Still others will wonder where Chinese market gardening fits into an “Australian style.” These are probably valid questions for readers to raise, but in doing so they would miss the point of this important book. Its strength is its accessibility, in being a work that neither talks down to its readers nor assails them with technical terms or postmodern babble. It is, indeed, a work that can be read in different ways: through its images, captions, and text. Focusing on the text is perhaps impossible; such are the quality of the images that the eye will wander. Whether the reader is taking in a finely wrought representation of a flower bursting forth into bloom or analyzing a botanical garden’s serpentine-avenued boulevard, whether pondering a choice phrased caption or considering the implications of that species introduced there, the images invite continual revisiting. Just think how lucky the exhibition’s visitors were to view the originals. In The Garden of Ideas, Richard Aitken has planted another fine study in an already impressive intellectual garden.

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Esra Akcan
Architecture in Translation: Germany, Turkey, and the Modern House

Esra Akcan’s Architecture in Translation is a study in the remarkable migrations of modern architecture from Central Europe’s German-speaking lands to Turkey. Extrapolating from a linguistic metaphor, Akcan calls what transpired from the mid-1920s to the mid-1940s “architecture in translation.” The author’s insight that the modern house and housing are two of the most contested constructs of German and Turkish architecture, and the way she locates architecture within the linguistic debates concerning translation in Turkey at the time, are brilliant. The historical material presented in this book, the extensive archival work, and the author’s ambition to devise a theory of translation, make it indispensable reading for anyone interested in the international experience of the modern movement.

The first phase of “translations” traced in this book began when Hermann Jansen, a professor of architecture in Berlin, won the competition for the master plan of Turkey’s new capital. Jansen’s plan for Ankara amounted to a German reincarnation of the English garden city. Ankara’s modern layout, functional infrastructure, and hygienic green spaces were meant to highlight the Turkish Republic’s project for radical modernization and “Westernization.” In providing a new history of this episode, Akcan is attentive to the discrepancy in the perceptions of the garden city in Germany and in Turkey. Although it may have appeared outlandish to a Turkish audience in 1929, Jansen’s garden city offered a politically conservative alternative to Weimar Germany’s modernist social housing projects (Siedlungen). The German professor had an inclination to design suburban communities, inspired by the local vernacular, even when his Turkish clients demanded a “cubic” architecture to showcase their own modernity.

A clear pattern emerges in these years: The Turkish bureaucrats recruited figures of professional authority in Germany, Austria, and France. Many of the new capital’s most representative buildings were commissioned to the Austrian professor Clemens Holzmeister and to his assistant Ernst Egl. The plan of Istanbul was entrusted in the 1930s to the French urbanist Henri Prost. These factors partly explain why the most stylistically “modern” of Turkey’s official architecture in the 1930s emulates an impression of academic authority.

The flow of the architectural culture from Germany to Turkey intensified after Hitler’s rise to power in 1933, forcing the prominent figures of Weimar modernism into exile. Among more than two hundred German, Austrian, and Swiss academics and professionals, including about forty architects, were numerous political and Jewish refugees.1 The left-leaning architects and planners of the Siedlung programs in Berlin and Frankfurt—Martin Wagner, Bruno Taut, Margarete Schütte-Lihotzky, and Wilhelm Lihotzky—were prominent among them. Not all the German experts who moved to Turkey were political refugees, however. Paul Bonatz, an influential architecture professor, first came to Turkey in 1943 to promote “the New German Architecture” under Hitler.2

Akcan organizes her book thematically according to the German and Turkish architects’ opinions about “translatability,” understood as a metacategory. She judges the first generation of German and Austrian experts, Jansen and Egli, along with the Turkish Kemalist bureaucrats who commissioned them, as among those who were convinced that “modernism was smoothly translatable” (1). At the opposite end of this spectrum she positions the Turkish architect Sedad Eldem, who, plunged in melancholy, launched a monumental typological survey of the Turkish house at Istanbul’s Fine Arts Academy. As a discursive construction, the Turkish house emerged in the writings of architects and hommes de lettres of Istanbul as a reaction to cultural colonization and top-down modernization. Akcan finds their work symptomatic of their “convictions about untranslatability” (215). She maintains that far from being the unmediated core of a native culture, the Turkish house was the product of a self-inflicted Orientalism, if not a sign of the cultural marginalization of Turkish intellectuals.

Bruno Taut stands apart from the other émigrés, since in addition to teaching and leading a state architecture office in Istanbul, he remained engaged in architectural theory. First published in a Turkish translation in 1938, Taut’s Mimari Bilgisi (Lectures on architecture) has been understood as a humanizing revision of the precepts of the modern movement.3 In chapter 5, “Toward a Cosmopolitan Architecture,"
Akcan rereads Taut’s work and traces its intellectual origins to Immanuel Kant’s cosmopolitan ethics.

Neither Germany nor Turkey was a good place for cosmopolitanism in the 1930s. But Taut’s embrace of “non-Eurocentric cosmopolitan architecture” (278)—as Akcan calls it—serves as an antidote both to the top-down translations of modernism and to the nationalist rejection of all translations. Akcan has written a surprisingly dialectical book: the antinomies of translatability/untranslatability are resolved only through the telos of a cosmopolitan architecture.

While Akcan’s theory of architecture in translation refers to a broader flow of ideas in one or multiple directions—a common experience—the cases she examines underscore translation as effectuated by the agency of the architect. It is precisely against this emphasis on the role of the architect as the author/translator that one needs to weigh the methodological innovation of Akcan’s project. What are the benefits of privileging translation as the organizing metaphor of a history of modernism?

Akcan’s method departs in equal measure from an art historical biography, and from a critique of ideology, as exemplified in Sibel Bozdoğan’s seminal book Modernism and Nation Building.4 It is “the historical unevenness of translation” between a German-speaking modernism and Turkey that is central to Akcan’s book (17). Inspired by the work of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and the recent attention to translation in cultural studies, she is at her critical best when reading specific buildings, projects, and spaces, against the grain, and as a text.

Akcan’s analysis of a house designed by Seyfi Arkan for Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s sister—the Atadan House—is a case in point. Whereas Kemalism has presented the liberation and suffrage of Turkish women as one of its chief achievements, and the modern houses designed for the republican elite were meant to serve as models of a new domestic life, Akcan finds evidence of a deep-seated patriarchy in the Atadan House. As in Beatriz Colomina’s reading of “domestic voyeurism” in the houses of Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier, Akcan’s reading deconstructs Arkan, a Turkish modernist architect.5

Akcan’s book thus offers an opportunity to reflect on the translations of post-structuralist literary theory into architectural history. For all the talk since the 1980s about the “death of the author,” the history and theory of architecture have been unwilling to give up the figure of the architect as a potent, form-giving subject. Quite on the contrary, the various applications of deconstruction and postcolonial critique have made architectural history more—not less—dependent on the advent of the subject.

To her credit, Akcan provides a superbly researched and nuanced account. She does not suggest that “Turkish modernism was only a translation of a modernism conceived elsewhere. Yet by describing Turkish modern architecture as an “architecture in translation,” and by showing how it changed in translation, she, too, privileges the view of modernism as the production of a select few.

Turkish modernism took place at a time marked by the shifting allegiance from an empire to a republic, the radical rejection of the Ottoman multietnic society, and a relentless repression of ethnic difference. Translation alone does not explain why some architectural models were embraced and others rejected by different segments of Turkish society. The problem of hegemony in the classical Gramscian sense presents itself in the evidence that Akcan provides us: Why did Eldem, the German-educated heir of an illustrious Istanbul family, end up creating the ultimate ideological-aesthetic construct of the 1940s: the Turkish house? Why did Arkan’s experiments with Weimar-style social housing in the 1930s remain an exception, rather than the rule? Why did the patron’s of a Turkish housing cooperative in Ankara demand a garden city and not a Siedlung? Turkish modernism seems to call for more, not less, critique of ideology.

Spivak once wrote, “Translation remains dependent upon the language skill of the majority.”6 Herein lies the sea change of the past two decades in the history and theory of architecture: as Weimar modernism has lost its paradigmatic value for the students of architecture, some of its major historical figures have attracted new attention precisely because of their years of “exile” in Turkey. Emerging audiences have reshaped the ways in which histories of modernism are written. Akcan’s book is a significant contribution to the historiography of modern architecture by transcending “East-West” polarization. This is a monumental undertaking and an excellent introduction to the brave new world of multipolar histories where the old fictions of a center and a periphery no longer apply.

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Lada Hubatová-Vacková
Silent Revolutions in Ornament: Studies in Applied Arts and Crafts from 1880–1930
Prague: Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design, 2011, 288 pp., 256 color and 112 b/w illus. $38.00 (cloth), ISBN 9788086863184

Joseph Mashack
Adolf Loos: The Art of Architecture
London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013, 290 pp., 52 b/w illus. $29.00 (paper), ISBN 9781780764238

In a short autobiography from 1915, Adolf Loos (writing in the third person)