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Dimitris Pikionis and Sedad Eldem: Parallel Interpretations of Modern Architecture in Greece and Turkey

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Dimitris Pikionis and Sedad Hakkı Eldem

What first attracted me to a parallel review of the work of Dimitris Pikionis (1887–1968) and Sedad Hakkı Eldem (1908–1988) was their common preoccupation with vernacular architecture, re-interpreted through modern means, and the thematic affinity of their published testimonies. Studying their background, we can discern the palpable influence of the native landscape, built environment and local history, and the intellectual climate that charged the building heritage of each country with a distinctive meaning. Furthermore, each architect's teaching and design work reflects both his Western training and his creative response to modern trends.

Pikionis, who was born and grew up in Piraeus, completed his civil engineering degree at the National Technical University in Athens in 1907. He continued his studies in painting and architecture in Munich and Paris, returning to Greece in 1912. Born in Istanbul, Eldem received his primary school education in Geneva and attended the gymnasium in Munich. He studied architecture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul (1924–8) under the Italian architect Guilio Mongeri, who had designed some of the major buildings in Istanbul and Ankara. He continued his studies in Paris and Berlin (1929–30).

While both Pikionis and Eldem came to be strong advocates for the local building traditions, they were trained by Western European architects and incorporated both the principles and elements of the modern movement in some of their early de-

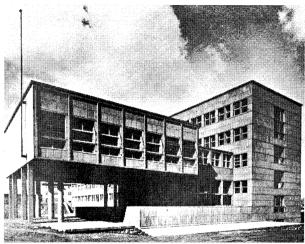


Fig. 1. Sedad Eldem, State Monopolies Directorate (1934-7), Ankara.

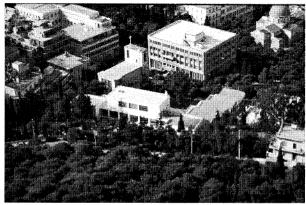


Fig. 2. Dimitris Pikionis, Lycabettus School (1933), Athens. (Stepped building at center.)

signs, as we can see in Eldem's State Monopolies General Directorate in Ankara (1934–7) and in Pikionis's Elementary School on the Lycabettus Hill, Athens (1933) (Figs. 1 and 2). These buildings reflect both the architects' familiarity with modern architecture and each government's support for the modern idiom. Eldem won the commission for the Directorate, his first opportunity to design a major state building, through an international competition. At the time, the pursuit of modernity in Turkey was reflected not only in Kemal Atatürk's westernizing reforms, but also in the new economic policies that supported the extensive building program of the early years of the Republic. Further developed in the 1930s, this program included the building of Ankara, the new capital city, the construction of service and industrial buildings throughout the country, and the development of models for school buildings.5 The Lycabettus school by Pikionis was part of a government school-building initiative (1930-2) by the then Minister of Education, George Papandreou, that led to the construction of 6,000 new school rooms and the repair of 2,000 existing ones. This ambitious building program also succeeded in establishing the modern architectural idiom in Greece.6

These examples reflect but part of the repertory of the two architects. In the subsequent decades, as the aesthetic and political preoccupations shifted in each country, both Pikionis and Eldem returned to the building tradition of their respective countries and created buildings that were directly inspired by vernacular architecture. Compare, for example, the refreshment pavilion next to the church of St. Dimitri Loumbardiaris, near

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Fig. 3. Dimitris Pikionis, Refreshment Pavilion (1951–7) by the church of Loumbardiaris, Athens.

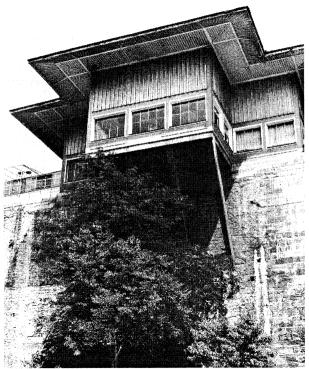


Fig. 4. Sedad Eldem, Ta lik Coffee House (1947), Istanbul.



Fig. 5. Dimitris Pikionis, Experimental School (1935), Thessaloniki.

the Acropolis hill, by Pikionis (1951–7), with the Ta lik Coffee House in Istanbul by Eldem (1947) (Figs. 3 and 4). These works are compatible and comparable because they are both sensitive to the site and draw inspiration from the local vernacular building tradition without simply imitating historical examples.⁷ On larger scale buildings, we can see the influence of local architecture on the Experimental School in Thessaloniki (1935) by Pikionis and on the Faculties of Sciences and Letters, University of Istanbul (1942), designed by Eldem and Emin Onat. Both building complexes draw inspiration from the large, elaborate private mansions of the late Ottoman period that can be found to this day in northern Greece and western Anatolia (Figs. 5 and 6).8 Reflecting on his two school complexes, Pikionis wrote in 1958: "The Lycabettos School was built around 1933. When it was completed, it did not satisfy me. That is when I considered that the universal spirit had to be coupled with the spirit of nationhood; and from these thoughts came out the Experimental School in Thessaloniki (1935) [and others]."9

"The local people [laos] are the true builders, holding on to the ancient quality of their art. . . . But thoughtlessly we follow the foreign [prototype], always to be left behind it," charged Pikionis in a 1925 article which pioneered the study of vernacular architecture in Greece. 10 He criticized rationalism, because its aim to "fulfil human needs in a strictly materialistic way completely ignores the spirit."11 He cautioned that when "conditions are agitated by something foreign, by the lie of civilized life, for example, this naturalness of the people is in danger of being lost."12 It is the people "who hold the memory . . . of the Greek essence [ousia]," he wrote in 1954.13 Pikionis tried to incorporate vernacular building methods in his own works by studying local natural material and local building details, and by searching for truth in construction. He carried out the landscaping design of the Loumbardiaris church and the approach to the Acropolis hill-the latter being one of his most celebrated works-mostly on the site, with little help from drawings, except to clarify certain details. The physical effort of his handson approach had a spiritual dimension for him. There would be no "pleasure in piling up stones and carving marble, or line up sounds and words, if a human entity, the whole world, god were not contained in these partial actions," he wrote in 1925.14

During the 1930s and 40s Sedad Eldem similarly advocated his commitment to a "native" [or national] style, which was inspired by the Turkish house. 15 During his long and productive career, this commitment to regional heritage remained unflagging. Lecturing in 1978, he advised his colleagues and students: "Before attempting to look to the future, and in order to protect ourselves from the influence of alien cultures, we must concern ourselves with our own architectural heritage, reap its fruits and take strength and inspiration from it. Any other approach would be unproductive and would necessarily be swallowed up in the flood of world architecture. We must first gain an understanding of our own individuality, become familiar with the values of our own culture and architecture and learn to love them and be proud of them. Only after structuring the new foundations with

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the help of knowledge and sensitivity can we design our own new style."16 And reflecting on his work in 1980, he reiterated: "The chief aim of my fifty years of professional life has been to create a regional architectural style. I have approached the problem from various angles, not all of which have been appropriate or successful. With time I have become even more convinced that internationalism in architecture is not a productive choice." Along with his support of regional architecture, Eldem's comments also reveal a certain disdain, if not fear, for the influence of "alien cultures." Nevertheless, he did not turn down international commissions, as that of the Hilton hotel, mentioned below. Like most of his contemporary intellectuals in Turkey and Greece, Eldem was caught in the cultural paradox that Paul Ricoeur described in his 1965 essay "Universal Civilization and National Cultures":

Whence the paradox: on the one hand, it [the nation] has to root itself in the soil of the past, forge a national spirit, and unfurl this spiritual and cultural revendication before the colonialist's personality. But in order to take part in modern civilization, it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical, and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandon of a whole cultural past... There is the paradox: how to become modern and return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization.¹⁸

In Greece, the turn away from the international trends and towards the local traditions in the 1930s reflected a broader cultural shift, as artists and writers, fluent in the contemporary Western currents, sought to define the elements of Greekness in both high and low art. This initially open and wide-ranging search became codified by the state after the establishment of General Metaxas's dictatorship on 4 August 1936. Metaxas elaborated the notion of the "Third Hellenic Civilization," after the civilizations of ancient Greece and of Byzantium. While this state-sanctioned "return to the roots" often resulted in uncritical imitation of existing works, broader questions regarding cultural heritage and identity remained in the foreground, at times transcending official rhetoric. In Turkey, a similar movement to embrace regional architecture was approved by legislation in 1934, decreeing that "the Ministry [of Public Works] will see to it that a Turkish architectural style is developed in order to maintain a certain uniformity." The focus on regional and national architecture gained full momentum in 1940, two years after Atatürk's death, in part as the result of the second world war. Shortages in imported building materials forced architects to reconsider traditional building materials and construction methods. Ideologically, nationalism was called on to provide internal cohesion and withstand external pressures.19

Architects, artists, and other intellectuals in both countries continued their explorations into native culture during the post-war decades, but at a decidedly smaller scale. Both



Fig. 6. Sedad Eldem and Emin Onat Faculties of Sciences and Letters, University of Istanbul (1942).



Fig. 7. Sedad Eldem, Social Security Agency Complex, Zeyrek (1962–4), Istanbul

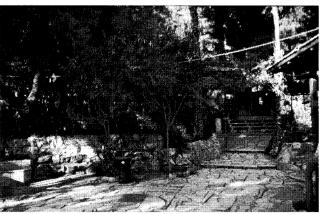


Fig. 8. Dimitris Pikionis, Landscaping by the Loumbardiaris church and refreshment pavilion. Pikionis arranged the landscaping around the Acropolis Hill (1951–7) in a similar manner.

Turkey and Greece were eager to display a westernized façade to the world, as is evident by the emblematic presence of the Hilton hotels in Istanbul (1952) and Athens (1958–63). Of course, the effort to introduce modern forms in both countries was not purely symbolic. New hotels with modern facilities, such as telephones and meeting rooms, were needed in order to accommodate the needs of international political and business meetings. Located often outside the city center, they were also intended to stimulate property development outside the crowded downtown areas.

Eldem's design career was much more extensive and varied in scale than Pikionis's. Eldem collaborated on the design of the Istanbul Hilton with the corporate firm of SOM, which was based in New

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York and directed by Gordon Bunshaft.²⁰ In his later buildings Eldem expertly married the elements of modern and local architecture, as we can see in his Social Security Agency Complex in Zeyrek, Istanbul (1962–4) (Fig. 7). The project incorporates not only building elements of traditional houses, but also the scale and morphology of urban neighborhoods.²¹ Pikionis's most lasting impact at an urban scale has been his landscaping of the Acropolis and Philopappou Hills in Athens (1951–7), a sensitive and meticulous work inspired by the building methods of contemporary vernacular builders (Fig. 8).²²

As we can see by the brief overview above, there are fundamental similarities in the work of Eldem and Pikionis. And while they were both distinguished and often pioneering in their theoretical and design contributions, they were certainly not alone in their explorations of vernacular and modern architecture. Having both also taught at the university, they influenced by example other practitioners, as well as their own students.²³ The significant degree of correspondence in the modernizing ideologies of the two countries might, in part, explain the similarity of architectural forms, although architectural creation cannot be pinned on one or two specific factors. The writings and published interviews of Pikionis and Eldem show the extent to which the evident similarities in their work may also be based, in part, on their memories of similar buildings.

In describing his earliest memories, Dimitris Pikionis wove together references to his family, nature and the ancient ancestors: "My grandmother used to take my sister and me down to the headland of the Phreattys every day for a walk. We strolled over the jagged rocks where the sea breeze gently stirred the slender stalks of the wild plants that sprouted through the cracks; we wandered across the god-bearing soil that was littered with bits of broken pottery, picking our way between gaping wells that spoke to me of the ancient people who once dwelled in this land-my land. And thus I gradually formed an image in my mind of the spirit and the history of my land." While nature inspired an almost religious awe in him, the ancient landscape was experienced both through his body and through his mind: "While still at school, I often took long walks exploring the Attic countryside.... But who can adequately describe the impact of these sites upon a young man still enveloped in Goethe's 'magic mantle of poetry'?"24 As a student in Munich, he reminisced: "I was studying Aeschylus and my eyes were filling with tears, contemplating, like Goethe's heroine, the distant land of the Greeks."25 Here the landscapes of Pikionis's own experience were refracted through the multiple lenses of Aeschylus, and Goethe and his heroine. Distance and nostalgia etched them in his memory. Upon his return to Greece in 1912, after his studies in Munich and Paris, the familiar landscape helped anchor him once again: "As the boat reached the port of Patras, my eyes were struck by the cold, dazzling whiteness of a piece of marble lying in the mud. Such was its impact against the things surrounding it that I thought: 'Now I will have to revise everything I have learned up till now'."26

Recalling his studies in Istanbul, Sedad Eldem commented:

"In our free time we used to go to the Topkapı Palace. . . .] I was drawing sketches, taking down details. We were nourishing our souls (forgetting lunch time). It was a surprise for Mongeri Jour professorl to find out our extra-curricular studies about Turkish architecture."27 "To understand the meaning and the beauty of the materials and to discover a modern character in those old buildings, I was spending all my Sundays and most of the weekdays wandering in the streets of Istanbul. . . . I was in love with the beauty I was gradually discovering. It was not the beauty of finished classical compositions, it was rather the overall effect and harmony of certain rhythms and motifs, certain smaller elements."28 For Eldem, "the greatest achievements of Islam are those of the past . . . we must first journey into our past and seek our inspiration there."29 And as he reminisced in another interview, while studying in Berlin, he was "dreaming of a kind of Turkish city . . . something between an Anatolian city and an American one. Of course, today [1980] I realize the impossibility of anything of this sort."30

As is evident from each architect's evocative words, the impact of the familiar landscape was fundamental in their later development. What is even more interesting to me is the process through which an architect comes to discover this "familiar landscape," one that is neither static nor monolithic. When Pikionis first described the Attic landscape or the streets of Athens, he focused on the remnants of antiquity, the testimonies of the ancient civilization depicted in the poetry of his favorite authors. There were no references, at first, to the humble vernacular buildings, which later came to figure prominently in his writings. As he started searching for an indigenous way of building, he began to notice and extol the works of the vernacular builders. On the other hand, Pikionis did not make references to the distinguished neoclassical buildings erected in Athens during the 19th century, designed primarily by German, Danish and later Greek architects, nor to the prolific work of Ernst Ziller, who single-handedly marked the city with its ornamented, finde-siècle image. "As a student I was doubly rebellious," asserted Sedad Eldem in the 1980s. "I was violently against the 'neo-Turkish' of domes and arches... I was equally against the kübik international style. And at the same time, I was passionately in love with the Turkish house. If thereafter I have achieved something in my career I owe this achievement to the persistence of these strong feelings."31 Like Pikionis, Eldem passed over the newer architecture surrounding him. Among the examples were the late-Ottoman and Orientalizing ones of the turn of the century, built by foreign architects, and the first national style of his teacher Mongeri and his contemporaries, best exemplified in buildings in the new capital, Ankara. Both architects recorded only those architectural examples that evoked a creative response in them.

In his later writings, Dimitris Pikionis reconsidered some of his previous pronouncements against the foreign-brought architectural traditions. "But why does the presence of the foreign haunt me like that? I am captivated by this attraction of the antithetical worlds." Writing about the Castle in Rhodes in 1946,

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he reflected on the "four peoples, the Greek, the Roman, the Frankish, and the Turkish [who] left, marked on the stones and the marbles, the ideograms of their being, of their life ideal, as each one had grasped it."33 His journey of exploration, a difficult journey that used architecture as its mileposts, led him closer to the culture of the Ottoman past. He approached Moslem architecture at once with reverence and pronounced distance: "The water fountain. The Frank made water fountains, too. But you sense that there are an act of administrative welfare. In the Turk. they take on a human, religious meaning. . . . I am talking about the innermost kinship and the unbridgeable contrasts of the races [phyle] and of the ideals."34 Pikionis came back to the same questions about opposing traditions and artistic shapes in an autobiographical article he wrote in 1958, at the age of 71. "Someone said, correctly, that the course of Hellenism is dependent on our responsible position between the East and the West. And I will add: and from the competent composition of the opposing currents into a new shape [morphe]. I could analyze how this problem manifests itself in Architecture. But it would suffice here to say that I am from the East [eimai anatolites]."35 Sedad Eldem, I suggest, would have concurred.

Epilogue

In Imagining the Balkans (1997) Maria Todorova commented that "probably the most striking feature of the dominant discourses in the different Balkan countries is the remarkable similarity between them."36 However, she cautioned at the conclusion of her study, "one of the charms of the Balkan nations, but also their curse, is that they have incredibly rich and dense histories, but they are usually self-contained."37 I found this true during my own early academic training, but there is now a noticeable, if not inevitable, change. People in the region are cultivating the soil for productive dialogue, in spite of occasional political setbacks. Focusing on the memory of place across nations is not always an easy task, as it inevitably incorporates the study of displacement, immigration, and loss of place. Nevertheless, I am optimistic that, through our concerted efforts, the study of our common built heritage, its meanings and memories, can lay the foundations for a common language, for, as the Arabic proverb goes, "we resemble our neighbors more than we resemble our ancestors."

PHOTO CREDITS

Figs. 1, 4, 6, 7: Sibel Bozdo_an, Suha Özkan and Engin Yenal, Sedad Eldem, Architect in Turkey (New York: Aperture, 1987).

Figs. 2, 3, 5, 8: Mark Forte, December 1999 and January 2000.

NOTES

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Eleni Bastéa, "Dimitris Pikionis and Sedad Eldem: Parallel Reflections of Vernacular and National Architecture," in *The Usable Past: Greek Metahistories*, Keith Brown and Yannis Hamilakis, editors, (Rowman and Littlefield; forthcoming). Unless otherwise noted all translations from the Greek are mine

- On the Ottoman legacy in the Balkans, see Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 164 and *passim*. On p. 181, she highlights the fact that "the Ottoman Empire played a crucial role as mediator in the course of several centuries, which permitted broad contacts, mutual influences, and cultural exchange in a large area of the Eastern Mediterranean."
- On Pikionis, see Architectural Association, Dimitris Pikionis, Architect 1887–1968, A Sentimental Topography (London: Architectural Association, 1989) and D. Pikionis, Keimena [Texts], edited by Agnis Pikionis and Michael Parousis (Athens: Educational Institute of the National Bank of Greece, 1987).
- Engin Yenal, "Profile of the Man," in Sibel Bozdo_an, Suha Özkan and Engin Yenal, Sedad Eldem, Architect in Turkey (New York: Aperture, 1987), 159.
- Bozdo_an, "Modernity in Tradition," in Sedad Eldem, 26.
- Afife Batur, "To Be Modern: Search for a Republican Architecture" in *Modern Turkish Architecture*, Renata Holod and Ahmet Evin, editors (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 68–93, and especially p. 69.
- Dimitri Philippides, Neoellenike architektonike [Modern Greek Architecture] (Athens: Melissa Publishing House, 1984), 181. See also, Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, "A critical introduction to Greek architecture since the Second World War" in Orestis B. Doumanis, Post-War Architecture in Greece, Greek–English edition, (Athens: Architecture in Greece Press, 1984), 19.
- On the Loumbardiaris pavilion and site, see *Dimitris Pikionis*, *Architect*, 51–7. On the work of Pikionis, see also Philippides, *Neoellenike architektonike*, 295–304. On the Ta_lik Coffee House, see Bozdo_an, "Modernity in Tradition," in *Sedad Eldem*, 50–1, and Üstün Alsaç, "The Second Period of National Architecture," in *Modern Turkish Architecture*, especially pp. 98–9.
- For the Experimental School, see *Dimitris Pikionis*, *Architect*, 42–3, and Philippides, *Neoellenike architektonike*, 207–9. For the Faculties of Sciences and Letters, University of Istanbul, see Bozdo_an, "Modernity in Tradition," in *Sedad Eldem*, 62–7.
- ⁹ Pikionis, "Autobiographika semeiomata" [Autobiographical Notes], in Pikionis, Keimena, 34.
- Pikionis, "He laike mas techne ki emeis" [Our popular art and ourselves], in Pikionis, Keimena, 63, 69.
- Pikionis, "Aisthetikes arches tes architektonikes tou aixonikou synoikismou" [Aesthetic Architectural Principles of the Aixoni Prototype Housing], in Pikionis, Keimena, 256. The Aixoni project was never built.
- Pikionis, "He laike mas techne ki emeis," in Pikionis, *Keimena*, 59.
- Pikionis, letter to his wife, Alexandra, Munich, 21 August 1954, in Pikionis, Keimena, 44.
- Pikionis, "He laike mas techne ki emeis," in Pikionis, Keimena, 65–6.

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- Eldem used the words native [yerli] and national [milli] interchangeably. Bozdo_an, "Modernity in Tradition," in Sedad Eldem, 44, n. 1.
- Eldem, "Development of Regionalist Tendencies," paper presented at The Aga Khan Award for Architecture Seminar held in Istanbul, Sept. 26–8, 1978. Cited in Sedad Eldem, 165.
- Eldem, "Toward a Local Idiom: A Summary History of Contemporary Architecture in Turkey" in Conservation as Cultural Survival, 1980. 96, cited in Sedad Eldem, 171.
- Paul Ricoeur, History and Truth, trans. Charles A. Kelbley (Evanston, Il.: Northwestern University Press, 1965), 277.
- For Greece, see Philippides, Neoellenike architektonike, chapter 6 and Mario Vitti, He genia tou trianta [The Thirties' Generation] (Athens: Hermes, 1989). For Turkey, see Üstün Alsaç, "The Second Period of National Architecture," in Modern Turkish Architecture (as in note 5), 95 and passim.
- The Athens Hilton was designed by Emm. Vourekas, Pr. Vasileiades and Sp. Staiko, in collaboration with the Hilton architects, Bozdo an draws a connection between Eldem's collaboration on the Hilton design and the general economic and political climate of the 1950s and 60s, when "the flow of foreign aid to Turkey, the arrival of Western experts from various international organizations, and Turkey's aspiration to become 'the little America' accelerated the dissemination of precepts of the 'international style'." Bozdo an, "The Predicament of Modernism in Turkish Architectural Culture: An Overview," in Sibel Bozdo an and Re at Kasaba, Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 141. See also Carol Krinsky, Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Ownings & Merrill (Cambridge, Mass.: The Architectural History Foundation and MIT Press, 1988), 52-55, for a detailed review of the collaboration between Eldem and SOM in the Hilton design.
- On the Social Security Agency Complex, see Bozdo_an, "Modernity in Tradition," in *Sedad Eldem*, 85 95.
- On the landscaping of the Acropolis and Philopappou Hills, see Dimitris Pikionis, Architect, 70–97 and Philippides, Neoellenike architektonike, 295–300.

- The influence of Pikionis can be readily seen in the work of Aris Konstantinidis (1913-93), who also blended the principles of vernacular architecture and the modern movement. On "critical regionalism" in Greece, see Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, Architecture in Europe, Memory and Invention since 1968 (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 17-19. See also, Kenneth Frampton, Modern Architecture: A Critical History (London: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 3rd edition, "Critical Regionalism: Modern Architecture and Cultural Identity," 314-27, where there is also a brief reference to the works of Pikionis and Konstantinidis. In Turkey, the work of Turgut Cansever and Ertur Yener, notably their Turkish Historical Society building in Ankara (1966), similarly employs the Mediterranean building tradition. See Bozdo an, "The Predicament of Modernism."145-6 and Atilla Yücel, "Pluralism Takes Command: The Turkish Architectural Scene Today," in Modern Turkish Architecture, 141-2
- ²⁴ Pikionis, "Autobiographical Notes," *Dimitris Pikionis*, *Architect*, 34.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 28.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 36.
- Eldem, "Sanayi-i Nefise'den Akademi'ye," in Sedad Hakkt Eldem: 50 Yıllık Meslek Jübilesi, 1983, 7, cited in Sedad Eldem, 28.
- ²⁸ Interview with Eldem, 25 February 1986, Sedad Eldem, 26.
- ²⁹ Eldem, "Toward a Local Idiom: A Summary History of Contemporary Architecture in Turkey" in *Conservation as Cultural Survival*, 1980, cited in *Sedad Eldem*, 143.
- Interview with Eldem, 25 February 1986, in Sedad Eldem, 33.
- 31 Eldem, "Son 120 Sene Içinde Türk Mimarisinde Millilik ve Rejyonalizm Ara_tımaları" in Mimaride Türk Milli Üslûbu Semineri, 1984, 57, cited in Sedad Eldem, 44.
- Pikionis, "To provlema tes morphes" [The Problem of Shape], Pikionis, Keimena, 206.
- ³³ Ibid., 209 10.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 218.
- ³⁵ Pikionis, "Autobiographical notes," 35.
- ³⁶ Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 182.
- 37 Ibid., 186.