Sedad Hakki Eldem has often been defined as Turkey’s ‘State Architect’ for many reasons, but his constant reference to vernacular architecture was driven by a very refined culture of also a transnational character. An analysis of his correspondence demonstrates that he was also an internationally renowned intellectual who through his work became a sort of ‘ambassador’ of that culture for which his family had always advocated. Eldem is a minor figure in the Western world, probably because he was too tied to Turkish cultural events to be considered as highly as Pikionis or Pouillon. The aim of this paper is to bring to light unknown aspects of Eldem’s work which have never been taken into consideration, thereby often creating a somewhat misleading portrait of this architect.

Key-words
Vernacular architecture — Ambassador — State Architect

«Your interest in matters concerning Turkey is a sufficient reward for me». In this way Sedad Eldem wrote in a letter dated 1967 and addressed to Mr. E.R. Gallagher at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor of San Francisco. This phrase alone sums up the essence of this architect’s personality. A few years after I started studying Eldem’s work I realize that in order to fully grasp the value of his work, ouvre, both built and projected, and in order to have a non-stereotypical portrait of his figure, it is essential to read his correspondence.

Sedad Hakki Eldem was born in Istanbul in 1908, during the decline of the Ottoman Empire. His family was part of the elite society: he descended from Ibrahim Edhem Pasha¹ on his mother’s side; Osman Hamdi Bey² was her uncle. Sedad recounts that he received a traditional academic education³ that was strongly tied to the Anatolic and Ottoman traditions and, at the same time, to the cosmopolitan principles of the Empire. After a childhood and adolescence spent in Europe, young Eldem returned to Turkey right on the eve of the proclamation of the Republic of Atatürk. In 1924 he enrolled at the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul, and it was here that he began to learn from his city, starting with the Topkapi Palace.

Eldem was destined to become the greatest interpreter of modern architecture in Turkey. Who else but he who had conversed with the Masters of Modern in Europe and America, and was a son of Ottoman aristocracy, could open a Turkish path to the modern movement? His family’s background, and the infinite possibilities that opened up for him when he returned from the West, made him capable of creating the first modern architecture in his homeland. Not only that, he was able to educate and shape a whole generation of Turkish architects, making the question of identity .
one of the cornerstones of his design research. Far from the stereotypes of western architects transplanted in Turkey (who continued to use their same models of the European city without realizing that they were in a profoundly different urban structure), Eldem offered, time after time, his version of the facts. The solutions were always eloquent, tied to the building sites and firmly rooted in a recognizable and traceable typological context.

The most important theme of the work of Sedad Eldem was the study of the Turkish-Ottoman house and its reinterpretation in a modern key by utilizing an updated technological system with the use of modern materials. In particular, the ancient wooden frame system of the Ottoman houses was re-proposed by Eldem but using a reinforced concrete frame system.

No other person was as comprehensive, devoted and productive as he was in bringing the traditional Turkish house back to life through his own architectural experience. The essential characteristics of this building type, and its possible variations depending on the site, represent the main trait of Sedad’s work and also his main legacy.

What has contributed to the general misleading image of Sedad Eldem is both the Zeitgeist of his time and the socio-political situation in which the architect found himself operating: to be able to construct so eloquently in the heart of Istanbul, to do so with such representative architecture and monuments, to promote the study of vernacular architecture (already in 1932, an experience that in those years could only have a “nationalistic” meaning as happened in many countries of the Mediterranean) and still be in a privileged position due to inability to understand of a sometimes misleading image of Sedad Eldem and the essence of his design research.

When I arrived in Turkey at the beginning of my Ph.D. (Acciai 2012) studies I discovered that there a general opinion had been formed about this figure, even though he was widely studied. He was known as: the State Architect (Gallo 1991), the greatest archivist of Ottoman architecture (Pamuk 2008), the enemy architect of the Jews⁴, the architect that was not very reliable from the historical point of view. His project reconstruction often included his own personal research into previous structures, but were often confused for simple reliefs and therefore the compositional and non-historical value was not
fully understood. Analyzing and studying his constructed works, his writings, and above all his unexplored and vast correspondence, I didn’t find, and still do not find, a confirmation for these definitions of Eldem.

The work of Sedad Eldem is a well-rounded corpus, and it is difficult to separate the various components of his work: teaching, research and professional work come together in what has undoubtedly been the highest and fruitful contribution to the architecture and to the constitution of an architectural conscience modern Turkey.

Sedad Eldem had the merit of transmigrating methods, teachings and languages and applying them to the context of Turkish architecture; a field where no “native” architect before him had ever crossed the boundaries. In fact, until the 1930s, Turkey had first been “influenced” by the “First International Style” and then by the “Cubic Style” or “Ankara Cubic”. The first of these movements re-proposed Ottoman architecture according to a newly refined Orientalist style, while during the second, Turkey became a testing ground (Eldem 1980) for foreign architects. Cubic Style, mainly massive and rhetorical, was the result of the application of that monumental classicism which was well received by totalitarian regimes. This was fiercely resisted by Eldem modern form that were proudly rooted in the Turkish-Ottoman culture.

According to Eldem, in the 1930s, Turkey had to find its own architectural language both to overcome the Neo-Ottoman tendencies carrying imperialist styles, and to go beyond international interference that implied colonialist principles (Akcan 2012).

For Sedad, the new architecture should have been modern, and therefore national, and vice versa (Bozdoğan 2001, Bozdoğan S, & Resat 1997). He claimed that Turkey did not have to be an orientalized copy of European architecture and that a modern country should have its own national architects.

The young Sedad responded to these issues by basing the core of his design research on the Turkish house, an entity that until the 1930s had not been considered. In fact, in Turkey the analysis of traditional architecture was restricted to the study of monuments and public buildings (Eldem 1934). Eldem has often been accused of nationalism or defined as the ‘State Architect’ for his many governmental works, because he had the opportunity

Fig. 2
Güzel Sanatlar Akademisi
(Mimar Sinan University) after the restoration 1945-1953), S. H. Eldem papers,© Rahmi M. Koç Archive, digital copy obtained through SALT Research.
to work during the Kemalist era and because on certain occasions, as in the Faculty of Arts and Science, the architectural language could only embrace a monumental cadence (Gallo 1991).

From Eldem’s correspondence emerges the portrait of a brilliant, curious intellectual who had connections with many scholars worldwide, and that he was in contact with several prestigious foreign universities and cultural institutions.

This correspondence can be subdivided into various areas: there are letters addressed to several correspondents concerning the personal research that the architect pursued, on the spread of the Turkish-Ottoman (Acciai 2017a) house in the territories of the former Ottoman Empire.

Eldem’s correspondents were highly qualified researchers and engaged intellectuals who worked on (among other things) vernacular architecture and the various forms and influences of the Ottoman House. The letters show that Eldem was working on the Turkish house outside Turkey through two different methods of study. On one hand, he was interested in the traditional architecture of countries that had experienced Ottoman domination, which he studied through the publications of other intellectuals and architects, such as Lézine, Moutsopoulos, Revault and Kojić; on the other, he was looking for what remained of specific examples of Ottoman architecture (especially houses and palaces) on foreign territory after the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. Beyond being a charismatic figure of modern architecture in Turkey, Sedad Hakki Eldem was deeply interested in reconstructing the existence of those “fragments” of Ottoman architecture that he knew were scattered around the former Ottoman world.

This research, conducted thanks to personal connections, emerges solely from Eldem’s archives and represents the “private” aspect of the topic that was the heart of his design analysis The Turkish-Ottoman house. The “public” scope of this same subject is undoubtedly represented by the establishment of “Seminar on the National Architectural Style” by Eldem and Ernst at the Academy of Fine Arts of Findikli, Istanbul where they both taught.

This double value of Eldem’s approach – private and public – to the study of the Ottoman house combined with the fact that the National Architecture Seminars reverberated strongly while the transnational study of the Ottoman house remained buried in its private archives, has without a doubt contributed to the highlighting, in the historiography, of only one of these aspects: that of research and appreciation of Turkish architectural identity.

Among his papers there are also letters in English, French and German exchanged with Hans Poelzig⁷, Giulio Mongeri⁸, Philipp Holzmann, Paul Bonatz⁹, Adolphe Thiers, Robert Mantran, S.O.M, Gordon Bunshaft, Harrison Barnes & Hubbard¹⁰, Henri Prost, Paul Smarandescu¹¹, Rowland Mainstone, and others. John Seymour Thacher, for example, reaches out to him for advice on the landscape architecture of the archaeological site¹² of Sarachane in Istanbul.

As I expanded my field of analysis and tried to understand the critical fortune of the Eldem’s figure in the Western world, I faced the same problem: those documents, which shed new light on the portrait of a fascinating but controversial character, had remained up until now unknown to most. The same goes for example to the extraordinary letters¹³ in which Eldem tirelessly explained his theoretical work. He sent and gifted his books¹⁴ to disseminate the value of Turkish vernacular housing architecture as way of living that was already modern.
The many “conversations” he had with leading members of the American, English, French and German scientific community, such as S.O.M.\textsuperscript{15}, Dumbarton Oaks, The Architects Collaborative (TAC, in particular with), professor Karl Bittel, Philip L. Goodwin, and many others are basically unknown. Some examples: Nikolaus Pevsner, in 1956 wrote to Eldem about the possibility of organizing an exhibition on Turkish architecture at the Royal Institute of British Architects and asked for his help for ensure that in the exhibition the modern examples would not be suppressed by tradition. In 1958, Jacques Laurent, at the time Chief Architect of the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, wrote to Eldem to discuss with him of the founding of the Etablissements Culturel Français d’Istanbul. And Wilhelm Viggo von Moltke\textsuperscript{16} in a letter dated February 13, 1956 thanked Eldem for being able to organize conferences in Turkey for Mr. Wachsmann. With some of these colleagues the intellectual partnership and friendship lasted for years. Persons like with Davis B. Allen\textsuperscript{17}, interior architect at S.O.M, Robert Van Nice\textsuperscript{18} of the Dumbarton Oaks, or Robert Mantran are present in Eldem’s correspondence for many years.

It is analyzing the immense number of letters, postcards, and short messages in Sedad’s archives that the portrait of this architect slowly changes form in our perceptions. The correspondence mainly concerned the exchange of articles, the new
publications, and his interlocutors, often friends that Eldem never failed to
invite to his house on the Bosphorus in Yeniköy, supported his efforts to
give modern architecture a vernacular character.

Through the letters Eldem made known to the world his publications and
aimed at spreading the knowledge of Turkish architectural culture. For ex-
ample, thanks to his intellectual association with Eldem, E.R. Gallagher
was able to create a large library on Turkish architecture at the Califor-
nia Palace of the Legion of Honor, something that was not so easy in the
1960s. Just think about the long and difficult journey that every letter or set
of books had to make from Istanbul to California19.

At the same time Eldem asked his American correspondents if they could
send him, for example, the latest Rudofsky publications, such as Architecture
without Architects or The Kimono Mind20. Eldem loved to keep
himself up to date21, and in 1962-63 he asked for and obtained a visa and a
scholarship from the French government to go to France to see the results
of the reconstruction in Le Havre and in the cities most affected by the
Second World War.

And again invitations to conferences and lectures, requests for opinions
Returning to Eldem’s critical fortune, especially regarding Western historiography, it is clear that the absence of all this world of relations that Eldem cultivated with extreme dedication combined with the image of the strong man – representative of Modern Turkish Architecture – determined in the collective consciousness the formation of a very different image from that of a Pikionis or a Pouillon.

Turkey in the eyes of the West is not Greece, the idealized cradle of our civilization. Turkey has always represented something different for the West: during the long decadence of the Ottoman Empire, it was the object of Orientalist dreams of most of Europe, and later with Atatürk and with the years of tumultuous coups, a difficult place to approach.

Pikionis with his students carried out important campaigns aimed at studying the characteristics of the identity of vernacular architecture in Greece, but this experience had a different effect on Pikionis’s historio-
graphical image, compared to what happened to Eldem. Sedad Eldem and his school (Martinelli 2017) have explained to generations of architects the anthropological, architectural and cultural value of a building type – the Turkish-Ottoman house – fundamental for the construction of the housing culture between Europe and Asia. Sedad investigated the historical and geographical boundaries of this way of living, and followed its variations in those territories (now autonomous nations) that had been part of the Ottoman Empire. Finally, he used all this knowledge, which derived from the largest and most complex study of typology ever done, to give new life to Turkish architecture making modern what has always belonged to the historical evolution of this fascinating territory.

If we analyze, what is perhaps the most representative of his projects, i.e. the Faculty of Arts and Natural Science of the University of Istanbul, we find that inside there is the use and reinterpretation of those characteristic elements of the Turkish-Ottoman house. In this building, as in many others by Eldem, we find a modern reinterpretation of the *sofa*, a typical connective element of the traditional Ottoman-Turkish houses. First of all, Eldem has reinterpreted the *sofa* in its variation on the ground floor (*taşlık*) as the *sofa* is paved with stone and extends throughout the entire building and is a connective element between the interior and the exterior. So the path that leads from the great hall of the Faculty of Arts and Science passing through the arcaded corridors to the different nucleus of the complex, is nothing more than a sequence of spaces where the concept of a threshold is repeated in time and space. The same type of contamination occurs in the Eldem’s building. It is as if the architect had merged architectural themes that usually refer to different kind of areas, that is, he had combined elements of the exterior with the features of the interior. The arcaded galleries dividing the areas in three levels and overlooking the large ground floor corridors of the Faculty originate again from the *sofa* in its more ancient variation: the *hayat* (Eldem 1984, p. 61), is the *sofa* located outside the house and the rooms and traceable to the houses in the Edirne region and in the district of Meriç (Eldem 1984, p. 61). Even in the Faculty building, as in the traditional houses, the *sofa* (*hayat*) gives access to the rooms (*classrooms*), which are distributed by this extraordinary compositional element. Eldem used this particular element in a even more monumental scale, reproposing a peristyle on the pavilion located at the large gate that overlooks the courtyard. The origins of this arcaded element are to be rediscovered in traditional architecture: the external *sofa* (*hayat*) ending with a wooden pergola (*çardak*) was present in many Ottoman houses but also in the kiosks and pavilions. This demonstrates the brilliance of Eldem’s vision in that he uses this type of space not only in the exterior but also in the interior as in the harem of the Topkapi Palace (Bozdoğan, Özkan, Yenal 1987) and as only this particular compositional instrument allows to do. In fact, the *sofa* according to Eldem: «is a public realm, the street, the square within the house» (Akcan 2012, p. 233).

The figure that emerges from this architecture encloses the heart of the Ottoman-Turkish house: a base that supports the projecting residential part (generally a wooden structure), which is independent of the street line, and a roof, the extreme extension of this compositional “crescendo”.

In the Faculty, the idea of the Ottoman-Turkish house is recapped in a modern way by this sequence of elements, which highlighted the absence
of the eaves in the facade. But what has been more highlighted are not these compositional aspects dictated by a refined culture, but the stylistic and linguistic aspects: the monumental cadence, the rigor of the stone, the representative emphasis of a State Architecture. Eldem turns the University into a monument and this says a lot about his ideas for the modernization of Turkey.

Sedad Eldem should be studied in the schools of architecture not only in Turkey because his work is an unusual example of architectural thought where the modern is intertwined with the ancient. In the case of Turkey with its strong intercultural value the ancient Ottoman civil vernacular tradition (with all the nuances that the latter term contains) for Eldem was already modern. Whether he was designing public buildings or civil dwellings, Sedad structured his work starting from the base module of the window (of proportions 1:2 between height and width) and of dimensions between 120 and 150 cm. This measure was for Eldem the most important element of standardization of Turkish-Ottoman civil buildings: the number of windows in traditional architecture defined the dimensions of the room and this consequently defined the house itself according to the distribution of various rooms and the dividing space (sofa).

In the light of the new emerging materials, I see as necessary the revision of the portrait of Sedad Hakki Eldem that historiography has given to us until today; to give full truth of this architect who should be counted among the Masters of the Modern, and who was the true ambassador of Turkish architecture in the world. A descendant of a family of diplomats, Eldem managed to adapt his profession to that intellectual milieu and system of cultural relations within which he had grown up.

Notes

1 Ibrahim Edhem Pasha: statesman, bureaucrat and intellectual of the Ottoman empire who promoted the work: De Launay, M. (1873) – *L’architecture ottomane, ouvrage autorisé par iradé impérial et publié sous le patronage de Son Excellence Edhem Pacha* = Die Ottomanische Baukunst, Durch Kaiserliches Iradé Genehmigtes Werk; Herausgegeben Unter Dem Schutze Sr Excellenz Edhem Pacha, Imprimerie


3 Indited writings dated 8 June 1968 by S. H. Eldem, 1. Transcription by S. Acciai and C. Paluszek.

4 In this manner Nora Şeni, director of IFEA (Institut Français d’études Anatoliennes) from 2008 to 2012, tagged Sedad Eldem upon my arrival at the French Institution in Istanbul (2010).


6 These seminars pursued the study of Turkish civil architecture that until the 1930s had not been taken into consideration: Eldem maintained that, due to lack of upkeep and care, these buildings were soon to disappear, and for this reason «the study of civil Turkish architecture had become a question of maximum urgency». (Eldem 1934) “Eski bir Türk evi [An ancient Turkish house]”.

7 Through archival research it was possible to find a letter dated 16 August 1930 in which Hans Poelzig presents and recommends Sedad Eldem to a colleague, explaining that Âlisanzade, as Sedad liked to be called in his youth, had taken his year-long Building Design class at the Technical University in Berlin with optimum results, and he asked his colleague to let Eldem show him his projects.

8 Giulio Mongeri (1873 - 1951), an Italian architect, was Sedad Eldem’s professor at the Mimar Sinan University.

9 Paul Bonatz, a German architect (Solgne, near Metz, 1877 - Stuttgart 1956), first the assistant then the successor of Theodor Fischer at the Stuttgart Polytechnic (1907-43). He settled in in Turkey and had a fruitful work friendship with Sedad Eldem.

10 Harrison Barnes & Hubbard, English architectural firm, authors of the Nuffield College of Oxford The intense correspondence with Eldem shows the long friendship with the Turkish architect and the sharing of some common themes. The English group in fact had a office also in Cyprus and was also involved in the restoration of many konaks (traditional dwellings).

11 Paul Smărăndescu (1881-1945) a generation older than Eldem, had received a diploma in architecture from the French government and endeavored to define a neo-Romanian style through the reconfiguration of historical elements.


13 See the letter dated 6 May 1970 addressed to Eldem by Rowland Mainstone, where he thanks the Turkish architect for his fascinating book on the Turkish kiosks. Mainstone also regrets that each time he has been in Turkey, he has never been able to spare the time that they deserved, for Seljuk and Ottoman works.

14 Sedad Eldem studied the Turkish-Ottoman house during his whole life. The result was an encyclopedic multi-volume: Eldem, S. H. (1984).

15 Skidmore, Owings & Merrill LLP (SOM) is an American architectural,urban planning, and engineering firm. It was formed in Chicago in 1936 by Louis Skidmore, and Nathaniel Owings. In 1939 they were joined by Jonh O. Merrill. Sedad Eldem became their partner for the Hilton Hotel project in Taksim, Istanbul (1951-1955). In this project, carried out under the supervision of Gordon Bunshaft, Eldem took care of some local aspects characterizing the architecture of this western-setting building in Istanbul. See Acciai S. (2018) – *Sedad Hakki Eldem, an Aristocratic Architect and More*, FUP Firenze University Press, Firenze.

16 Wilhelm Viggo von Moltke (1911-1987) was an influential urban planner in the US, working as the chief designer on projects in Philadelphia and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). He was also a teacher at the Harvard Graduate School of
Design. He was born in Kreisau, Germany, in 1911. He received an architectural degree from the Technische Hochschule in Berlin in 1937, but chose to leave the country during the same year due to his political opposition to the Nazi government. This suggests that he met Eldem he Technische Hochschule in 1929-30.

17 Davis B. Allen (1916-1999) was an American interior designer. He had a forty-year tenure at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill (SOM). He also designed the Andover chair. In 1985, he was inducted into the Interior Design Magazine Hall Of Fame.

18 Robert L. Van Nice (1910-1994) was together with Rowland Mainstone, one of the most important scholars of St. Sophia.

19 See the letter dated 25 August 1966 in which E.R. Gallagher thanks Eldem per for his fascinating book on the Turkish house plans that finally arrived in perfect condition in San Francisco.

20 With regard to the letter where it is evident that Sedad Eldem was interested in Bernard Rudofsky’s books, see: (Acciai 2017).

21 The letter in which Sedad Eldem asks for a visa to go to France is dated 8 March 1961.

22 See the letter dated 23 April 1967 by Gisle Jakhelln. The Norwegian architect wrote to Sedad Eldem because he wanted to reach Turkey in 1967 to work there.

23 See the letter dated 4 July 1960, by the English architect H. J. Spiwak that wrote to Eldem to ask him questions about the Hilton Hotel and the quality standards of the hotel rooms.

24 In 1936 Dimitris Pikionis, was a professor at the National Technical University of Athens and supervisor of the study on the Greek houses. He entrusted the completion of that project to a group of young architects: Dimitris Moretis, Giorgos Giannoulelis and Alexandra Paschalidou. This was the team that studied for the first time in Greece, the traditional civil architecture.

25 In the Balkan Peninsula (but not only) since the 1930s in the schools of architecture grew the study of civil architecture. In this context, the legacy of the Ottoman house was claimed by many nations when they were defining their identity through the concept of “national house”. See Acciai S. (2017) - The Ottoman-Turkish House According to Architect Sedad Hakkı Eldem: A Refined Domestic Culture Suspended Between Europe and Asia, cit.

26 «La maison turque»: unpublished text, prepared by Eldem for L’Architecture d’Aujourd’hui magazine in 1948, 4. Transcription and translation from the original manuscript in French by S. Acciai and C. Paluszek.


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