



SEMINAR

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The Byzantine Mosaic Wall in a Modern Shape

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Looking back to the 1950's, a comprehensive urban migration was ongoing in Istanbul. A need for new dwellings was arisen. Town planners and architects were looking towards a modernization in a western style. With Hilton Hotel (designed by the American studio SOM together with the Turkish architect Sedad H. Eldem), the post-war international modernism was introduced in Turkey. At the same time, the politics of prime minister Adnan Menderes involved a return to Islam (and a religious traditionalism) from a time of secularization.

In this context, the Betebe company brought in the new building material *glass mosaic*. Focused on the glass mosaic clad façades from late 1950-70s in Istanbul, this project intends to give a background to the building material used. Dwellings around the city, and outside the city centre, still have these mosaic skins. Not only in Istanbul, but also in Ankara, Bursa, Edirne and Iznik among other places we find the mosaic façades. Almost all the façades are different. Some are in strict geometrical shapes, others are done without any regular pattern, and some are executed with big colour fields.

How did it all start? Interested in Byzantine mosaics the founder of Betebe, Fethi Tanalay, studied the Hagia Sophia mosaics and the Chora museum in Istanbul. He travelled to Italy and continued his observations in the basilicas of Ravenna and Venice from the 500-1300 centuries. These churches are as known clad from floor to ceiling in mosaic adornment and he profoundly learnt the glass mosaic technique. Back in Istanbul, he built up his new company. For twenty years at Betebe the tesserae-pieces were hand cut in 20 to 20 millimeter, similar to the Byzantine technique. (From the 1980s however the mosaic is machine-made, most often in pieces of 10 to 10 mm.)

The project will describe how the new product emerged in the 1950s, looking at the complex relation between tradition and modernity. Can we discern a clear link back to the Byzantine mosaic? The glass mosaic offers special qualities on the façades and in the neighbourhood, due to the reflecting material, which picks up light and reflects it. The surface, which is somewhat uneven, becomes shiny and hard and changes between matte and glistening. The tiny mosaic pieces are multiplied on the façades creating big surfaces, but at the same time, they preserve the neighbourhood's small scales value.