

Changing Uses of the Middle-Class Living Room in Turkey: The Transformation of the Closed-Salon Phenomenon

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Abstract: Structured as a think piece, this study examines the transformation of Turkish middle-class living room practices and their material settings from the 1930s to the 2010s in accommodating the changing uses of that space. First, the spatial division between the public and private aspects of domestic interiors in the culture of the early Turkish Republic is discussed, with a focus on the change from traditional uses to more Westernized and modern functions and styles; through the review of relevant literature, the development of the living room as it reflects changes in the domestic culture of the early Turkish Republic is traced. Next, the closed-salon practice, which excludes daily routines and everyday clutter and requires a high level of cleanliness and order, is discussed as the dominant prototype. Finally, the paper analyzes the transformation of this prototype to meet the evolving role of the living room in the middle-class Turkish home.

1. Introduction

In many cultures, the practices of allocating domestic space and the products used in its display and maintenance evolve and are transformed together with the culture's social evolutions. Following this framework, we study home cultures in Turkey to observe the transformations of practices and of the material culture of domestic space as the country faced its new government's commitment to modernity and Westernization when it became a republic in 1923, replacing the centuries-old Ottoman Empire.

The living room is usually considered the domestic space the Turkish middle class uses to create certain impressions and display status. The Turkish living room as a Western construct dates back to the 19th century (Bozdoğan, 2008; Gürel, 2009a). By this time, the Westernization and modernization movements that were to affect many cultural practices had emerged, and they accelerated with the political changes that took place in the late 1920s and 1930s attendant to the establishment of the Turkish republic. The government promoted cultural and material practices that were considered modern to encourage the replacement of traditional practices, including conventions regarding home cultures, with Westernized ideas and culture.

The adaptation of the living room and its furniture as a showcase of Western and modern social status is connected to the social construction of Western and modern identities and lifestyles in place of traditional ones. The modern furniture units of the equally modern living room are much different from the traditional, familiar units. For many members of the Turkish middle class, though, adapting to the transformed living room as

it shifted from traditional to modern was not a quick and easy process.

Displaying this adaptation and transformation through the living room and its furniture emerged as a significant—and sometimes stressful—issue throughout middle-class households as the appearance of the Ottoman, or “pre-modern,” representations became threatening. Gradually, though, in the homes of the early Turkish Republic, Western and modern furniture came to represent the new civic identity (Bozdoğan, 2002; Gürel, 2009a). The living room and its furniture served as a showcase, indicating the occupants' social status and civic identity (Gürel, 2009a).

Because displaying the modern status was very important, extra emphasis and care were given to the living room and its contents, which were designed to create good impressions and to function as a display stage for outsiders to view. In addition, the middle-class living room was mostly isolated from daily routines and activities. Thus, a living room that remains in perfect order because it is closed to the everyday routines of the household and its practices—what is known as the *closed salon*—became a powerful prototype defining the living room throughout Turkish middle-class homes (Kılıçkiran, 2008; Özbay, 1999).

This study begins by examining the transformation of the middle-class Turkish living room through this closed-salon practice, considered a powerful and dominant custom in middle-class Turkish domestic culture, through examples from the literature. Following this discussion, the study focuses on the manifestations of the closed salon, including the connections of spatial and material elements to social transformation.

2. The Living Room As the Public Stage of the Home

Home is a concept that presents many possibilities. First, a home is a refuge for its household members. It is a place to get away from the outside world, to rest and relax; in that role, it accommodates many intimate, personal, and private practices. It has as well public and formal qualities that provide a stage representing the household members' identities, tastes, and lifestyles to outsiders.

Having both private and public qualities, the home is mostly defined as a place of ambiguities and paradoxes (Short, 1999). These different qualities merge to create dualities, such as formality/informality, social self/inner self, and being outside/being inside. To cope with the tensions in these dualisms, members of many cultures have deliberately created a spatial division within the home (Rechavi, 2009). In carrying out this practice of dividing the living space, some parts of the home are assigned and used for more public and formal activities and some for more private and personal needs and practices. As Rechavi (2009) explains, this division means that while some spaces are relegated to group activities or hospitality, others accommodate individual and intimate activities.

The resulting divided spaces have been defined in many different but related ways. According to Goffman (1959), places of human interaction can usually be divided into *front regions*, such as the living room and dining room, where performances actually take place, and *back regions*, such as the bedrooms and bathrooms, where preparations for such performances are made. Similar to Goffman, Korosec-Serfaty (1984) accepted a division between domestic spaces. He used the term *facade* for the more public and formal parts of a home and considered the other spaces in a home to be where a personal, nonpublic life takes place. Rechavi (2009) distinguished the two areas by calling them the *front stage* and the *back stage*. The front stage refers to spaces where the family presents or displays itself and entertains outsiders, while the back stage indicates areas of presumably greater individual control, where household members prepare and eat food, rest, and seek solitude.

In most cultures, the living room is generally accepted as the most public part—whether it's called the front stage, the front region, or the facade of the home (Attfield, 2007, p. 62; Ayata, 1988, p. 8; Bryson, 2010, p. 197; Goffman, 1959; Gürel, 2009a, 2009b; Korosec-Serfaty, 1984; Munro & Madigan, 1999, p. 108; Rechavi, 2009). Formal occasions, such as those involving hosting, serving guests, and related practices, take place in the living room, which provides a stage for the household members to display their status, showcase their tastes, and portray a certain image to the outsiders. Socially acceptable aspects of the home dweller's life are expected to be expressed in the living room (Korosec-Serfaty, 1984)—not usually considered a space where the more intimate or personal aspects of the home dweller manifest themselves (Rechavi, 2009).

Basing their study on the assumption that the living room is the domestic space used to create certain impressions, Laumann and House (1970) related social characteristics (i.e., status, social mobility, and social attitudes) to the style of the living room decor. Influenced by Goffman (1959), Laumann and House explained that the living room is where communication of social characteristics takes place and thus is the room where a connection between social identity and style would most likely be revealed.

In the context of Turkish middle-class homes, considering the living room the public space of the home is a common practice (Ayata, 1988; Gürel, 2007, 2009a, 2009b; Kılıçkiran, 2008; Özbay, 1999; Pamuk, 2006; Ulver-Sneistrup, 2008). According to Gürel (2009a), within the confines of the traditional middle-class Turkish home, it is in the living and dining areas that the social interactions among the inhabitants and their guests

take place. These spaces, which mediate between the personal and the public aspects of the home, form the location where the inhabitant's identity is portrayed to outsiders. The representative quality manifested through material culture conveys messages and symbolic meanings that reflect the inhabitant's habitus (Gürel, 2009a).

3. The Turkish Salon As the “Museum Living Room”

In the context of understanding the transformation and contemporary situation of the living room practices in middle-class homes in Turkey, it is important to recognize and understand the prototypical living room setting, which is excluded from everyday routines. In this concept, keeping a living room isolated from these routines, as well as maintaining cleanliness and order, was the status display standard for the household, one to be sustained throughout all the hosting performances on formal occasions. This model, which we term *salon*, is considered to be a dominant practice by authors in both literary and academic realms (Ayata, 1988; Gürel, 2007, 2009a, 2009b; Kılıçkiran, 2008; Özbay, 1999; Pamuk, 2003; Ulver-Sneistrup, 2008).

With the establishment of Turkey as a republic, Turkish society underwent a series of Westernization and modernization reforms. Republic ideology sought to distance the new nation from the Ottoman Empire (Bozdoğan, 2001). The notions of modern and Western were conflated to produce a modern mode of living, which was linked to the concept of civilization (Gürel, 2007). According to Gürel (2009a), domestic space and its material culture had a profound role in shaping modern consciousness. The material culture of living rooms, in the context of the public stage of domestic interiors, served to construct modern and Western identities (Gürel, 2009a). Living rooms, together with the furniture and objects they contained and practices they held, were spaces for the representation of modern and Western identities.

The middle-class Turkish living room as a Western construct was to be experienced with all its Western content: furniture, objects, and new cultural practices. Orhan Pamuk, the Turkish Nobel Prize Laureate in Literature, offers his memories of the living room in his childhood home in the 1950s in his memoir *Istanbul: Memories and the City* (2006). Pamuk was living in an upper middle-class home in which modern and Western identities were represented in both materiality and domestic practices. He describes the room thus:

Not only were pianos not played but there were other things—always-locked glass sideboards stuffed with Chinese porcelain, cups, silver . . . all these things filling the living rooms of each apartment made me feel that they were displayed not for life, but for death. When we harshly sat on couches with inlaid mother-of-pearl and silver strings, our grandmother warned us, “Sit appropriately.” Living rooms were set up as little museums for visitors—some of which were imaginary—whose arrival time was uncertain, rather than as comfortable spaces where the inhabitants could pass time in peace, such was the concern for westernization. (p. 15)

As Gürel (2009a) points out, what Pamuk calls a “museum living room,” crammed with eclectic furniture and accessories, represents living rooms of upper middle-class families in Istanbul and other major cosmopolitan cities during the 1950s.

The importance of Western and modern representation manifested itself in conspicuous, expensive, and precious furniture and objects, and it was expected that a high standard of maintenance, care, and cleanliness would be observed. To sustain this standard, which was tested by visiting outsiders, the

living room was commonly isolated from the daily routines of the household members and everyday clutter. The door of the living room was even locked, and children were kept out of this “public” space—an act considered key in defining the closed-salon practice.

A study Ayata (1988) conducted regarding the middle-class homes in Ankara presents features similar to Pamuk’s (2006) descriptions of his family’s living room (salon) and related practices, exhibiting rich descriptive data about the closed-salon practice. According to Ayata, this salon, with all its contents, served as a space dedicated to the formal occasions attended by outsiders. To attain and maintain the high standards of hosting, the living room was kept clean and in proper order at all times. This standard was so dominant throughout the domestic space that even the household members themselves were not usually allowed into the salon. All evidence of everyday routines was removed so that the salon could be preserved as a solely formal and public space.

An important element sustaining the closed-salon practice was a separate space, called a *sitting room*, that was different from the salon. Ayata (1988) notes that this space allowed for the actual living needs of the middle-class household, given that the actual “living room” was isolated from everyday routines. The sitting room thus fulfilled the need for intimate family life and everyday household practices while leaving the formal living room for guests and hosting. These family practices might include watching television, reading, having conversations, and many other cozy, everyday routines. In this private realm, no formality was involved or needed. The material characteristics of this room were usually considered rather modest and inexpensive compared to what was required for the salon. The practical uses of the objects of the private realm were especially important, whereas the objects of the salon were primarily for display.

Ayata (1988) notes the opposite qualities of the objects that belong to public and private realms, which correspond to the closed salon and the sitting room in the middle-class homes in Ankara. In the public realm, the furniture and the objects were expensive and had a low level of everyday use, whereas in the private realm they were cheap and had a high level of everyday use. Ayata describes the contents of the sitting room as simple and old objects that served informal and traditional practices; in contrast, the objects that were reserved for the closed salon were luxurious, expensive, and new, serving formal and proper practices. The household represented its modernity not only through the materiality of the salon, but also through the practices conducted in that space. Because the salon was intended to be used primarily for formal and public occasions, it functioned as a space for hosting and formal events.

In the closed salon, it is possible to observe the deep distinction between public and private realms through objects, furniture, and domestic practices. Ulver-Sneistrup (2008) interprets the closed-salon setting as living rooms that have idealized public qualities. According to this interpretation, the living room contains idealized and solely public qualities, whereas the other rooms have idealized private qualities.

Gürel’s study (2009b), in which she discusses the gender roles in the domestic space throughout the modern middle strata in the Turkey of the 1950s and 1960s, supports the presence of idealized public qualities and formal practices of the living room. According to Gürel, the living room was used to host activities that emphasized formality. A significant ritual exemplifying these practices was the “women’s reception day,” an occasion on which a housewife in the middle or upper income level hosted a circle of female friends on a certain day of the month (Gürel, 2009b). In this formal event, prestigious luxury objects like crystal glasses, silver saucers, and porcelain dishes were

expected to be used and displayed prominently (Gürel, 2009b).

Closed-salon practice emerged as a domestic phenomenon with its strict public–private distinction, isolation from the daily routines, locked door, and prominent display of status through materiality and ritual. Kılıçkiran (2008) defines this domestic setting as a model for middle-class homes. In this model, the living room is seen as the outer home; it is exempt from household use, is reserved for visitors, and is to be kept clean and neat at all times. The rest of the house, generalized as *rooms*, constitutes the “inner home,” where the largest of the rooms, the sitting room, is reserved for the daily intimate activities of the family. Kılıçkiran describes this model as a prototypical understanding of Turkish domestic space throughout middle-class homes, a view supported by a number of other local researchers (Yıldırım & Başkaya, 2006; Onur et al., 2001).

4. Transformation of the Museum Living Room: Merging the Public and Private Layers

The living room practice described above, in which the daily routines of the household are excluded, has been described in many different ways, including using the terms “museum living room” (Pamuk, 2003), “idealized public living room” (Ulver-Sneistrup, 2008), “closed-door salon” (Özbay, 1999), and “powerful prototype” (Kılıçkiran, 2008).

What is the contemporary situation of this powerful prototype? How powerful is this closed-salon practice now?

According to Özbay (1999), in the contemporary environment, it is rare to find closed-door reception rooms or salons in middle- and upper middle-class houses or flats. Özbay attributes the decline of this practice to the lessened distinction between front- and back-stage activities. Another consideration is the markedly lower birth rate (Özbay, 1999): With fewer children in a family, the concern for the well-being of, and education for, all family members can increase and can be manifested in the use of household space. Consequently, keeping the living room only for visitors began to be perceived as unnecessary or irrational, and the back-stage sitting rooms began to be converted to allow children to have designated rooms, now believed necessary to personality development and individuality. Yet another important factor that opened the doors of the closed salon was the emergence in the ‘70s of TV sets as a central component of family life (Gürel, 2007; Özbay, 1999).

In agreement with Özbay (1999), Özsoy and Gökmen (2005), based on the results of their field research, support the decline of the traditional closed-salon model and practice in middle- and upper middle-class homes. They explain,

To allocate a room for visitors is one of the customs of traditional Turkish families that is gradually disappearing in the urban lifestyle. This entails keeping one of the rooms in the dwelling clean and orderly. Studies conducted with the various income groups have shown the changing habits of the families in the urban areas and found a growing tendency to lose the traditional way of life in the urbanization process. (Özsoy & Gökmen, 2005)

Ulver-Sneistrup (2008) conducted extensive and comparative research that incorporated in-depth interviews about ordinary status consumption of home aesthetics throughout three different cultures (Turkey, Sweden, and the United States). In this study, Ulver-Sneistrup elaborated on the phenomenon of the Turkish salon in middle-class homes in Istanbul. She found that in the homes in Istanbul that internalized the closed-salon model and practice, the division of public and private space engenders a heated debate (Ulver-Sneistrup, 2008). An emphasis on the maintenance of the divided parts that show off the public space as ideally just public and the private space as ideally just private

is highlighted:

Through my observations, I came to know the Turkish salon as a space for only public reception—carefully decorated and consisting of predetermined objects that together constituted a proper stage for reception. A room of order in a home at its best. (Ulver-Sneistrup, 2008)

According to Ulver-Sneistrup, the closed-salon model and practice is considered a central requirement in middle-class homes—whether it is internalized or contested. Although most middle-class homes welcome the closed-salon model and practice, some contest this prototype, using different tactics to eliminate signs of formality (Ulver-Sneistrup, 2008). The respondents, who were in their 20s and 30s and whom Ulver-Sneistrup describes as “younger”, avoided formality by banning conventional decor and social rituals in their homes. Ulver-Sneistrup interprets these young respondents as struggling against the older generation that defines itself partly through home styling and domestic practices. This rebellion against the traditions of the older generation is manifested through the intentional absence of a salon. Those who contest the closed-salon practice furnish their homes in a casual way, without display units or heavy dining room sets, replacing the artifacts representing formality with their symbolic opposites.

In her 2008 study, Ulver-Sneistrup correlates the transformation of the “museum living room” phenomenon with the change in the notion of status and consequently with the ways in which status is displayed in the living rooms of middle-class homes. Social groups that undervalue the traditional status display are considered to have a tendency to resist the ways and the tools of the previous generation that used them to conduct formal, separate rituals. Consequently, the living room is now considered a space for the daily routines of the household. In this context, isolating the living room from the daily uses of the household makes little sense.

The rebelling of the younger generation against the closed-salon practice could be interpreted as a sign that points to the coming transformation of this entrenched prototype; the content and visual analysis of recent home and decoration magazines also give support to this interpretation (Nasır, 2014). It is observed that the contemporary living room is defined by rather informal and self-oriented practices and is not devoted solely to formal occasions. The living room is generally presented as a multifunctional space available for everyday practices such as eating, studying, sitting, resting, watching television, and listening to music, as well as for the more traditional function of serving guests. Visual and content analyses support the multifunctional quality of the living room through both private and public dimensions (Nasır, 2014). The December 2011 issue of *Evim* defined the living room as “a space in which you can eat your meals, serve your guests, watch TV, read books; have individual activities or get together with your family. It is like a compact living area which serves for different functions” (p. 198).

Complementing the living room, the furniture, equipment, and decor also have multifunctional qualities.

5. Conclusion

Experiencing the living room as a small museum dedicated for formal occasions and solely for guests is still considered a dominant phenomenon in the context of middle-class Turkish homes (Ayata, 1988; Gürel, 2009a, 2009b; Kılıçkiran, 2008; Özbay, 1999; Ulver-Sneistrup, 2008; Yıldırım & Başkaya, 2006). This model and related practices remain valid in some social fragments even in the contemporary environment (Ulver-

Sneistrup, 2008). The living room as museum (closed-salon) phenomenon is a compelling concept that is still considered and referred to both by those who internalize the concept and by those who contest it.

It appears, however, that the closed-salon practice is losing its influence. Behind this decline, the changes in the lifestyles and transformation of the need for status display may be considered significant factors in that the cultural transformations influence the domestic practices. The perception about living room use has shifted; the living room is now considered a more informal space in which the household can conduct its daily, intimate practices. Furthermore, the meanings of *formal occasion*, *hosting*, and *socialization* have been transformed. Socializing with outsiders increasingly takes place outside the home, and women too have become more visible in the public realm. All these cultural transformations were connected to the adoption of a more informal and individualized lifestyle by the middle and upper middle classes.

The informal lifestyle has given rise to more informal living rooms, furniture, and related domestic practices. It is expected that the transformations taking place in the living room space have affected the whole of the materiality, practices, and furniture uses in the living room. The formalities associated with the closed salon have begun to be contested by users of the new generation. The struggle with the conventions and traditions of the closed salon resulted in the adoption of casual and informal styles of furnishings and practices. In this way, codes that oppose the material culture and practices that are associated with the museum living room are put into play to contest the powerful prototype.

Countering the closed-salon model and practices with the intentional elimination of the salon and all its codes is a complex response that deserves elaboration. It is interesting to note which tools, styles, units, and related practices are chosen to frame this struggle. All the materiality accompanying the contention is potentially important in regard to displaying the transformation of middle-class living rooms in Turkey.

The transformation of the living room reveals the merging of the public and the private realms in the same space. As Özbay (1999) indicates, the difference between the activities that are performed in the public and in the private realms of the domestic space has gradually decreased. Some householders have embraced spatial optimization to make use of the largest domestic space—the living room. It came to seem irrational to devote the living room *only* to formal occasions to meet the goal of creating a idealized public space.

As the living room increasingly accommodates the daily intimate practices of the household, the public realm and the private realm are converging in the living room. As shown in Table 1, in the former living room, only public practices were conducted. With the transformation of the living room, both public and private realms merge in the same space.

Table 1. Merging the Private and Public Realms

	Private Realm	Public Realm
“Closed-salon” practice	Sitting room	Living room
“Living room” practice	Living room	Living room

In this paper, it is observed that the domestic spaces are differentiated; some spaces are devoted to group activities or hospitality and others to individual and intimate activities (Rechavi, 2008). In the previous closed-salon practice, this segregation was strictly observed. With the merging of the public and the private realms, the public practices that signal the

representation and status display of the household begin to appear in the same space where the intimate and private daily routines are conducted. This merging is considered to have great potential for deeper investigations, particularly on the effects of the convergence on the uses of the objects and the furniture in the living room, in the context of understanding the transformation of the middle-class living room in Turkey.

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