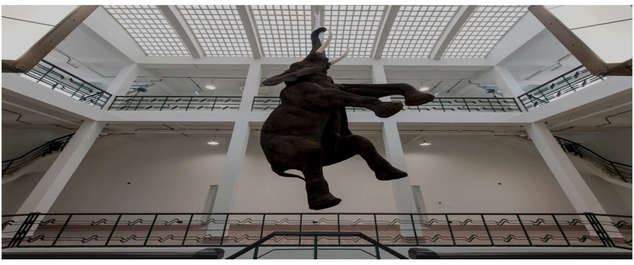
New Old Liqueur Factory



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Pilevneli Mecidiyeköy, the new temporary space of Pilevneli Gallery, is situated at the rebuilt building of the Old Liqueur and Cognac Factory. The process with which this building has been re-brought to life, a controversial topic in Turkish architectural discourse, is still generating multi-faceted discussions. *Mecidiyeköy Liqueur and Cognac Factory as the Daring Move of the Young Republic and More: Grumblings in the Context of City Memory*, the expansive exhibition by Emre Arolat Architecture (EAA) that specifically focuses on this structure while also addressing its surrounding area and the effects of Mecidiyeköy and İstanbul's urban growth, was on display between 12 February – 24 March 2019 at the gallery. As mentioned in the exhibition: "At the very least it may be refreshing for this space (. . .) to be evaluated and discussed (. . .)." With this encouragement, I find it valuable to consider what I've learned about this structure, the questions that formed regarding the ongoing debate and my personal experience of the new building.

Mecidiyeköy Liqueur and Cognac Factory, completed in 1931, is a building known for the contentious process that allowed it to be experienced today. Designed by the distinctive French modernist architect Robert Mallet-Stevens (1886-1945), this building was his sole industrial structure that was built abroad. The original design consisted of a main production building and an entrance pavilion. It was used as a liqueur factory, its intended function, until the year 2000. After liqueur production ceased, Tekel wanted to repurpose the building and made drastic modifications to the design, thus the building lost its originality. The structure was idle until 2006 and was then used as the Department of Major Taxpayers for two years. The first application for registration in 1997 was repeated in 2005, but it was rejected due to the alterations negatively impacting and destroying original design elements, rendering the structure ineligible. In 2006, this time also supported by the persistent efforts of DOCOMOMO Turkey, the design was considered as valuable regardless of the severe changes, and was registered by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism Committee. In 2008, after a few tenders, the firm that purchased the site got in touch with EAA for a multi-purpose design proposal. The Liqueur Factory building was assigned a cultural function.

From this point on starts the controversial renewal process, partly due to the building's registration status amongst other reasons. Because the value of this space as an industrial heritage structure was deemed to be registration-worthy by the committee after the damage was done, most elements of the original design had been lost or modified. The lack of insight mentioned in the Awareness part of the exhibition could be the most evident culprit of how this structure was handled: "In order for a work of architecture to be recognized and preserved as a cultural asset, its importance must first of all be recognized. Then people must become concerned about the destruction of the work recognized as important." The reasoning behind the restoration decisions is clearly explained both in the exhibition and in the interview with Asst. Prof. Gülsün Tanyeli in *Arkitera*. In a nutshell, if the structural integrity of the building were to be updated to meet modern structural standards with fortifications to the reinforced concrete load-bearing elements, the features that made the design rare and valuable would have had to be further modified to lose their originality. Instead, the option to rebuild the entire building and increasing the quality of the load-bearing system using modern materials and methods was preferred. Before the structurally weak original building was demolished in 2012, all structural and design-related information about the building was collected with detailed archival and on-site studies. The photographs of the original design that were found in Tekel Archives were massively helpful in preparing the restitution project. In light of all this collected information, the building was virtually exactly rebuilt and opened to the public on 11 December 2018.

When the design is considered on its own as the rebuilt main building, the entrance pavilion and the garden, it's a fairly characteristic example of early modernist architecture that provides a pleasant experience, separating the user from the incessant pedestrian/vehicular traffic of Mecidiyeköy and its dense built environment. However, when evaluated in a larger context including the rest of the project it's part of, other recently completed projects and existing buildings surrounding the site, the design also creates a strange spatial experience within an urban fabric typology rare for this country. The wall effect, created by the skyscrapers almost resting against the building's back (south) façade, while relatively mild, is still perceivable. Even though the relationship with the outdoor spaces of the neighbouring Torun Center was taken into account, an inconsistent transition occurs between that area and the public green space of the Old Liqueur Factory (which might barely be called public). These spaces are still a consolation for most of the public that rightly complain about the absence of open, breathable spaces in the city and had hoped this entire site would have been converted into a green space/park. Both the Old Liqueur Factory and the skyscrapers are detached from one of the busiest traffic arteries of Istanbul with this public space. From the garden of the Liqueur Factory, E-5 highway and local Mecidiyeköy traffic can be observed from a distance. Thanks to elevation differences, both are perceived to be relatively muted. While from the opposite end, when you are passing by on the highway, the area looks just plain weird due to the scale of its surrounding structures.

The interior spaces are realised as close to the original design as possible; this can clearly be seen from the archival photographs included in the exhibition. The atrium that housed this exhibition and Daniel Firman's Instagrammable *Elephant* installation is the focal point of the building. When I was visiting, the large door leading to this space was locked, but when this wide entrance is active, it will allow direct access to the focal point and enhance the user experience by starting it from this more delightful space, rather than the bland grey room that currently acts as the entry point. Even if the exhibitions don't start in this atrium area, use of this entrance will strengthen the spatial relationship with the garden and provide a more cohesive experience. The main exhibition rooms with their grey and concrete-like finishes draw attention to the design of the load bearing elements, more so in the basement level with the addition of ribbon-like windows. The top level, only as wide as the atrium, is currently inaccessible to users. This level intensifies the effect of the atrium with natural light flowing from its glass brick skylight all the way down to the monumental staircase. The building has a coldness to it, I can't really say if it's because it was just completed and opened for public access, or because of the exhibition layout. It may even be the ghost of the municipal tax office. Besides the cold vibe, the interiors are also physically cold, so dress accordingly, especially in winter months.

Let's continue with questions I can't quite answer. The Liqueur Factory was the first example of an industrial building by Robert Mallet-Stevens that was realised abroad. After this whole ordeal, with it being eventually knocked down and rebuilt, can it still be considered that way? Can the work of an artist/architect still be treated as theirs even after all the alterations, even after it is demolished and rebuilt faithfully to its original design? Is the building Robert Mallet-Stevens's work in its current state, or is it a monument to his unique design? Is it a souvenir of an architect and an era, created in 1:1 scale, like those mass produced small scale replicas of paintings, sculptures and similar works of art, sold in museum gift shops?

What if this exhibition that delves into this building's history and process was to be permanent? Even if the building changed owners and/or function, could it be possible for this exhibition to remain where it was displayed, or to be showcased in a different space within the building, allowing this aspect of the Liqueur Factory's identity to be tangibly preserved and reminded to visitors? Would such a decision allow the value of this building to be further established as a cultural and structural heritage asset? Can the Liqueur Factory's history becoming public knowledge emphasise the significance of the notion of cultural heritage through this one case? Instead of being subjected to a similar process, can registration decision proceedings of other historical buildings essential enough to be passed on to future generations, spaces inseparable from urban memory that fit the heritage criteria, be more efficiently handled? In this way, can these structures and spaces continue to exist without having to lose their original design elements, without having to be demolished, moved, rebuilt?

Prof. Dr. Zeynep Ahunbay has been quoted in an article in *Radikal*, saying the following about the Liqueur Factory:

"In restoration, demolishing should be a last resort. I do not understand why they are demolishing in this case. The strength of concrete is not sufficient; could that be an excuse? You reinforce it and preserve it. As the first example of a reinforced concrete building, the foremost thing to do is to preserve it with its deficiencies and pass it on to future generations. It should have been preserved in its original form. Now a copy of it will be built. . . . A registered building being demolished and the statement 'We will build it as it was' being said in the name of restoration is horrific. . . . They should not even have been permitted to build a skyscraper around it, yet they completely demolished it."

The justification of this argument aside, could the publishing of almost click-bait articles that include similar quotes have aggravated the debate, along with the vagueness of what had been happening regarding the structure/site, the secretiveness of the project development and the public's distrust in the process? Could it be that the controversial Liqueur Factory has found its place in Turkish architectural and art discourse in this way? If it weren't for the series of events/decisions that popularised the developments regarding this building, it could have been destroyed forever despite all efforts. Actually, would that have been better?

Asst. Prof. Yıldız Salman, in the piece she wrote for the *New City Reader* which was published as part of the 1st İstanbul Design Biennial, says that "In my opinion, if the current policies regarding privatisation do not change, the demolitions of most of this type of buildings through similar processes will be inevitable." The expansion of the revanchist 'urban regeneration' to include cultural heritage sites and structures is happening precisely because of this and validates Salman's prediction.

Now, let's also dream a little. If the committee had accepted the registration application in 1997, if none of these had happened and the Liqueur Factory had reached present day without changing owners, with all of its original design choices and elements intact as an industrial building, if it had been forbidden to build anything else on the site, if the building had been meticulously preserved even after the liqueur production ended, if it had evolved into a well-maintained museum... Would this imaginary process been appreciated, or, appreciation aside, would there have been an awareness or demand for this approach? Would it have only been acknowledged by the architectural community and other enthusiasts, but still be a smoother, more satisfactory conclusion? Would reaching this fictional result with no debate or controversy have shown that things are progressing as they should be? The notion of cultural heritage preservation settling into the collective memory, the appropriate institutions adhering to international preservation standards, a structure, a site, a neighbourhood, a city not becoming what they have become today, is that the most ideal? Can the most ideal be achievable, be realisable today, in this system we all live in?

Most people who have been following the news about the Liqueur Factory had already been let down and disheartened by previous episodes of similar stories; it is completely normal to react and show sensitivity to these developments. Every structure indispensable to urban memory is being demolished, moved elsewhere horizontally-vertically, recreated within another space, its façade is being 'preserved' etc. Other examples are being handled more responsibly, by architects (someone who qualifies as an architect being involved is a win regardless) who have various levels of knowledge about cultural heritage and preservation concepts, who stay truer to original designs and have more respect towards the notion of heritage while developing projects, preserving spaces in varied ways and degrees. In an interview with *Arkitera*, Emre Arolat says: "(. . .) to be honest, I find the sensitivity shown and the noise made by the public in this geography about preserving these types of buildings quite insubstantial." Maybe the "Turkish Architectural World" is experiencing some desensitisation or reactional weariness towards all this ceaseless destruction. Personally speaking, people also may look the other way to protect their sanity, emotional wellbeing, their love and interest in architectural practice and discourse. I am thankful that those experts and colleagues who don't look the other way, who choose to persist loudly and visibly, who work hard to do the right thing still exist. With the encouragement of these efforts and debates, people like me will surely find the courage and enthusiasm to join in.

References

Arolat, E. (2019). The Malady of Development, or Revenge of a Kind. And Sometimes Both at Once. *Mecidiyeköy Liqueur and Cognac Factory as the Daring Move of the Young Republic and More: Grumblings in the Context of City Memory* [Exhibition]. 12 February-24 March 2019. Pilevneli Gallery Mecidiyeköy, İstanbul.

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