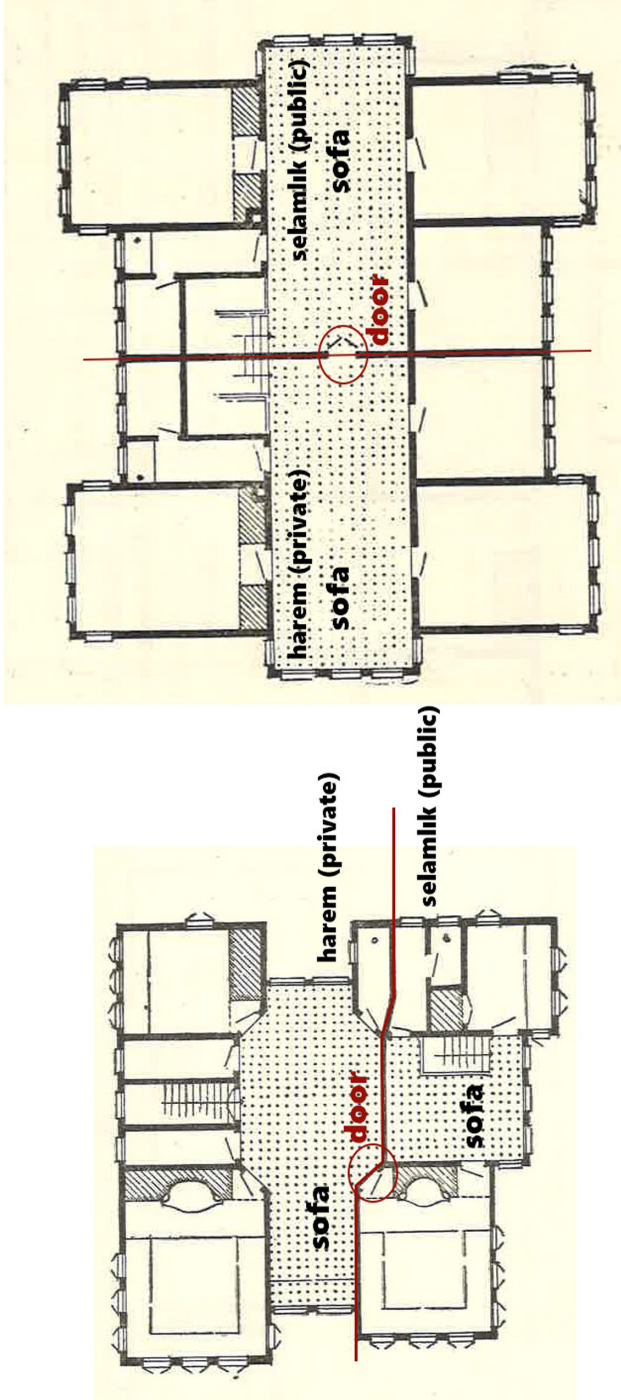
FIGURE 1 Two house plan examples from circa 1800, illustrating the layout of harem and selamlık, interconnected by a single door. (*Source*: Eldem, 1954).
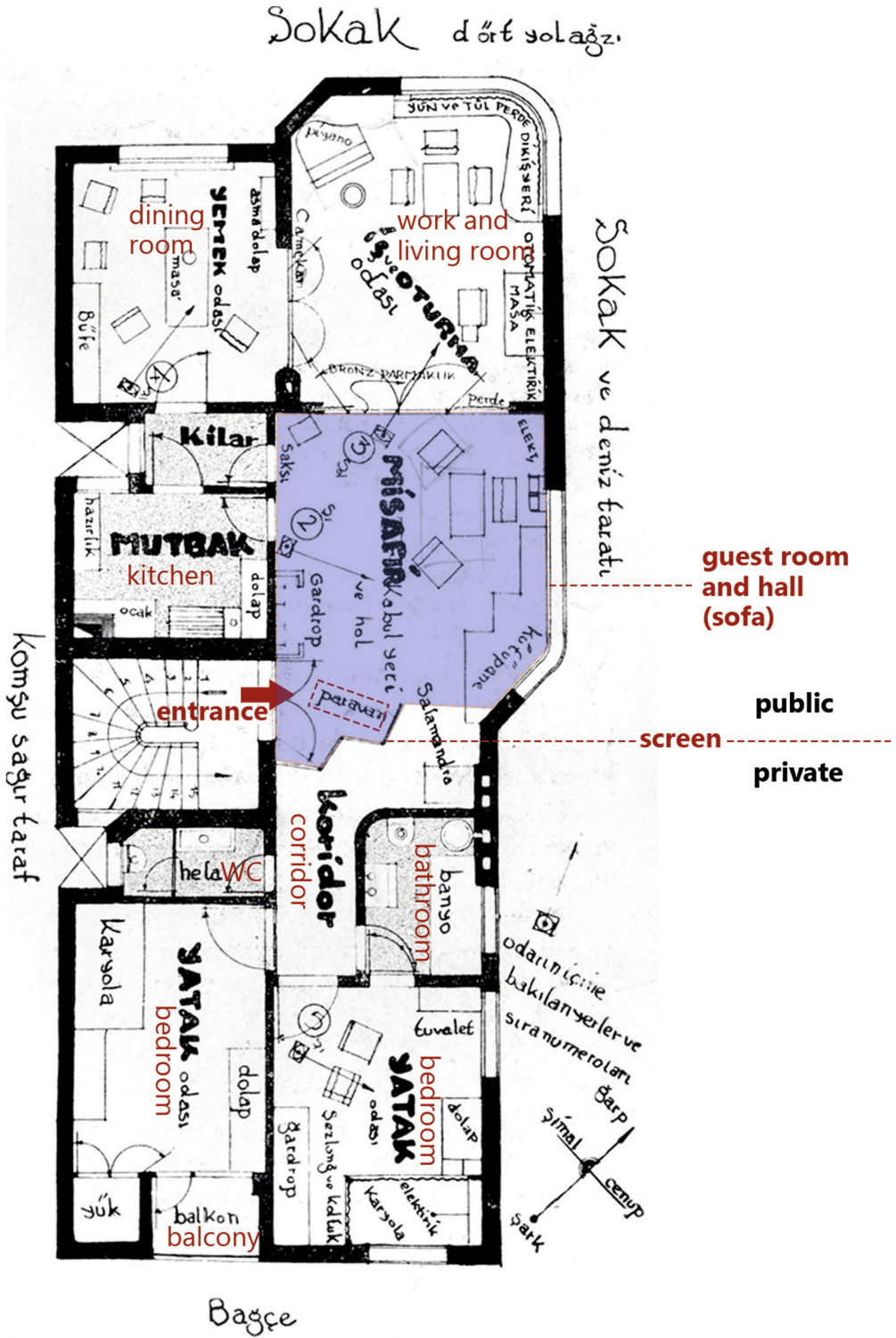
FIGURE 2   Drawing of an ideal apartment floor plan by Aptullah Ziya, detailing and annotating the optimal layout and design features. (*Source*: Ziya, 1931).
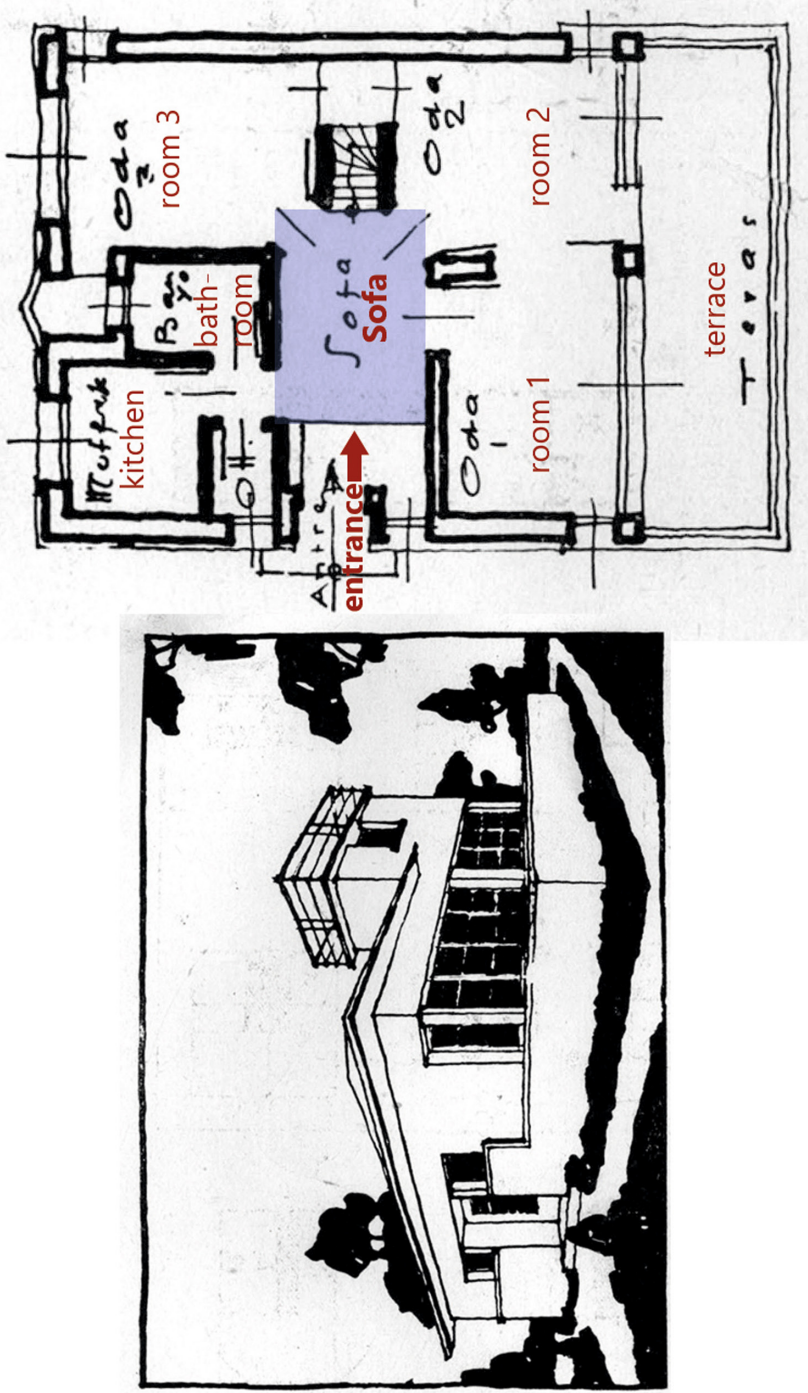
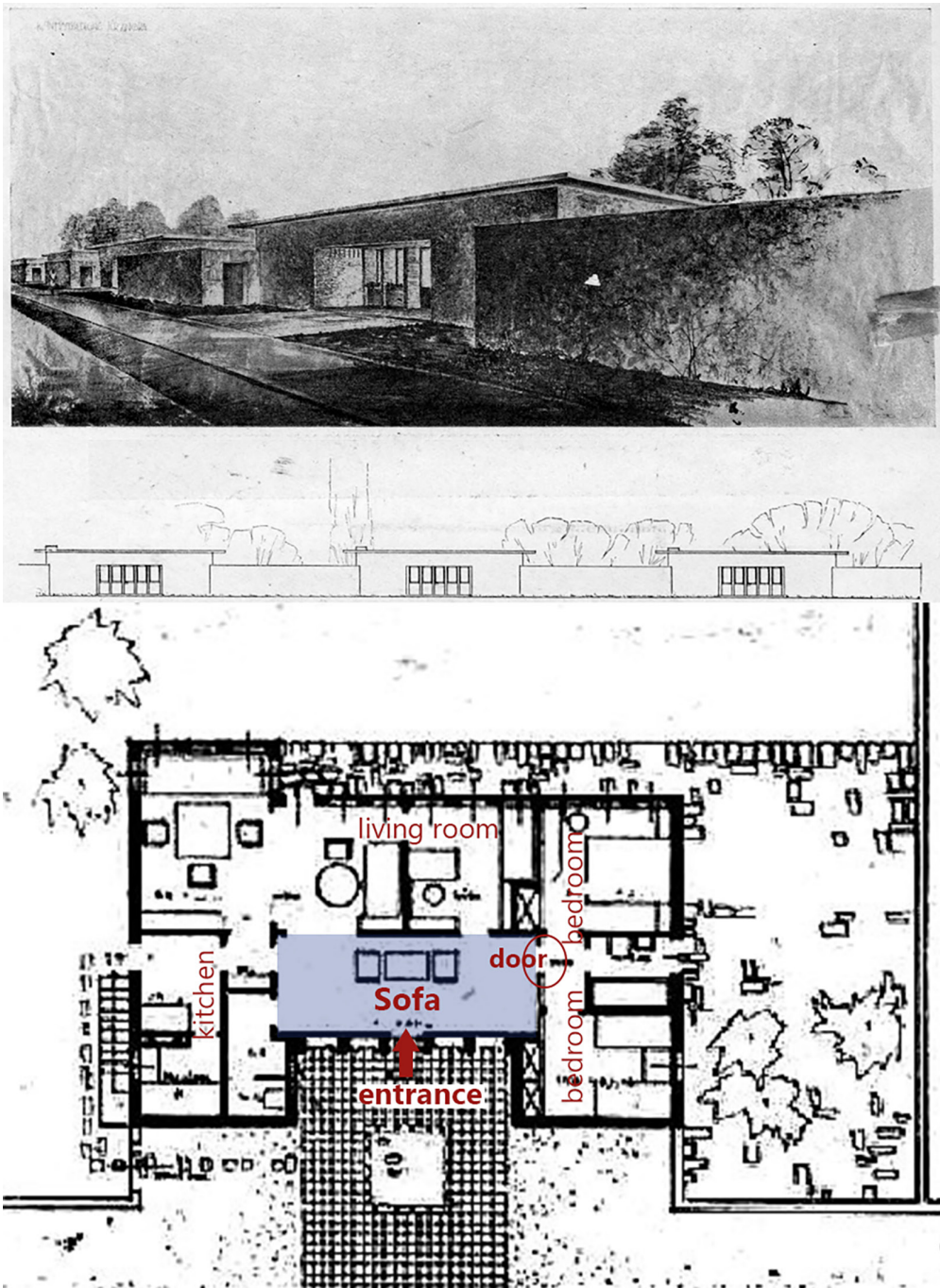**FIGURE 3** Architectural drawing of a single-story house design by Abidin Mortaş, featuring a central sofa as a key element of the layout. (*Source*: Mortaş, 1931).

FIGURE 4 Drawing of an affordable family house type for Ankara, designed by Seyfettin Nasıh, showcasing the division of public and private spaces and featuring a sofa. (*Source*: Nasıh, 1933).
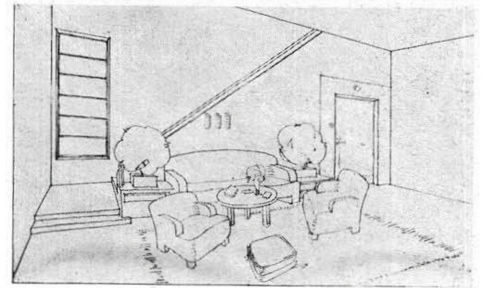
We put a screen next to the entrance." Ziya separated the public place (which outsiders may enter) from the private space (where the family lives) using a screen. Moreover, the guest room is in the middle of the house, into which all the other rooms open. It is a discernible adaptation of *sofa*.
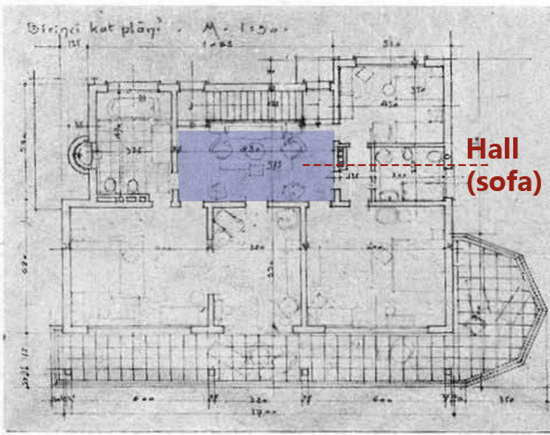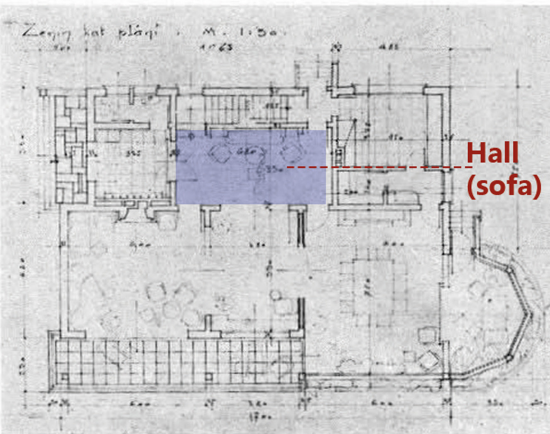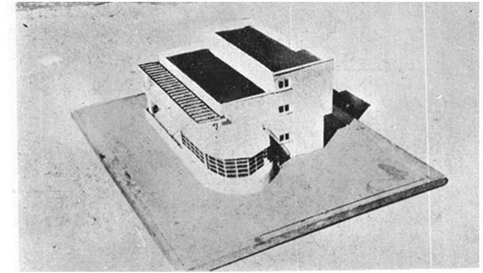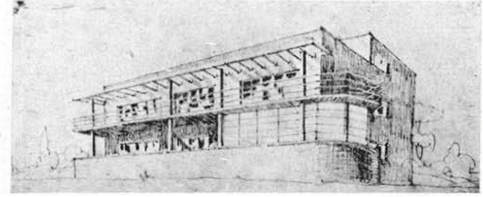
FIGURE 5 Drawing of a two-story house project by Abidin Mortaş, featuring a sofa in the central circulation space. (*Source*: Mortaş, 1934).

Figure 3 shows an example of central planning, putting *sofa* in the middle and organizing the rooms around it. Generally, in one-story houses, the first place after the entrance functioned as *sofa*. Here, the architect wrote "sofa" on the plan showing that it was designed intentionally. From the outside, it is a modern house, but from the inside, it shows a foundational form of a traditional house.

An affordable family housing project in Ankara is seen in Figure 4. In this project, public/private division was established using a door. Furniture in the entrance hall implies a similar approach to Ziya's exemplary apartment floor plan (Figure 2). The entrance hall functions as a formal guest room *(selamlık's sofa)* while the living room in the back functions as *harem's sofa* which is private for the family.

In multi-story housing projects, a public/private division is made between the floors, and the stairway lobby is generally assigned as *sofa* since it is in the middle of the house and is a gathering and circulation area. The plan shown in Figure 5 depicts furnishings in the stairway lobby, and the perspective drawing named "stair from the hall" illustrates the sitting area located in the hall. This place is where family members spend their days as in *harem's sofa*.

In the house presented in Figure 6, there are two *sofas*. The *sofa* on the ground floor is in the middle of the house and serves as a gathering and welcoming space, which people
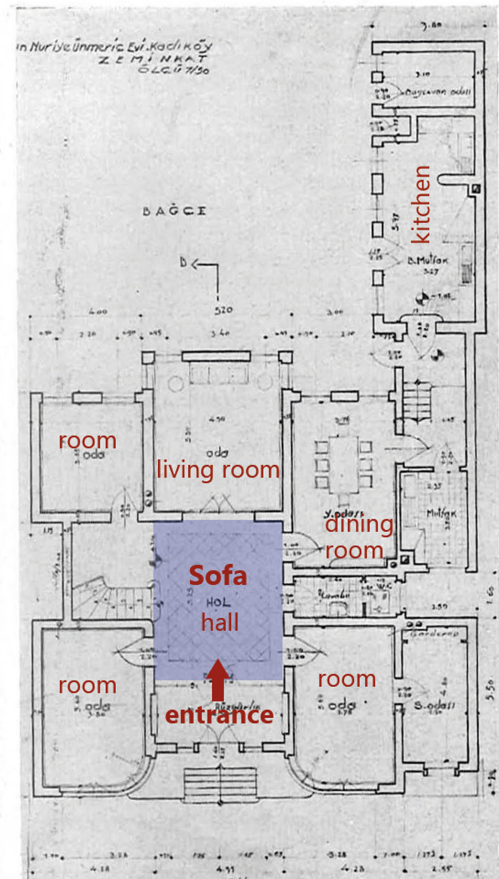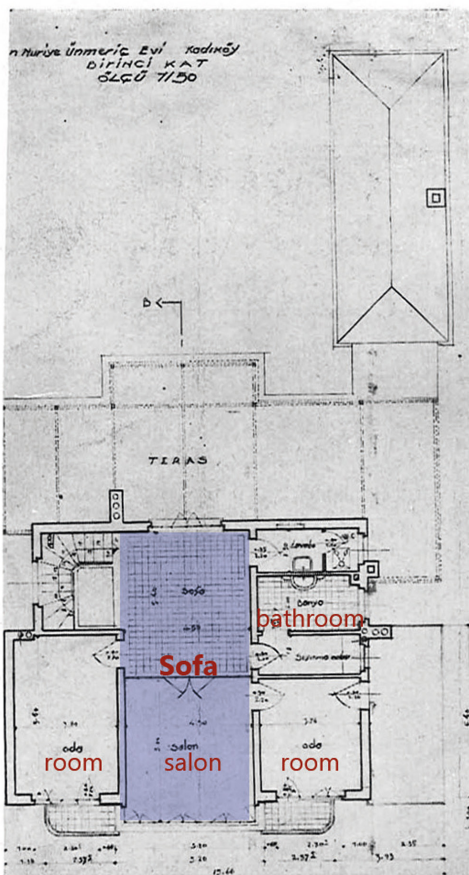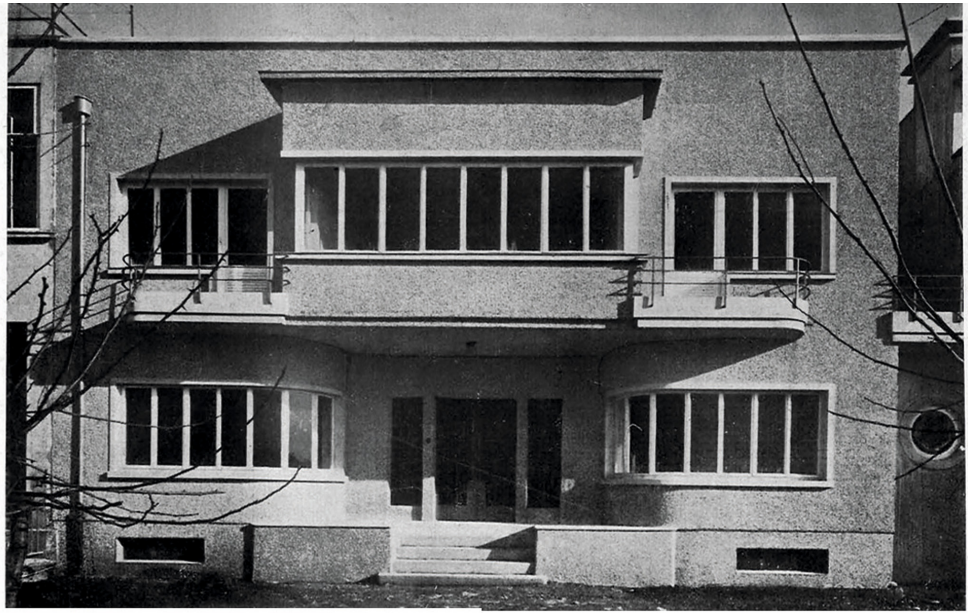
FIGURE 6 Drawing of the two-story B. Behçet Ünmeriç House by Neşet Akatay, depicting two sofas and showcasing the organization of public and private spaces across different floors. (*Source*: Akatay, 1939).

have to pass through if they want to go somewhere in the house. The other is on the upper floor and labeled as *sofa* by the architect. The upper *sofa* is in the private zone of the house and acts as a *harem's sofa* and is combined with the private living room. Although there are living rooms in all projects, architects have created another space specifically for the family to live in. These daily and transitory spaces are the same as a *harem's sofa* in terms of use and represent the continuity of a traditional bond. Furthermore, in multi-story houses, private spaces are found on the upper floors, while public and semi-public spaces were on the ground floor.

As can be seen, the internal dynamics of the houses have been recreated in multiple ways without completely severing the ties and constraints of the past. In most cases, two distinct spaces were designated for living, one for the family and the other for guests. The primary private area of the house, where sleeping and dressing rooms were located, has remained private much like the *harem*. Also, all five examples have spaces that were designated and functioned as *sofa*.

The common element among all five projects is their modern facades. While these buildings may have the esthetic of modernism from the outside, they maintain the traces of traditional layouts within. Features of what is commonly referred to as Modern Movement, such as open plan, flowing spaces, or light structures, are absent in nearly all of the 188 projects, including those that do not adopt gender segregation or *sofa*, which is not surprising considering the technical difficulties to achieve these. Overall, although geometric lines and ornament-free facades appear "modern," the spaces in which people actually live do not perform significantly differently from those of a traditional house in Turkey. This suggests that despite the modernization efforts and aspirations of the era, certain facets of traditional living arrangements endured, illustrating the complex interplay between tradition and modernity in the architecture of early republic Turkey.

CONCLUSION

The dynamics of modernity are inclusive; by adopting, harmonizing, and cross-fertilizing, they encompass rather than exclude or oppose (Göle, 2000). As stated by Eisenstadt and Schluchter (1998), modernity did not culminate in homogenization or concurrence anywhere in the world; rather, every instance of modernity gave rise to its unique reality. A mix of living styles emerged and cultural diversity survived even though transformed into different entities. Drawing on an understanding of multiple modernities, this study attempted to show the link between Kemalist reforms and early republic residential architecture. It argued that reforms affecting social life were constructed to act as tools for changing people's appearance in order to portray an image of being new or modern. A person donning European clothing, writing in Latin script, following the Gregorian calendar, participating in gender-inclusive gatherings, and residing in a "modern" house could be deemed to meet the requirements of modernity. Yet beneath this surface image, the enduring aspects of social and cultural life remained hidden. The ideals symbolized by modern facades with geometric and rational proportions were not fully reflected in the internal designs of these homes. It underscores that a simple copy-and-paste approach to modernity is not possible as sociological and cultural constructs persistently intermingle. The outcomes inevitably become hybrid, embodying a unique blend of influences shaped by time and location.

In Turkey, the path to modernity was neither unequivocally endorsed nor outright rejected; instead, it melded with existing social patterns and structures, resulting in a distinctive entity. Furthermore, the architecture of the time is not merely a reflection of the Kemalist vision but a nuanced manifestation of a multifaceted societal shift. Therefore, the significance of early republic Turkey's modern residential architecture does not solely derive from its formal

resemblance to European Modernist designs. Rather, it stems from a transcultural understanding that recognizes the multiple expressions of modernity.

This exploration into the interplay between modernity and residential architecture is not just an academic exercise; it has real-world implications for the understanding of modern heritage. The ways in which we presently perceive and contextualize modern heritage will significantly influence our approaches to conservation, restoration, and repurposing. With this perspective in mind, this study contributes to a broader effort to grasp the historical and cultural meanings embedded in the housing projects of early republic Turkey. In a rapidly changing world, where modern heritage faces challenges ranging from demolition to neglect, the lessons drawn from the nuanced interplay between modernity, architectural form, and cultural continuity offer valuable insights. By recognizing the diverse expressions of modernity and the enduring influence of cultural and social dynamics, we can better appreciate the complex tapestry of the modern heritage.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The founders of the republic and their comrades are commonly referred to as Kemalists, based on Kemal Atatürk's name.

[2] New Architecture is a term used in Turkey for what is commonly referred to as the Modern Movement.

[3] It is important to note that the people moving from wooden mansions to modern apartments were primarily bureaucratic elites or well-to-do families. Notably, the projects featured in the *Arkitekt* journal were already a selective category, typically showcasing building projects considered "worthy" of publication. Consequently, it is essential to recognize that the projects under scrutiny here represent a distinct segment of the construction activity occurring in early republic Turkey. These architectural choices are a testament to the lifestyle and aspirations of specific segments of society.

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