This paper examines convertible sofa-bed with all its functional, socio-economic and socio-cultural dimensions since it is a signifier of the housing problem originating from the in-migration wave from 1950s to 1980s, and gives reference to traditional habits of sitting and hospitality culture in Turkey. Therefore, an analysis on the evolution of convertible sofa-bed provides an insight for the social change in Turkey’s history.

1. Introduction

A convertible sofa-bed is basically a sofa which folds up as a sofa and folds out to double up as a bed. It is widely used in Turkey since it suits well to the Turkish culture and everyday life. Despite the changes in the product’s name and physical configuration, convertible sofa-bed’s basic functions are both to be a part of the ‘sofa set’ that is being used in the living room and to increase the number of existing beds in the house, if needed. Thus, a living room in daytime can be converted into a bedroom at night, when the sofa is converted into a bed. The rooms of the house become flexible and provide multiple uses due to unexpected situations.

An ethnographic inquiry was conducted to find out why people preferred using convertible sofa-bed and how they used it in their houses. The research also helps to understand the way it was used in the past and the change it has been through, in terms of its former physical configuration and location in the house. The change of the design of the convertible sofa-bed is parallel to the change of the traditional Turkish house: It is a partial solution in the inner space because the household population increases while the dwelling becomes less affordable.

To summarize its symbolic and functional value in Turkey; on one side, convertible sofa-bed represents in-migration to metropolitan areas, unplanned urbanization and housing problem; on the other side, it represents hospitality culture despite the lack of space, traditional housing and sitting habits. The analysis of the product shows how these aspects are combined together and what kind of a solution the convertible sofa-bed proposes for this situation.

2. Towards the social connotation of furniture

Considering their relationship with the society, products are conveyors of cultural values and lifestyles: They are objects of psychic and physical investments; elements of life decoration where cultures are reflected and documented. Thus, they are messages from the society that produces them and they are signifiers of their users’ identities (Bilgin 1986). Like all kinds of signs and messages, products also consist of two main structures of meaning: Denotative meaning of commodity is related to “what for” it is produced. Connotative meaning of the commodity is, on the other hand, related to aesthetic, moral and subjective reflections on each individual’s mind (Barthes 1957).

Considering ‘furniture’ as the subject of analysis, it is possible to build connections towards various socio-cultural movements and changes. Thus, furniture becomes a substantial signifier of the socio-cultural and socio-economic characteristics of those societies or individuals who are involved with them. In this context, symbolic properties are important so that furniture becomes a ‘documentary product’ identifying such a broad field of everyday life. Furniture gains its identity through social values and becomes a language (Carkaci 1994).

An example for the relationship between furniture and society is given by Cranz (1998) where he claims that the ‘cross-legged sitting’ or sometimes known as ‘tailor sitting’ posture is actually ‘Turkish sitting posture’, and identifies this socio-cultural posture with a specific furniture, the traditional divan:

A particularly common alternative posture is sitting Turkish-style, what Westerners call cross-legged, or sometimes ‘tailor-fashion. In Turkish homes, traditional ‘divans’, from which we get one of our terms for couches, are deep, wide and firm enough to permit sitting in this way. The divans are low wooden platforms with pads and bolsters, built into a room called a "sofa" for receiving visitors and enjoying oneself with family. From this we have derived another of our terms for couches. (Cranz 1998: 27)

These distinctive sitting postures refer to distinctive cultural codes and systems (Andrews 2003 ). In the case of Turkey, for instance, the socio-cultural movement during and after 1970s evoked different dimensions in the variation of furniture and other inner housing equipment. In addition transitions between segments of society supported not only the increase in variation and
number of furniture types, but has also created different systems of taste in housing equipment (Carkaci 1994).

3. The case of in-migration and the evolving Turkish house

The very first examples of Turkish dwellings were built on soil ground, with various isolation material, and they used to consist of a single huge room, and different activities, such as, eating, sleeping, sitting and storing were happening in this same room (Goker 2009). Since rooms in traditional Turkish house are designed as volumes having many functions, objects used in these rooms became also portable and multifunctional. A characteristic of traditional Turkish house is the sofa, the center area of the house to which all other rooms have direct connections. Sofa is the place where all members of the family can spend time together and also, guests are hosted.

Within new housing designs that are constructed in urban areas sofa is losing its power and importance in gathering people together. As a result, sofa disappears physically in urbanized areas’ dwellings (Eric 1986). The transition from traditional Turkish house to the apartment started with the industrialization process of Turkey and the resulting in-migration from rural areas to urbanized areas. This process started from 1950s on and was the result of the modernization of agriculture that has started with the Marshall Aid (Tekeli 1996). The reason behind this in-migration is rather the otiose labor-force in agriculture than the beginning of the industrialization process.

From 1960s on, squatter housing became a current issue in Turkey. Istanbul, thereby, became the core of the squatter housing process in Turkey. Through legislations and several releases in 1970s and 1980s, squatter houses are replaced by ‘squatter apartments’ (Turkdogan 2002). It is not a coincidence that convertible sofa-bed production increased in 1980s when the rate of in-migration is examined.

For the structure of Turkish house from 1960s to late 1990s, it is possible to claim that the house consists of two main parts: The inner house, where the family lives, and the salon, where guests are hosted. Conceptually, the inner house means sincerity, nearness, warmth, comfort, directness, density and familiarity, while salon is the world of relationships with ‘disturbing’ strangers (Ayata 1988). Due to this sharp distinction of spaces in the same house, the family living in there has two distinct worlds, socially and psychologically. With respect to this situation, it is possible to claim that the room, where convertible sofa-bed is placed, serves like a transition room between living room and bedroom. The concept of the living room in Turkish house and convertible sofa-bed speak the same language.

4. The story behind convertible sofa-bed: Transformation of society, transformation of products

It is explained that the socio-cultural attitude in Turkey is to prefer products that have multiple functions. Considering furniture, these have been sedir, divan, kutuphaneli divan and convertible sofa-bed, which are examined in the following sections in terms of their use.

Sedir and yukluk

In traditional Turkish house, furniture was built together with the house. Thus size, location and place of furniture are limited. In rooms there are sedirs that continue along walls, as in Figure 1. The household generally uses these sedirs for sitting and laying (Goker 2009). Sedir has a low height from the ground but it is wide on its sitting area. Considering the fact that people in villages work all day on the farm and they mostly process their product on the ground sedir allows these people to rest accordingly because its nearness to ground corresponds with the tendency of working, sitting and resting close to the ground.

Another example for this tendency is the floor-bed: It consists of a piece of mattress and placed on the ground where it is used as bed. Floor-bed can instantly convert a living room into a bedroom and it can be rolled up quickly. Due to storage need of the ‘rolled up floorbed’ and related equipments such as bed linen, another unit has been required which is called yukluk. So, yukluk, meaning ‘the place to load’, started to serve for storage. Accordingly, yukluk became one of the most important elements in the house so that it is also used with divan and kutuphaneli divan.
**Divan**

During the transition from village life to urban life, sitting, laying and storing habits and related products had to be re-defined. Change of social life and change of neighborhood required new solutions for sitting, laying and storing. After in-migration from rural areas to urban areas and within the first encounter with urban culture, generally, divan has been the new solution for sitting and laying. Divan serves for the obligation to fit into limited spaces and also for the effort to host relatives who come and stay for a certain period [Eric 1986]. Thus divan is used in the living room during the whole day as a sitting unit and at night it gains another function where it is used as bed. Considering physical characteristics of divan, a noticeable one is that it is higher than a usual sitting unit where under it a certain free space occurs. This free space is usually used as a storing unit where it is covered with the furnishings of the divan (fig. 2).

![Figure 2. Turkish divan with its furnishings (photo by Engin Merzali).](image)

Since the area for sitting is larger than a usual sitting unit the person who sits on a divan generally sits cross-legged or lays his/her legs straight.

Expressions related to divan usage are mentioned as following:

I have been using divan before I married, in 1968-1969. It was located in the house where we used to sleep. Cloths and cushions were sewn for divan, and it was covered with these cloths during the daytime. It was very high from the ground, so our feet could not reach the ground. Thus, we used to tuck up our legs while sitting on it, and it was very comfortable. When we wanted to sleep, we used to cover it with bed linens, which were tidied up in the following morning (Celikoglu 2011).

Considering the fact that these statements belong to people with the age range 40-70, it is obvious that divan is widely used at least for 30 years long, which is between from 1950s to 1980s.

**Kutuphaneli divan**

Traditional divan is followed by another type of furniture called ‘kutuphaneli divan’, meaning divan with a library. Kutuphaneli divan [fig. 3] enables to sustain conventional sitting and laying habits by its physical structure where it additionally has some kind of cabinet consisting of shelves and closed spaces.

![Figure 3. Kutuphaneli divan in its environment (photo by Koray Gelmez).](image)

From late 1970’s on, kutuphaneli divan got widely used in Turkish houses since it was considered to be more elegant and modern than the traditional divan. Like divan, kutuphaneli divan also served as a sitting unit throughout the day while it became a bed at night. Eric [1986] claims that the relationship with the new social environment in the metropolitan area and the effort to create a ‘high-cultural’ effect required the need for exhibition and storage of books.

Today, kutuphaneli divan is still considered as a part of Turkish material culture. Encyclopedias next to religious books, vases and alarm clocks are displayed on its shelves that are covered with laces, and this situation made kutuphaneli divan a stereotypical product for Turkish society. As Eric [1986] states, kutuphaneli divan used to be a status symbol during 1970’s, and it became less and less popular with time.

Experiences of interviewees show that kutuphaneli divan was perceived as a "modern and chic" furniture compared to divan and became a status symbol:

- My grandfather had a kutuphaneli divan, probably left from 1970s. On its shelves there were old photographs, photograph albums and books. In its closet part, there were things like cologne, eyeglasses, and etc.
- Kutuphaneli divan was expensive for us, it was luxury. We preferred divan [Celikoglu 2011].

**Convertible sofa-bed**

Considering traditional sitting, laying and storing habits, convertible sofa-bed [fig. 4] is totally in accordance with the habit of using the same unit for sitting and laying since it can be used as a sofa during the day and as a bed at night. Moreover, it allows a closed volume under its sitting unit where many goods can be stored. Thus, it allows a way to adapt the traditional lifestyle in villages to metropolitan lifestyle replacing yukluk.

Issues of informal housing and insufficient living areas, as well as cultural characteristics of traditional Turkish family life and hospitality had an important role in the situation that the convertible
sofa-bed became widespread in Turkey. Here, characteristics of people or families sharing the same dwelling become the most decisive factor. Due to the structure of the family and the change in the number of family members such as care taking of children and elders that are not considered while buying or hiring the house, the inner organization and requirements of the house changes continuously. Thus, a house that does not seem insufficient at first is expected to be ‘flexible’ with time.

The position of convertible sofa-bed in the house has changed during years. When it first entered the house, it was perceived as luxury furniture alternating to divan and kutuphani divan, and it was placed in salons. After a while, within the effect of decreasing price, convertible sofa-bed is transported to back rooms, such as living rooms and children’s rooms. It did not really serve to conspicuous consumption but it is rather defined with its use and functionality.

Today, convertible sofa-bed is still a part of Turkish everyday life. It exists with various models in different rooms of houses, in the background of old family photographs, in movies that reflect middle-or lower-class lifestyles and in humour magazines with caricatured expressions.

5. Conclusion

The widespread use of convertible sofa-bed in Turkey has two main reasons: The multi-functionality of the product and its correspondence with the socio-cultural background. Considering the multi-functionality of convertible sofa-bed, it serves as a unit that provides an extra bed but does not turn the room into a ‘bedroom’ providing a certain ‘flexibility’ for the house. In addition, it replaces yukluk by allowing storage in its own volume and draws a line between the rural and urbanized lifestyle. This multi-functional characteristic proposes a solution for the urbanization and housing problem in Turkey that has started with the in-migration wave from 1950s and reached its peak in 1980s.

Within the socio-cultural background, the traditional habit of sitting and the hospitality culture are to be mentioned, which strongly relate to rural lifestyle, but survived through the transition process to urbanized lifestyle. Convertible sofa-bed follows the traditional way of sitting as sedir, yukluk, divan and kutuphani divan did. It serves as an extra bed for guests in a small house because according to Turkish hospitality culture, a place for guests should always be provided no matter how insufficient the house is.

To conclude, convertible sofa-bed is a product that proposes a solution for the problems in inner space caused by urbanization and in addition, it can respond to traditional sitting, laying and storing habits very well. Convertible sofa-bed with all its characteristics refers to those years of industrialization, in-migration and urbanization process of Turkey. Thus, it carries the traces of a society’s history with its physical configuration and multi-functionality, which signify the need to flexibility for the product itself and the need to flexibility for a society through a transition process.

References


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