Vernacular Shifts:
Observations from a Small City

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The vernacular Turkish house has been the subject of much solid academic research. Ilhan Tekeli, in "The Social Context,[1]" traces the history of Turkish architectural practice, education and research in the Republic, and identifies the 1940s as the decade when studies of vernacular form became the focus of dissertations at the two architecture schools in Istanbul, the Academy of Fine Arts (later Mimar Sinan University) and Istanbul Technical University. The Turkish House, in its myriad forms, has been documented, drawn, photographed, and in some cases restored and preserved[2]. Turkey is rightly proud of a rich and diverse architectural heritage; yet the country, since its inception as a republic in 1923, has also sought to modernize its infrastructure, urban planning policy, and construction industries, as well as to raise the standard of living throughout the country. Migration from rural areas to urban centers continues to increase, with the swing toward a majority urban population firmly established by 1985[3]. With a population on the move, newer and higher density housing is the order of the day, as fewer and fewer adult Turks actually live in the city their family is from, much less the house of their birth.

New architectural research has been inspired by hybrid vernaculars, such as the *gecekondu,* a form resulting from the rural-to-urban migration[4]. This paper focuses on a different hybrid vernacular, the apartment dwelling. Specifically, this study observes some patterns of vernacular **means** of dwelling, patterns that remain and patterns that have shifted within three generations of a family in the Central Anatolian city of Aksaray, as they move inexorably from their traditional Turkish houses to modern apartment buildings. Observations were collected in two visits to Aksaray, in the summer of 1997 and the summer of 1999.

THE CITY

Aksaray is a small city in Central Anatolia, southeast of Ankara, northeast of Konya, and west of Kayseri. Its economy is based mainly on agriculture, primarily sunflower and wheat crops, processing salt from nearby Tuz Golu, and some textile production. The city, a regional center since Seljuk times, has grown steadily since the founding of the Republic. It has seen in the last four decades a large influx of people from Turkey's southeastern region. A former Aksaray resident estimates the population of the city in the 1970s was about 50,000; he now puts the population at about 150,000[5]. Village settlements outside the old city center have gradually been incorporated into city boundaries, and what were once fields and gardens now are paved neighborhoods of apartment buildings. With an increase in demand for housing, real estate values have gone up, and it seems to make financial sense to subdivide large family properties into money-making apartment complexes.

THE FAMILY

The subject family[6] has lived in Aksaray for just over one hundred years, the patriarch having moved there from nearby Nigde as a young man. The patriarch was successful in business and acquired a large amount of land, which was divided among his children from two wives. Inheritance laws were in a state of flux in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; most of the property ended up in the hands of one son, Mustafa, whose sister Makbule received little of the inheritance. Mustafa Bey held on to the land, and left it to his six children, who divided it evenly. Makbule Hanim moved into her husband's home, which was later inherited by her eldest son, one of five children.

THREE TRADITIONAL HOUSE FORMS

In 1997, Pempe Hanim, the wife of Mustafa Bey and mother of his six children, lived in a single-storey adobe home next to the adobe home of her second son, Kadir. These houses were in the low section of the hills that rise just outside Aksaray's center; both came into the family through Pempe Hanim's inheritance. Pempe Hanim's home had walls 72 cm thick, a covered porch with low couches for outdoor visits, and vegetable gardens and roses outside the door. The house had electricity and cold running water; heat was provided by a fireplace in the multi-purpose main living area[7] and a small coal-burning stove. A water closet had been added to the back of the house within the last ten years; prior to that, an outhouse had been located at the back corner of the property. The house also had a kitchen with a sink and a stove, and two small bedrooms.

In 1997 and in 1999, Vahit, the son of Makbule Hanim, lived with his family in the single-storey stone and adobe house his parents had owned. This home was in a neighborhood within easy walking distance of the oldest part of Aksaray. Many of the older structures in this area were not being maintained; they were clearly marked for eventual redevelopment into apartment houses. Vahit Bey is a tailor with a shop in the city center; he walks to work each day, and usually walks home for lunch. The stone and adobe house was on approximately a half acre of land; Vahit Bey kept chickens, and his wife, Sukriye, had a vegetable garden. The stone house had a covered porch with low couches for visits, a large main living space, a kitchen, electricity, and hot and cold running water. It appeared to have two bedrooms (I discovered a third unused room when measuring the house in 1999). The house had a cellar that was no longer used. In 1997, there was no water closet in the house; by 1999, a new bathroom with shower and toilet had been cut out of some of the kitchen space. The stone walls of the house were approximately 55 cm thick. The roof was a thick flat layer of adobe over woven reed mats on top of poplar beams, which formed an exposed ceiling.

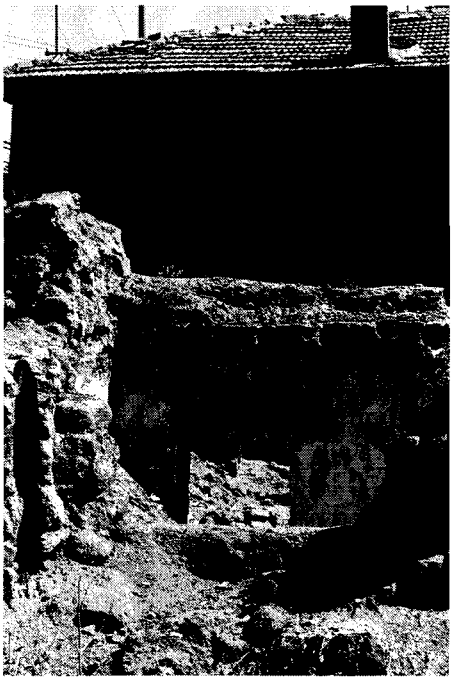

Fig. 1. Abandoned house near central Aksaray.

In 1999, Mensure, a niece of Mustafa and Makbule, lived in a two-storey stone house in Aksaray proper. A brief visit yielded impressions of a once fine house for relatively wealthy town dwellers. The house had been built by an Armenian family more than a hundred years ago, when Aksaray had a sizeable Armenian population. Mensure Hanim and her husband had bought the house in the 60s. Mensure Hanim now lived on the upper floor; the lower floor was in need of some maintenance. The interiors were appointed with well-crafted woodwork and built-in cabinetry. The house felt like a city dwelling, with views from the windows to the street rather than to a garden, with no prominent porch as entryway and gathering point. The main living space was large and airy, and furnished with chairs. The main entry door had a lock on it.

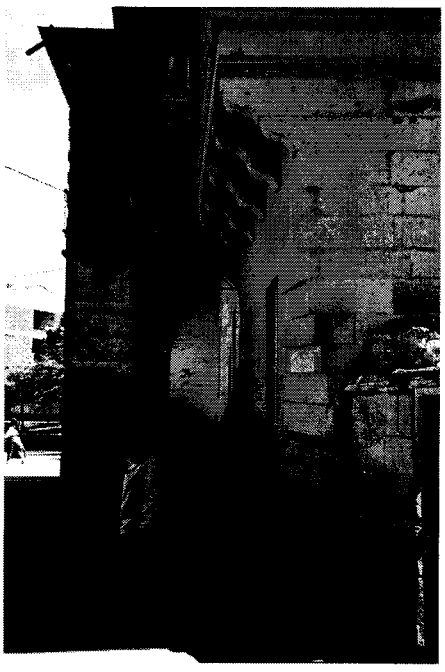

Fig. 2. Stone house near old city center.

THREE APARTMENT TYPES

Vahit Bey's youngest brother Nafis is a banker. In visits in 1997 and 1999, Nafis Bey and his family lived in the Emlak Bankasi Apartman Sitesi in the newly developed end of Aksaray, relatively far from the city's center; Nafis Bey drives a car to work. His apartment building is medium-sized; it has five floors with three apartments per floor. The Emlak Bankasi apartment buildings are part of a larger complex developed in the eighties by several different banking and real estate development firms. There are perhaps 100 buildings in the development, providing approximately 1500 dwelling units. Nafis Bey's apartment was on the fifth floor. It was considered very modern, with a full Western bathroom, a water closet, three bedrooms, a dining room, kitchen, living room, and two small balconies. The apartment even had a numbered parking space.

In visits in 1997 and 1999, Pempe Hanim's youngest son Ismail lived with his family in a small apartment house on a street of small apartment houses and a few single family houses. This Aksaray neighborhood appeared to have been a sort of early suburb of the city, lacking both the almost rural feel of the adobe neighborhood in the low hills and the city feel of Mensure Hanim's stone house. His apartment was the second floor of a two-storey, two-family house. The apartment had an entry porch with room for a table and chairs, and a balcony with low couches. Inside was a large main living area divided into two almost separate spaces (formal sitting and informal sitting/dining), a kitchen, a water closet, a shower room, and two bedrooms. Ismail Bey parked his car on the street.

By 1999, the matriarch Pempe Hanim had moved into a brand new apartment building her son Kadir had built on family property and sold for profit. Kadir Bey and his large family lived in the apartment across the hall from Pempe Hanim. This new apartment building was four storeys tall, with two apartments per floor, excepting the ground floor, which was commercial space. Pempe Hanim's apartment on the top floor was laid out in the modern manner. It had a dining room, living room, kitchen, water closet, Western bathroom, three bedrooms, and two balconies. The building had a small but working elevator. The old adobe was being rented to "a poor family." Pempe Hanim, her son and his family had clearly moved up the social scale by moving into an apartment.

PATTERNS OF DWELLING

Garden/home connection:

The vernacular house is often described by its spatial layout, its formal and material properties. It provides the framework for the patterns of life and everyday activities. Some of these patterns are portable when the dwelling form shifts; others are re-interpreted; still others are lost. One traditional dwelling pattern is based on the house to garden connection. In the vernacular lifestyle of even three decades ago, this family relied on its home vegetable gardens for variety in its diet. Daily patterns included work outdoors, in the yard, the garden, the chicken coops, and on the house itself. Social gatherings took place on the porch whenever weather permitted. Visits from family members were frequent, unannounced or informal, and done on foot. In 1997, at the homes of Pempe Hanim and Vahit Bey, visits were still mostly informal, often undertaken on foot, and always began on the porch, where one would sit for the first cup of cay. Shoes would be removed and left on the porch before entering the house.

In the apartments, the house is removed from the garden. Instead of a passage from street to garden to porch to house, the path is now sidewalk to apartment building hallway, to stairwell, up long flights of stairs (or an elevator ride for Pempe Hanim), to apartment door. Shoes are removed standing just inside the door, or, if there are many guests, out in the hall in front of the door. Some of this family's apartment

dwellers had found small planting areas along the edges of their buildings. Nafis Bey's wife Aysun had a few plants in pots on the south balcony. In general, much less time is now spent tending to plants, and none to animal husbandry. The balconies are not an even functional replacement for the porch; to reach the balcony one must first pass through the house, removing one's shoes. Visits are thus less casual, and the visitor cannot tell by inspection from the street whether anyone is at home in an apartment. Visits to an apartment-dwelling family are usually preceded by a phone call, and are often made by car.

Ismail Bey's home in the two-family building offers a re-interpretation of the house to garden connection. The building's site is not large, but as only two families occupy it, there is more garden space per family than in higher volume apartment buildings. In 1999, Menekse Hanim, Ismail's wife, grew all the family's summer vegetables with enough left to put up for the winter. The entry porch at the top of a single flight of outside stairs was private enough to use for family lunch and supper, but was also used for informal visits, though the visitor more often than not would call before dropping by. With outdoor living space provided before entering the house, shoes would remain on until the visitor was invited inside.

Main living space:

Another dwelling pattern to examine is how indoor space is used for social gatherings. The traditional Turkish house, in most of its forms, has an open central area serving multiple functions. In Aksaray, the misafir odasi is used for dining, gathering, sitting and talking, and as a guest bedroom. Pempe Hanim's adobe house and Vahit Bey's stone house had very traditional main living spaces, furnished with low couches that could double as guest beds along the walls. When these spaces were used for dining, a low table would be placed in the center of the main floor area, which was usually kept clear, and diners would seat themselves on the floor around it, sometimes leaning on a pillow or against a couch, sometimes not. After eating, the low table would be removed, and those gathered would stretch out their legs and relax on the floor against the couches, some moving up onto the couches to relax there. The space occupied in the room was thus much closer to the floor than in Western living room occupation patterns. As noted above, the main living area in Mensure Hanim's city-style dwelling was furnished with chairs, and had a more formal Western sitting room quality to it.

Fig. 3. Main living area, Vahit Bey's house, 1997.

Pempe Hanim's new apartment had distinct rooms designated for dining and socializing. The dining room was furnished with a very Western wood dining set, with matching china closet and tea tables. This room was rarely used. The living room had been furnished in the style of the old main living space of the adobe house, with the addition of a new television against the wall where there might have been a fireplace in a traditional house. Here the dwelling pattern of the old vernacular was carried directly into the new space. Low couches along the walls, an open central space. Breakfast, lunch and dinner were eaten here around the same portable low table; after eating people reclined in the same positions on the floor and on the couches. The kitchen, too, while spatially modern, was treated like the kitchen in the adobe. There were no built-in modern appliances except for a large sink, and kitchen cabinetry was minimal. The space was large enough for several people (women) to be preparing food in designated areas.

The dining room at Pempe Hanim's house was used twice during my 1999 visit, once as a space for the men to gather in as preparations for an elaborate meal spilled into the main living space, and once as the gathering space for the women the night before a wedding, as the men gathered in the main living space. In the latter instance, the dining room table and chairs were pushed against the walls, opening up the central space to facilitate socializing.

Nafis Bey's family had re-interpreted the vernacular pattern of eating/socializing in their modern apartment. Their small living room had two Western couches, two upholstered comfortable chairs and a television; it was the space most often used by the family, and really functioned in a manner quite similar to the modern American family room. Here, too, watching television was a family activity. While visitors might be served cay and a snack there, it was not used for dining. In this house, the kitchen was used for informal family lunches and late suppers, while dinner was served in the dining room. The dining room space had acquired a secondary function as the misafir odasi. In addition to the full dining room table and chairs, which were set very close to the large china closet against the wall, the room featured a Western convertible sofa, a television, two upholstered but formal chairs, and a coffee table. Whereas in a traditional vernacular Aksaray dwelling pattern an overnight guest might eat, socialize, and sleep in the same room, at Nafis Bey's house the guest would socialize in the family room, and eat and sleep in the dining room.

Toilet and bath:

A third dwelling pattern that merits observation is the availability and use of space for personal hygiene. One of the strongest complaints against traditional dwelling that I heard in Aksaray concerned the limited facilities for elimination and washing. No one wanted to use an outhouse; indoor plumbing was the standard, for reasons of comfort, cleanliness and as an icon of modern life. As noted above, Vahit Bey and his family added a modern toilet and bath, at considerable expense, to their stone house between 1997 and 1999, giving up part of the kitchen, but also giving up trips outside in cold and wet weather. All the modern apartments in this survey featured a water closet with a crouch-style toilet and a sink (usually cold water only) as well as a bathroom with a sit-style toilet and either a tub with handheld shower attachment or a shower stall. Most of the people I observed regularly chose to use the crouch-style water closet over the sit-style toilet. In Pempe Hanim's new apartment, the sit-style toilet area was used as storage space, and as she did not use her water heater, the shower stall was also used for storage. When she wanted a bath, she went across the hall to her son's family's apartment. This was a clear example of carrying over a vernacular dwelling pattern from a traditional house to a new housing type. Only Nafis Bey's family, probably the youngest and most modern of all the family groups, tended to use the sit-style toilet, and the sink in their WC had both hot and cold water.

Home maintenance patterns:

A large shift can be seen in the patterns of home maintenance that people perform. With a traditional stone or adobe house, maintenance tasks are part of a daily and yearly schedule. While the thickness of stone and adobe walls provides excellent insulation for Aksaray's extremes of temperature, adobe and thatch roofs need seasonal upkeep and are prone to leaks. Walls and floors made primarily of earth make for a heavy load of in-home cleaning. One of the lures of apartment living is the reduction in necessary maintenance chores. As lifestyles in Aksaray have shifted to a more urban and less rural pattern, people spend more time at work or going to work, more time procuring consumables and less time growing them, and thus have less time to spend at home repairing or maintaining the physical house. The Aksaray families in this study have acquired a more industrialized perspective of the division of their days into work time (away from home) and leisure time (at home). The generic nature of the concrete and brick-infill apartment dwelling is seen as a plus, because it neutralizes the need for material-specific and time-intensive maintenance.

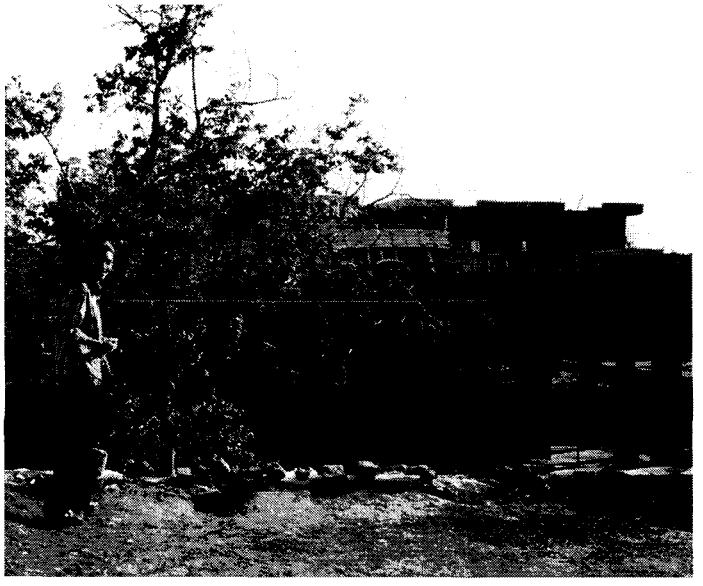

Fig. 4. Apartment construction seen from the adobe roof of Vahit Bey's house.

Patterns of spatial perception:

One final set of observations made in visits to Aksaray in 1997 and 1999 involved the shifting of patterns in how people perceive the spaces of the house, neighborhood, and city. At the house level, the move from a traditional dwelling to the new vernacular apartment has meant a change in the qualities of enclosed space and enclosing envelope. The thick uneven walls of the adobe and stone homes have given way to the uniformity of plastered or stuccoed concrete frame with brick infill. Poplar beams and woven mats overhead are replaced by plaster ceilings. Concrete slab floors are uniformly level. The new materials have luxury status; they are seen as proof of an increase in the standard of living. Vahit Bey and his family are eagerly awaiting the day when they have enough money saved to tear down their stone house and build an apartment building on the family property. This explains the unused third bedroom mentioned above in the description of the house; the roof and walls need extensive repair in that room, and they would rather give up the space for now and save the money for new construction, rather than fixing what they see as a substandard dwelling. They did not see the stone house as a valuable example of traditional architecture, and did not really understand why someone would want to measure or document it.

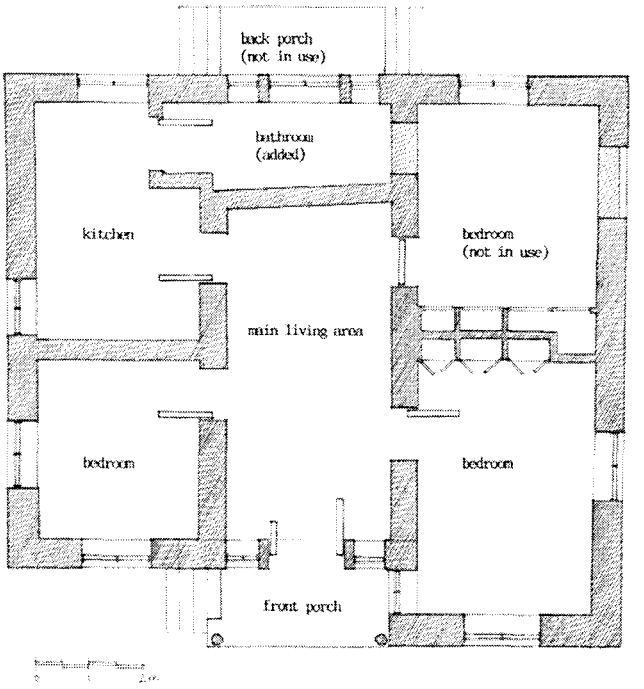

Fig. 5. Measured plan of Vahit Bey's house, 1999.

The shift to individual family apartments in separate areas of the city also means that the neighborhood changes. No longer can an entire extended family be found within walking distance across a few fields or a few streets. People are beginning to rely on cars for travel between areas of Aksaray, and the phone is becoming an important part of the new vernacular pattern of family contact. A phone call not only precedes a visit, it may sometimes replace a visit. Meanwhile, one's immediate neighbors may or may not be relatives, friends or even acquaintances. With apartments being built on speculation, who lives where is a question of what one's housing budget, and the real estate market, will bear. As individual family members develop and sell their portions of inherited land, the idea of a central family locus is rapidly becoming a thing of the past.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

This paper represents research informally conducted in two short summer visits to Aksaray, in 1997 and 1999. The author would like to pursue further research of a more formal and planned variety. This research would take the form of prepared oral histories, measured drawings of both traditional Aksaray houses and the new vernacular apartment, comparative and analytical drawings of spatial use in both, and extensive photographic documentation. A stronger analysis of spatial perception, vernacular patterns, and shifts in cultural tastes would be a desired goal, as well as an understanding of how this research might have broader application (to other communities in Turkey, and to communities in other countries).

The observations presented here raise more questions than they answer. In a broad study of Turkish housing patterns, Yildiz Sey notes, "The trend of building multi-storey apartment houses began in the

1950s and continued until the end of the 1960s ... In the 1970s, however, the trend began to shift toward multi-block complexes ... With some exceptions, these buildings have no significant architectural characteristics.[8]" Can and should architects seek to play a role in the transition from old vernacular to new? And what role does architecture (the field of practice and the body of work) play in forming culture and tastes, such as spatial desires, city image, and self image? To what extent do "significant architectural characteristics" make a difference to inhabitants? Stefano Bianca, who has begun to analyze these issues in Arabic cities, believes,

> *"[...] the introduction of new architectural models into a different cultural context has a far-reaching impact. It cannot be limited to isolated "formal" or "technical" problems, but has to address aspects of local customs, human behavior, and, above all, the meaning of architectural forms as perceived by their users.*[9]"

Perhaps, given the tradition in Turkish architecture schools of studying and documenting vernacular architecture forms, it is within the purview of both urban planning and design departments to address the issue of changing vernaculars, to analyze not only changes in form but changes in patterns of life and spatial use. And shifts analogous to the Aksaray observations can be found around the world as forces of urbanization, globalization and information access affect our perceptions of identity and space. Research into how these shifts affect our built world, locally and globally, could open the door to interdisciplinary work, in academia and in the practice of space formation, and to a broader understanding of space and identity in the twenty-first century.

NOTES

[1]Ilhan Tekeli, "The Social Context," in *Modern Turkish Architecture*, ed. R. Holod and A. Evin (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984).

[2]For example, the well-known houses of Safranbolu; the wooden houses of Suleymaniye and Zeyrek in Istanbul; some rock-cut dwellings in the Cappadocia region. In addition, Earthwatch International has a program to document traditional houses in Kula in the Aegean region.

[3]1985 census figures: 47% rural, 53% urban. Cf. 1980 figures: 56.1% rural, 43.9% urban; and 1960 figures: 74.8% rural, 25.2% urban. From *Turkey*, published by the Directorate General of Press and Information, February 1993. Estimated figures from 1995 are 31% rural, 69% urban; census 2000 figures are not yet available.

[4]See, for example, "Gecekondu" by M-A. Ray in *Architecture of the Everyday*, ed. S. Harris and D. Berke (Princeton Architectural Press, 1997); and "Contesting Urban Space in Early Republican Ankara" by Z. Kezer in *The Journal of Architectural Education*, 52:1 (1998): 11-19.

[5]Personal communication.

[6]All names have been changed to respect the family's privacy.

[7]This space is sometimes called the sofa, but in Aksaray people refer to it as the misafir odasi, or guest room. See O. Kucukerman, *The Turkish House in Search of its Identity* (Istanbul: Turkish Touring and Automobile Society, 1988), and C. Eruzun, "Turkish House," in *Turkey: Pilgrimage to Cities*, (Tokyo: Process: Architecture 93, 1990).

[8]Yildiz Sey, "To House the New Citizens," in *Modern Turkish Architecture*.

[9]Stefano Bianca, *Urban Form in the Arab World: Past and Present* (New York:Thames & Hudson, Inc., 2000).