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The Tree, The Mansion, and a Nation: Cultural Narratives of the Walking Mansion

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Abstract – The Walking Mansion in Yalova, Türkiye, holds a special place as a symbol of the Early Republican Period. In 1929, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic, took a journey from İstanbul to Bursa aboard the Ertuğrul Yacht and encountered a remarkable plane tree situated along the Yalova coast. Atatürk, inspired by the shade, built a mansion for retreats. This two-story residence was completed in twenty-two days. In 1930, Atatürk saw a gardener pruning branches and remarked, "The branch will not be cut, the mansion will be moved!" This led to disassembling the mansion, excavating its foundation, and relocating it five meters east in three days. This study analyses the Walking Mansion through interrelated discourse analysis, integrating cultural narratives and national identity in Türkiye's Early Republican Period, complemented by site analysis for architectural interpretation. Accordingly, it is aimed to understand how an architectural edifice generates a cultural narrative in a newly established Republican state within political, cultural, social, and environmental contexts. Thus, the hidden meanings of the Walking Mansion are unveiled within the Turkish Republic's history as a cultural narrative that reflects the state's gentle attitude, metaphorically aligned with Republican ideals and its multi-layered representations.

Keywords – The Walking Mansion, Cultural narratives, The Early Republican Period of Türkiye, National identity, Architectural heritage

I. Introduction

The Walking Mansion in Yalova, Türkiye carves a special niche in the cultural narratives of the Turkish nation as a distinctive architectural edifice that carries special meanings in the new, modernist, and reformist history of the Early Republican Period. In 1929, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, was travelling from İstanbul to Bursa by the Ertuğrul Yacht, a grandiose plane tree appeared on the coast of Yalova. Then, the crew went ashore with Atatürk and had a break under the shade of the tree. The calm and serene atmosphere of the area highly affected Atatürk, and he ordered the construction of a mansion here for him to be used as a resting point during his long journeys. The request of Atatürk was fulfilled quickly, and a modest, two-story mansion was constructed in twenty-two days.

In 1930, when Atatürk was visiting his mansion, he saw the gardener cutting the branches of the plane tree because its leaves and branches were damaging the façade. At that time, the well-known phrase was said by Atatürk: "*The branch will not be cut, the mansion will be moved!*" Then, an equipped team consisting of architects and engineers moved the mansion on the rails by excavating until the foundation, and the building was slid approximately five meters toward the east in three days. The building was named the Walking Mansion (*Yürüyen Köşk*) in the Early Republican period (Fig-1).

In this study, the history of the Walking Mansion is handled as a cultural narrative of the Turkish nation by representing special meanings on the gentle and appreciative ideology of the Republic. Accordingly, the construction history of the Mansion is valued as an environmentalist cultural narrative in the Republican ideology, and various perspectives on the symbolic meaning of the building for the Turkish nation are discussed in this research.

Fig. 1: View of the Walking Mansion and the plane tree (Author's personal archive, 2025)

II. Materials and Method

In this study, the Walking Mansion is studied using an interrelated discourse analysis methodology, which combines discursive formations of cultural narratives and national identity approaches specific to the Early Republican Period of Türkiye. The site analysis and field observation methods are conducted as complementary methods to feed architectural interpretation of the Mansion. In this way, the special place of the Walking Mansion is examined as a building-scale symbol of the Early Republican Period ideals, which remained fresh and vital in the hundred-year-old Turkish memory as an ongoing cultural narrative from the 1930s.

Thus, it is aimed to understand how an architectural edifice can generate a cultural narrative in a newly established Republican state within political, cultural, social, and environmental contexts. In this way, the hidden meanings of the Walking Mansion are unveiled by locating the building at the center of the Turkish Republic's history as a symbolic narrative that transfers the gentle attitude of the state, which metaphorically matches Republican ideals and their multi-layered representations on a broader scale.

III. The Walking Mansion as a Document

The territories of the Ottoman Empire experienced a comprehensive period of transformation, which unfolded progressively within political and socio-cultural contexts, aimed at establishing a new democratic understanding at the onset of the 19th century. Consequently, the emergence of novel political structures necessitated concrete representations nationwide. On the one hand, state officials directed the political trajectory of the Empire towards a Republican regime; on the other hand, these changes and reforms influenced the fabric of daily life [1].

Throughout this period, architectural priorities were constantly re-evaluated in the context of the prevailing economic and political landscape. Notably, the early 1920s revealed the challenges of the post-war years and demanded prioritization in reconstructing Anatolia's built environment amid financial and technical constraints [2]. Rather than pursuing new constructions across the country in an entirely new Republican style, the era's architectural language was significantly shaped by the Ottoman heritage [2]. The architecture of the 1920s primarily emphasized continuity with the recent past, making Ottoman revivalism a suitable architectural choice [3]. Thus, reinforcing traditional connections with the existing Ottoman style became central to the reconstruction of cities [1]. While the 1920s are characterized as "the years of shortage," the 1930s marked a new chapter in which innovative architectural trends and priorities emerged in the Republican built environment [3]. In this manner, state institutions, public buildings, squares, and monuments became iconic symbols of the Republic within the urban landscape, embodying the new Turkish identity [3]. On the one hand, these structures represented the new Turkish identity as architectural manifestations within the built environment; on the other hand, their public use became an integral aspect of national connotations in the Republic.

In this context, the architecture of the Early Republican Period served as physical structures and potent instruments for constructing and embodying the new Turkish identity. These edifices, monuments, and public spaces functioned as tangible manifestations of the nation's aspirations while acting as living documents of a transformative era. This dual role of architecture—as both material form and symbolic representation—resonates with Foucault's perspective on history, wherein physical structures may transcend their immediate functionality, evolving into enduring monuments that capture and convey broader social, political, and cultural meanings. This intersection between the material and the discursive formations reveals architecture's capacity to engage in the ongoing reconstitution of historical narratives, thereby shaping collective memory and national identity over time.

Foucault evaluates history as not merely memorizing monuments, but as an autonomous actor, which "transforms documents into monuments" [4]. In other words, documents and all other evidence in textual, visual, oral, physical, or written form can transform into a powerful material, which has an inherent power to reconstitute historical strata by establishing meaningful relations between the evidence and different discourses. By proposing a stratification of discourses centered on ruptures and discontinuities, new foundations arise from "displacements and transformations of concepts," which hold implicit meanings in their structural relationships, formations, and contexts [4]. This innovative historical approach offers various avenues to comprehend the impact of these ruptures on established structures, leading to significant transformations in both discursive formations and the understanding of social, political, and cultural contexts throughout history.

The built environment is more than a mere background for historical events; it actively contributes to meaning-making. Documents evolve into monuments, while a city's physical structure is a dynamic archive influenced by social forces, cultural narratives, and political authority. This interplay illustrates how the built environment mirrors and informs the narratives shaping a society's identity and history. Thus, the built environment is profoundly influenced by its era's dominant power dynamics and ideologies [5]. Therefore, cities should not be seen as physical locations or constructed spaces; they are also shaped by the ruling class's power relations, ideologies, and values [5]. As a result, a city embodies complex interactions among society, officials, and various governmental and non-governmental organizations [7]. Furthermore, a city's historical context and cultural foundation are vital to its development.

From this perspective, an architectural edifice could also be valued as a significant document to generate a historical narrative. Besides architectural characteristics of the edifice, its political context and construction processes can illuminate the veiled stratum of the building and reveal hidden meanings. In this way, the edifice manipulates the era's historical flow and generates a breaking point in its time's social, cultural, and political contexts. Occasionally, that rupture could be conveyed in the following decades as a narrative, which makes a ground in history as a memory. Hence, the edifice transforms into a document as a living witness to history. In this way, history and the document establish a correlational link that resulted in a synchronous and reciprocal change in one another. At this stage, Foucault emphasizes the role of the document by redefining its relationship with history and knowledge. Consequently, history becomes an active participant that shapes, reinterprets, and reorganizes the document, rather than merely serving as its interpretation or outcome [8]. Thus, history reconstructs the document by integrating it into a network of interconnected elements and units.

Accordingly, the Walking Mansion is integrated into the cultural narratives of the Turkish Republican Era as a living document of the history (Fig-2). The building-scale approach to the Mansion could be enlarged with Boyer's definition of the city as a "work of art," continually expressed through iconographic depictions of a society's collective memories. Accordingly, the city is depicted as a "narrative space" and rich with "emblematic" symbols that represent the physical embodiment of memories within the urban setting [8]. Whether through transient representations, like triumphal arches, or enduring architectural artifacts, such as monuments or statues, the city is a deliberate arrangement of iconographic portrayals of a society's memorial disruptions [8]. Therefore, a city, along with its constructed environment and architectural artifacts, emerges as an intentional manifestation of history, memory, and identity specific to a society.

Fig. 2: View of the Walking Mansion
(Author's personal archive, 2025)

The cultural narrative of the Walking Mansion is considerably grounded in the political discourses of the newly established Turkish Republic. As "forms of argumentation", political discourses serve as practical mediums in societal construction processes, aligned with the prevailing agendas of the time [9]. From this viewpoint, discourse is seen as a social construction that both influences and is influenced by society in an ongoing, interconnected manner across various documents, texts, and remnants. Here, an architectural edifice could be integrated into the discussion as a strong and physical representation of the era. In this way, architecture emerges as a vital component and document of the built environment, where discourses are physically represented in spaces to solidify discursive formations in their social, cultural, and political contexts [9].

IV. Discussion

Following its construction in 1929, the move of the Walking Mansion became a document contemporarily narrated in the nation as a symbol of various attitudes of the Turkish Republic. Firstly, Atatürk's attitude in preserving the plane tree and preventing its cutting is implicitly associated with the protective policy of the state, both in national and environmental contexts. On the one hand, the 1930s had remarkable momentum in the industrialization process and establishment of factories nationwide; the construction and movement stages of the Walking Mansion represent an environmental policy of the Republic. Accordingly, the preservation of natural assets points out the sustainable development policy of the state within a grandiose industrial modernization process of the 1930s. In this respect, the plane tree gains ground in the cultural narratives of the Republic as a symbol of the respect given to the natural heritage of Anatolia, and it could be valued as a representation of the state's environmentalist attitude.

Secondly, the respect given to the hundred-year-old tree is metaphorically related to the city's esteem for its centuries-old Ottoman heritage. While Republican ideals were consolidated in the late 1920s and 1930s, historical and cultural continuity was not ignored; on the contrary, the plane tree was associated with the Turkish Republic's roots, grounded in the Ottoman heritage. Hence, the centuries-old Ottoman roots are symbolically sustained in the newly established Republican state.

Thirdly, after the construction of the Mansion, the backward green area of the plane tree was gifted to the nation as a model farm for future park renovations nationwide. The donation of the farm is valued as a significant step for integrating green and cultivated areas into the nation. It has become one of the earliest examples of recreational areas in future city planning developments of the Republic. Accordingly, farms and the plain tree are considered living evidence of the state's eco-friendly attitude, while comprehensive modernization steps have been pacing the built environment nationwide.

V. Conclusion

In this study, the Walking Mansion in Yalova, Türkiye, is valued as a striking symbolic representation of the cultural narratives on the modernization process of the state from the 1920s. The Mansion is not merely an architectural edifice; the building becomes a concrete symbol of a multi-layered narrative of the Republican state between the new modern government, culture, history, built environment, and natural assets. The selection of Yalova by Atatürk for his resting area near a centuries-old plane tree shows a clear reflection of the respect given to the natural environment. The Walking Mansion comes into prominence as the symbol of the development ideals of the newly established Republic, with a collaboration with the environment and the existing Ottoman heritage of the area.

On the other hand, the sliding of the Mansion proposes a strong narrative on re-drawing and re-defining the boundaries between nature and the nation. By protecting the plain tree and moving the Mansion, Atatürk emphasized the environmental respect which had to be internalized as a state policy. Besides being sustainable, attention and ecological consciousness, the Walking Mansion illuminates a critical balance between architecture and nation. From this perspective, the Walking

Mansion could be considered an architectural respect given to the natural environment.

From another perspective, the physical movement of the Mansion establishes a strong parallel between the dynamism of history and the Republic's national identity. The movement of the building represents the Turkish Republic's development and improvement ideals while metaphorically preserving its roots. The cultural narrative of that movement proposes the reformist search for the state by protecting its traditional bonds. In this respect, the Walking Mansion becomes an architectural statement of the future aims of the Republic, grounded in Ottoman roots (Fig-3).

Fig. 3: View of the Walking Mansion and the plane tree (Author's personal archive, 2025)

Accordingly, the Walking Mansion transforms into a cultural narrative for the Turkish nation from the 1930s until today. By carving a special niche in the national memory of the Republic, the Walking Mansion becomes a concrete representation of the state's nature-nation collaboration, and the future aims of the Republic on the Ottoman heritage of Anatolia with great respect. Thus, the Mansion proposes a multi-structured narrative for the Republic not as a mere architectural building but as a symbol of various reformist perspectives of the state. From this respect, the Walking Mansion is valued as a strong example of a national symbol to show how an architectural edifice could transform into a document for a hundred-year-old cultural narrative for the Turkish Republic.

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