A Study in Terms of Cultural Geography: Traditional Talas Houses

Alperen Kayserili1*

1Department of Geography, Agri Ibrahim Cecen University, Agri, Turkey.

Author’s contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

Article Information

DOI: 10.9734/JGEESI/2016/24254

Editor(s):
(1) Alan Phipps, Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Criminology, University of Windsor, Windsor Ontario N9B 3P4, Canada.

Reviewers:
(1) Julio E. Rubio, Tecnologico de Monterrey, Mexico.
(2) Tugba Kiper, Namik Kemal University, Turkey.

Complete Peer review History: http://www.sciencedomain.org/review-history/16242

Received 11th January 2016
Accepted 8th September 2016
Published 19th September 2016

ABSTRACT

Anatolia is a region dominated by Turkish Islamic Civilization for nearly one thousand years. During this long period, the region has had a rich civilization growing under the rules of the Ottoman Empire and the Republic of Turkey especially Anatolian Seljuk Empire. Talas is one of the settlements of Kayseri which has one of the richest cultural heritages in Central Anatolia. Although Talas has a long history dating back to First Age civilizations, it has developed and been enriched after being settled by Turks. In this rich cultural area, Muslim Turks, Orthodox Armenians, and Americans who were conducting Christian missionary activities have lived together in a cultural structure where tolerance of each other especially emerged since the period of Ottoman Empire. Residential culture is one of the most visible cultural characteristics of society, and this study has evaluated Talas with this in mind. Traditional Talas house’s research has been done from the point of cultural geography. Some suggestions were made on how to protect those houses, for example, to use them for tourism.

Keywords: Traditional dwellings; dwelling form; cultural structure; cultural geography; Talas.

*Corresponding author: E-mail: alperenkayserili@gmail.com, akayserili@agri.edu.tr
1. INTRODUCTION

Immovable cultural properties are joint remains of civilizations showing the social and economic values or the level of development and also depending on the physical environment from past to present [1]. Physical culture embodies moral culture items and gains its appearance from buildings, techniques, roads, vehicles etc. [2]. Like in all human activities, building a house is affected by natural environmental factors too [3,4].

Houses and neighborhoods emerging from an environment are not nominative cases that can be dealt in terms of their physical and architectural features [5]. However, houses in settlements built by societies who live in similar natural environments nonetheless may have significant differences. Also, different cultures living in the same or similar natural environments build different houses in terms of shape, layout and plan due to their different cultural understanding of the environment and their different use of materials within their culture [6]. These houses can react to the environment differently and as a result of this they become one of the most important directing processes for creating cultural identity [7]. Besides, houses emerging from assimilation of cultural values and social norms become the most significant material culture clues [8].

A house as the center of the living area for humans is thus a reflection of their culture on the landscape. Because of this feature, a house is a space for people who built it and who use it by processing the culture with care and making it visible [9]. A house reveals the cultural landscape formation by creating the material form of human and space relationships [10]. Cultural landscape is a product of ideological representation of community that transfers from one generation to the next generations [11]. According to another aspect, a house is a place of culture production or a product of social or cultural connection [12]. With all these assessments, a house including its geographical conditions is a need of humans influenced by their cultures and faiths [13]. Therefore, houses reveal the inevitability of human-space-culture interaction.

Traditional house patterns and forms are therefore definable cultures on the Earth [14]. Traditional houses may however blend the traditional and contemporary values in order to provide newly urbanized populations with an adaptable urban environment in which residents can continue their lives. A house is one of the most important cultural items which needs to transfer from past to future. Because of this it is both a historical and cultural heritage item [15].

House is a definitive benchmark in the practice of the understanding of privacy, defence of the boundaries of domination, defining personal space, freedom from the crowd and defining location [16].

As a result of the psychological and physiological needs of the people of the community, a specific internal spatial layout should be formed. Then, this layout may be modified in various ways. This work can develop from day to day, determined by economic and technical factors, and harmonized for aesthetic sensibility [17]. The architecture will thus reveal the aesthetic landscape elements like an ordinary demonstration of the link between the forms of housing construction and human dreams [18].

A house reflects the builder's customs, traditions, desires, history and economic conditions with building materials, geological and geomorphological features, climate, vegetation, soil and other natural environmental factors [19]. Natural environment is important for molding residential architecture and serving the needs of the people who need to adapt to building-environment conditions. Different climatic zones of Anatolia therefore bring different architecture and settlement pattern forms. In short, the human-nature relationship is the most important factor determining space culture in every civilization.

Residential housing first offers itself physically for the use of residents, but events that give meaning to the space are derived from human relationships and their economic, social, cultural or religious values [20,21]. Movable and immovable historical and architectural preservation awareness in Turkey began long after that in developed countries, and so, the concept of protection in the modern sense is fairly recent. The government has taken measures related to urban conservation by publishing regulations about Protection Identification and Registration of Immovable Cultural and Natural Assets, which was published on 10th December, 1987 dated and 19.660th official newspaper. No. 2863 Law on Protection of Cultural and Natural Heritage is still
Protection and preservation are preservation, maintenance, repair, restoration, function change operations in immovable cultural and natural heritage; are preservation, maintenance and restoration works in the movable cultural assets” [22]. However, understanding of western-style protection which we are trying to apply at the present time is new and not as vigilant as in other European countries. Thousands of traditional houses have already been destroyed in Turkey.

2. PURPOSE AND METHODS

The aim of the study is to describe the physical features in the location of Talas and to interpret the cultural heritage and cultural landscape that people living in Talas brought from past to present in terms of their houses. Field work and interview methods have been conducted in order to achieve the purposes of the research, and the data obtained were evaluated in the analysis-synthesis process. A random sampling was performed with the best examples of houses which are surviving in the region. Research area was visited twice for field observations in 2014 and in 2015. By examining 9 separate houses in detail, a total of 553 photographs were taken from inside the houses and outside on the streets. During the research, the examination of all houses was not possible because of the absence of inhabitants and locked doors. Furthermore, some houses did not exhibit a traditional culture due to destruction of those elements.

2.1 Research Field and General Geographical Area Characteristics

Talas is located on a hilly terrain in the southeast of Kayseri. It is neighbour with Melikgazi in the north, Bünyan in the northeast, Tomarza in the southeast, Hacilar in southwest [23] (Map 1). Talas has a total surface area of 234.93 km$^2$ [24].

It is divided into two sections as landforms. The first section is Lower Talas which is established on a plain. The height of this area is about 1,200 m above sea level. This area extends to adjacent areas of the city Kayseri by starting from the foot of Mount Ali to north and northwest. The second part is called the Upper Talas and the height reaches approximately 1,400 m above sea level [25]. Mount Ali is the highest region of Talas. This mountain is located 5 km southeast of Kayseri. The Mount Ali was formed by the accumulation of volcanic materials, spewing from Mount Erciyes about 2 million years ago. The height above sea level is 1,870 m and the biggest volcano cone in Erciyes volcanic region [26]. Talas is located to the north of Mount Ali, on three hills (Map 2).
Although the general climate of Talas is similar to Kayseri, its temperature values are slightly lower due to its elevation [27]. Semi-arid steppe climate characteristics occur in Kayseri and in the immediate vicinity [28]. While the highest average temperatures are over 30°C in July and August in the summer season, the lowest average temperature can drop below 0°C in the winter season especially in January. The highest amount of rainfall is reached in April and May while the driest months are in July and August [29].

2.2 Historical Development of Settlements

Talas is estimated to be a very old settlement and if it is related to the establishment of Kayseri, the city would have a history dating back to 2000 BC [30]. A trade colony founded by Assyrian traders is understood to constitute the city’s historic resources. International trade is thought to have been the most important reason for the main city in Anatolia, Poodle (Kültepe) [31].

However, historians did not know much about Talas until the Byzantine period. After the domination of the Byzantines and the Muslim Arabs, during the rule of the Anatolian Seljuk Empire, there was a huge reconstruction move in the city [32].

Talas was reconstructed like Kayseri in the period of Anatolian Seljuk. In the period of Yıldırım Beyazid in 1398, Talas, managed by Ottoman Empire has been under the management of the Republic of Turkey since 1923 [33].

2.3 Traditional House Culture in Talas

Vacit Imamoglu previously made the most extensive study of Kayseri houses, and he expresses that Kayseri houses have their own style [34]. From the outside, it appears that stone carving and ornamentation are in the forefront. Inside the house, wood carvings are artifacts in today’s houses from master hands. When the houses are evaluated by the general characteristics, both Islamic and Christian culture characteristics are shown. Therefore, these features will be interpreted with the investigation methods of cultural geography. First, there will be an assessment of the materials used in the traditional Talas houses, as the cutted stone, salt stone and kevek stone should be extracted from the city and around it [35]. Because of the volcanic character of the terrain widespread use of stone materials usually show and it is a natural result.

Map 2. Topography map of study area
However, as can be seen from historical artifacts and houses in the city, these stones are both functional and works of art.

In Talas houses, as well as in the other regions of Anatolia these are designed according to Sedat Hakkı Erdem’s household planning [36]. In Talas houses one of the main factors is Sofa (hall). The Sofa is built in the entrance of the house, and it also provides transition to kitchen, winter rooms and Harem (Image 1).

In Talas houses, it is possible to see some effects of natural environmental conditions throughout Anatolia. The doors, the windows and the walls are usually placed according to geographic location to benefit from sunlight. Therefore, courtyards and eyvan (outside gardens) are directed to the south, and deaf walls are located in the north [37]. The ground floor is set according to location of the street and house’s tilt of the ground [38].

One of the most important elements of the traditional Talas House is the kitchen. Its traditional name is Tokana. Inside the tokana, there is a tandoori where foods and bread can be prepared, including a berm of height 50-60 cm, and a taşlık where the dishes can be washed. Also in some mansions there are cellars called Şırahane where grapes are stocked inside in cellars. For going down to these cellars they used stairs from the sofa and Tokana. Their traditional name is Zemzembi (Image 2).

One of the most important elements of Talas Houses is The “Haremlik” section which separates it from sofa. This feature is used in the house is an indication of the impact on the residential architecture of Islam. Because women guests need to pass sitting area without being seen by men, this structure must be built in those houses. As well as other rooms Harem’s walls and ceilings are covered with wood, also there are multi-purpose inbuilt cupboards and sofas [39], (Image 3).
One of the different elements contained in sofa is an ornate niche which is called Şerbetlik. Şerbetlik adds visual richness to rooms; also it assumes the function of table on which a tray can be placed on during the service (Image 4).

In Talas houses, the ornaments on the doors which opens the room from sofas attracts attention to the visual richness of the house. The tree of life which is used intensively in the traditional Turkish art of carving, and the sun, moon, and star motifs can be seen. Different door knockers in the garden gate strengthen the visual expression (Image 5).

In traditional Talas houses, one of the most remarkable features is wall hollows which are made in order to ensure the circulation of air and temperature circulation between rooms. These also provide connections between cellars and tokana (Image 6).

One of the most ornate and richly decorated elements in Talas houses is the mural painting. Human figures are not used due to the influence of Islam, and so, landscapes and floral motifs are forefront (Image 7).

Considering that one of the highest settlements in Anatolia is Talas, the cold climatic conditions are anticipated in the houses. Double-layered windows and winged exterior sides are used to reduce the impact of cold air. In winter months when casements are closed, small holes and head windows are used in order to lighten inside the home. These holes are called yıldızlık (Image 8).

One of the most important influences of Islam to Turk architecture is the enhanced privacy in a residence. In single floor residences, high walled gardens were built in order not to see the inside from outside. In the two-floor residences or in the larger ones, seeing the inside is prevented by building small lighting windows, or in the single floor residences by building high walled gardens, for example, so that woman and visitors can go outside in the open air in these areas (Image 9).
Image 5. Room gate and garden gate examples

Image 6. Example of ventilation

Image 7. An example of mural painting in Yaman Dede Mansion
Doors built in gardens and residences are important in terms of showing the effects of Muslim and Christian cultures. Doors may be ingenious examples of stone carving with floral and geometric patterns, whereas in Christian family residences, they have a baroque architecture.

Residences belonging to Muslim and Christian families generally are built with double doors. These doors are reinforced with steel coating on the wood and decorated by fastener like nails called hobnail. Also, it is intended to increase the residence security by reinforcing the doors from backside with various supports (Image 10).

The Talas houses are usually built in earth-sheltered forms. In order to decrease the effects that result from the soil’s permeability, the builders usually tried to make the soil impermeable by using salt and lime [40]. But, because the evacuation of the water was not still possible in this way, they used water evacuation systems called gargoyles (çörten). Gargoyles are usually made of stone material as well as metal and wood.

One of the most remarkable element of Talas houses is a water well for satisfying need for water on a garden or near garden’s wall facing the street. In winter months, heating of air melts snow on these wells, and fills them with water for residents’ use. The well is reached with a road from underground (Image 13).

3. DISCUSSION

This study has been an interpretation of traditional Talas houses. Talas City’s rich cultural accumulation is derived from the members of different religions and cultural unions living together in this region, and so, the houses have traces of history into present day. Especially today, the effect of religion on housing is evident for Muslim families. For example, in single storey houses, lower floors are not preferred as bigger windows, and the outside environment of houses is enclosed by high garden walls. On two or more storey houses, lower floors have small windows just for lighting.

Image 8. Casement window examples

Image 9. Examples of high walled gardens
Examples of door and adornment belonging to Christians and Muslims' mansion

Door locks and measures of security

Examples of earth-sheltered Talas houses and Çörten

A wide variety of adornments are designed to brighten the dark interiors inside houses. For example, carvings are on almost all corners and non-religious pictures are elsewhere. Where traditional structures are slowly disappearing, houses are showing of the effects of globalization, and so, as in many cities, there is a cultural struggle for existence of the old and the new in Talas City.
Historic Talas houses have a special place in the traditional Turkish house architecture. They embody both Christian and Islamic architecture, and so, they signify tolerance and respect for other religions. Therefore, they represent the occurrence of inter-religious love and respect, while adding distinctive beauty to the area.

4. CONCLUSION

As already mentioned, many traditional houses have been destroyed in Turkey in the name of urban renewal. This was also true in Talas city, although now local residents with cultural values for restoration work and various conservation projects have started working for the protection of traditional housing. The city's culture and identity may thus be transferred to future generations.

Even so, conservation and restoration of Talas City has had both positive and negative effects. Especially private enterprises such as a restaurant or traditional residence cafeteria have disrupted the historical and cultural fabric, and have obliterated traditional housing elements. In comparison, encouragement of tourism of traditional houses may help to retain the historical and cultural fabric of the buildings.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

REFERENCES

36. Eldem SH. Turkish house plan types, Istanbul: Istanbul Technical University Architecture Faculty Publications; 1954.
37. Arpacioglu U. Rural areas in regional architectural features intended scope determination of Kayseri evaluation of the physical environment value of home. (Access Date: 23.09.2014)