

# Identity Formation in Cultural Environments: Traditional Turkish House Interiors

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**Abstract**— A cultural place is an environment where people construct their collective identity. In collective memory, place identities turn in to cultural identity reflecting traditional values. The aim of this study is to develop a model to correlate the concepts of cultural identity, place identity, and space. Traditional Turkish House Interiors is selected as an example of a cultural heritage reflecting the identity of a collective image. The interior design formation of a typical Traditional Turkish house is discussed in the context of cultural and place identity concepts.

**Keywords**—Cultural Identity, Image, Place Identity, Traditional Turkish House.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Human, as the creator of cultural diversity, is the main force in shaping environments. Every culture consists of the patterns of living habits, attitudes and beliefs that shape our way of understanding the world around us. Culture can be defined as “a way of being, relating, behaving, believing and acting which people live out in their lives and which is in a constant process of change and exchange with other cultures” [1]. That means the culture is also in the centre of interrelations among the environment and the human. In other words, culture is an effective factor that shapes how people behave in a certain environment. Moreover, it affects how we perceive the environment.

This study focuses on the environment in the interior space dimension. It discusses the interior space design through image formation phase. In addition, the process of place identity formation and cultural identity is defined in relation with each other. Also, designing an interior means designing an image. From this point of view, reflecting true cultural identity as an image is the basic principle in designing interior environments.

Interior architecture profession aims to create environments that satisfy the needs of functionality, aesthetics, and cultural identity. IFI (International Federation of Interior Architects and Interior Designers), widely known as the international committee of interior designers, define the profession as:

*“As a creative enterprise, interior design and interior architecture are a mode of cultural production. They are a place-maker that interprets, translates, and edits cultural*

*capital. In a global world, interior design and interior architecture must play a role in facilitating the retention of cultural diversity.”* [2]

In this study, cultural identity and place identity formation is discussed based on the typical interior elements of Traditional Turkish Houses. This study aims to introduce typical values and meanings of interior space elements reflecting the cultural identity and image. The focus of the study is interrelations among cultural identity, place identity and environmental design. From this standing point, place identity of Traditional Turkish House is discussed within the context of image formation through cultural identity.

## II. CULTURAL IDENTITY, ENVIRONMENTAL PERCEPTION AND COGNITION

Identity is described as a biological organization which develops through adjustment (settlement), assimilation and assessing the social world; and moves over time. Whereas collective identity can be the reflection of traditions, beliefs, and attitudes. Therefore, it consists of all value systems of a specific culture.

According to Matsumoto, the culture

- is Dynamic,
- involves a system consisting of rules
- is expressed through the community as well as the self unit
- conveys the sustainability of vitality of the community (with help of the system)
- involves attitudes, values, belief, norms and behaviors
- is shared with groups
- is interpreted by each member of the community
- is transform to new generations
- has the potential of change [3].

In a sense, designing an image (reflecting the identity of a specific culture) affects all these essential factors. Moreover, every cultural value gains a form in the interior environment. In other saying, cultural identity gives shape to the interior environment.

Before discussing the correlation between perception and cognition, it is fatal to define them in order to understand the image formation in interior environments. In fact, experiencing a specific environment means perceiving that environment basically.

There are two main sources of information that can be used to perceive the environment accurately. These are:

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1. Currently available information, and
2. Relevant past knowledge and experience stored in the brain [4].

According to Rapoport, relevant past information and experience is directly affected by the cultural identity. In a way, they shape the perception as in the below model. [5]

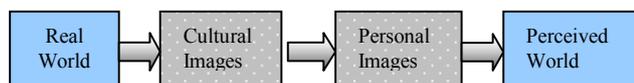


Fig1. Rapoport's Perception Model

According to this model, perception of real world is filtered by the cultural and personal images in our brain. In other words, people perceive the world with their cultural and personal images. People not only perceive these images, but they also store and organize them. This process is named as cognition. Cognition is to create a knowledge structure by:

- Taking external data,
- Interpreting it,
- Transforming it, and
- Recognizing it.

Nohl, defines the environmental cognition in three levels as: perceptive, qualifier and symbolic. Perceptive level constitutes object and environmental cognition. In the qualifier level, the object is cognized with its context. The symbolic level of cognition consists of abstract and conceptual parts of the environment. The first and the second levels create a base for the third level (the symbolic level). The symbolic level can also be defined as "the cognition of conceptual and abstract phase of environment" [6].

In this respect, cultural identity can be considered as the base for this symbolic level of environmental cognition. In fact, the formation of new cognition of environmental images in the brain is partially affected by these cultural symbols.

In addition, Rapoport considers the environmental cognition as a system of classification. In this classification system, the meaningful relations are created with the relation between the meaningful parts. In case of meaningless connections between new images and stored images in the brain, the image is stored in short term memory and cannot be recalled again. Moreover, Rapoport defines the process as a continuous chain of perception, knowing and considering. In this context, the cultural identity (as an affective factor in environmental perception) influences the cognition process as well.

Paiget defines the cognition process as the adaption of organism to the environment [7]. This is not the recognition of the exact copy, but the creation of unique knowledge of the environment. In this creation, the consideration of existing knowledge is essential [7]. It is obvious that formation of this existing knowledge is shaped with the collective cultural identity of the self. Humans both perceive and cognate the environment through their cultural identity. Therefore, the cultural identity and the environment are strongly related to each other. Human (as the designer of the environment) is affected by the reformation of cultural identity. In fact this renovated cultural identity gives way to new designs.

There are many examples to the strong interaction between

the environment and cognition process. Especially, these examples demonstrate that, different people living in different cultures have different space perceptions. Also, environment and the individual constitute a whole. The parts of this whole cannot be discussed independent of each other and these interactions together constitute a social system [8].

One example to this interaction can be the environmental perception of the Mbuti Pygmies who live in the rainforests. Since the living environment is pervaded with a dense layer of vegetation, they scarcely perceive the sun, moon and stars. Therefore, the environment for those who live in this culture is more inclined to a horizontal perception rather than vertical. Furthermore, the sky, stars, and the sun (having a religious meaning in several cultures) express no particular meaning in this culture. In this culture, the formations of cultural meanings (affecting the environmental perception) have caused the horizontal space perception to develop more than the vertical one [8]. Looking from this perspective, the Traditional Turkish House, which has been continuously used in Turkey, from the sixteenth century until now, can be seen as an image reflecting the cultural identity.

### III. SPACE AND PLACE IDENTITY

Space is a three dimensional volume. Interior designers start designing this empty volume and turn it to an environment that contains human existence. Every designed environmental image contains features from its user. There is a two way correlation between space and its user. The person defines the space, the space defines the person; the person gives meaning to the space, the space gives meaning to the person. This relation has cultural, psychological, economic and physical dimensions.

When the interaction is considered from this perspective, the concept of place rather than space emerges. Here place includes space, time and people. According to Hay when the human element comes into space, space becomes more of a place than a space [9]. Law and Altman have defined the place concept as the space which is given meaning through individual, group or cultural processes. Thus, over the usage process, people create their own place identities. This transforms the space into their own place. This process is defined in the relevant literature as "place identity" [10]. As defined previously, the identity is described as a biological organization which develops through adjustment (settlement), assimilation and assessing the social world; and moves over time [11]. Place formation can be defined as the attitude the individual forms towards a certain environment. The concept of place involves not just a physical element, but also emotional factors. Hay describes the three factors which affect the formation of the place concept as:

1. Residence status in the place (superficial, partial, personal, a sense of place coming from the past)
2. Age status; as a developing cycle of life
3. Connections that develop in adulthood; generally marriage  
No matter what space and time means, place and occasion

tells more [12]. Temporality is an important phenomenon in the place concept. People do not only create their spaces, the geography of their lives, but also the time-space (place) of their lives [13]. In short, the concept of place is fundamental to the individual and his space interaction. Place should be perceived as a dimension of space which comes by the individual's use of the space.

Moreover, place identity is an affective factor in both environmental perception and cognition processes. Most of the findings in previous studies demonstrate that the process is affected by the personal and global identity of the self [14]. Moreover, the place identity and the "extended self" concepts are related with each other in the relevant literature. In a way, Vignoles and Droseltis define the extended self concept as "the idea that places are experienced cognitively as 'a part of the self'. They mention that "The people and places that we encounter, and these identities affect our responses to new events" [14]. From this point of view, it is clear that experiencing typical features in a certain place is an affective factor in perception of place. According to Schutz, people perceive the world through types (structured by our cognitive schemes) [15]. Auburn and Barnes summarizes this approach as:

"The person's representation or stock of knowledge of the world, first, is social in that its typified content arises in and through the community and its history. Furthermore, typification is underpinned by language or more precisely the 'vernacular of the collectivity'..." [16].

At this point, the typical features of a specific environment become important. Environment (that has a cultural value) is considered as a cultural heritage because of its typical features. These are fatal in forming the image that has a certain value in people's environmental cognition.

Cultural heritage captures the environmental images of the architectural structures, monuments, or the artworks formed together by these having universal value in terms of history, art, or structure groups, natural protected areas or landscape having universal values in terms of history, art or shape [17]. Moreover, the images gain importance in the area of demonstration of cultural identity as a heritage in tourism. In a way, the tourist is motivated by historical, artistic, scientific or heritage offerings of a community, region, group or institution [18].

The next part of the study focuses on the typical feature of Traditional Turkish house interior as an example to image formation of a cultural identity that has a heritage value.



Fig 2. Traditional Turkish House

#### IV. IMAGE FORMATION OF TYPICAL TRADITIONAL TURKISH HOUSE INTERIOR

Interior space elements shape the image of a place. In the design process, these elements give identity to the space. Especially, living environments (like houses) directly reflect the cultural identity of the society. "Vernacular-traditional houses are the physical appearances of the society's cultural heritage, beliefs, life style and values since these are the outcomes of the people's life and cultural continuity" [16].

The typical house formation has been derived from the nomadic culture in 15<sup>th</sup> century. But the formation derives from BC 2000 with "rectangle shaped, two rooms house type" [19]. Between BC 1600-1400, there appeared Hittite houses. This time, an entrance hall is added to the two rooms. Also, a pre-entrance space is added through the long axis of the house. According to Erdim, this is an initial formation of "sofa and hayat" in the Traditional Turkish House [19]. Moreover, Kuban defined this formation as: two rooms accessible with each other; and which opens to a courtyard, in the same way the courtyard precedes with colonnade [20]. According to Kuban, from Central Asia to Egypt this pattern can be seen in many houses and palaces named as 'bayt' which means house in Arabic [20].

As Anatolia has been an important location between Europe and Asia, there were many different civilizations on it throughout history. Moreover, in different regions of Anatolia, different types of houses can be seen. But, these differences are in material usages and form. Actually the space organization is almost same in all regions [21].

According to Küçükerman, belonging to a nomadic culture creates a disconnection between the feeling of belonging and the land, in a way this leads to an abstract formation of living environment [22]. In addition, Nomadic Turkish tend organization is considered as an affective formation in the Traditional Turkish House image. The tent basically aims to satisfy the basic needs. The tent as a living unit contains *tör*, *saba*, cellar, store units, *çiğ* etc. The fire was in the center of the tent, "*tör*" was the place for storage, "*saba*" was the place for eating storage, "*çiğ*" was the screen that separated the *saba* and cellar.



Fig.3. Interior view of Turkish Tent [23]

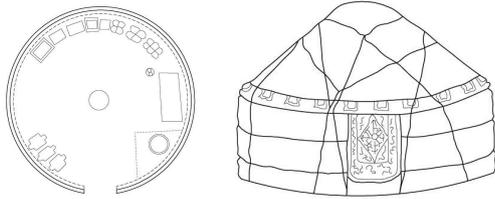


Fig 4. Plan and exterior elevation of Turkish Tent [23]

According to Küçükerman, hard land properties and the climatic factors in the Central Asia made Turks to become a nomadic society. Because of this life style, there developed a place identity independent of the land features. In the literature, this understanding of place is named as “land autonomous place” [22].

Nomadic Turks settled in Anatolia after they adapted Islam as their religion. Deriving from a nomadic culture, adapting to Islam and the environmental characteristics of Anatolia became the main factors effecting the formation of the Traditional Turkish House [22]. The Traditional Turkish House is mainly divided into two parts: harem (reserved for female members of the family) and selamlık (reserved for male members of the family). According to Islamic beliefs, areas of the house for men and women are separate. Basically, house arrangement is limited to one storey; where the top floor is always accepted as the most important part of the house.

The house is a place for all family members. After marriage, the children of the family kept going on to leave with their parents. Each of every family had a single room as their private living area. In other words, there was a patriarchal family structure.

There are three main elements in the formation of typical Traditional Turkish House. These are: “oda” room, “eyvan” and the sofa (hayat). Eyvan is the “space between groups or room, it is a passage in front of the rooms, which permits the common life inside” [22]. Sofa is the main hall that all the rooms are arranged around. It is the space between the rooms. Also, it is a circulation area between rooms. Moreover, it is used as a social area that contains sitting units. According to Küçükerman, sofa is the “most important element of the form of the Turkish house and which influences its whole shape” [22].

Seddat Hakkı Eldem classified the house according to position of the sofa. These are: without a sofa, with an outer sofa, with an inner sofa, with a central sofa. The other service areas such as kitchen, laundry and cellar can be located outside the house or they can be located in the ground floor without effecting the formation of the upper floor. [24]



Fig. 5. Room Interior Formation [25]

Another typical element of the house is the room. In most examples, the room is in square shape. In addition, the room shape is independent of the function of the space. Each room contains basic living requirements such as; sleeping, eating, sitting, working and resting. In the plan diagrams each wall creates a medium for a different activity. One wall of the room can be used as a storage unit; another can contain a fireplace, a sitting unit (sedir) or even a bathroom. On this account, Yürekli and Yürekli named the room as a single unit “house”. Küçükerman describe the room as:

- The space that serves as a medium for specific functions.
- It determines specific rules. These rules determine the collective identity. [22]
- Set around the common space.

Because of these, the function does not change the form of the room.



Fig. 6. Bath unit in the room [25].

There are also other specific functions for a single room such as “baş oda”. It is the master room which is the main area and is used as a guest room for the head of the family [23]. Master room is located in the upper floor and has the street facade.



Fig 7. Baş Oda [26]

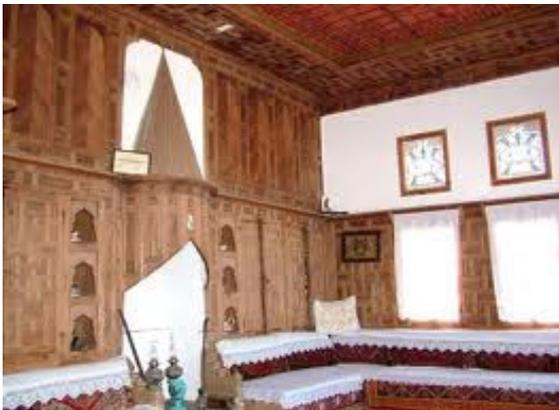


Fig 8. Room Interior [27]

When the size of the rooms is examined, it is obvious that the human scale is the main criteria in design. Direct perceiving and hearing distances are considered in the size of the room. Also the arrangement of the movable cushion seating and stable sedir units are arranged according to support the social communication [28]. In the interior of the room, there is a horizontal element (all the height of doors and windows is limited under this line). This horizontal line means “the basic principle that utility areas should not exceed human stature brought about a tangible, visible upper limit” [23].



Fig 9. Fireplace [23]

The built-in wardrobes named as “yükçük” are the other

typical interior space elements in a Traditional Turkish House. In initial examples, the main criterion in design is satisfying the functional needs. Therefore, the design is simple in aesthetic means. With addition of extra units for exhibition purposes, the design became more elaborate. These wardrobes contain daily used equipments such as beds, rugs, and cups. Most of the examples are made of carved wooden elements. [23]

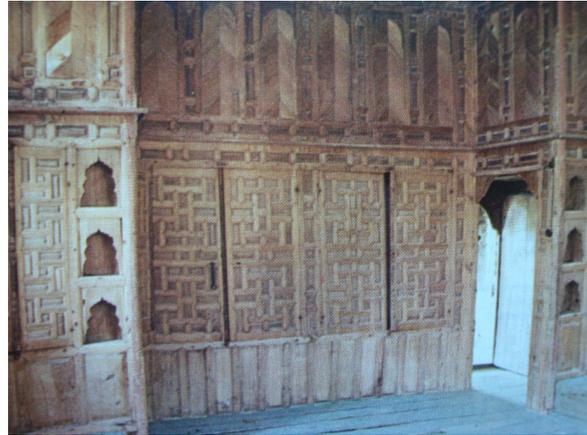


Fig 10. Built-in Wardrobes [27]

Wardrobes are located from floor to ceiling in low ceiling rooms. In case of high ceiling, the formation differs. The plane wall can continue to the ceiling or add extra unit for storage. In some examples, this plane wall between the ceiling and the wardrobe is decorated with aesthetic wooden features [20].

The floor and sedir are the main sitting units in the room. Mostly the floor covering is timber. Whatever the floor covering material is, there are always cushions, felt, carpet, kilims or rush mat on it. These coverings create a base for functions such as sleeping, seating, and eating. “If a respected visitor arrives and there is no room on the sedir, then the younger members of the family will give up their seats on the sedir and sit on the floor” [23]. Most setting units are located under windows. They surround the room and are elevated from the ground. They are also located by the walls. Therefore, the center is left empty for other activities. Also, this organization supports the social interaction.



Fig 11. Seating Unit [27]

The other typical interior space element in Traditional Turkish House is fireplace. The fireplace is mainly used for

heating purposes. Sometimes, it is also used for cooking purposes. The shape of the fireplace changes according to the importance of the room. In less important rooms, the fireplace is without any extra cover. Another example is the fireplace with cover (closed when the fireplace is not used). The most elaborate ones are with decorated exposed covers [20]. With this intensive decoration, they add extra value to the overall atmosphere of the interior.

The ceiling is also an important interior space element with its typical ornamentations. The ceiling and the floor is designed in unity. The level differences in the floor are supported by the level differences in the ceiling. The formation of volume in the interior is both created with ceiling and the floor together. In most ceiling examples, the wooden beams are exposed. In some examples, this wooden ceiling is filled with highly artistic decorative features. One example of the ceiling decoration can be pendant wood elements fixed on top of the other [23].



Fig. 12. Ceiling Detail [27]

In short, the room interior is a multifunctional area just like in the tent structure. Floor coverings, ceiling decoration, fireplace, seating units and built-in wardrobes are all common typical elements in this interior.

The image formation of Traditional Turkish House is derived from these typical features. Thus, these typical features are shaped with the cultural identity. "These typical elements are vital in users' experience in a way that these typical elements reflect an image in the users' cognition" [29]. As mentioned above, the cognitive process is formed by traditional types that are shaped through history. It is obvious that the formation of a true image of Traditional Turkish House Interior is created with these typical features.

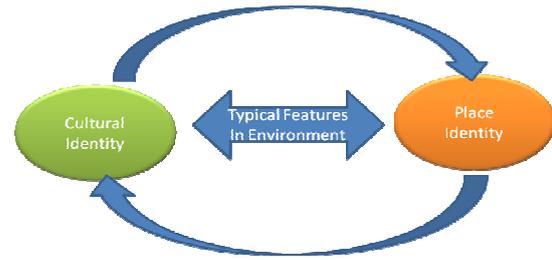


Fig.13. Identity Factors Effecting Typical Features.

## V. IMAGE FORMATION MODEL OF A CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

Traditional Turkish House Interior formation is an example of image creation having a cultural value. All these physical features in the interior create a wholistic interior image having a cultural identity. These features are used continuously through history. Therefore, they became typical features. These images are reflection of living habits, traditions, attitudes, and beliefs. They are also a reflection of cultural identity. In other saying, they are cultural heritage.

Image formation of a specific cultural environment is a complex phenomenon. There are many factors affecting the process of image formation. In the proposed model, the first phase became a place with human participation. Space is considered as an empty volume containing physical features. In other words, it acts as a base for the image formation.

In the second phase, with the human participation, the space became a place. Cultural and personal features are considered as an effective factor in the process of place formation. In other words, space turns into place with the integration of both cultural and personal features.

In the formation of typical feature of the image, place, place identity, and cultural identity are considered as interrelated factors affecting each others. Besides, cultural identity and the place identity are the factors that are interrelated with each other. With a two way interaction, place identity shapes the cultural identity and the cultural identity shapes the place identity. Moreover, they are affective factors in image formation of a typical environment that has a cultural value.

Image of a cultural heritage is considered as an environment that has a cultural identity (in a way place identity). A cultural heritage has to have a cultural value. In the proposed model, this cultural value is derived from interrelations between cultural identity, place identity and the typical image of the environment.

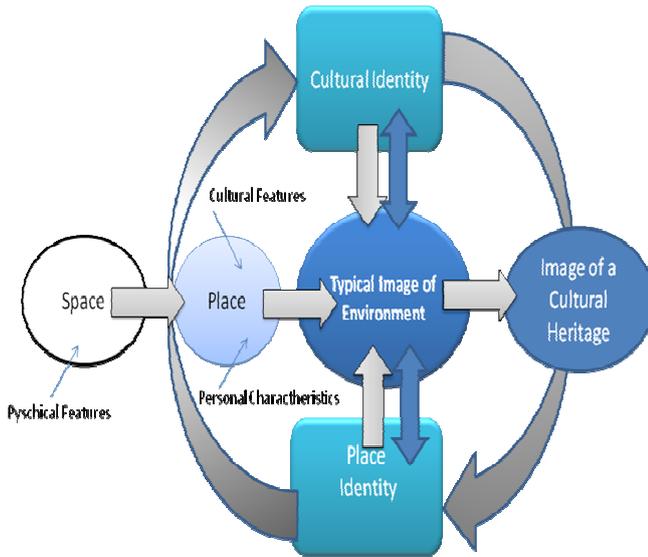


Fig. 14. Image Formation Model

Proposed model aims to set the environmental, personal and physical features as an effective factor in the dimension of cultural identity formation. Cultural identity formation is considered in the dimension of image formation.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Image of cultural heritage is a stored knowledge that reflects the identity of a specific cultural. In formation of place there are same features that gains identity to that environment. These features are shape with the living habits, belief, attitudes and traditions. Each of every place act as a map that is consists of living patterns. In environments that has a cultural value, the place act as map of the collective identity in the global world.

Perceiving the true identity formation in a certain environment, make people satisfied with their both physical and conceptual satisfaction. People feel comfortable in the places that are concurrent with their place identities. Moreover, with reflecting true cultural identities, designer can take part in sustainability of cultural value. The typical features that are creating the image are the basic elements in designing new images.

Unfortunately, after these social changes few numbers of typical image in Turkish House can be survived. The affects of Industrialization change the lifestyle in Turkey. Large agricultural family societies, turned in to small families in industrial societies. [30]

With the migration of local people to the big cities, many houses became abounded. With the increase in population housing demands increase. Housing concept changed from single family building to apartment complex. Also, lack of awareness in protection ended up with demolished traditional houses. [31]

All of these complex social changes create a new housing

concept in Turkey. Unfortunately this new approaches are far from reflecting the cultural identity of Turkey. "Besides, it is far from reflecting the typical place identity of Traditional Turkish House." [29]

Culture has recently been defined as "a way of being, relating, behaving, believing and acting which people live out in their lives and which is in a constant process of change and exchange with other cultures". [1] In some instances, this process of change turns in to a process of rejecting the old and creates unifying culture.

As a conclusion, study discusses and proposed a model for the interrelations among the cultural identity, place identity and environmental design. This model aims to create a consciousness in designer's attitudes in environment that has a cultural value.

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