

VISUAL SEMIOLOGY IN ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

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Abstract

Beyond being a shelter, houses are such structures which obtain meanings shaped by the influence of culture, particularly reflecting the society's socio-cultural structure. As a time-*khronos* and space-*topos* pattern, the houses reflect the characteristics of the culture or ethnic group which they are part of, while on the other hand, they reflect the images of the individual's essence as a communicative action. The effect of climate and typology, which are physical components of culture, as well as social components of culture, such as value systems, belief, lifestyle and habits, are cardinal factors in the formation of traditional houses. In this respect, traditional structures are visual representation spaces that narrates their own story, like verbal culture, and they convey their unique codes through visuality. This study, which discusses traditional architecture as a cultural text, aims to reveal traditional Urfa houses through analytical readings, within the context of visual semiology. The samples selected within the scope of the study will be evaluated according to the context of stylistic features they are part of, such as plan and spatial perspective, the location of the houses, and detections regarding the visual culture will be discussed through the cultural and architectural design approach of Umberto Eco.

Keywords: *Visual Semiology, Visual Representation, Culture, Architectural Design*

Introduction

A city can be seen as an organism that lives in the process of historical and social development, before and beyond being a holistic structure, formally arising from the need for collective presence. Like every place, a center of the population must have a center-*umbilicus*, which communicates with the universe. City language forms based on building the identity of a city. Besides military, religious, and public, the structures and places that divide the civil habitats of the individual are designed over submitting obligation. Architecture, which gives meanings to different living spaces, perceives different building representations that emerge as urban artifacts as body language. This aesthetic preference is nothing more than a grammatical rule that controls the language of the city beyond being an artistic style. The fact that the representation of the city depends on an image design that meets what the city is saying does not only want to be understood; this image turns into a sign of authority that instructs the urban to *look* and *obey* (İnatçı, 2009). The spatial and temporal suitability of a city is automatically determined by the predispositions of social activities towards homogeneity or heterogeneity, which is related to how dominant cultural nuances are. The rationality and functionality that are shaped based on daily lifestyles and myths transform into the notion of space, according to which the city takes form.

Houses are one of the architectural structures shaped by the influence of the culture. As housing is a system that includes different and multifaceted meanings other than meeting the need for sheltering, it has a socio-cultural meaning as well as physical (Zorlu, 2010). Altman and Chemers (1980) define housing as a window that shows how different cultures affect the physical environment. Gür, on the other hand, defines a house as an organized pattern of communication, interaction, space, time and meaning. Also, according to Gür, while a house reflects the characteristics, lifestyle, rules of behavior, environmental preferences, images, time and place taxonomies of the culture or ethnic group to which it belongs, it defines the images of the user's essence as a phenomenon that reflects the personality and privilege of the individual with its self-realization and equipment (Gür, 2000).

Housing pattern as time-*khronos* and place-*topos* reflects the characteristics of the culture or ethnic group to which it belongs while transforming images of the essence of the individual into a communicative action. In the housing efformation, in addition to the effects such as climate and topography, which are the physical components of the culture, social components such as value system, beliefs, lifestyle, and habits are also important factors. In this respect, houses are visual representation spaces that tell their own story and contain unique codes, just like the oral culture. Architectural works contain intangible indicators of the social outlook of its time such as the working principles and conditions, the belief systems, and the economy, as well as tangible indicators of its physical composition such as the structure, materials, and construction techniques (Taşkıran, 1997). According to Eco, architectural objects transmit nothing in sight, *they are functional*. No one doubts that the glass makes drinking a liquid easily, as a roof is used to cover a place. This determination is direct, precise, and obviously making functionality something so comfortable and easy to grasp. The first question here is: *Can functions be expounded in terms of communication?* And the second question is: *Does looking at functions in terms of communication help us better understand them and define their functions better?* (Eco, trans. 2019). It is precisely this point that makes architecture provocative for the field of semiotics.

Semiotics, which can also be described as a communication mechanism, not only examines the systems that are clearly seen to be the sign system but also treats all cultural phenomena as if they are indicator systems and tries to reveal the meaning of the systems. This does not mean that all cultural phenomena are communication processes only, but all of them a) *can be accepted as communication processes* and b) *gained cultural functions, especially for being a part of communication processes*. In this aspect, architecture semiotics has a special place among semiotic research (Eco, trans. 2019). It starts from the assumption that culture is fundamentally communication in doing so. If one recalls the first image of the cave in the stone age, it is known that the abstract sample about the cave was first encrypted at the individual level and then it is reasonable to transfer the images of the cave to other people by drawing them. The architectural code thus generates a visual password, and the cave principle becomes the subject, object of communicative relations. Thereby, what Eco mentioned by quoting Barthes comes true. As soon as the society is formed, every use becomes its own indicator (Erkman, cited in Eco, 2016). Based on the semiotic approach as a form of communication, the indicator according to the semiotic approach based on this study refers to the function that refers to the signified, encoded in a cultural context, and at the same time makes possible the practical existence of the signified. Selected parts of traditional Urfa houses, which the study focuses on, will be analyzed based on Umberto Eco's view, in terms of semiotic structure within the framework of architectural function, cultural coding and interpretation.

Visual Semiology

Semiotics, which is based on the concept of sign, is a discipline aimed at grasping how the signs circulate in the process of the formation of meaning in language, and the concept that is accepted as the basic starting point of this discipline is the sign. In philosophical terminology, the sign is produced by the combination of a vocal or written form (*signifier*) and a conceptual content (*signified*). The sign is a term denoting any indicator or marker that expresses something other than itself, evokes the thought of something other than itself in the mind when understood thanks to its ability to substitute anything, that shows something other than itself to the person who interacts with it, and that refers to an object, event, phenomenon, or action other than itself. (Güçlü, Uzun, Uzun and Yolsal, 2003).

According to Guiraud, the sign is a stimulant, a sensory substance. The mnemonic image evoked by the sign connects to the image of another stimulant. The function of the sign is to evoke the mentioned second image in a communicative context. In explaining the substance of the sign, Guiraud analyses the content of a sign under the following headings: *communication, coding, motivation, monosemy and polysemy, denotation and connotation*. Among these headers, he explains denotation and connotation as follows: denotation is the objective understanding of something, however, connotation adds individual sight to the signs because of its format and content. Both denotation and connotation work together in establishing the principal basis of an indicator while they also represent its contradictory meaning (Guiraud, 1975).

Signification is the relationship formed between the signifier and signified in a sign. When we see, hear, or perceive in one way or another a signifier, the meaning that is its signified is formed in our mind. Objects in the real world and the concept formed in our minds may not be identical. In this context, the sign must be interpreted as a two-layered and interconnected structure. It is necessary to relate meanings produced for an image and why, how and when these meanings were produced, and to produce potential meanings from these relations. When it comes to

visual images, these are the representation of thoughts, emotions, and a sequence of events or phenomena, and therefore imaginary expression necessitates a process of interpretation and re-interpretation through form and content. According to Guiraud, the signification is the thing that connects an object, a being, concept, an event to a sign that can evoke these in memory. A cloud is a sign of rain. Eyebrows rising upwards are a sign of confusion. A dog's barking is a sign of anger, and the word 'horse' is the sign of an animal. Hence, the sign is a stimulant...The effect of the stimulant on the organism instantly evokes the mnemonic image of another stimulant. It evokes the image of a cloud, rain, a word or being (Guiraud, *trans.* 1999). In this respect, images carry and evoke the meanings and thoughts of the cultural foundation that relate to phenomena such as politics, religion, tradition, arts or climate, with these images participating in the signification process of the same cultural foundation. Therefore, semiotics is about the sign itself as well as how it is reproduced and made meaningful.

Eco introduces the term 'sign function' in the place of 'the sign'. According to Eco, the term 'sign function' refers to the correlation between narrative (material event) and content. He reinforces this with an example called the Watergate Model that he provides and reaches a definite conclusion. Thus, a code is formed (a) between the expression plane and the content plane; (b) the sign function is produced by the relationship between the expression system's abstract unit and the content system's abstract unit; (c) thus, a code produces general examples (types), thereby generating laws that generalise concrete signs (tokens), such as signs that occur in communicative processes. Finally (d) continuity presents the unit that precedes the semiotic relation and that has no relation to semiotics (Eco, 1976).

Between the semiotics of communication and meaning, there is cultural semiotics represented by Eco. According to Eco, semiotics is the study of cultural phenomena considered as communication. In this case, stating that 'A sign is anything that can meaningfully substitute something else', the author provided a wider definition for the concept of the sign. However, he accepts Hjelmslev's definition of the sign as a unit that contains both 'content' and the 'expression' form and produced by the connecting of the two. A sign is a unit composed of content and expression connected by common relation with each other and by the 'sign function' (Eco, 1976). According to Fiske, for an image to be evoked and communication to take place, users must accept that image as a sign. Signs that appear in the form of a word or an image have the function of conveying a message and might be for warning purposes or have artistic content (Fiske, 2010). Moreover, the same sign might be interpreted in different ways depending on its context. Thus, we can regard semiotics as a form of perception based on signs.

Studying signs and their meaning relations, semiotics is also important in terms of studying visual signs. Semiology, which deals with signification and the production of meaning, also includes semiotic analysis, which is a reading process. In this respect, it is the act of researching, deconstructing, and reconstructing the structures of signs. Semiotics considers objects that use a planar expression tool as its subject of study. Thus, painting, graphic art, photography can be defined as specific visual fields (Rifat, 2009). According to Eco, the semiotics theory of a given culture gives away information about its structure and semiotic methods. According to him, it is not possible to distinguish the rule system corresponding to a given communicative phenomenon without thereby accepting a structural homogeneity with the rule systems that apply to all other communicative phenomena (Eco, 1976). Thus, everything which humans produce, use, or select can transmit meaning to others.

Semiology and Architecture

In his book "*La Struttura Assente*" (A Theory of Semiotics), Eco considers architectural signs as human-made objects and framed spaces conveying potential passwords and defines them as systems based on habits. Semiotics does not only examine systems that are already clearly seen to be systems of signs. It also treats all cultural phenomena as if they were systems of signs. In this process, he starts with the assumption that all cultural phenomena are systems of signs. That is, he accepts that culture is fundamentally communication. In this context, architectural design is one of the fields where semiotics must thoroughly reckon with reality (Eco, 1976).

One of the concepts Eco emphasises when it comes to considering architectural objects as signs is *functionality*. An example given by Eco is the use of a spoon to bring food to the mouth, which exemplifies the fulfilment of a function with a tool. Here, the tool puts the function in action. The very act of saying that the tool puts the function in action amounts to saying the tool has a communicative function, since the tool also transmits the function to be performed in the meantime. However, the use of a spoon by a person that is eating is also a sign, a conveying of the fact that in the eyes of those who watch her, she follows certain rules and customs. Therefore, the spoon initiates and carries out a certain type of eating and its meaning is eating in this particular manner. (Eco, *trans.* 2019). Accordingly, an architectural object is a sign that has a denotation as an object of use regarding the meaning

it conveys, in addition to its functionality. However, depending on the different functions given to the sign, it moves from the plane of connotation to that of denotation and thus refers to another function as a sign, that of the *communicative function*. As the first level of semiotic signification, denotation depicts the relation between the signifier and signified on the one hand, and the sign and its referent in external reality on the other. Denotation allows everyone involved in the act of signification to make the same inferences. In this respect, regardless of its style and the aesthetic concerns underlying its construction, an architectural structure is above all a structure that meets the need for shelter. Connotation, the second level of the signification process, depicts the interaction that occurs when the sign meets the feelings or excitement and cultural values of the users (Fiske, 2010). In this context, we can say that connotations are culture-specific and are shared by society.

Eco explains the distinction between denotation and connotation in architecture as the equipment that makes a building habitable is its primary signified. For example, when I see a house window, I can often perceive it as a formal element without thinking of its functionality and interpret it in terms of its relationship with other windows. However, an architect can also construct things that would give the impression of a window but do not function as one. These would be perceived as windows in an architectural context. The more clear their aesthetic functions are, the more likely they are to be perceived in this manner. The shapes, numbers and placement styles of these windows do not only serve a function. They also provide information about habitation and use. That is, these produce connotations. Even if an architect or a designer is a genius, she cannot render the new form she creates functional if it is not based on previously existing coding processes. That is, if we cannot perceive the house as a set of signs related to codes that we already know, we cannot use it (Erkman, cited in Eco, 2016). In this respect, it is necessary to know the social and cultural codes of the society to be able to interpret the codes related to architectural structures correctly. According to Eco, an architectural sign is a unit that conveys meaning by itself. Moreover, according to Eco, architectural codes produce visual codes and from this point on, drawings or architectural images become transmitters of a potential function and these coding processes reflect patterns of social behaviour as well (Eco, 1987).

In this regard, in social sciences, it is necessary to also focus on the concept of culture. Culture is defined as all the intellectual, artistic, philosophical, scientific and technical productions and assets of a community, a folk, a nation that form the unity of life, feelings, thoughts, and values (Doğan, 2000). Rapoport defines culture as a shared notion that reflects the order in a group's thoughts and behaviors and shows harmony (Rapoport, 1977). Beliefs, behavior styles, social roles, and daily life practices are parts of culture. Therefore, culture is the determinant of the behaviors that affect lifestyles, and each culture has its own specific meanings. Architecture is also a reflection of these cultural meanings. Cultural codes affect the comprehension and understanding of space. Spaces are the environments that transmit the cultural values of the inhabitants. In this respect, architectural language is a system of signs fed by cultural codes.

Furthermore, according to Rapoport, human behavior, including interaction and communication is influenced by roles, context, and situations that, in turn, are frequently communicated by cues in the setting making up the environments; the relationships among these are learned as part of inculturation and acculturation. Therefore, social structure; roles, status, identity, gender relationships and privacy; regarding Rapoport, status and identity primarily has impact on the cultural expression such as, differentiation between role of female and male affect the activates within the space with house (Rapoport, 1982; 2003).

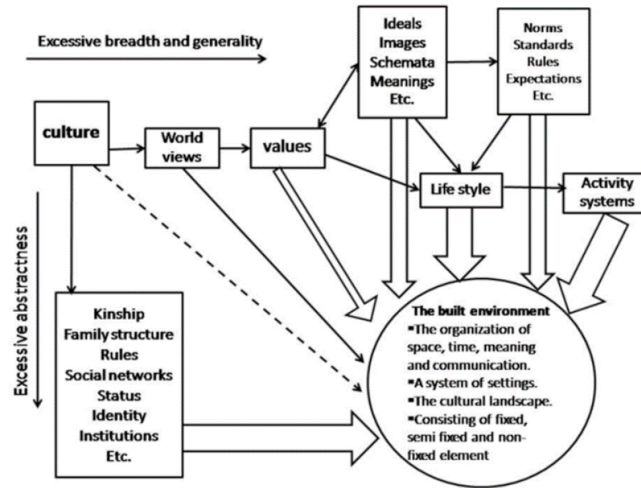


Figure 1: The built environment as product of culture (Rapoport, 2003)

According to Rapoport, a mental scheme shared by any cultural group is effective for the emergence of specific observable behavioral patterns in that culture, and the culture and lifestyles which form in this way shape the house. Within this context, culture and the residents' lifestyle are influential in many factors such as the diversity of the spaces in the house, their arrangement, the relationship between spaces, the organizational character of the spaces, and the organization of equipment based on the patterns of space use (Rapoport, 1969).

In approaches to urban space, semiotics and its concepts are employed in analyzing the architectural forms within the framework of the idea of seeing architecture as a language. For example, architectural codes and their transformation have been discussed regarding whether they are functional or not (Bunt, Broadbent & Jencks, 1980). As a result, architecture is not merely a place composed of form and space; at the same time, it is a place able to convey socio-cultural codes indicated by form and space. Therefore, architecture is considered a communication tool. In this context, traditional Urfa houses will be examined with the reference to Umberto Eco's semiotic structure within the framework of architectural function, cultural coding, and interpretation.

Analysis of Urfa Houses

Urfa houses, which have an important place in Anatolian traditional housing architecture, have been formed based on a design and construction tradition that has lasted for centuries. The historical urban texture of Urfa reflects an organization of space parallel to the Medieval Turkish-Islamic character similar to Anatolian cities. In this context, self-enclosed structuring is eminent among the elements forming the architectural structure of Urfa houses (Kuban, 1968). Urfa houses are structures placed on a smooth topography that is not inclined, have no regular parcel borders, and are adjacent to each other with spaces that are intertwined from an arbitrary position. These structures, which consist of spaces lined up around an open courtyard with two-storey buildings closed to the outside world, emphasize privacy, are based on the daily life and agriculture within itself, and are production centers shaped according to the needs of the economic order.

Stone as a material has been quite significant in forming Urfa houses. These houses reflect the construction techniques of the period, as well as the socio-economic and cultural values of the inhabitants and their lifestyles. Besides, the location and the aesthetic understanding of the owners are also effective in forming these houses. Urfa houses have an introverted character and show an asymmetrical plan around the courtyard. Factors such as climate, security, and privacy have been effective in forming these houses. The stone and wooden ornaments of these houses are remarkable. There are generally rooms, iwan (s), kitchen (tandoori), bathhouse, barn, toilet and cellar around the courtyard (Ören, 2008; Akkoyunlu, 1989).

The courtyard is very significant in Urfa houses. (Image 1). On the ground floor, the daily rooms or winter rooms and service spaces are lined up around an open inner courtyard that forms the functional and visual focal point of the plan, with a water element in which a pool is located and a green image provided with various plants. Courtyard encompasses rooms, eyvans, and verandas. There is a decorated door and window on the surrounding walls. In some houses, there are two courtyards, which are divided as harem usually utilized by women and selamlik

usually utilized by men. It provides a certain connection between different spaces; it also provides a resting area in summer. It is used for other household chores such as food preparation, washing dishes, and so on. Urfa houses have been constructed as separate for men-selamlık and women-haremlik (Image 2-3). The section where the women live is more equipped and bigger compared to where men live in the house where the household is. At some houses, these sections are passed through separate doors from the street side, and first to the men's section, and then to the women's section with two doors. The women's section, which forms the house's actual part where the family lives, has more area than the men's section. Women's section includes service places such as kitchen, barn, toilet, and cellar mostly. Harem is the place for women to be able to sit when foreign men come home. In this architectural arrangement in which the Islamic worldview is dominant, the harem is a common area where all household members are together without distinction between men and women during the day; and this is also the literal dimension of the harem room. Selamlık -The men's section is the section where male guests are hosted. The men section usually includes a courtyard (life), one or two rooms, an iwan, a barn (camel) for sheltering animals, and a toilet. According to connotational meaning the haremlik section appears as a place where the family economy is managed and privacy (mostly of the woman) is secured. Selamlık, on the other hand, represents a space for men who are mostly outside their homes because of work and social interactions, and it sometimes serves as a place for them to meet fellow men at home. It also represents the man as the authority figure, and prestige of the family.



Image 1: Courtyard, (Photo credit: Hasan Doğan, 2016)



Image 2: Haremlik- Female territory (Photo credit: Hasan Doğan, 2016)



Image 3: Selamlik- Male Territory (Photo credit: Hasan Doğan, 2016)

One of the main determining factors in terms of architecture is the iwān (Image 3). The iwān, the symmetrical plan motif with a room on one or both sides, maintains its original form by isolating itself from other spaces in all buildings. Influenced by Central Asian and Persian architecture, it is seen in Indo-Islamic architecture that the four-iwān plan and iwāns, in general, is used less and, as a result of strong local influences, as well as the use of different architectural elements, iwāns were re-interpreted. Iwān is the open production area in two-storey houses. The middle iwān with two empty rooms on either side is functional and formally dominant. The iwān on the upper floor is not a production but a resting area. In single-storey houses, the superiority of the symmetrical unit with an iwān and one or two rooms next to it is emphasized by raising the ground a few steps from the courtyard level. This symmetrical plan motif, which exists in Urfa houses, reflects the Mesopotamian traditions without any change. Iwān is restricted to the outside and opens to the courtyard in Urfa houses.

In its connotational meaning, iwāns, when looked at from the outside with the aim of determining its spatial character, are neither indoor nor outdoor and they have neither interior nor exterior. It can be said that they are semi-indoor or semi-outdoor. They have the features of an indoor space because it is located on the inward-facing side of the walls that define the boundaries of the structure. However, they also have the features of outdoor space because it is an open space in the court of the house. In terms of illumination, the iwān represents the welcoming of the moonlight into the indoor in the night and the sunlight during the day. It creates a half-illuminated space in the night and a half-shadowed space in the day. Iwān represents the middle ground between the light and the dark, just as it represents the middle ground between the indoor and the outdoor. We can find traces of culture codes that root back as far as Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, which are among the Eastern faiths infiltrated into Islamic mysticism. It is a natural assumption that the iwān is representative of the light-dark dualism. It is possible to even say that the iwān is a purgatory. Of course, this is not a factual definition but rather a hermeneutic interpretation. Architecture is a branch of art, not a domain isolated from cultural or anthropological norms. Semiotics includes information as well as interpretation.



Image 4: Iwan- Eyvan (Photo credit: Hasan Doğan, 2016)

Furthermore, Urfa is one of the cities where doors are effective in architectural manners. One of the most striking elements on the doors of Urfa houses is that the street doors are surrounded by rich stone ornaments. The decorative arches, which are carved structures at the entrance of the building, do not act as carriers. This structure surrounding the space above the door serves as a decoration. The wall of the door is indrawn, and the outer walls are built in the shape of an arch. The sides of the outer walls get closer to each other as their height increases, finally meeting at the top and creating a pointed end. This shape reflects the dynamism of an opened curtain while at the same time conveying the feeling of authority and order. These crown arches can be perceived as binary indicators of power and hospitality, the earthly and the divine, and the commanding and the commanded. The crown, which represents potency and power, is also a jewel that keeps the human levelheaded; it is earthly and human. Also pointing to the divine, this arch looks like a motif of cloud-like lightness. These arches, which become pointed as they go higher and are the most representative of Islamic mysticism, give the feeling of emptiness that emerges when a part of a structure is taken apart, the contrary of which is felt when looked at tombstones. The space left by the indrawn wall of the door represents life, and the rest of the structure represents a tombstone, the last stop. Urfa houses' doors, which are quite diverse and magnificent in general appearance, are essential in understanding the region's cultural and socio-economic structure. The door of an iwan is also an indicator of the status of its owner. The door's width and height, the expensiveness of the material used and the number of decorations manifest what kind of influence the owner has in the community. This communicative effort towards the visitor or the passer-by also reveals the relationship between social status and the feudal community structure.



Image 5: Doors (Mızrak, 2011)



Image 6: Door (Mızrak, 2011)

Conclusion

As a cultural phenomenon, houses differ according to the characteristics of communities living in similar physical conditions. For this reason, culture has an impact on the architecture of the houses and the shaping of the settlement as much as the physical conditions. Buildings and settlement patterns reflect the culture that created them (Rapoport, 1969). Barthes states that not only urban space but human space, in general, has always had a meaning. The place where human lives (namely “*oikoumene*”) creates a real discourse with its symmetry, reflections, place contrasts, and paradigms (Barthes, trans.1997).

In this study, traditional Urfa houses are made meaningful within the framework of semiotics. Thus, architectural signifiers have been handled and evaluated with their connotative dimensions along with their literal meanings. In this way, it was attempted to reveal the semantic layers of architectural signifiers. In this respect, it is clearly seen that elements evident in everyday practices such as the socio-cultural structure or value judgments reflect on the architecture of houses as much as the physical elements such as the climate and topography of traditional Urfa houses. Cultural phenomena such as the privacy of the family, especially the woman’s, and the structure of the extended family are the factors for shaping the Urfa houses. Particularly the spatial arrangement, the hierarchy between spaces, and the configurations of the characteristics of the spaces can be seen as a reflection of the cultural components of the society on the settlement layout of the houses. Broadbent defines the building as container for human activities, the building as modifier of the given climate, the building as cultural symbol, and the building as consumer of resources (Broadbent, 1980). Cultural differences stem from the interpretation of memories, emotions, symbols, meanings, and values of individuals who belong to specific groups. Consequently, the traditional houses are places that relate to individuals’ culture and lifestyle. Intangible cultural values play a determining role as a functional element of architectural structures. At this point, architectural structures can be assumed expressive of meaning as a signifier of cultural values. Thus, each culture has peculiar architectural features consisting of common elements (signs) exposed by the building’s components.

Semiotics, which treat and examine cultural phenomena as sign systems, assume culture as communication. From this viewpoint, architectural semiotics perceives and evaluates the functionality of structures as cultural forms at the same time. In this sense, architecture is the outcome of religious, philosophical, or cultural tendencies that lead to the emergence of forms with specific characteristics beyond a structure satisfying the housing need.

Note: The photographs (image 1,2,3,4) used in this study were taken by co-author Hasan Doğan. The houses used in the photographs were restoration houses affiliated with the Şanlıurfa Province Culture, Education, Art and Research Foundation.

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