Notes from an Archiving Project:
Building the Private Archive of an Architect in Turkey

Abstract
This paper focuses on an archiving project, conducted by the Architects’ Association 1927 in Ankara, about one of the leading figures of modern architecture in Turkey, Nejat Ersin (1924-2010). Carrying out research on his life and works has been on the agenda since 2013, when the association moved its headquarters to the Corbusian housing block that Ersin designed. In April 2017, his wife donated his professional and personal documents to the association. After she passed away, his family members provided additional archival material in January 2018. These documents and projects, collected through donations, together meant that a new approach to the study of his work, foreseen in 2013, had become necessary. In this article, I will discuss the construction of the private archive of an architect in the context of architectural historiography.

Keywords: Nejat Ersin, archiving, architect’s archive, architectural history, historiography, Turkey, Architects’ Association 1927

Introduction
To live, as Walter Benjamin said, “means to leave traces.” However, one’s approach to the traces left behind may differ from person to person. By analyzing modern architecture’s relationship with the mass media through two important figures of twentieth century modern architecture, Adolf Loos and Le Corbusier, Beatriz Colomina revealed the architects’ different approaches in her book Privacy and Publicity: Modern Architecture as Mass Media. The first chapter of the book, “Archive,” opens with a comparison between Loos, who seems to have not left many traces behind, and Le Corbusier, who collected far too many. Thus, the materials in the architects’ archives also define the research conducted on them: “If the research into Loos is organized according to gaps in the archive, the research into Le Corbusier is organized by archival excesses.” Considering this issue in the context of the relationship between the archive and architectural historiography, both lead to the same result: “If Loos destroys all traces and Le Corbusier accumulates too many, both hide.” When it comes to the archive, there is no absolute truth in historiography. The writing of history is a search for truth. There is no single path to truth, there are only possible readings and interpretations of the archive, which is a place where “the professional historian is a reader.” Considering this issue in the context of the relationship between the archive and architectural historiography, both lead to the same result: “If Loos destroys all traces and Le Corbusier accumulates too many, both hide.” When it comes to the archive, there is no absolute truth in historiography. The writing of history is a search for truth. There is no single path to truth, there are only possible readings and interpretations of the archive, which is a place where “the professional historian is a reader.” In the early 1990s, it was the archival turn that opened up the role of the archive to discussion as a source of information that also preserves historical truth. Since then, it has been noted that “archival materials did not only tell one ‘story’ but could be interpreted in different ways depending on the audience.” As such, an archive gains meaning depending on its context, time, archivist and researchers. The archive is not static, but rather dynamic, flexible and mobile.

Although the role of the archive is questioned in historiography, archives help us remember the past and keep traces of the past alive. As for architectural history, Dana Arnold claims, “The past does leave traces of itself in the present in the form of archives, whether they be documents, institutions or indeed buildings.” Nevertheless, architects in Turkey, for instance, do...
ne ated by the Architects’ Association 1927 in Ankara on the architect Nejat Ersin (1924-2010), who was one of the active architectural actors in twentieth century Turkey. By focusing on this particular case, the intention is to examine the value of private and local collections in architectural historiography in order to show how constituting the private archive of an architect has implications for the historical development of architecture and to discuss how uses of such archives, i.e. any attempt at producing knowledge through architectural documentation, adds new layers of meaning to the archive. This article is divided into three parts: the first is devoted to a brief introduction to the architect, the institution and the materials, the three elements that give the Nejat Ersin Archive its character; the second reflects on the construction of an architect’s archive through current theoretical approaches; and the third examines the potential uses of such archives in writing architectural history.

Taking this background into consideration, this article tries to explore the issue of the relationship between archives and architectural historiography. In this respect, it introduces a unique case: an archiving project conducted by the Architects’ Association 1927 in Ankara on the architect Nejat Ersin (1924-2010), who was one of the active architectural actors in twentieth century Turkey. By focusing on this particular case, the intention is to examine the value of private and local collectors in architectural historiography in order to show how constituting the private archive of an architect has implications for the historical development of architecture and to discuss how uses of such archives, i.e. any attempt at producing knowledge through architectural documentation, adds new layers of meaning to the archive. This article is divided into three parts: the first is devoted to a brief introduction to the architect, the institution and the materials, the three elements that give the Nejat Ersin Archive its character; the second reflects on the construction of an architect’s archive through current theoretical approaches; and the third examines the potential uses of such archives in writing architectural history.

The Architect, the Institution and the Materials

No archive arises out of thin air. Each archive has a “pre-history,” in the sense of prior conditions of existence.

Nejat Ersin, born in 1934 in Dünca Kocaeli, is one of the leading figures of modern architecture in Turkey. Although he graduated in 1950 from the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul, his life and career were mainly centered in Ankara, the capital of Turkey. After working as an architect for several institutions and organizations during the first decade of his professional life, Ersin opened his own architectural firm in 1960 and continued practicing architecture until he retired in 1996. Nejat Ersin is known as one of the protagonists of Ankara and Turkish architecture, embracing the contemporary (modern) environment and making use of modern architectural language in several meticulously-designed buildings. His early architectural portfolio in the 1950s, which can be described as rigorously modernist, gradually evolved toward a synthesis of local and universal architecture in his later works. The second half of the twentieth century, in which he developed his professional practice, was marked by several turning points in Turkey’s socioeconomic discourses and practices. These key transformations, such as elections that brought parties of different ideologies into government, occurred between the 1950s and the mid-1990s. They include the 1950 election, which resulted in the victory of the Democrat Party and thus brought collaboration with the United States, the political, cultural and intellectual liberalism of the 1960s that led to the differentiation of social structures, and the introduction of a free market economy and the effects of globalization in the 1980s, which provoked a widespread construction boom. The architectural realm associated with these transformations also changed during this period.

In brief, Ersin’s architectural practice carries the traces of this period’s characteristics. The country’s social, political and economic conditions over the course of his career had a significant impact on his work, which greatly contributed to the formation of twentieth century architecture in Turkey.

In parallel with the global changes that occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War, Turkey embraced a modernist attitude, not only in the country’s social and political structures, but also in architecture. The international style that emerged in the postwar era was influential on the architecture of Ersin, who had just recently joined Turkey’s professional milieu in the 1950s. This period in his career was dominated by the projects he designed for housing cooperatives. In the 1960s, when professional practices began to develop and several architectural firms opened in Turkey, Ersin started his own firm, thereby taking an active role in the production of architecture as an entrepreneur known as a “build-and-sell” contractor. These developments exponentially increased the number of residential projects he designed. The 1970s saw greater diversity in his works in terms of functional programs and private enterprises. The architect designed a wider range of building types than ever before, such as private residences and offices, and other commercial buildings. In addition to these new corporate employers, industrial buildings constituted an important part of his practice in the 1970s. In this period, Ersin also explored new spatial articulations and complicated construction solutions in his designs. The process of globalization, which roughly began in the 1980s, manifested itself in the construction of the physical environment in general and in Nejat Ersin’s architecture in particular. In this period, consumerism started to invade all areas of life in Turkey. Starting in the 1980s, tourism-oriented investments and vacations began to...
emerge as a social phenomenon, especially in Turkey’s coastal regions. Consequently, summer homes, full-service hotels with recreational facilities and other amenities and, in general, tourist accommodations began to appear in Ersin’s architectural practice in the 1980s and mid-1990s. In his nearly fifty years of professional life, Nejat Ersin produced over 150 projects of different scales and functions throughout Turkey that, notwithstanding the distinguishing characteristics and qualities of his architecture, are consonant with the country’s social and economic realities.15

Over the course of his career, Ersin simultaneously undertook duties in non-governmental organizations, including the Kavaklıdere Sporting Club, and professional institutions, such as the Chamber of Architects of Turkey. He also occasionally wrote for architectural publications. In 2002, he was granted the Achievement Award for Contributions to Architecture at the National Architecture Exhibition and Awards, given out by the Chamber of Architects; he later served as the chairman of the jury during the ninth edition of the event. The jury report summarized his comprehensive and versatile career, as represented by several exceptional productions:

To Nejat Ersin, who has witnessed in person the history of the profession in Republican Turkey; who, throughout his 52-year career, aside from realizing outstanding projects such as airports, urban residences and industrial buildings, has shown efforts in promoting the profession and in bringing to prominence the social function of architecture; and who represents the reputation of architects in society with his humble and estimable personality.16
Nejat Ersin passed away in Ankara at the age of 86. After retiring, Ersin kept a few of his documents in a wooden cabinet in his house. These documents, along with many others, were donated to the Architects’ Association 1927 in April 2017 by his wife Perihan Ersin, a process that was continued by other family members after she passed away in January 2018.

The Architects’ Association 1927 is the oldest independent architectural institution in Turkey. It was established on February 18, 1927, four years after the proclamation of the Republic of Turkey. As a nonprofit institution, the association, aiming to develop and disseminate architectural culture in the country, regularly organizes talks, exhibitions, competitions and other public events for architects, architecture students and citizens. After moving around Ankara for several years in February 2013, the association moved its headquarters to the Corbusian housing block in Ankara known as Cinnah 19 that was designed and built in 1956-1960 by Nejat Ersin and his team of architects and engineers. While working at the State Airports Construction Department, Ersin and his coworkers founded a housing cooperative. The architect himself was appointed project architect and construction supervisor by the cooperative.
The Architects' Association's premises in the building
The ideals of modern architecture had awakened Ersin’s interest and he stated that he was inspired by Le Corbusier’s housing blocks during the design process. By following Le Corbusier and the Unité d’Habitation (1947-52), he designed an iconic modernist building in 1950s Ankara. Since 2013, the association’s presence in the building has gradually turned the space into a new center for the arts and culture in Ankara and reincorporated the building into the life of the city. It creates an awareness of the heritage of modern architecture and offers a model for its preservation.

Keeping Ersin’s personal archive of over six thousand artifacts on the association’s premises therefore constitutes a meaningful whole. The collection acquired by the association in 2017 comprises over 2,600 architectural drawings in his own hand documenting over 150 projects from between 1951 and 1994 (though many others are undated); over 3,500 photographs documenting the architect’s career and life; numerous books and journals; documents such as project notes, his correspondence and article drafts; and objects including drawing sets, awards, photography tools and watercolors and/or pencil drawings. In this sense, the collection presents an architecture that the architect closely linked to his life and a life intertwined with architecture. As such, the association undertook the task of an archiving project that may be twofold and interdependent in nature: constituting the archive and introducing the wealth of the archive through events and publications. Moreover, the association chose not to outsource the project, but rather decided to use its own resources, devoting a part of its facilities to this architectural heritage, which is entirely stored onsite. Since 2017, this project has been undertaken with great care: the collection has been classified, digitized and cataloged and research has also been conducted in other institutions, such as the municipal archives. As of August 2020, we are now working on creating a database to facilitate access to scholars engaged in historical research and preparing a book to introduce the Ersin archive to the public interested in the built environment.

Building the Archive

Constituting an archive represents a significant moment, on which we need to reflect with care. The construction of an architect’s archive was not a task the association had undertaken before. There had been no similar cases in Turkey except for a few big-budget projects carried out by professional teams partnering with corporations. There was no preliminary experience that could be regarded as a model because each collection possesses its own characteristics and is unique in relation to its formation and the way it is archived. In this sense, I suggest that the materials held by the Nejat Ersin collection also reveal the way the archive was constituted. At this point, one of the most important questions should be that addressed by Millar: “When and how do pieces of evidence become archives?” — the “significant moment” Stuart Hall calls attention to, when random and dispersed pieces begin to become an organized whole. Our first attempt at understanding the Nejat Ersin Archive was to examine in depth the materials acquired by the association and to simultaneously transfer all analog documents to a digital format. As a matter of principle, all projects, documents, photographs, ephemera, objects and books were kept together, regardless of their archival value. Protecting these records as a unified whole has been our primary approach to the archive’s formation and none of the materials were therefore excluded.
The Nejat Ersin Archive consists of documents collected as the natural result of human activity, even though "postmodern architectural thinking holds that archives should be innocent byproducts of life and work." It is an original collection that contains documentary evidence related to Ersin’s 50-year professional practice and traces of his daily life. As Royce suggests, "all sorts of traces can be archived." Documents, which survived the ordinary birth-death cycle of unplanned destruction or intentional discard, were doubtlessly intentionally preserved by the architect’s own decision. Although we do not know today exactly why they were chosen, I believe that the selection was not very conscious, but was instead random. Presumably, the selection was based upon practical reasons or even chance. In this sense, the organization of the records, as they do not appear to be arranged according to any particular principle, simultaneously has its own order and disorder. These characteristics thus distinguish the Ersin archive from any "systematic" and "artificial" collection.

At the earliest stages of the evolution of the archive, we tried to make a list of Ersin's complete works. The records of the collection and what is known from Ersin’s published works and from researcher’s previous studies have created the components of the list, which also reveals the gaps in the collection. It is also correct to say that both the contents of the collection and these gaps define the Ersin archive. This reminds us of the dialectic that exists between the presence and absence of documents in archives. The list, with its full and empty lines, likewise guides us through the next steps for research. The first step toward filling these gaps is to place archival documents in their context and to provide an interpretative framework; only in this way can the documents serve as evidence. Having analyzed the difference between information and evidence, Laura A. Millar emphasizes the importance of content, structure and context for evidence by saying: “If content is the ‘what’ and structure the ‘how’, context is everything else: the ‘who’, ‘where’, ‘when’ and possibly even ‘why’.” To exemplify this: the documents in the archive were mostly silent when it comes to their date. However, the date, as outlined by Roland Barthes, “belongs to the photograph,” and similarly, the project or construction date is undoubtedly an important part of architecture. In light of every new piece of information from other sources, the list was organized and reorganized and gaps have begun to be partially filled in with the appearance of new evidence that may make one appearance or another disappear or become more meaningful. For this reason, constant efforts have been made to find any information about the relationship of the document to any other architectural records. Defining relationships between each record in the collection with another, on the one hand, and the relationship of the Ersin archive with other archives, on the other, plays an important role in the structuring of the collection. The Nejat Ersin Archive therefore shows that random and dispersed pieces could become an archive only in communication with other material. As Demida contends, “the archivization produces as much as it records the evidence.” Such as, the underlying argument in favor of Demida is that, in the case observed in this paper constituting the archive is made possible by enlarging the scope of the architect’s work with new records and the filling of gaps. For this reason, when and how these pieces started to create an archive, i.e. “the very moment,” could be hard to pin down.

Reading the Archive and Writing Architectural History with the Archive

The architect who leaves traces behind takes the very first step to historicize him or herself and provides historians with first-hand documents. Here, the archive becomes a tool for architects who are remembered by future generations. In this sense, putting the architect Nejat Ersin at the center of the archive provides the opportunity to examine this individual in great depth and detail, which grand narratives are not able to pay attention to. Furthermore, the characteristics that make Ersin’s architecture unique and special become the subject of historical research. This provides new opportunities for the architectural historian to go beyond what is known about the architect and to produce new research on his life and works. It would not be wrong to say that the archival materials, such as pictorial and literary architectural records, determine the direction of historiography in each project alongside the built work itself. The building, commonly considered to be the primary archive by some architectural history scholars, becomes secondary. Historians generally tend to see the building as the final product, yet the building is the final product of a process; it is designed, commissioned, built and occupied. Documented architecture therefore gives us a different perspective that allows us to understand the evolution of this process. The built work provides information on all actors that play a role in fields ranging from design to construction and they support a holistic approach to the study of the architectural past.

The issue of authority is also on the agenda. The building may have been changed or there may be differences between the drawing and the structure, between architectural design and construction. Kleinnan claims that “almost every built work is itself a reproduction, made of reproducible and even changeable components. In short, built work has a troubled relationship with the question of originality.” For cases in which the project is not implemented or the building disappears, the body of documentary evidence is the most important record left behind for architectural historians. As a result, “the architectural archive promises to stabilize architecture, this is the architect's task and right.” Apart from the detailed research to be carried out on a single building or project, the archive provides the chance to examine Nejat Ersin’s career and life with a “complete” view. The continuity in his architectural works, the characteristics of the architect’s world of production, and the role of his projects can be analyzed. Trying to understand the roles taken on by Ersin, besides his architectural production, also illustrates how the architect constructed himself as a subject, an identity or a social figure in the architectural environment of his time. The issue of an archivis: an individual also becomes a topic for critical analysis and is extensively and critically examined. It aims to reestablish the “architect” as a subject and its authenticity and to discuss architectural actions through their biographies, productions and contributions to the architectural field.

The Nejat Ersin Archive not only preserves the traces of an individual architect’s life and professional practice, but also holds evidence of a period’s architecture in its social, cultural, political and economic context. The Ersin archive maximizes memory, which preserves the architect’s past, life and practices and characteristics of the period’s cultural and sociopolitical life. The archive is therefore both public and private; it is a place for the publicity of the private, though Colomina claims that ‘the archive is private, history is public.’ Here, the Ersin archive is also key to understanding twentieth-century architecture in Turkey. As a cross-section of Nejat Ersin’s architecture, the architecture of ‘Turkey and the sociocultural life of the city of Ankara, the archive becomes a place for the production of knowledge of the milieu. Along with the history of architecture, it provides a background for historians engaged in research and inter-changeable components. In short, built work has a troubled relationship with the question of originality.” For cases in which the project is not implemented or the building disappears, the body of documentary evidence is the most important record left behind for architectural historians. As a result, “the architectural archive promises to stabilize architecture, this is the architect's task and right.” Apart from the detailed research to be carried out on a single building or project, the archive provides the chance to examine Nejat Ersin’s career and life with a “complete” view. The continuity in his architectural works, the characteristics of the architect’s world of production, and the role of his projects can be analyzed. Trying to understand the roles taken on by Ersin, besides his architectural production, also illustrates how the architect constructed himself as a subject, an identity or a social figure in the architectural environment of his time. The issue of an archivis: an individual also becomes a topic for critical analysis and is extensively and critically examined. It aims to reestablish the “architect” as a subject and its authenticity and to discuss architectural actions through their biographies, productions and contributions to the architectural field.

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To conclude, having introduced the project of archiving the life and works of a modern architect in Turkey, I have attempted to analyze the role of constructing the private archive of an architect in the writing of architectural history. As such, the discussion was centered on the special significance of archives in establishing a relationship between the past and architecture. Architectural archives create a background for historians engaged in research and help them construct and reconnect their narratives. Here I argue that personal and local collections have immense value in architectural historiography, as can be seen in the formation of the private archive of an architect in Turkey. Nonetheless, this exploration should not be considered more than...
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**Reflections on the Archive**: Selda Bano's work on reorganizing the archives of the Mimarlar Derneği 1927 highlights the importance of preserving and making accessible historical records. The archive, as described by W. J. T. Mitchell, is a “site of memory” that enables the construction of a living archive, whose construction enriches and enlarges the past through a new lens. This concept is echoed by Bloch, who argues that the past is not a passive collection of data but a responsibility for tomorrow.

The archives of the Mimarlar Derneği 1927, which have been digitized, classified, and cataloged, offer a rich repository of architectural knowledge. The digitization process not only preserves these materials for future generations but also makes them accessible in new ways. This approach aligns with Bloch's idea that the past is not a passive artifact but an active participant in the present and future.

In conclusion, the work of Selda Bano on the archives of the Mimarlar Derneği 1927 serves as an important reminder of the value of preserving our collective memory. As Bloch suggests, the past is not a fixed entity but a dynamic, evolving concept that shapes our understanding of the present and informs our actions for the future.