Exhibitions

Tarihın Dönüm Noktalarında Bir Mimar. Clemens Holzmeister (Clemens Holzmeister: An Architect at Turning Points of History)
Turkish Grand National Assembly Building, Ankara
October 2001

Çankaya Municipality Contemporary Arts Center, Ankara
November 2001 and February 2002

Dolmabahçe Cultural Center, Istanbul
March 2002

Istanbul Technical University
April 2002 and April 2003

Middle East Technical University, Ankara
October 2002

The Austrian architect Clemens Holzmeister (1886–1983), a minor figure in the generally accepted history of modern architecture, was a major figure in the history of modern architecture in Turkey. Although not as well known as other foreign architects who lived and worked there in the 1930s (including Bruno Taut and Martin Wagner), Holzmeister was the most prolific, leaving a legacy of buildings that continues to provide concrete examples of the modernist ideals of the young Republic of Turkey.

Those familiar with the recent work of Sibel Bozdoğan (Modernism and Nation Building [Seattle, 2001]) know that Turkish architecture in the twentieth century has been alternately influenced by the forces of nationalism and internationalism. The Republic of Turkey—founded in 1923 after a war of independence—initially continued the architectural trend of building in the First National Style, which had been practiced by the architects Vedat and Kemal Ataturk (surnames were not used in Turkey until after 1934) during the last years of the Ottoman empire. Their work and that of their colleagues attempted to architecturally represent a concept of Turkish-ness by grafting traditional motifs like domes, pointed arches, spandrel tiling, and overhanging eaves onto designs heavily influenced by the Beaux-Arts planning principles of symmetry, axiality, and monumentality.

The most famous buildings in the First National Style constructed after the founding of the republic can be found in Ankara, the country’s new capital and its architectural showpiece. Early examples include the First Parliament Building (1917–20) by Ismail Hasif Bey, the Second Parliament Building (1924) by Vedat, and the Ankara Palace Hotel (1924–27) by Vedat and Kemal Ataturk. Also of note in Ankara are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (1927), the Ethnographic Museum (1925–28) and “Turkish Hearth” Building (1926–30) by Arif Hikmet Koyunoğlu, and the Agricultural Bank (1926–29), Ottoman Bank (1926), and Business Bank of Turkey (1928) by the Levantine architect Giulio Mongeri.

In the late 1920s, this Eastern-influenced and regressive attitude of updating or modernizing Ottoman architectural forms was abandoned in favor of a more Western, future-oriented outlook, parallel to the reforms taking place in other spheres: the abolition of the Sultanate (1922), the institution of a dress code banning the fez and veil (1925), the replacement of the lunar with the solar calendar (1925), the adoption of the Swiss Civil Code (1926), and the replacement of Arabic script with Latin letters (1928), to name a few.

In the early 1930s, the Turkish government began to invite foreign experts to give advice and assistance on development issues. The German-speaking world was generally preferred, especially in the field of architecture and planning. In 1927, the German town planner Carl Lörcher was asked to produce a plan for the Yenişehir (New Town) area of Ankara. A year later, Hermann Jansen won a competition for a complete master plan of Ankara, which was officially approved in 1932. Over the next ten years, approximately forty German, Austrian, and Swiss architects came to work in Turkey, particularly in relation to architectural education. The most renowned of them (in addition to Taut and Wagner) were Ernst Egl, Martin Elsaesser, and Holzmeister.

Holzmeister’s experience in Turkey was more as a practitioner than an academic. Before fleeing Austria in 1938, he designed and ran his Turkish projects (sixty-five in total with seventeen realized) from his architectural office in Vienna. While in exile from 1938 to 1954, he taught at Istanbul Technical University, but continued to produce and occasionally build designs in Turkey. Holzmeister’s best-known works were completed in Ankara: the Ministry of Defense (1927), the Ministry of Labor (1928), the Presidential Palace or Kiosk (1931), the Turkish Central Bank (1931), the Security Monument in Güven Park (1931–36; designed in collaboration with the Austrian sculptors Anton Hanak and Josef Thorak), the Interior Ministry

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Building (1932), the High Court of Justice (1933), the Austrian Embassy (1935), and, most notably, the (Third) Turkish Grand National Assembly or Parliament Building (1938–63).

It may seem odd that a non-Turkish architect could be responsible for so many structures associated with national sentiment (government ministries, presidential palaces, monuments, and even a parliament building), but the atmosphere of the time—where anything Western and modern was valued as a positive influence to be emulated—must be taken into account. The nationality of the designer of these buildings was not significant, as long as he or she believed in the ideals of the Turkish Republic.

The Holzmeister exhibition, organized jointly by the Austrian Cultural Office, Istanbul, and the architecture department of the Middle East Technical University, Ankara, premiered in the fall of 2001 in the parliament building he designed. The display presented the architect’s life and work in Turkey as well as the projects he completed in Austria and elsewhere before and after his years in exile. The material was organized into several thematic sections mounted on both sides of panels suspended to form a spiral. Surrounding this installation were watercolors painted by Holzmeister during his travels around Turkey.

The first thematic section, on the inside of the spiral, was Cartography of a Life, split into four distinct time periods (Childhood, Training, and Early Practice, 1886–1921; International Practice, 1921–38; Years of Exile, 1938–54; and Return to Home, 1954–83). This biography was accompanied by timelines detailing contemporaneous episodes in the architectural and political circles of Turkey, Austria, and the rest of the world. The timelines were particularly useful in placing Holzmeister’s Turkish works within the larger context of international events. The second thematic section, Magnitude and Diversity of the Oeuvre, also on the inside of the spiral, concerned Holzmeister’s non-architectural works. It was arranged according to subthemes, including his drawings and watercolors, his work as an academic, and his collaboration with sculptors, performing artists, craftsmen, and engineers.

The third and most extensive thematic section, Architectural Works, was on the outside of the spiral, and consisted of the subthemes Power, Faith, Performance, and Life and Death, which corresponded roughly to Holzmeister’s government buildings, religious buildings, theater and opera buildings, housing, and memorials. The best known of these themes in Turkey is undoubtedly the first, as can be seen from the predominance of government buildings in the list of Holzmeister’s completed projects in Ankara. Less familiar to the Turkish audience were the other three subsections, chronicling Holzmeister’s work in Austria and other non-Turkish locations. The exhibition admirably succeeded in presenting Holzmeister as a well-rounded, talented, and thoughtful international architect whose impact extended beyond Ankara’s government buildings.

The presentation was not, however, an unequivocal triumph. Beyond the superficial problems of the awkward plural in the title (a translation of Architekt in der Zeitensende, taken from the title of Holzmeister’s autobiography) and the display of reproductions rather than original archival materials, the true shortcoming of the exhibition was its lack of overall unity. Instead, it consisted of disparate elements that never quite came together. As mentioned above, the three main sections of the exhibition presented the entire life and work of Holzmeister. However, the simple math of trying to display three sections on a spiral with two sides just did not work out. As a result, the thematic sections sharing the inside of the spiral seemed compressed. In addition, the high-tech construction of the aluminum tensile structure, although intentionally designed to stand out from its surroundings, functioned only to create an atmosphere of unrelated parts. Finally, Holzmeister’s wonderfully sensuous watercolors were relegated to the nearby walls of the gallery like naughty children forced to stand in the corner.

The exhibition’s lack of cohesiveness, however, is made up for in the forthcoming catalogue, where the three thematic sections are physically united in one document. The publication is also noteworthy for its seventeen supplemental essays by Austrian, German, and Turkish scholars, which complement and further interpret the well-researched show. Of particular interest are essays that address the larger question of how and why the Republic of Turkey so wholeheartedly embraced the modernist style during the 1930s, as well as Holzmeister’s role in the search for a Second National Style after a backlash against foreign architects occurred in the 1940s.

In short, where the exhibition seemed like a collection of bits and pieces, the catalogue brings these elements together to provide an excellent document for scholars working on this time period or geographical location.

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Forthcoming publication related to the exhibition: