

Personal Statement

It is curious to think such a simple line can be so decisive in determining the quality of human lives. Those were the thoughts passing through my mind in the summer of 2018, as I gazed out across the walls marking the border that Turkey and Syria share. As a young architecture student, I was in Reyhanlı with my team to conduct a long-term field study. I had volunteered to design and help build a community center that strives to be a platform for social cohesion and reconciliation between host and refugee communities.

The community center project supported by the government and my university was set to be constructed in this town, as the ratio of refugees to the non-refugee is the largest in Turkey. Before the start of unrest in Syria in 2011, the total population of Reyhanlı was 86 660. Since then, the number has more than doubled: As of January 2019, the number of Syrian refugees alone reached 120 343¹. This sudden jump in the populace caused infrastructural deficiencies, and because of multiple attacks and suicide bombing events, the tensions in the town rose.

Being responsible for the coordination of the project, it was two intense and unforgettable years of back and forth between Ankara (where I simultaneously continued my undergraduate studies) and Reyhanlı; being welcomed into refugee and local circles; working with various NGOs (such as UNHCR and WAHA International) and human mobility experts. I discovered the power of the architect not just as a designer, but also as a communicator and ambassadors for societal change: We weren't simply making a building; we were bringing different parts of society together around a common cause and showing them a possibility of a better, more sustainable way of living. Tied to the building, and working with the municipality of Reyhanlı, we are creating a program to help people gain new work and language skills, also facilitating them to start their own businesses. Through hard work and perseverance, after an uncountable number of meetings, presentations, and perhaps too many cups of Turkish and Arabic coffee, the building is in the construction stage and set to be complete by this summer. As I was involved in every step of the project, from the field study to design to the negotiation table, I had the chance to gain experience and develop myself in a multitude of directions.

This project has strengthened my conviction that the architectural profession has great potential in developing innovative, contextual, human-oriented and aesthetic solutions to global issues. To me, architecture goes beyond the so-called basic needs, as it is more than the mere shelter: It reflects social values and brings the world of thought into the physical realm. It becomes part of history and the living collective memory, shaping all encounters, altering the unconscious. It becomes the background for memories that shape us.

As a small kid, two chairs and a blanket were all I needed to construct a makeshift tent in the middle of my grandmother's living room. Somehow reminiscent of the nomadic life of my ancestors, growing up, my life has been divided between different countries. Living and attending school in Croatia, Turkey, and the UAE and my various travels in neighboring geographies have allowed me to develop an increased sense of awareness and connectivity to the world.

I was just stepping into adolescence when I started to attend an international school in Abu Dhabi; concepts such as identity and culture became very important. It was in that highly diverse and enriching environment that I learned how to represent my country and culture as a bridge between the east and the west. It was also during that time that I saw two extremes; luxurious megastructures surpassing clouds as opposed to a handful of construction workers having to share six square meters to make a living for their families. In the middle of the desert, between oil wells and water desalination plants, I also realized the importance of natural resources and started to research sustainable practices.

Upon returning to Turkey, in high school, I joined MUN (Model United Nations) to educate myself more about politics in the rapidly changing world. Through these international conferences, I learned how to talk in front of an audience and to persuade them. At Tevfik Fikret, I got interested in philosophy and participated in weekly discussion sessions with my teachers and friends through which I advanced my critical thinking skills and honed my intellect. Doing theatre, I learned teamwork and to trust people. The hard work paid off when we received the jury's best play prize in Lithuania, representing our country. In all of these endeavors, my equal fluency in English, French and Turkish has been an advantage to help take down barriers, facilitating relationships with people.

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For the first step of my university education, I chose to continue studying in Turkey as I wanted my roots as an internationally practicing architect and urban designer to be in my home country, feeding on the vast culture and history that these lands have witnessed. As an undergraduate student in Bilkent, I was taught by a diverse faculty (from Turkey, the U.S., Europe, and Asia), with an array of specializations and interests. Through them, I explored different aspects of the field and started to form my own approach. Since graduating with honors in 2019, I have been invited on multiple occasions to architecture design studios as a jury member.

As a freshman, I joined Design and Architecture Society (DAS) and began actively working in the organization team. At the end of my first year, I was elected as the Design & Media Coordinator to the board of directors and worked together with subgroups such as Tasarım Bilkent (a series of panels in which successful professionals from all around the world share their insight and experience), 1M1M and Pafta Magazine to help organize and promote our events to the masses. This experience expanded my network in the profession. During my position, I also taught first- and second-year students how to use graphic design software. As a senior, I quit DAS to focus on my responsibilities for the Reyhanlı Community Center Project.

To challenge myself, starting from the second year, I took part in numerous design competitions. I learned not to give up and to learn from mistakes, to continue forward with positivity. I became very efficient at time management and learned how to keep a clear head even under very stressful circumstances. Several of my colleagues have expressed that although normally they don't enjoy working in teams, working with me has been a good experience that they would like to repeat. I believe one key to success is ambition nurtured in a healthy work environment. That is why I try to pay attention to the individual strengths of my team and support them to contribute to the group. The hard work started to pay off as our submissions have won (Forgotten Folks Faculty Student Competition 2018) and been shortlisted (for example Building 4Humanity Design Competition 2018).

Furthermore, thanks to the quality of the work that we have submitted in the Forgotten Folks Competition and my presentation during the review process, one of the jury members in the competition; Mikko Heikkinen allowed me to be a co-curator for his exhibition titled "Architecture with Community". Also, after our submission to the Building 4Humanity team, they decided the site for the following edition of the competition to be located in Turkey and asked us for help with the organization. Through my role as executive team manager, and working with architects and educators such as Juhani Pallasmaa and Suha Özkan, I learned about the processes of evaluation in famous architecture prizes such as the Pritzker and the Aga Khan Awards.

At this point in my career, after having laid my roots in Turkey, I feel ready to grow and extend my branches out overseas to the United States through the Fulbright Program. I believe that the Fulbright Scholarship will allow me to challenge myself in a highly competitive and ambitious environment. I want to show that Turkey is open to the world and that we have good architects and rising urban developers. I am excited to introduce our architectural heritage that spans across so many ages, having been touched by many cultures, both from the east and the west. I want to present how such an amalgamation can offer a fresh perspective to answer world's problems.

Sources:

[1] Şahsuvar, Muzaffer, and Necip Porsnok. "Reyhanlı Göç Ana Planı." *Reyhanlı Göç Ana Planı*, Reyhanlı Belediyesi, 2019, pp. 1–5.