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Argul Weave: Local Skills Meet Global Design Practices or Activating Turkey's Hinterland Potential

Blagovesta Momchedjikova

Abstract

When *Argul Weave* officially opened in Bursa, Turkey, in the Fall of 2014, it became the first structure of its kind in the region: master-minded by architect Burak Pekoglu, it combines complex geometry with local labor and building materials—Patara beige natural stone for the façade, from Burdur, and dark-red Aegean marble for the plinth, from the Aegean area—to make a bold aesthetic statement in Yildirim, Bursa—the textile industry hub of Turkey—a complex geometry can be scaled down to a buildable design here, by the locals. This article examines some of the forces that helped shape *Argul Weave* into one coherent, and visionary, composition: from theories of modern architecture to practical knowledge of local customs, and ponders the importance of the structure in summoning the varied resources of Turkey's Hinterland while also facilitating the creative synergy among the locals (workers, residents, users).

Of all the cities I have known, I cannot recall one as closely identifiable with a certain age as Bursa. In the one-hundred thirty years between its capture and the conquest of Istanbul in 1453, Bursa was not content merely to be a Turkish city down to its very essence, it also determined its own spiritual countenance, which would be constant for all time.

Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Five Cities*

To reach “Yesil” Bursa (The “Green” City of Bursa), one can drive, take a train, or, as we did, get on a 2-hour ferry with the Ido company, from Istanbul. The ferry ride from Istanbul follows the Mermer Sea, as it crosses the Bosporus, from Europe to Asia proper, where Bursa, with a population of 3 million, lies, unlike Istanbul, not on and around the immediate waterfront, where the ferry lands, but deep inland in Anatolia, on the Northwestern slopes of the “Holy Mountain” of Uludag—its relationship with the mountain emphasized more so than that with the water (Fig. 1). In fact, Bursa’s directions of East/Center/West have developed as a result of their relation to Uludag—the “Mysian Olympus” under Byzantine rule—a popular winter resort.



Fig. 1. A bird’s eye view of Yildirim, the textile industry section of the “Green” City of Bursa, with *Argul Weave* (completed in 2014) in the foreground and Uludag in the background, 2014. Photo credit: Thomas Mayer.

In 2014 UNESCO designated Bursa as the birthplace of the Ottoman Empire (UNESCO World Heritage Center), a true testament to the belief that despite all the changes that Bursa has undergone over the centuries, “it has consistently preserved the atmosphere of the early founding period” and “possesses in itself the purest degree of the Turkish spirit” (Republic of Turkey

Ministry of Culture and Tourism). Indeed, Bursa served as the first capital of the Ottoman Empire (1335-1363) and remained, after that, a major commercial center (Fig. 2). It is here that the founding sultans of the empire, Osman and his son Orhan, are buried; it is here that the “Ottoman” architectural style—characterized by its intricate geometric designs, and rich and exotic materials—of the empire originated. Ottoman architecture is still visible and at its best in the imperial mosques, many of which remain in Bursa: the Ulu Cami (The Grand Mosque), the Yesil Cami (The Green Mosque): their signature “domes” provided inspiration for further development of mosque design in Edrine (the second capital of the empire) and Constantinople (the third and last capital of the empire). The great Evliya Celebi, in his famous *Book of Travels*, calls Bursa a “city with saintliness.”

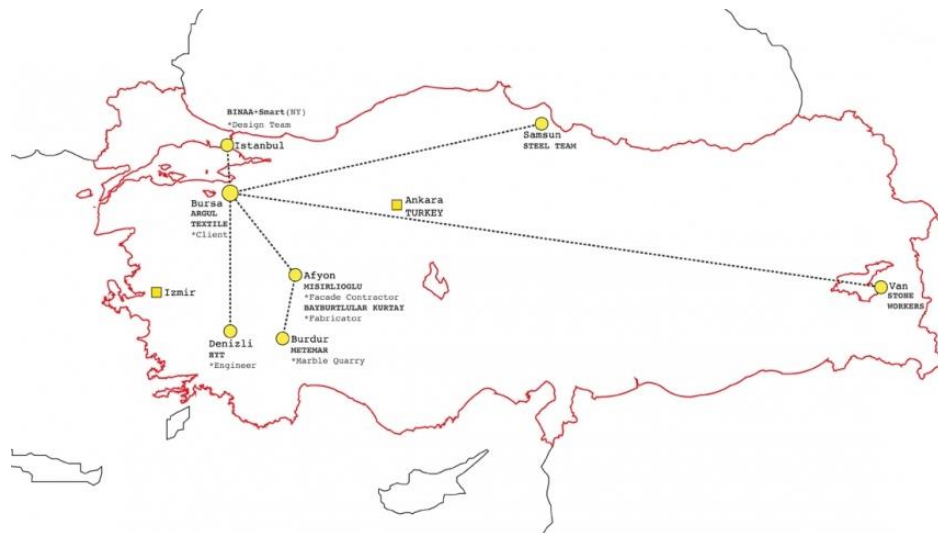


Fig. 2. Map of Turkey, showing explicitly where the various materials for building *Argul Weave* in Bursa came from. Source: www.binaa.co

Currently, one finds not only early Ottoman architecture in Bursa but also a multitude of contradictions: women wearing contemporary clothing as well as women wearing the burka; Turkish and American pop blasting on the radio stations; the giant Swedish manufacturer IKEA as well as the grand silk bazaar Koza Han; McDonald’s “big Mac” as well as Bursa’s very own lamb grill “iskendir kebab,” Starbuck’s “grande” and the signature Turkish tea; shiny brand-new Mercedes Benz’s and the run-down watermelon carts; noisy chain manufacturers and the lazy quiet of backyards; carefully planned construction and haphazard formations...all evidence of Bursa’s location, history, tourism, and waves of recent immigration.

These same contradictions abound also in the rapidly developing area of Bursa’s Yildirim—Turkey’s textile hub—and our ultimate destination (Fig. 3). For starts, we enter the new, two-story restaurant *Usludurmaz* on Uzun Street at 3:30 pm on a sunny Wednesday afternoon in August only to discover that almost all the food it serves is gone. Still, the cook is able to prepare a plate of assorted (luckily, delicious), warm leftovers, as well as desert, for each one of our small BINA party of three. We hungrily devour the food amid the rather

fancy setting: a spacious eating area, with impeccably white table cloths and sparkling water glasses on the many tables, flooded by the light of day through the wide windows. The upstairs, even more spectacular, is just as empty. The prayer rooms and washrooms in between the two floors—typical for the more prominent Muslim establishments in Turkey—gape empty as well. Where are the many patrons that this restaurant is built for?



Fig. 3. Various images from Yildirim, Bursa, Turkey, 2013. Photo credit: BINAA

Ece Elmaci, an architecture student and an intern at BINAA, explains that people in this area take their lunch for one hour, at the set time of noon, daily; dinner—they have at home. “These are the workers,” who come in the morning and leave in the afternoon, explains further Ece, as she points to the many manufacturers outside the restaurant—textile companies, baby clothes wholesalers, sewing companies, iron and chain makers, auto parts suppliers (Ece Elmaci, Personal Interview). This restaurant is like an “oasis in the desert,” the co-owner confides in us, because the shiny new establishment is indeed surrounded by buildings with fading and unattractive facades (Durmaz, Personal Interview). That seems to be the pattern here: new, modern buildings sit next to decrepit ones; well-designed main streets branch off into what architect Burak Pekoglu calls “condition” streets—undefined passageways in between factories; grandiose boulevard perspectives collapse into blocked ones; shiny storefronts border fronts with outdated outside freight elevators; pristine streets turn into garbage ridden ones ...Welcome indeed to the neighborhood where contradictions feed off of each other in a truly symbiotic relationship (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. The not-so-spectacular surrounds of *Argul Weave*, Yildirim, Bursa. 2014. Photo credit: Thomas Mayer.

Manufacturers move in quickly here, either building their own spaces or renting already existing ones, confirms Onur Salmaz, who has worked in the family business *Argul Textile* ran by his uncle, Ali Arpacı, for the past 20 years. So what brings textile owners and wholesalers here? Although space is not necessarily cheaper, the proximity of clients to manufacturers is a big draw, Mr. Onur thinks, at least as far as his business is concerned (Onur Salmaz, Personal Interview). If you ask Mr. Pekoglu—a young, Harvard-educated architect from Istanbul—his answer will be similar: opportunity. Under the supervision of architect Matthew Fineout, he brought his design education, enthusiasm, and experience to the developing area of Yildirim in Bursa, in order to show how aesthetics and function come together to create better spaces. Although, at least at first sight, aesthetics is not the main priority of manufacturers here, for Mr. Pekoglu this was an amazing opportunity to combine Western design, ideas, and practices with local needs; and hi-tech knowledge—with local production, materials, and labor. Add to that the willingness of a local businessman to try something new, and the decentralized planning that takes place here, and you have the perfect mix—*Argul Weave* (Burak Pekoglu, Personal Interview).

Indeed, Mr. Pekoglu's building here, *Argul Weave*, is quite the site since it opened in the Fall of 2014. At 4,500 square meters, three stories, and a sprawling rooftop garden-restaurant facing Uludag's grand mountain slopes, it resembles a giant, custom-made sculpture with a carefully molded white stone façade, the likes of a gigantic warp-and-weft potholder pattern. At the corner of Kirpinar and Koklu Streets, just up the street from Huzurlar Mosque, *Argul Weave* borders lush sycamores and mini-palm trees, other modern buildings, the old *Argul Textile* building to the east, as well as fruit carts, haphazard houses, broken perspectives, and some garbage hills to the south. Its north faces Uludag. What prompted both architect and businessman to shake hands over this experiment?

The two met in January of 2012, and two years later, *Argul Weave* is up and running. Ali Arpacı, who inherited the textile business from his father, needed a façade to a building whose skeleton was already in place. Mr. Pekoglu offered, after many hours of thinking, calculating, and consulting with his

advisor Mr. Edwin Chan, a 3D modeling/visualization of a radical concept (the original design first appeared as a sketch on a café napkin, as Edwin and Burak first commiserated in New York—inspired by the process and image of weaving, Mr. Pekoglu proposed the unique façade of the weave—three kinds of stone elements interweave to create the charismatic, warm aesthetic of the building whose owner is a textile manufacturer and whose own business is right next door (Fig. 5). Luckily for him, owner Ali decided to take the risk, and with excitement at that: “Let’s do this,” Mr. Pekoglu remembers him saying (Burak Pekoglu, Personal Interview).

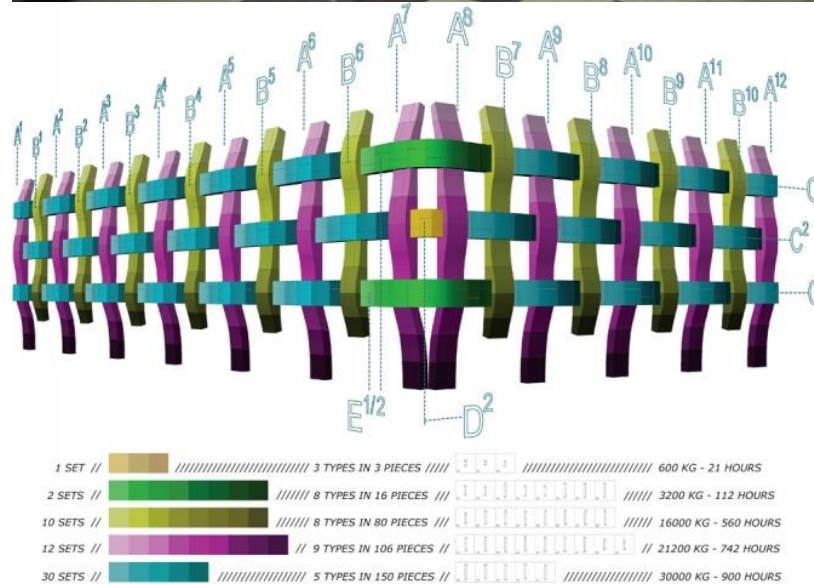


Fig. 5. *Argul Textile* commissioned the building of *Argul Weave*: Burak Pekoglu wanted to stay faithful to the history of textile and weaving of the company, and to the history of the area; hence, the weaving pattern embedded in the exterior. Made of stone, the interior was to represent the waviness of fabric through a very particular wavy shape given to the stones. Photo credit and Image: BINAA

Thus the idea of the fabric, as a product, and of weaving in various pieces of threads to create a solid textile matter, as a process, became the inspiration for the unique “woven” exterior of the building (some liken the façade to the top crust of a gigantic apple pie). And although the six three-story store spaces will be rented to any kind of business, and for any kind of storefront, the history of the textile industry of the region and the personal history of textile production of the owner are embedded in the building’s design, as is the larger history of Bursa as one of the leading producers and exporters of another fine fabric, silk.

But that is not the only history embedded in *Argul Weave*: the main building materials used for its construction are all locally extracted, shaped, delivered, and installed—the Patara beige natural stone for the façade, from a quarry in Burdur, about 6 hours away, and the dark-red Aegean marble for the plinth, from the Aegean area, put in the service of the complex geometry, make a bold aesthetic statement in Yildirim: that complex geometry can be scaled down to a buildable design, right here, by local hands and labor. It took attendance of Turkey’s largest stone fair and months of looking until Mr. Pekoglu found a small company in Afyon that can manually execute the intricate design within the deadlines and within the budget. Indeed, in the true spirit of customized construction, the *Argul Weave* relied more so on the craftsmanship of local builders, who manually shaped each sturdy stone façade element, than on the precision of machines. Consistently re-trained in the particularities of the intricate design, the local workers became, together with Mr. Pekoglu, inventors of a new building style, unique to Bursa’s history, culture, production practices, and needs (Fig. 6). The main braided motif of the structure then—the weave—pays homage not only to the textile heritage of the region but also to the meshing together of practices and standards embedded in its making.

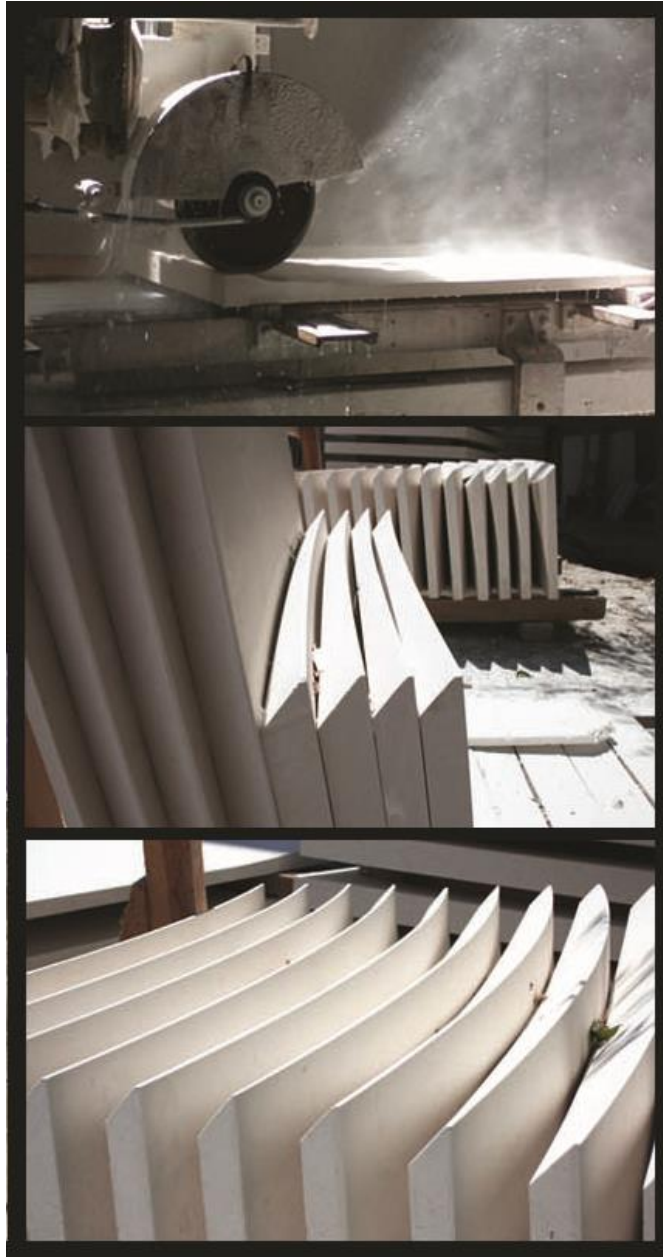


Fig. 6. Shaping of the façade stones of *Argul Weave*. 2014. Photo credit: Thomas Mayer.

To help shape *The Weave* into one coherent, and visionary, composition, Mr. Pekoglu used both theories of modern architecture and practical knowledge of local customs. Le Corbusier's "Five Points of Architecture" on "freeing" the building façade from supporting walls really resonated with him (Principle 5: by "projecting the floor beyond the supporting pillars like a balcony all round the building, the whole façade is extended beyond the supporting construction"), which explains the unique exterior as well as the rooftop garden (Principle 2: "the roof garden will become the most favored place in the building," as "roof gardens mean to a city the recovery of all

the built-up area”), (Le Corbusier). In the process, he was able to summon the varied resources of Turkey’s Hinterland, not only in materials but also in labor, while also facilitating the creative synergy among the locals (workers, residents, users) along the way. *Argul Weave* becomes then a fine testament to how Mr. Pekoglu managed to translate the unique digital design to local use, where an artistic façade serves a dedicated function of access (hence, the carefully calculated window openings within the weaving pattern) as well as to how he adjusted a grand architectural idea to the local means of production: negotiating, humanizing, simplifying the process, more than once, and oftentimes remotely (while working on other projects abroad), (Burak Pekoglu, Personal Interview).



Fig. 7. Constructing the steel support for the signature stone façade of *Argul Weave*, 2014. Photo credit: Thomas Mayer.

But working on the Weave had not only its ups but also its downs: the frustration of dealing with contractors who complicate instead of smooth the workers’ tasks was, Mr. Pekoglu and some of his trusted workers admit, ever-present. As the middle-man, the contractor failed to explain the architect’s vision well to the workers, created confusion in them, delayed their payments, and paid them less than promised. The textile business here in general follows a rather unique pattern, as Mr. Onur explains: the business transactions rely on familial, trust-relationships between merchant and client built over the years: for instance, it is normal to receive the check for the fabrics that he sells to the manufactures up to 8 months after the actual business transaction has occurred (Onur Salmaz, Personal Interview). But in the building of *Argul Weave*, the complication occurred due to the specifically hired outside contractor, who banked on the familial nature of doing business in the region to betray the workers in their ambitions and pay.

Mr. Pekoglu confirms that his relationship with the construction workers remained family-like throughout, as he had no problems with them. On the contrary, the workers were eager to refine their skills in order to make what was required of them, and super enthusiastic to participate in such a unique project in the region. Emre, one of the workers, for instance, was drawn to the project because he felt that it was “meaningful, aesthetic, and glorious.” He is happy to use the building as a professional reference now and proud to show pictures of it to neighbors, family, and friends (Emre, Personal Interview). Even though it took Mr. Pekoglu a while to find people from the region who he negotiated with in order to bring them into the project, he was happy with his final choices. The excitement that the workers exhibited for the project was contagious, Mr. Pekoglu agrees, and it gave the workers reason to challenge themselves to understand the new design technologies, 3D computer graphics, and modeling. It also assured Mr. Pekoglu that the project, despite the difficulties it faced almost every day, would be finished. The workers were “talented people who trusted themselves,” they “owned the work and were proud of it,” (Burak Pekoglu, Personal Interview), (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8. A worker finishing up the stone façade on the rooftop of *Argul Weave*, which is now a restaurant, 2014. Photo credit: Thomas Mayer.

It is not unusual for buildings to go up rather fast in Yildirim, where “decentralized” planning rules, especially if the money is there and the design is not too complicated. True, random construction and an un-unified “look” of the urban landscape are the consequence of all that but so is the freedom to create, as is the case with *Argul Weave*, where Mr. Pekoglu could design something unusual yet appropriate and pleasing. Indeed, he wanted to use *Argul Weave* as a visual statement that will energize the particular corner it sits on, the neighborhood, and why not, the city. But to make a lasting visual statement among the visibly run-down immediate surroundings, Mr. Pekoglu had to make

the conscious decision to actively “dis-engage” from them: he imagined the unfortunate location as a unique opportunity to set an “aesthetic” precedent, help “re-define” the character of the area, and create “new expectations” for city landscapes (Burak Pekoglu, Personal Interview).

It is no surprise then that one of Mr. Pekoglu’s architecture idols is the great Mimar Sinan (1488/90-1588), chief Ottoman architect and civil engineer during the reign of three sultans, famous for over 300 major buildings—mosques, schools, palaces, bridges, baths, caravanserais, water supply systems (Saoud 7 and Rabb 26-37). A true master builder of cities, Sinan always created with the clear vision of how his structures would affect their immediate surroundings and the overall image of the city. Dedicated to creating “harmony between architecture and landscape” (Saoud 9) in order to beautify cities, he planned and executed every detail of a building with this grander vision in mind, planting each structure at a particular spot—a clear sign of “Ottoman city-making” (Kostof 457, qtd. in Saoud 10); of “making urbanism” (Petruccioli 9, qtd. in Saoud 10).

Similar ambitions circulated in Mr. Pekoglu’s mind as he undertook a project on an uneventful corner at the edge of the city. “A single piece of architecture,” says he, “has the power to re-define the character of a city”; to “anchor” us; to “script” our urban experiences, like it did in the time of Sinan (Burak Pekoglu, Personal Interview), (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9. Kids riding bikes and playing around *Argul Weave*, Bursa, Turkey, 2014. Photo credit: Thomas Mayer.

New buildings have the possibility to, literally, write city history anew: creating different experiences, expectations, movements, energy, memories. And so, Mr. Pekoglu decided to use the context granted to him: the street corner, the edge of the city, the textile owner, the textile industry setting, and create within this context in order to rise beyond it: with a perfectly designed,

high-end building, planted in an effort to re-see Bursa. He is well aware that *Argul Weave's* façade is “a spectacle that both reflects the history and culture of the area and provokes further reflection as it puzzles the viewer.”

Is the final design exactly as Mr. Pekoglu planned it? “It is pretty close,” he says. “The overall concept has been fulfilled” and he is satisfied. In addition, he hopes that *Argul Weave* will not only serve a purpose such as host businesses and be aesthetically pleasing, but also set the tone for a dialogue in the public sphere; in fact, help create a public sphere in an area of transit workers who congregate only around food carts and mosques (Burak Pekoglu, Personal Interview). The sidewalk, the corner, the rooftop of *Argul Weave* are all public place opportunities that can help transform the transient area into a community with character.

A successful public space comes to be organically though, as Jane Jacob reminds us in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Bursa abounds with such spaces already—the grass areas, cafés, and benches downtown. It is nearly impossible to create public spaces artificially; it is best if a public space is shaped into such in area where people congregate naturally for leisure, which is not the case with commercial areas.



Fig. 10. Students construct models of various BINAA projects, this one is of *Argul Weave*, for an upcoming exhibition, 2016. Photo credit: BINAA

Isn't then *Argul Weave* hoping to achieve the impossible, as it has sprung up at a site without the element of people gathering there previously? Quite on the contrary, thinks Mr. Pekoglu—since it is at a corner intersection where people normally converge, even if momentarily just to cross or visit a fruit cart—people will talk about the new building: it inscribes the landscape rather prominently and provocatively (Burak Pekoglu). The restaurant on its top will draw people in as well. By becoming a subject of conversation (Fig. 10), Mr. Pekoglu believes, *Argul Weave* will eventually become a public place in its own right.

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