

## READING THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN ACADEMIC WRITINGS THROUGH THE CASE OF MARDIN

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### ABSTRACT

Today, in many spheres of life including architecture, “to have an identity” is considered to be an important qualification for anything, and the reverse is considered to be extrinsic. Particularly, “identity” is emerging as a theoretical obstacle / limiter in architectural education and also in the professional practice. Construction process of identity is possible to refer in field of architecture as in all human sciences. Identity is a subject which is hard to talk about, despite its quality of creating new controversy routes. While the research of humanities related to identity issues tend to refer to dichotomies, in the field of architecture it produces clichés. When the PhD and master thesis that are done in the field of architecture were made subject to textual analysis is thought that identities of architects, architectures, urban districts and buildings are all produced in similar pragmatics. This paper will focus on how academia- which is one of the identity constructing actors- constructs identities. In the study, examples about production of urban and buildings’ identification will be given. Thesis was written in Turkish academic institutes which included keywords of "architecture" and "identity" will be examined. Such research that has a small but effective cross-section is expected to reveal academia’s role in the production of identity. After identity constructions or productions of ideals in academia are tried to be explained through several examples, their impacts on the production of novelties will be discussed in the conclusion. What kinds of problems will emerge from interference to an urban area, a building or an object which is considered a production of architecture with identity rhetoric or engagements will be discussed. In this respect, if holiness references such as owning an identity or essence are being produced by academia, it is possible to talk boundaries about understanding and signification. Despite the studies that are made to bring architectural products identity into view, it is argued in this study that here is no hierarchical priority among the numerous combinations that form the identity.

**Key Words:** Identity

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

It is known that many academic gatherings held in Turkey for so many years have frequently thematized their sub-titles with 'identity'. Particularly in architectural and urbanism studies of social sciences, it is possible to mention several titles focusing on identity. Taking this as a point of departure and assuming that identity is constructed by several specific means, it is safe to argue that academia is also one of those means.

The academic world of architecture has also produced many identities and particularized that knowledge with the domination of scholarship. This study is written, as a reference to a chapter in the thesis titled 'A new reading approach to Identity: the Discursive Construction of Identity and the Case of Mardin,' which was submitted to Karadeniz Technical University in 2013, with the purpose of developing a critical point of view with regard to scholarship produced by academic works.

## 2. EXAMINATION OF IDENTITY PRODUCTION IN ACADEMIA THROUGH EXAMPLES

Knowledge production in academia is a subject that needs to be studied and criticized. Aiming particularly to know and understand the subjects, this domain's occlusive approach to create identities is noteworthy. In academic circles, yet especially in architectural academic circles, the ongoing dominance of positivism can be seen as the reason for such approach. Restraining almost all knowledge into a concept by categorizing them is one of most frequently used methodology in academia. Most academics not only conflate all concepts and use them in one ideal monolithic term, but also create a homogenizing reflection vis-à-vis such concepts. Further, they label the research topics with a codification of forms. This eventually leads us to a description of the research subject as 'absolute,' existing in a space far away from its own reality (albeit directed to a nearby space).

This approach, which to some extent is understandable in natural sciences, is not practical in social sciences since ever-changing research object in such disciplines is 'humans. Likewise, the discourses of identity by academics, for the sake of being objective, are produced with *idee fixe* that freezes or stabilizes human factors as much as possible. I criticize not the quantity here but rather the very belief on the invariance of the quantity. The reason for that is because different identities are constructed on the quantities that are regarded as invariant in academic texts written in the field of humanities, and even these constructed identities are expressed repeatedly as entrenched stereotypes.

At this juncture, when we look at the meaning of the concept of identity we see that the concept itself produces a continuous dichotomy between its meaning and the object it describes. For example, when one says " something with A identity,' this at the same time means that the described thing is regarded as similar to all identity A

holders or members and dissimilar to other non-A identities. This case makes hybrid identities difficult to include or even think about them in existence. On the contrary, the absence of hybridity cannot be the case at all.

Owing to the scope of this study, the construction of identity in urban and architectural context is examined with relevant examples. For example, "Turkish House" (Saralioğlu, 2007) epitomizes one of the most widely used and remarkable examples of the construction of this identity, which is a commonly written stereotype in this regard. Saralioğlu, studying the conceptual construction of "Turkish House" (Saralioğlu, 2007), argues that the concept of Turkish house roughly began to be discussed and therefore constructed since the 1930s, concomitantly when Turkey's traditional residential architecture or cultural heritage began to be 'officialised.' The conclusion of Saralioğlu's work evidently demonstrates how academia constructs an identity.

*"During 1928-1950 when the earliest texts on "Turkish house" in Turkey were written and in the process of developments in the Early Republican Era's Turkey, a "national" category, under the name of "Turkish house" was created. With its known discourse, typological, morphological, social, and even esoteric approaches were developed for the subject categorized under 'Turkish house; not only in architectural narratives or in historical narratives on architecture, but also in the popular imagination, the term Turkish became a concept that everyone agreed to use. It is evident that the aim of that approach was to melt the pluralism/diversity of normal housing into a 'singular' national architectural category. Therefore, the construction of the 'nation' in Turkey is accompanied by the concept of 'Turkish house.' In the texts written after the 1960s, however, it is seen that the construction of the concept of 'Turkish house' was completed, that is to say, there was left no doubt about the existence of 'Turkish house' typology by then. "*

Accordingly, construction of a similar structure can be observed in many theses written on urban identity. Moreover, it is likely to see a variety of identity construction in many theses written in other fields, apart from architecture and urbanism. For instance, if the study subject of a work in any field of study is about a city or an urban area, it is possible to read the monolithic identity that is constantly produced for an urban area in the titles describing the field of study. To exemplify, when theses that are written about and around Mardin<sup>1</sup> are examined the said two cases appear to be a common feature. In this line, some of these theses contain identification of local findings and design models that are developed based on such identification. In these theses in question, the concern of "protectionism" leads to an approach that accept building dating back to only a certain period, or 'old' architecture as meaningful and valuable stands out.

Apart from these, likewise in many of the titles of these theses, the information on the identity of Mardin presents many stereotypes and even myths, which indicated the latter case. The phrase, "History and Culture of the city of Mardin" (Davutoğlu, 2008), (Demir MM, 2010) is present in almost all theses studying the city. In the

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<sup>1</sup> List of last ten years' examples are provide from the 1st Attachment of "A new reading approach to Identity: the Discursive Construction of Identity and the Case of Mardin"

same way "historic urban fabric" is presented as magnum opus or masterpieces, decontextualized from its social fabric (Gündüz, 2011).

It is demonstrable to see the impact of academia in identity formation in many studies as in the abovementioned examples. After such recognition some discussion as well as frameworks on the definition of the identity can be discussed.

To begin with, for example, one of the topics needs to be discussed is the design grammar that is built on the acceptance of the historic urban fabric and architecture of the city. In these works, which are mostly based on formal data, it is observed that the reading of social relations networks seems insufficient. In such a reading methodology, the performer's point of view is fixed with numerical values, thereby; a definition that defines an invariant inferred from relationship diagrams of specific but limited number of networks is the conclusion. In this methodology, which can also be described as the implementation of mathematics to space, regardless of numerous results, because the conclusions are fixed, the method intrinsically is limited too. This following tack is followed in this methodology. First of all, the identity of the subject of the research is determined and then this presupposition is regarded as factual input for the next stage. The determined identity is regarded as a grammar however this grammar is established solely on subjective readings. At the end of each study, a presupposition or postulation is developed based on the grammar therein While studies conducted with this framework might be important for proposing alternatives, they are problematic at the same time because they also produce the perception as though there is a single and monolithic identity in that respect. Furthermore, it is seen that the methodology used for drawing such a conclusion reduces the design activity to a "chemical reaction" whose input, output and catalyst are deemed self-evident. However, architectural design indicates a further level in which social inputs continuously produce different and time variable results. With the progress in computer technology and its incorporation into architectural design process, one can see the inevitable use of this method in architectural theses completed in this field.

An example of this case is again present in one of thesis conducted on Mardin. The thesis, titled "Contemporary Mardin Housing Settlement Arising from Tradition," as the author argues, " aims to write about development of an design method of residential alternatives derived from modern housing typologies compatible with historical texture. " (Uzbek, 2004). As the author points out that the study is carried out in order to develop an alternative in the first chapter, the second chapter, however, describes the characteristic features of "Mardin houses." In the third chapter, the author develops presumptions regarding the new residential settlements, employing the grammar that is established from the characteristics of houses.

Although the study is successful in terms of its methodology, it can be argued that the thesis also poses some problematic issues as well. When starting with the design and doing so by a presupposition of characteristics of Mardin houses, developing typology in this manner is required. However, this presupposition is questionable in terms of its correctness and seems to consist of an imagined and self-produced morphology. Another issue of conflict is the assumption that the tradition is regarded as a value that needs to be produced, sampled or imitated or followed. In addition, the type of relationship that an image that is denominated as "traditional"

would have in this "traditional state" of space or how it will establish a presence in" contemporary" settings should be contemplated and described.

One can make reference to many more theses that are written in this regard. Nevertheless, without dwelling on this subject more, it is useful to touch on the construction of tradition in order to better understand the construction of identity. For creating an identity, grammar or a language, one primarily needs 'ideal' or more generally, a typology. The production platform for this construction is the existing theory and previous academic studies. That is why especially the chapter in which the object of study is defined contains many academic references and quotations.

For example, the book by Füsün Alioğlu, titled " Houses and Texture of the city of Mardin" is considered as one of the most important works among texts, studies, and books written about Mardin. The book, which was published as a book in 2000 and was derived from Alioğlu's 1988 doctoral thesis titled "An Essay on Traditional Houses and Texture of the City of Mardin," as well as other subsequent and enriched studies by the same author has been a textbook many researchers (Seçkin, 2007). The foregoing book, however, is a reference book for researchers working on Mardin. In the preface of the doctoral thesis, which was published into a book 12 years after its submission, first impressions and generalizations of a researcher draw the attention. The thesis, which aims to establish characteristic of Mardin houses within the framework of traditional houses and with the help of then research on "Turkish house," and to understand the composition of the urban fabric in Mardin, endeavors to explain the "historical" and "formal" identity of the region. In the introduction of this thesis, Alioğlu writes that periodic readings can be demarcated however she mentions that it is difficult to determine chronology in terms of structures (Alioğlu, 2003).

*"The effects of increasing industrial developments in the world since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was the case in Anatolia after the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Mardin is one of the latecomers of this process in which both large and small settlements were affected. This is the reason that Mardin is more preserved today compared to other settlements, and this itself was regarded as an opportunity, which also determined the decision to work on Mardin in this thesis. In studies on traditional Anatolian cities and houses, conclusions are derived usually ignoring the East and Southeast regions.*

*The main point of debate in these studies is centered on the texture of the city before and after Turkish period. In the pre-Turkish period texture of the city, although Hellenistic, Roman traces are tracked down, more often the question regarding what the Byzantine meant and what the Turks had added on top of that background was the case. The cities located in the southeast of the country, albeit within the borders of Turkish period Anatolia, could not receive attention and space in the narratives aiming to cover the overall subject, basically because these cities also had undergone Arab-Islam dominance prior to Turkish period. Another objective of this thesis, at this point, also revealed the need for studying traditional texture and houses of the city of Mardin"(Alioğlu, 1989).*

It can be seen that, when stating the objective of her thesis, Alioğlu describes the city's architectural heritage with an identity narrative based on race, region, nation or rulership. Such an identity narrative can be claimed to challenge a research that aims to have an integrated approach focusing on Mardin from today to the past. The reason is that because the city does not appear to be suitable for making an identity distinction leading an architectural heritage typology thereto. It can be argued that a historical analysis would yield more objective results without developing a typology.

### 3. CONCLUSION

As a result, this study elucidates the construction of identity or production of 'ideal' by academic works through focusing the case of Mardin. Similar studies can be carried out on architecture, urban studies or even all cases involving identity discourses. The main criticism that is aimed to be made in this study is the unchangeable, occlusive and uncritical conclusions of discourses of identity. When examining the studies done, contemporary researchers, as Tanyeli also argues (Tanyeli, 2011, p. 459), should take into account the fact that an 'identity is not unique at least in four aspects.' The first of these aspects is that identities are not objective but rather subjective. Identity can differ according to person or who defines identity. Another aspect is that criteria for differentiation of an identity also contain many other identities as well. Defining the third parameter as the time, Tanyeli points out, identities can transform in the course of time. Finally, describing the fourth parameter as the context, Tanyeli underlines that each time an identity is articulated it is defined differently and questions which contextual identity should be accepted as 'the genuine' articulation of that identity.

Throughout the study, the discussion of what determines identity is particularly not mentioned. That is because identity is regarded as a discursive discipline and can permeate all sociological fields, therefore all kinds of identity discourses that are produced by academic works overall is the focus.

Likewise, concepts used in architecture and urban studies such as architectural identity, and structural identity are also criticized in the same pot. Any predetermination of studies aiming to read identities that does not take into consideration those four parameters above as well as numerous combinations thereafter seems to be out of the hearth of the issues and self-evident. In the urban context, if the references of sanctity are attached to some terms such as locality, identity and having a particular identity are produced by academia, then, it is possible to talk about a tendency towards a deadlock, which has its own boundaries with regard to understanding and explaining such concepts. Tanyeli's criticisms of identity and architectural identity, in this context, seem to be elucidatory and informative.

*"Let's suppose that we can to build things that reflect our 'identities,' then, we have to specify, according to whom, when, and which components of which of our identities they should reflect. Those arguing that a city lost its architectural identity*

or has a fake identity, should first try to define the original identity they talk about. Of course, that does not yield any answers. Such identity definitions cannot be made. Neither is it possible, nor is democratic. Let alone being rational "(Tanyeli, 2011, p. 461).

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