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From the Elizabethan long gallery to the Turkish sofa: rethinking the art of inhabitation

Abstract

During the last century, optimisation processes of the residential architecture have been eradicating many archetypal spaces of the pre-modern house from domestic layouts.

The *sofa* of the Turkish house, among these archetypal spaces, is a relevant precedent that can help us question and eventually undermine the typical features of the western domestic interior. Its basic essence as a transition space originates from the ancient Anatolian courtyards. This paper aims to discuss both spatial and typological features of the sofa to emphasize its intrinsic modernity, as it has been done in the case of recent reconsideration of the Elizabethan long gallery.

Sofas allowed a domestic experience to be filled with visual richness, deep intimacy, and spatial variations. The sofa could extend, adjust, and widen the experience of the private realm letting diverse uses and accommodations. This is exactly the degree of indeterminateness that a contemporary flat dramatically lacks.

Keywords

inhabit — domestic space — pre-modern house — turkish house — *sofa*

Bio

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Recent restrictions due to a global pandemic brought to light that the domestic space, in the flats where we live, got suddenly narrow. They have shown to be dramatically dreary in conveying any imaginative deepness attached to our daily experience (dreams, *rêveries*, memories, imagination, inner journeys). Moreover, many essential activities turned out to be hard to perform: hide ourselves from others, define our own space of solitude, and interact socially with the public realm from distance. While being forced to stay within our living-space, we eventually realized how arid daily life experience might be in a modern flat. Hence, the importance of a space that is rich and ample. Allowing and adapting to unexpected circumstances has become a landmark concern. In spite of its qualified functionality, as well as a compact and rational organization, the modern house may fall short of that range of uncertainty that is so essential for social life.

The paper aims to review some archetypal spaces of the pre-modern house that over the last century have been cut out, or in the best cases just reduced, in the name of the dwelling optimisation. In pre-modern houses, spaces without a function were empty, open to be arranged according to different needs. Such spaces acted as a thick threshold, where domestic life could connect to the exterior, being a device for public relation or rather for retreating in private. Along a domestic journey, transitions by difference could produce visual lushness.

The aim of the text is not that of promoting a historicist revision of the traditional house, but on the contrary is to prove the possibility to enrich contemporary residential plans with spaces that are considered to be superfluous. Namely those narrative spaces that stimulate movement and use, in opposition to hideous corridors that thwart evolution of our flats.

Empty space and neutral space

Interest for spaces without a function resurfaced at intervals in the discourse of different scholars, which sought to enrich the articulation of domestic space.

In particular, Peter Smithson several times pointed out a specific spatial feature he referred to as *emptiness*. Emptiness has a quality in its potential to be filled, «the empty room is the same as the empty stage. You furnish it with those things necessary» (Spellman & Unglaub 2005, p. 64). This is what a house should convey, a place that is able to react/adjust to the circumstances, a place to be turned into a void, where one may experience the void. Smithson concluded his conversations with students with the following advice that today sounds prophetic: «you have to culture your path and set yourself to recover space and the notion of emptiness» (Spellman & Unglaub 2005, p. 68).

The Elizabethan long gallery (14th century) offers a striking example of a neutral space. The grand houses of the aristocratic class, in this period, had an accessory space in the form of a long and ample corridor open to the landscape. It was used for walking and talking when the weather was bad,

as well as for the display of paintings. The same definition as corridor-gallery emphasizes the multi-purpose nature of this space. The Elizabethan long gallery actually was an aristocratic and refined version of the Italian *loggia* and in general of the porticoes to be found in monasteries¹. Several domestic spaces scattered everywhere around the Mediterranean, from the modest vernacular houses to more noble and grand examples, shared similar threshold-spaces for the transition between the interior and the exterior. Certainly, these kind of spaces were the real essence of the art of inhabitation. Neutral space of the pre-modern house is the set of a domestic scenario conveying discoveries for the imagination of the dwellers. These interior landscapes brought flexibility in terms of space and time. Eventually the very ability to squeeze and expand, and to translate into something else, is today fundamental for a renewed residential design. Among different examples of neutral space, the Turkish gallery-loggia (*hayat*) stands as an open and convertible form². The *hayat*, after a process of integration with other local archetypes, produced a more complex form that is known as *sofa*.

The Turkish Sofa

The *sofa* of the Ottoman house had been preserved in its authentic forms until the beginning of the 20th century, when it was shrunk as an entry hall or further compressed in the form of a corridor.

The Turkish architect Sedat Hakki Eldem was the first to offer a formalization of the *sofa* by the way of a typological study based on a wide catalogue of plans³. As a result, he organized the set of plans within four typological categories in relation to the position of the *sofa*: without *sofa*, external *sofa*, inner *sofa*, central *sofa*. According to Eldem, the *sofa* was the most decisive factor in the composition of the Turkish house plan, for the type of the house was determined directly by the shape and the location of the hall (Eldem 1954, p. 16). In particular, he emphasized its manifold nature both from a functional point of view and from a spatial one. On one hand the *sofa* allows the transition and the communication between different rooms, on the another it is a suitable place for meetings, where to celebrate weddings and other festive events. End areas, freed from circulation, were used to sit. These were separated from the central hall and shaped as recessed spaces between a series of rooms (*eyvan*) or as cantilevered extensions connected to the hall (*kiosk*). Due to the articulation of such supplementary spaces (recesses-*eyvan* between rooms and extensions-*kiosk*) the plan, although elaborating a specific type, can be organized in different variations and combinations (Eldem 1954, p. 31).

More recently the historian Doğan Kuban (1995, p. 42) criticized the abstract fashion of Eldem's approach and the rigid approach of his typological study. Kuban endorsed a more evolutionary process, taking place in different times and progressing from simple, vernacular examples, to more sophisticated and refined cases. This resulted in the transition from one configuration to the other (Kuban 1995, p. 21). Kuban insisted on a

development in consecutive stages of two basic units: the corridor-gallery (*hayat*) and the recessed space (*eyvan*) (Kuban 1995, p. 24). Eventually the *sofa*, as the result of the diverse arrangements of the *hayat* and *eyvan*, extends and widens the space between the rooms. The same progression has been elaborated and represented by the authors in the figures provided for this paper.

It is clear how these spaces show a combinatorial character, for they increase their level of complexity while new components gradually are joined together. The whole composition layout of the Turkish house is based on this progression/transformation, which eventually originates the configuration of the *sofa*. The latter, from its inner location may expand towards the exterior turning into an autonomous element of the façade. The resulting distribution of the house is essential to achieve a visual relationship between the private and the public, or rather those parts looking out the *sofa*.

The *sofa* does not have any specific functions, yet it has a very peculiar nature: that of a void, a free space, apt to accommodate unpredictable uses without a formalization on the paper. Hence, its nature is far more complex than that of a corridor/hall. Ultimately, in order to suggest a definition of the *sofa*, we cannot refer to a specific space; rather we need to analyse the spatial arrangement that ensues from the combination of two archetypal spaces: the *hayat* and the *eyvan*.

The *sofa* as a modern template

All these features render the *sofa* as a viable domestic design element, to such an extent that it may be linked to some contemporary discourses.

First, it is the result of an assemblage of parts. Hence, paraphrasing Robert Venturi, the *sofa* can be considered as an “inflection device” in architectural composition. According to Venturi, «inflection in architecture is the way in which the whole is implied by exploiting the nature of the individual parts, rather than their position or number» (Venturi 1966, p.88). In a very similar fashion, the relationship between different parts of the *sofa* is triggered by their combinatorial properties, which imply the key for their mutual assemblage.

Having the quality of a space of transition, the *sofa* can be analysed according to the concept of threshold as Herman Hertzberger theorized it. «The threshold provides the key to the transition and connection between areas with divergent territorial claims and, as a place in its own right, it constitutes, essentially, the spatial condition for the meeting and dialogue between areas of different orders» (Hertzberger 2005, p. 32). Likewise, the *sofa* enables a gradual transition, in a way that is more a spatial articulation rather than a separation/closure (Hertzberger 2008, p. 49).

In the case of *sofa*, the transition/articulation process unfolds both as internal organization rationale and as a device for relations with the exterior. In this perspective, the pre-modern Turkish house is equipped with a buffer area that enables a hierarchical internal organization of the

private spaces and at the same time the connection to other living spaces by means of its outer ramifications⁴. The production of such a dynamic space for connections may relate to the *cluster* form of the distribution patterns developed by the Smithson in their early urban proposals⁵.

In conclusion, the *sofa* stands out as a relevant spatial archetype with a potential to be further explored. As a compositional device to organize a plan, it is suited to overturn the serial layout of contemporary flats. As a threshold space, the *sofa* allows soft transitions, where diverse use patterns may overlap and alternate. Lastly, as an element for external articulation, it implies new modes to connect, unite, and separate different residential units within the same building⁶.

All multiple articulations originating from a renewed interest in the sofa can lead to original paths toward a different art of inhabitation. In this way, the static, predictable experience of dwelling would be enriched by the changing, dynamic, fluid experience of the movement.

Images

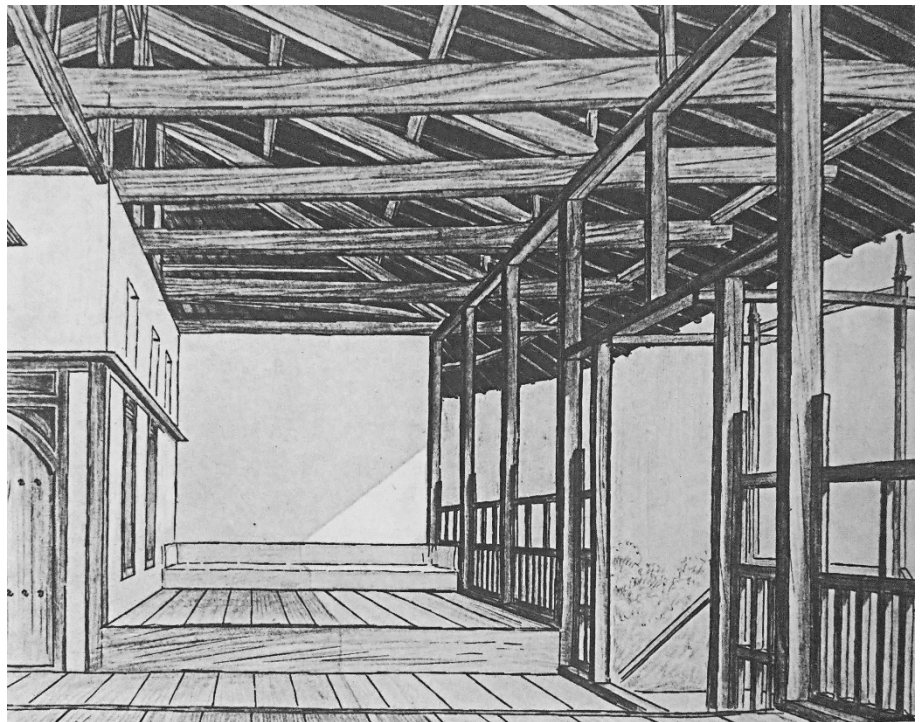


Fig. 1 Sedat Hakki Eldem, Drawing of the sofa (in *Turkish Houses*, Istanbul 1984).

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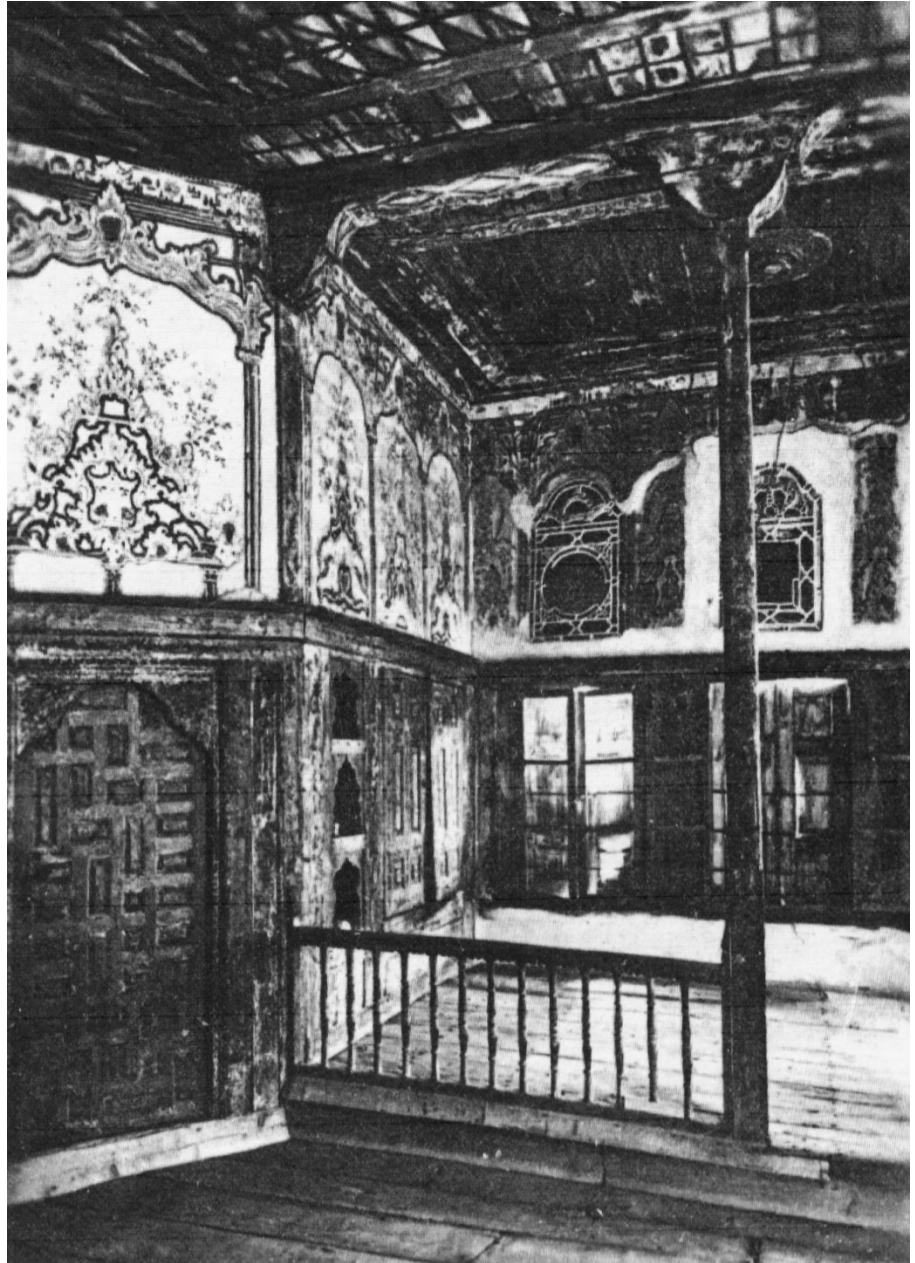


Fig. 2 Sedat Hakki Eldem, View of the eyvan (in Turkish Houses, Istanbul 1984).

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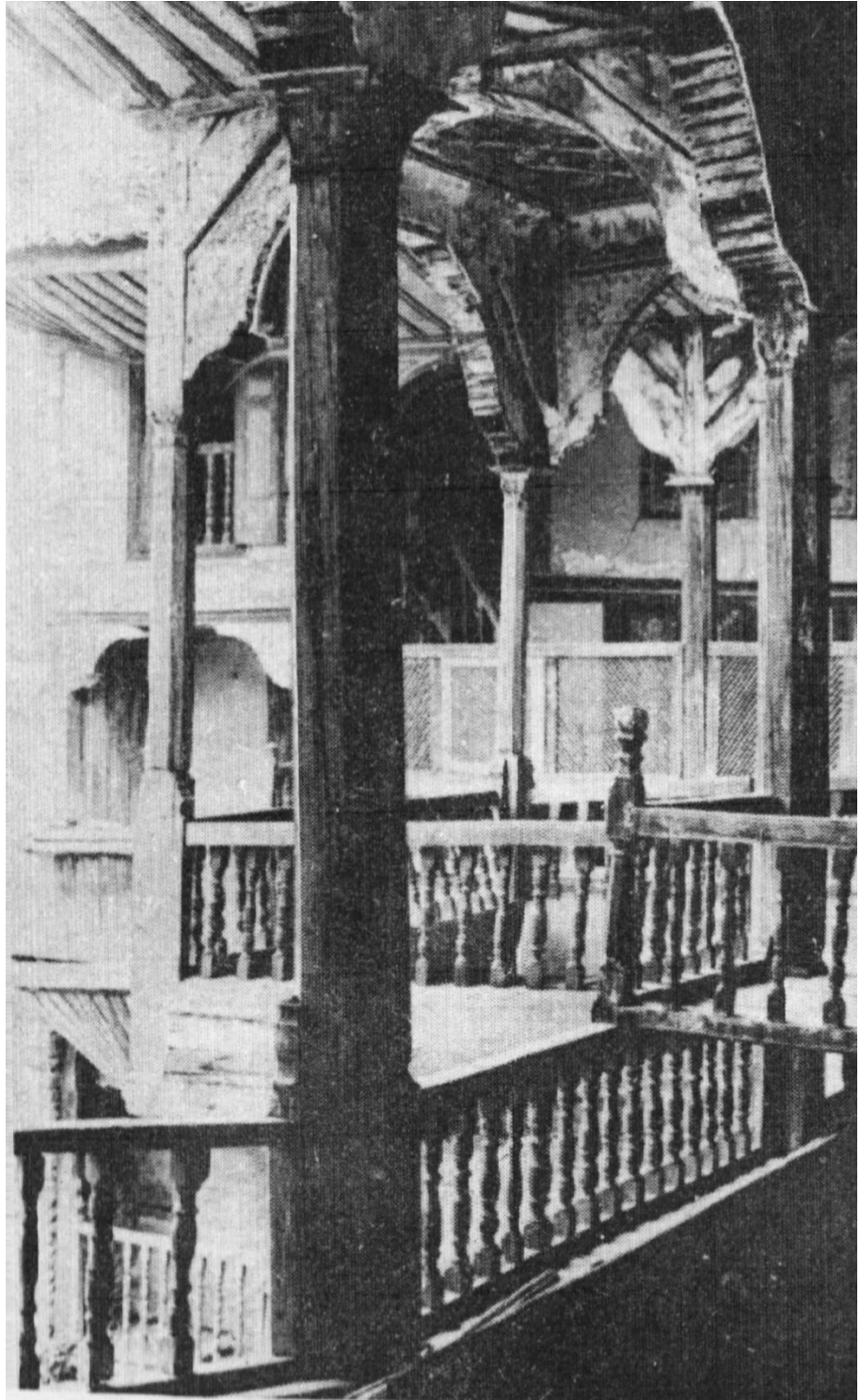


Fig. 3 Sedat Hakki Eldem, Perspective from inner sofa in a multi-story konak (in Turkish Houses, Istanbul 1984).



Fig. 4 Sedat Hakki Eldem, View of the hayat at the first floor overlooking the back garden (in Turkish Houses, Istanbul 1984).

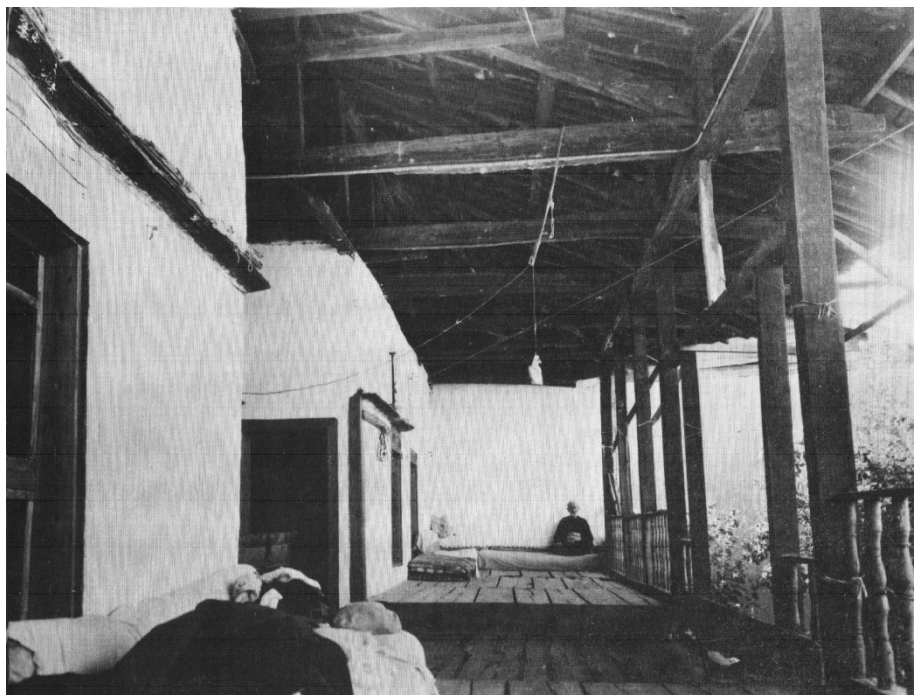


Fig. 5 Sedat Hakki Eldem, External sofa with level articulation (in Turkish Houses, Istanbul 1984).

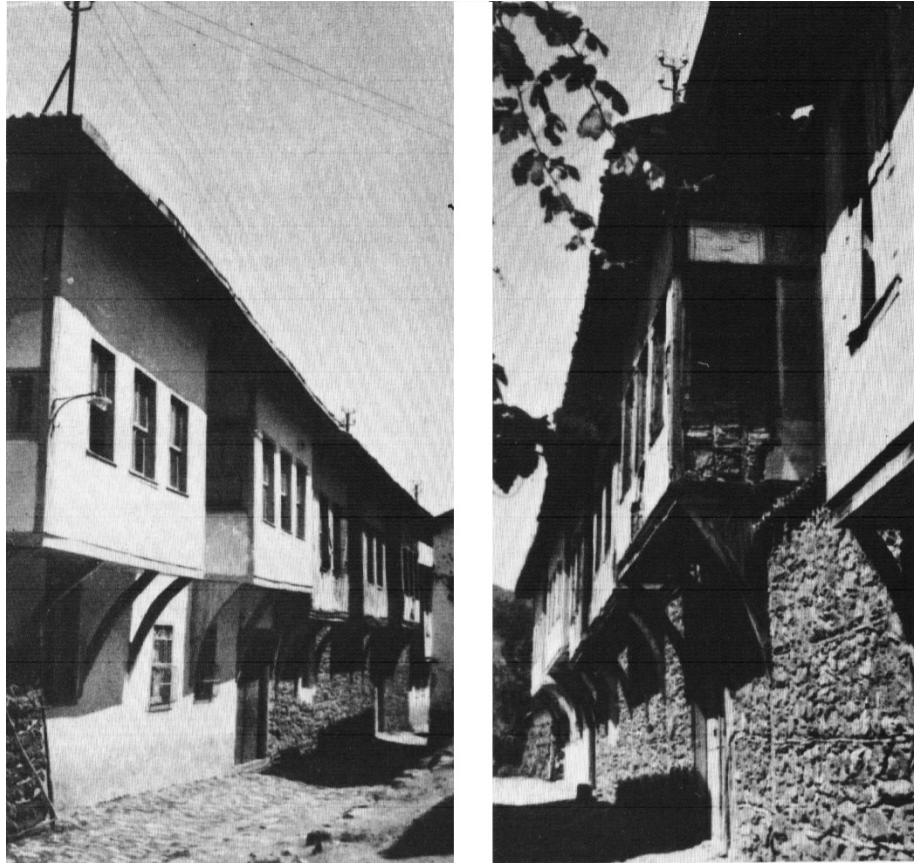


Fig. 6 Sedat Hakki Eldem, Façade articulation from the street (in Turkish Houses, Istanbul 1984).

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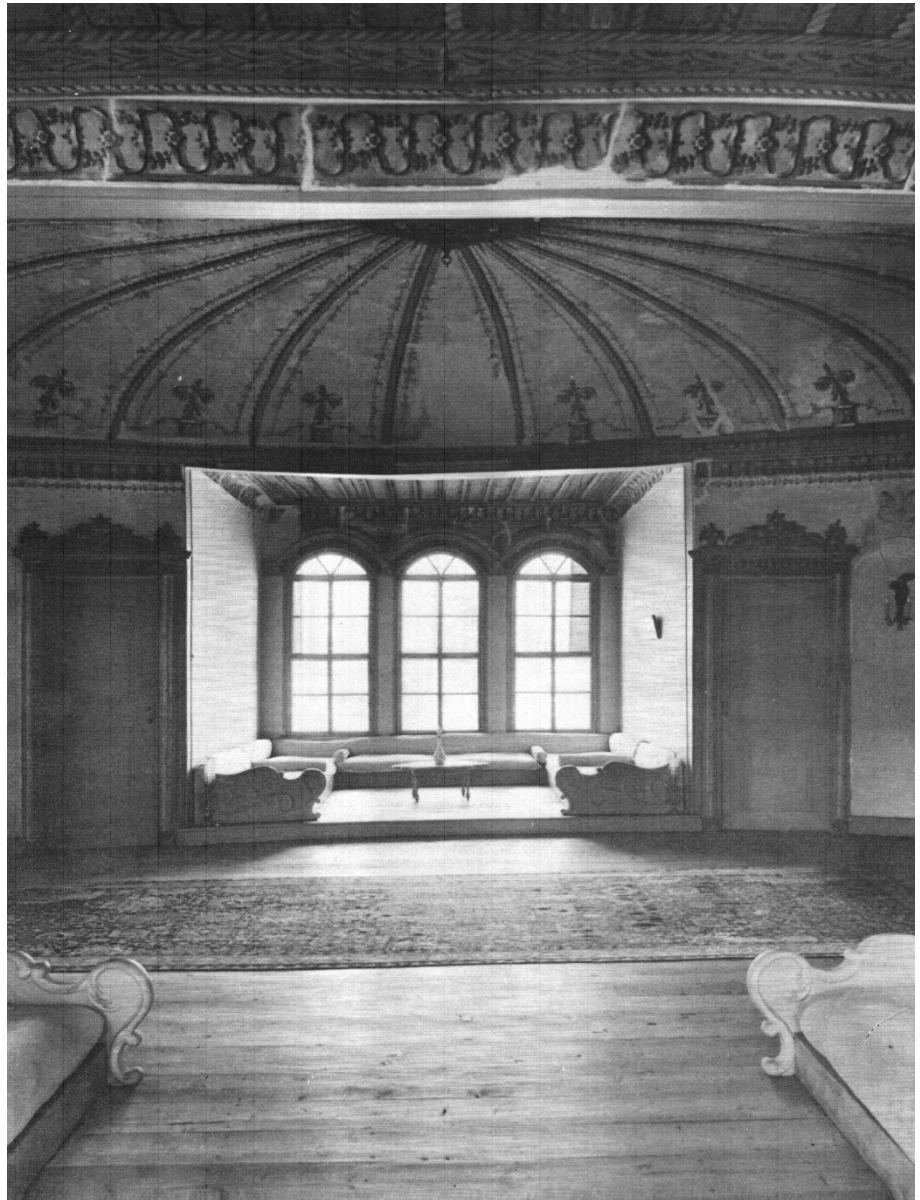


Fig. 7 Sedat Hakki Eldem, Central sofa with kiosk (in Turkish Houses, Istanbul 1984).

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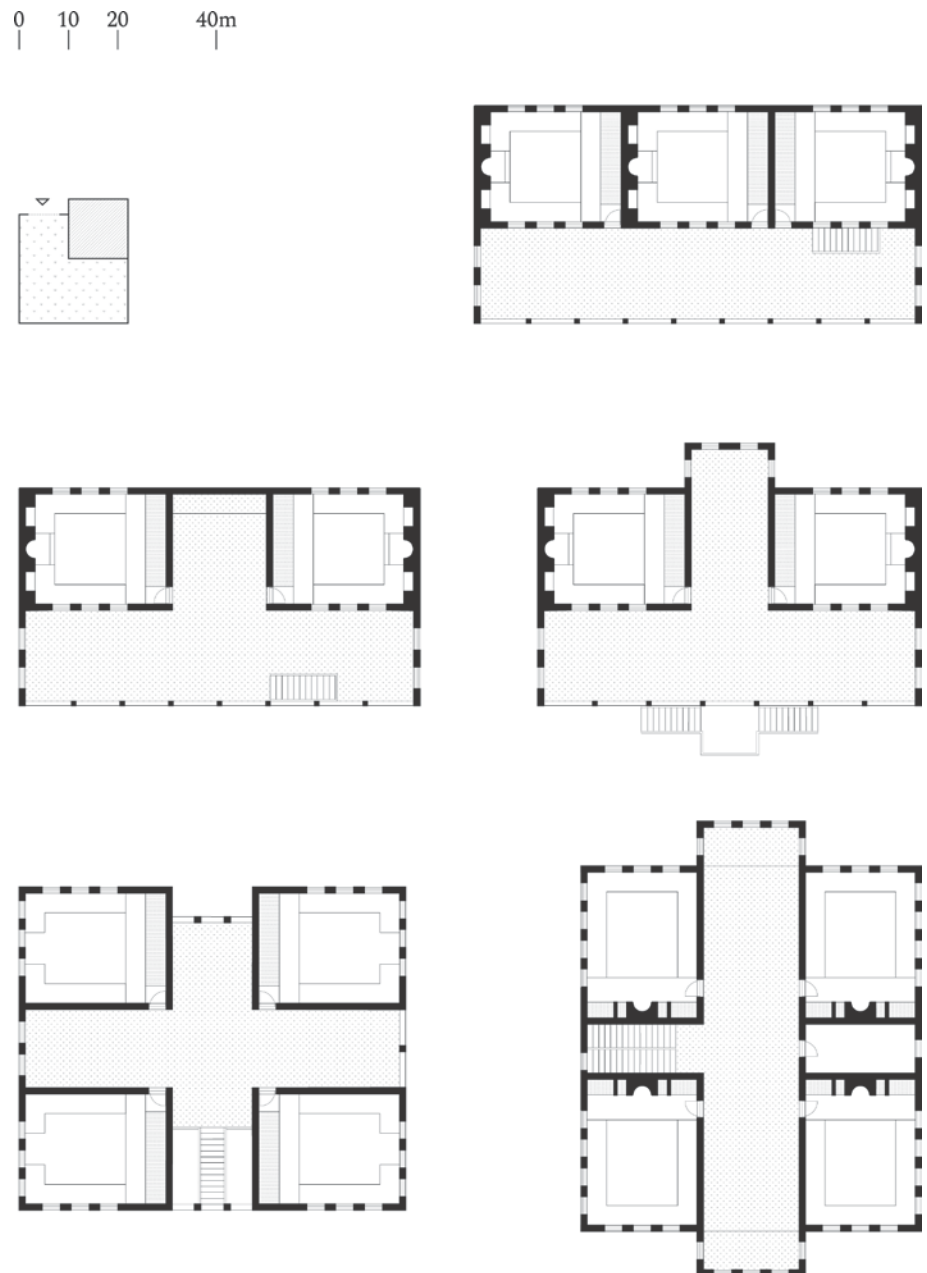


Fig. 8 G. Gasco G. Resta, Progress of the sofa from simple, vernacular examples, to more sophisticated and refined cases.

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O - oda
E - eyvan
S - sofa
H - hayat
K - kiosk

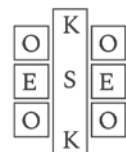
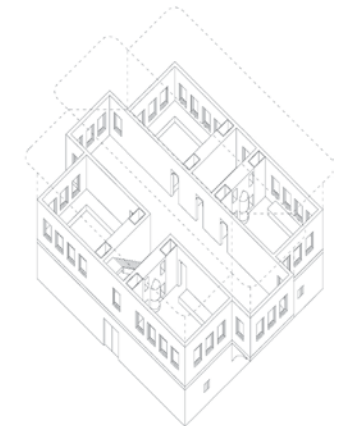
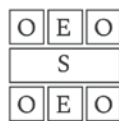
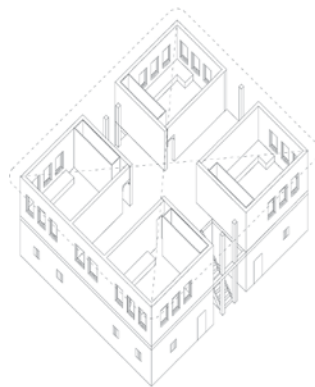
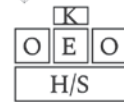
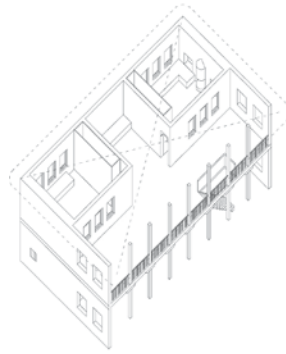
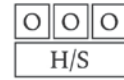
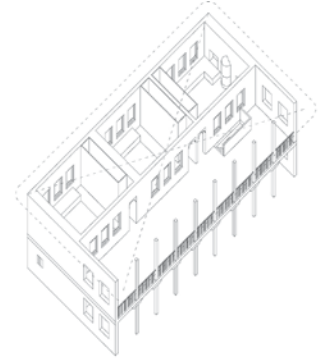


Fig. 9 G. Gasco G. Resta, Planimetric progression of the sofa combining hayat and eyvan.

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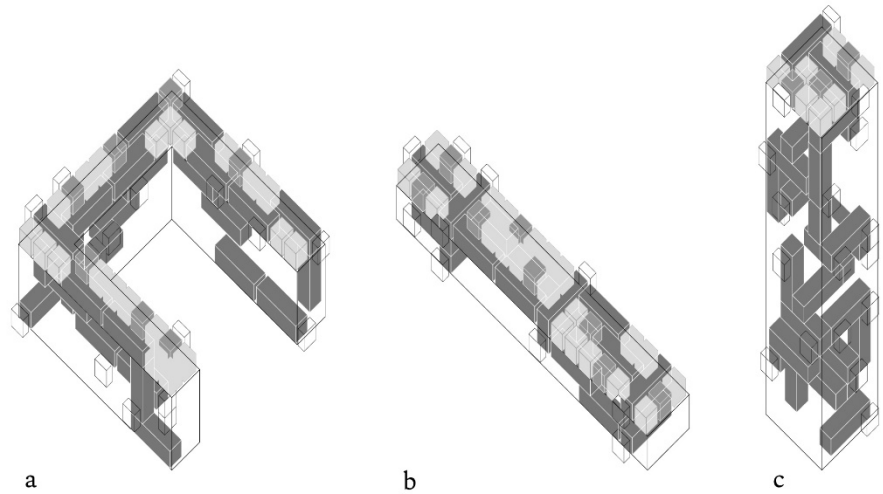


Fig. 10 G. Gasco G. Resta, Sofa as a contemporary compositional device to design community housing blocks.

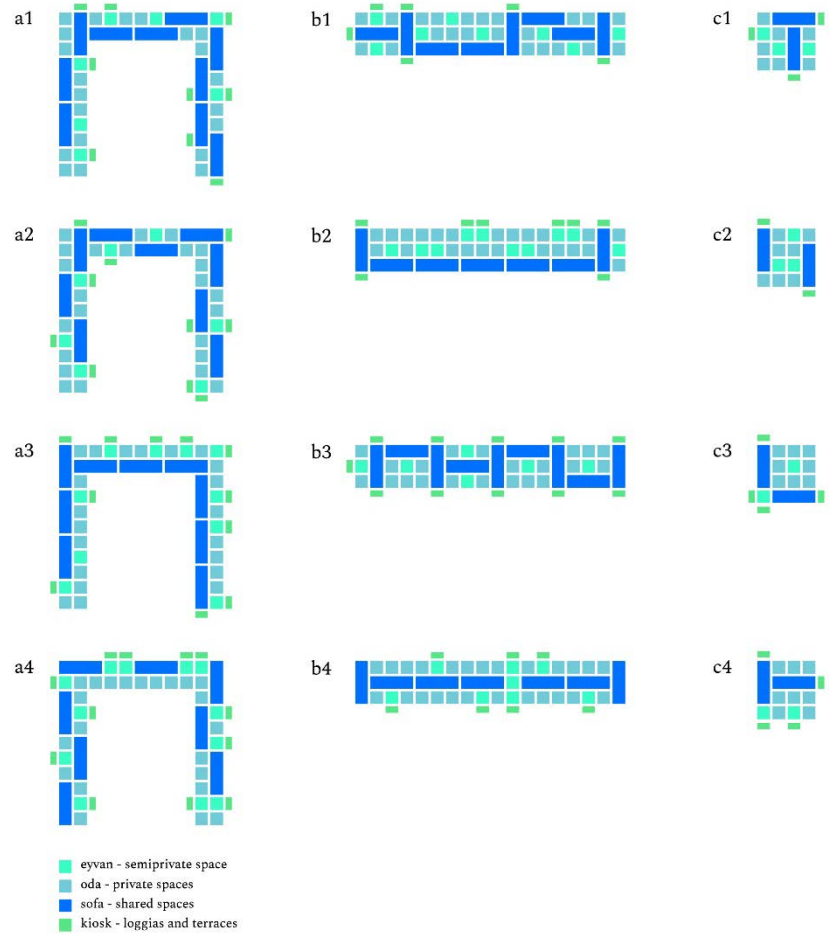


Fig. 11 G. Gasco G. Resta, *Sofa as a contemporary compositional device to design community housing blocks.*

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¹ See: Coope R. (1986) - “The ‘Long Gallery’: Its Origins, Development, Use and Decoration”. *Architectural History*, Vol. 29, 1986, pp. 43-84.

² The *hayat* was the transition space between rooms and external world. Of ancient roots it shared common traits with similar domestic archetypes of Greek-Mediterranean culture, as well as Hittite and Syrian. The *sofa* is a space characterized by a more complex articulation that is usually defined in a reductive fashion as a hall. See: Kuban D. (1995) – *Türk ‘Hayat’lı Evi*. Mısırlı Matbaacılık A. Ş., Istanbul.

³ Eldem launched the first studies on this subject in 1936 within the National Architecture Seminar he directed in the Istanbul Fine Arts Academy. This early body of experimental work, was later followed by a systematic research eventually published in 1954. See: Eldem S. H. (1954) – *Türk Evi Plan Tipleri*. Pulhan Matbaası, Istanbul.

⁴ The feature to connect different units within the same building had been already analysed and categorized by Eldem as an independent type named as “multiple partitioned plan” (Eldem 1954, p. 149).

⁵ See: Smithson A. & P. (1957) – “Cluster City: a new shape for the community”. *The Architectural Review*, 122, 730. Although the city cluster idea addressed no doubt an urban scale, yet at time turned out to be suitable to elaborate plans on an architectural scale, as in the case of the ‘streets in the air’

⁶ In relation to this point, we are experimenting similar compositional templates for community housing blocks at the Faculty of Architecture.