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Gecekondu in architectural discourse: conceptual traces of the politics of space in Turkey

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Gecekondu in architectural discourse: conceptual traces of the politics of space in Turkey

This article explores the evolution of architectural discourse on *gecekondu* in Turkey, examining its transformation from an urban phenomenon to a politicised issue since the 1970s. The socio-economic dynamics underpinning this informal settlement, which emerged as a housing crisis following mass migration, have significantly shaped the architectural theory and language of movements for spatial justice and 'right to the city'. To explore this evolution, the article employs a multidisciplinary approach, including discourse analysis, archival research, and a review of postgraduate theses on the issue in architecture departments of Turkish universities. By focusing on the lived spaces of *gecekondu* settlements and the structural conditions of urban poverty, it demonstrates how the *gecekondu* issue has contributed to the development of new conceptual frameworks in architecture. Ultimately, this article underscores the critical role of *gecekondu* in expanding architectural discourse, providing a lens to understand the intersection of space and politics in Turkey's urban development.

Bu makale, Türkiye'deki gecekondu olgusuna ilişkin mimarlık söyleminin evrimini, 1970'lerden itibaren kentsel bir olgudan politik bir meseleye dönüşümünü inceleyerek ele almaktadır. Kitlesel göçün ardından bir konut krizi olarak ortaya çıkan bu enformel yerleşim biçiminin temelindeki sosyo-ekonomik dinamikler, mekânsal adalet ve "kente hakkı" hareketlerinden etkilenerek mimarlık kuramını ve dilini önemli ölçüde şekillendirmiştir. Bu değişimi analiz etmek için makale, söylem analizi, arşiv araştırması ve Türkiye'deki mimarlık bölümlerinde hazırlanmış lisansüstü tezlerin incelenmesini içeren disiplinlerarası bir yaklaşım benimsemektedir. Gecekondu yerleşimlerinin yaşanan mekânlarına ve kentsel yoksulluğun yapısal koşullarına odaklanarak, gecekondu olgusunun mimarlıkta yeni kavramsal çerçevelerin gelişimine nasıl katkı sağladığını ortaya koymaktadır. Sonuç olarak makale, Türkiye'nin kentsel gelişiminde mekân ve politikanın kesişimini anlamak için kuramsal bir bakış açısı geliştirerek, gecekondunun mimarlık söylemini biçimlendirmedeki kritik rolünü vurgulamaktadır.

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Introduction

Turkey's process of industrialisation and its social transformation gained momentum following the transition to the multi-party era under the Democrat

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Party's leadership. Embracing liberal economic policies, the government encouraged private investments and restructured agriculture through mechanisation and market integration, which displaced large segments of the rural population.[1] This period not only redefined the state's role in economic development — especially as political power increasingly aligned with bourgeois interests after the 1950s — but also altered the spatial distribution of economic opportunities across the country by increasingly concentrating in major cities. While mechanisation and market integration in agriculture increasingly disrupted traditional relations of production in rural areas, urban centres simultaneously benefited from industrial incentives, emerging as key nodes of capital accumulation and employment.[2] These shifts triggered a significant wave of rural-to-urban migration that reshaped the social and economic structure of cities in Turkey, particularly with the emergence of a new urban social stratum.[3] One of the most critical consequences of this migration was a housing crisis, as rural migrants struggled to meet their basic residential needs due to the shortage of affordable housing stock and their limited economic capacity to access the formal real estate market.

Faced with housing shortages and unaffordable urban living conditions, migrants began occupying unclaimed or state-owned land and constructing unauthorised dwellings known as *gecekondu*, initiating a substantial transformation of the urban fabric (Fig. 1). Over time, migration intensified, driven by aspirations for employment and improved living standards in cities, and by the pursuit of the socio-economic opportunities urban environments promised. The proliferation of *gecekondu* was striking: from 50,000 units in 1955, accounting for 4.7% of the urban population, rising to 240,000 by the 1960s, encompassing 16.4% of urban dwellers and establishing these settlements as one of the country's most pressing urban challenges.[4]

In response to the deepening housing crisis, the state enacted policies aimed at halting further *gecekondu* construction. These policies emphasised formal, planned urban growth over informal construction practices. The first substantial legal intervention occurred with the passage of the *Gecekondu* Law in 1948, which sought to regulate, rehabilitate, or eradicate such settlements while curbing unauthorised construction through strategic policy measures. Although supplementary regulations introduced throughout the 1950s (Law No. 6188 and Law No. 7367) had a partial impact, the continuous influx of rural migrants and persistent housing shortages rendered the issue increasingly unmanageable. These laws envisioned that municipalities would construct low-cost and modest housing units on treasury land to be sold at cost to existing *gecekondu* residents; however, not only did they exclude newly arriving migrants but they also placed significant responsibilities on local governments whose financial and technical capacities were highly limited. As a result, these measures failed to adequately respond to the accelerating housing crisis.[5] By this time, the number of *gecekondu* had increased fivefold compared to the previous decade, with a significant proportion of the urban population now residing in these 'informal' settlements.[6]

Figure 1.
A gecekondu neighbourhood, Hıdırlıktepe, photographed by and courtesy of Mebrur Hatunoğlu, 2006

Although the *Gecekondu* Law enacted in 1966 (Law No. 775) recognised the *gecekondu* phenomenon as a significant issue within the broader context of urbanisation, legal regulations alone proved insufficient in addressing its underlying causes. The fundamental drivers of rural-to-urban migration remained inadequately addressed, leading to the emergence of *gecekondu* neighbourhoods as settlements distinguished by limited access to essential public services and social amenities. These settlements, located on the urban periphery as less desirable land for construction, were not included in urban development plans of local and central governments, but their growth and proliferation were tolerated by perceiving them as a cheap labour supply and, strategically, a potential source of electoral support for their populist politics by mobilising their rural culture based mainly on conservatism.[7]

The *gecekondu* phenomenon, which initially emerged as a pragmatic response to acute housing shortages of rural-migrants, progressively evolved into a central component of the broader housing crisis and became embedded within wider urban and political discourses in Turkey. Over time, it attracted critical attention from architects and scholars, not only as a socio-spatial formation but also as a contested site of urban transformation. Within this

context, the incorporation of *gecekondu* into architectural discourse illustrates how space operates simultaneously as both a product and a representation of Turkey's political dynamics.

This article investigates the intersections of architecture and politics through a discursive analysis of the evolving *gecekondu* phenomenon. It begins with a semantic inquiry into the term *gecekondu*, tracing its shifting interpretations in relation to the rise of socialist movements that contributed to the politicisation of architectural discourse. Special attention is devoted to the 1970s — a pivotal decade for these debates — through a close reading of *gecekondu* discussions in *Mimarlık* magazine, a key platform shaping architectural thought and practice in the period.

Building on this historical foundation, the article systematically analyses 110 postgraduate theses in architecture completed in Turkey over subsequent decades. These theses, identified through keyword searches in national academic databases, are examined using discourse analysis to trace how *gecekondu* has been conceptualised as both a central research focus and an empirical site. Ultimately, the article offers a nuanced perspective on how *gecekondu* has contributed to the politicisation of architectural discourse and redefined the epistemological boundaries of architectural knowledge production in Turkey.

Discourse of g*ecekondu* in the political context of Turkey

First legally recognised in 1948, the term *gecekondu* has been defined differently by various official sources; however, it commonly refers to unauthorised, unhealthy dwellings that violate zoning laws.[8] The term is a compound word, firstly, with *gece*, meaning night, symbolising the illegal nature of construction, typically occurring under the cover of darkness, when oversight is minimal. The second part, *kondu*, conveys the hurried and illicit appropriation of land for shelter after migration, evoking the verb *konmak*, to settle or to perch, which implies informal occupation.

This linguistic choice carries deeper symbolic meanings related to migration, suggesting that *gecekondu* represents more than a housing issue — it encapsulates the lived experiences of migrants who have settled in cities due to economic necessity. As a response to the unequal spatial distribution of economic opportunities, *gecekondu* emerged to address the housing needs of rural migrants seeking employment in urban centres.[9] The description of these low-cost shelters as 'unhealthy' highlights the broader issue of urban poverty, which is not merely a housing problem but a spatial manifestation of social injustice and inequality across various dimensions.

On the other hand, the discursive construction of the term not only criminalises this form of settlement but also emphasises its socio-economic significance, marking it as a critical phenomenon in Turkey's political and urban history.[10] Given the significance of this social stratum in supplying the labour force required by rapidly expanding urban economies, *gecekondu* emerged as a pragmatic housing solution for low-income rural migrants amid Turkey's rapid urbanisation. However, *gecekondu* settlements have embodied inherent

contradictions; many residents expressed dissatisfaction with precarious, low-wage employment and actively sought alternative livelihoods to attain financial security.[11] These contradictions were not limited to economic dissatisfaction but also manifested in the physical and spatial conditions of everyday life. The lack of adequate infrastructure and social services, combined with the improvised nature of these dwellings, has resulted in substandard and unhealthy living conditions that fail to provide a livable spatial environment for *gecekondu* residents.[12]

During the 1970s, socialist organisations began to incorporate the *gecekondu* phenomenon into their political agenda and published manifestos and newspapers to mobilise *gecekondu* residents around demands for improved socio-economic conditions by employing strategic phrases, such as '*biz halkız*' ['we are the people'] and '*halk güçleri*' ['people's forces'].[13] These rhetorical strategies were materialised in the urban landscape through graffiti, murals, and slogans inscribed on the walls of *gecekondu* settlements. Such acts of symbolic inscription served as a form of spatial appropriation, redefining these neighbourhoods not as sites of illegality because of their mode of construction and location on unauthorised land, but as arenas of political expression and resistance. In this climate, *gecekondu* underwent a semiotic transformation, emerging as a discursive tool through which broader critiques of labour exploitation and social injustice were articulated.

This period, preceding the 1980 military coup and its ensuing authoritarian regime, marked a critical juncture in Turkey's history, characterised by intensified ideological polarisation, widespread student and labour mobilisations, and an expanding social consciousness. Amid this turbulent landscape, some neighbourhoods[14] became epicentres of political activism, where socialist movements reinterpreted urban poverty through the lens of structural injustice and collective resistance.[15] *Gecekondu* thus emerged as a discursive expression of spatial justice and the 'right to the city' through a critical engagement with the politics of space, ultimately contributing to the transformation of architectural theory and language in Turkey.[16]

Architectural interpretation of g*ecekondu* in the 1970s

The escalation of student and labour movements in the 1970s, driven by broader social demands, catalysed the emergence of critical discourses within academia. During this transformative period, universities came to be regarded not merely as centres for academic and technical knowledge production but also as active arenas for social transformation. Demands for democratic participation in all spheres of governance gained prominence in scholarly debates, prompting a critical re-evaluation of the relationship between educational institutions and society.

Within this context, architectural education in Turkey underwent a profound reassessment of its institutional frameworks.[17] These discussions gained visibility through educational conferences, congresses, and seminars convened at various universities (Fig. 2). The 1976 Architectural Education Seminar organ-

Figure 2.
The first open forum jointly organised by student organisations of the faculties of architecture at Ankara State Academy of Engineering and Architecture, Karadeniz Technical University, and Middle East Technical University, together with the Ankara Branch of the Chamber of Architects, was held on 27 April 1974. In 'Eğitim Sürecinde Karşılaşılan Sorunlar' ['Problems Encountered in the Education Process', *Mimarlık*, 133 (1974), 15–20 (p. 20), compiled by Mine Kuban.

ised by the Chamber of Architects placed a particular emphasis on structuring architectural education within a democratic and participatory framework, reflecting calls for spatial justice and the 'right to the city'. The seminar underscored the importance of faculty–student dialogue, advocating for collective decision-making mechanisms in shaping curricula, pedagogical models, and research agendas, and emphasised an active collaboration between educational institutions and democratic organisations for the broader societal benefit.

The discourse on the 'Democratic University' was formally articulated in the Chamber of Architects of Turkey's declaration at the 2nd Regional Architects' Education Meeting of the International Union of Architects (1979). This declaration asserted that democracy should not be confined to internal governance and pedagogical models but must also encompass the university's broader role in generating collective solutions to social problems through sustained engagement with diverse social constituencies.[18] Consequently, architecture was increasingly conceptualised as a discipline embedded with social and ethical responsibilities. Within this framework, architectural education assumed a pivotal role, positioning itself as an instrument of social transformation, and architects as 'agents of change' or advocates of social justice in addressing urban challenges through the democratisation of education.

Mimarlık magazine, the publication of the Chamber of Architects, emerged as a key platform for documenting and disseminating the transformation of architectural education within its broader political context. Throughout the decade, the journal critically engaged with the socio-economic challenges posed by unregulated urbanisation in Turkey. The discourse it cultivated — largely

institutionalised under the auspices of the Chamber — played a decisive role in shaping architectural thought. During this period, debates increasingly centred on the proliferation of *gecekondu* settlements, which emerged outside the jurisdiction of conventional architectural practice. These settlements were framed as forms of spatial insurgency — subversive responses that contested the established spatial order.

Socialist groups identified *gecekondu* neighbourhoods as pivotal sites for political organisation, recognising their potential to mobilise diverse populations of rural migrants, often differentiated by ethnic and religious backgrounds, around common social demands. The intensifying ideological polarisation of the 1970s, marked by grassroots activism and calls for participatory governance, embedded anti-capitalist ideas within the socio-spatial fabric of *gecekondu* neighbourhoods.[19] This ideological orientation resonated within architectural discourse, which increasingly engaged with socialist thought, reframing architectural practice in terms of social justice and the 'right to the city'. The architectural intelligentsia situated *gecekondu* within Turkey's broader housing crisis and argued that spatial discussions must be grounded in principles of spatial justice. These debates emerged in response to rapid industrialisation-led urbanisation, which exacerbated structural inequalities and deepened the socio-economic divide for rural-to-urban migrants.

Although the second paragraph of Article 49 of the Turkish Constitution mandated state intervention to meet the housing needs of low-income families, critics contended that demolition policies and market-driven strategies often served to intensify social stratification.[20] Within this critical framework, scholars and professional organisations asserted that state-led housing policies functioned primarily as instruments of capitalist accumulation rather than as genuine responses to informal housing needs. By prioritising models contingent on high purchasing power, these policies systematically marginalised the urban labour force, largely composed of rural migrants, and relegated them to precarious living conditions. A report by the Chamber of Architects emphasised that urban restructuring efforts, which displaced *gecekondu* settlements to peripheral areas, only reinforced social injustice.[21] These policies restricted access to essential urban services and excluded residents from full participation in urban life, further entrenching socio-economic marginalisation.

The report conceptualised urban space as both a site of production and a domain of lived experience, emphasising the necessity of equal social rights within a democratic framework grounded in collective participation. It posited that meaningful social transformation in Turkey depended on addressing the dialectical relationship between material and structural conditions, and that *gecekondu* settlements should be acknowledged as vital nodes of urban life. The focus on *gecekondu* extended beyond its physical form as a symptom of housing crisis; it also encompassed its role in spatial production, cultural dynamics, social relations, and the emergence of alternative urbanisation models challenging capitalist spatial logic.[22]

Within this framework, a participatory model of spatial production was advocated — one that emphasised the necessity of multi-actor design and planning

processes incorporating user participation, thereby embedding social needs into spatial practices.[23] The socio-economic conditions of *gecekondu* neighbourhoods, which operated largely outside capitalist production modes, demanded a critical reconfiguration of architectural theory and methodology through a socialist lens.[24] In this redefined discourse, 'participation' emerged as a central tenet, aligned with the values of socialist organisations active in *gecekondu* neighbourhoods.[25] By the late 1970s, an increasing emphasis was placed on expanding the group of actors shaping development plans to include local organisations, unions, universities, and professional chambers — moving beyond the traditional dominance of governmental and bourgeois interests. The creation of a democratic urban environment thus required a strong emphasis on locality, contextual specificity, and spatial justice.[26]

Accordingly, architectural education was reconceived as a field that must transcend top-down design logic and engage in direct, sustained collaboration with space users. The architect was no longer seen merely as a technical expert but as an active agent in a collective and democratic process of spatial production — aligned with the notion of the 'people's freedom to create their environment'. From this perspective, housing for rural migrants transitioning to urban life was to be informed by local cultural practices and social relations. This challenged dominant educational paradigms, which traditionally framed human needs through physiological or anthropometric determinism. Consequently, design methodologies premised on such deterministic assumptions were to be critically reassessed in favour of socially embedded, context-responsive strategies.[27]

This new pedagogical orientation called for the integration of diverse cultural and social structures into design processes as a means of resisting standardisation. It also demanded a reconciliation between architectural design and urban planning, long treated as separate disciplines in educational curricula. Rather than relying on top-down interventions shaped by rigid societal structures, this approach promoted architectural solutions tailored to small-scale, adaptable social units.[28] Architectural education, thus reconfigured, sought to cultivate a design ethos attuned to the specific social, economic, and cultural conditions of individuals. Spatial production was envisioned as a dynamic process capable of accommodating social development, adaptability, and relational complexity. Two foundational principles were emphasised: (a) reproducibility and expandability, and (b) creativity and adaptability. This framework — termed 'social architecture' — was proposed as a paradigm for sustainable urbanism, one that integrated cultural diversity, addressed economic inequalities, and responded to demographic transformations.[29]

Gecekondu neighbourhoods increasingly became central to architectural discourse, serving as lenses through which to explore the intersection of social conditions and spatial production. Constructed by rural migrants using limited resources, these self-built dwellings provided empirical models of vernacular practices capable of addressing urban social issues within democratic and participatory frameworks. In the report, '*Gecekondu* in the Capitalist Process', such settlements were defined as 'makeshift houses built with old materials

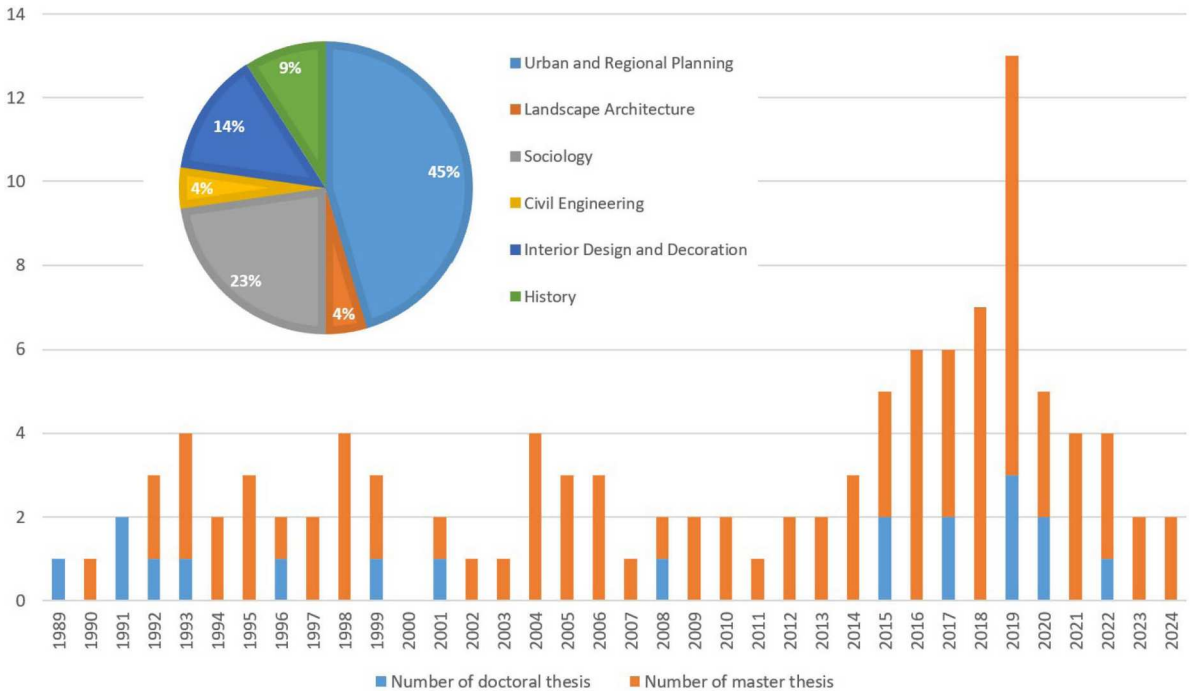
and parts found or purchased very cheaply, usually on public land occupied collectively with the cooperation of neighbors and relatives'.[30] Initially conceived as low-cost shelters, *gecekondu* evolved through incremental expansion — from single-room units to multi-room dwellings — responding organically to changing family needs. Rooted in local contexts, these neighbourhoods exemplified the values of derivability, developability, creativity, and adaptability — principles that gained increasing traction in the 1970s architectural pedagogy (Fig. 3).

The environmental features of *gecekondu* neighbourhoods also became a focal point. Often located near green urban zones, these settlements preserved elements of rural agricultural practices, contributing to urban food production and the maintenance of green spaces. In this way, *gecekondu* neighbourhoods embodied a form of environmentally sustainable urbanism rooted in collective spatial production. By integrating social and ecological concerns, these settlements offered alternative models of urban development that challenged prevailing paradigms and enriched architectural theory and pedagogy.[31]

Beyond their physical and ecological dimensions, *gecekondu* neighbourhoods played a crucial role in cultivating social solidarity among migrants. They functioned not only as responses to housing scarcity but also as spaces for maintaining rural social networks and cultural continuity. The collaborative nature of land occupation and construction fostered strong social bonds and enabled organised responses to urban challenges. These solidarities were institutionalised in architectural education and informed recommendations in commission reports produced by academic and professional architects, particularly those affiliated with the Ankara Branch of the Chamber of Architects. These reports called for elevating *gecekondu* environments to the standards that society should offer its workers — both physically and socially — while asserting the 'right to the city' for all urban residents.[32]

Accordingly, it was contended that architectural education must be reconceived not as a hierarchical transmission of knowledge, but as a politically conscious and collaborative endeavour — one that engages directly with working-class populations and fosters critical awareness of capitalist urban processes.[33] Migration, as a central theme, redefined architectural discourse on rural-urban relations, while the contributions of migrants were recognised as enriching the cultural heterogeneity of urban life. Rather than being criminalised, *gecekondu* residents were positioned as active agents in the production of urban culture.[34]

Ultimately, it was asserted that architecture is inherently embedded in its social context and that architectural education must cultivate critical consciousness.[35] During the 1970s, the architectural intelligentsia became increasingly politicised, infusing architectural discourse with socialist terminology. *Gecekondu* thus emerged not only as a subject of pedagogical experimentation but also as a focal point for interdisciplinary theoretical inquiry, particularly within architectural postgraduate theses that have continued to shape academic discourse to this day.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Conceptual construction of g*ecekondu* in architectural theses since the 1980s

Figure 3.
A case for the incremental production process of gecekondu, Hıdırlıktepe, photographed by and courtesy of Mebrur Hatunoğlu, 2006

Figure 4.
An analysis of the number of architectural theses on gecekondu and the ratio of their interdisciplinary, compiled by the author, 2024

This section explores how the *gecekondu* phenomenon, which first entered architectural discourse through intellectual debates in the 1970s, subsequently evolved into a subject of scientific inquiry within academic circles. This examines the conceptual frameworks through which *gecekondu* has been analysed in postgraduate theses produced by architecture departments in Turkish universities.[36] A total of 110 theses — 18 doctoral and 92 master's — were reviewed, all of which engaged with *gecekondu* either as a central field of inquiry or a case study. These theses, completed between 1989 and 17 October 2024, span both public and private universities across Turkey. Initially shaped by socialist ideologies, the architectural discourse on *gecekondu* often adopted a politically oriented lens, drawing theoretical and historical insights from Political Science and Public Administration. Over time, however, the scope of inquiry expanded to include perspectives from Urban and Regional Planning and Sociology, reflecting a more interdisciplinary engagement with the topic (Fig. 4).

Istanbul frequently emerges as the primary site of investigation in these theses. Since the early years of the Turkish Republic, the city has functioned as a central hub for industrial and commercial activity, attracting substantial rural-to-urban migration. Migrants fleeing economic hardship and unemployment in rural areas were drawn to Istanbul's concentrated job opportunities. However, the city's existing urban planning frameworks and infrastructure were ill-equipped to absorb this rapid population growth. In response to severe housing shortages, migrant communities established low-cost, informal shelters. This dynamic, coupled with the pace of industrialisation and infrastructural inadequacy, contributed to the proliferation of *gecekondu* settlements. Consequently, Istanbul has become a recurring and critical case study in architectural research on the subject.

In the academic discourse, *gecekondu* is often translated into English as either 'squatter housing' or 'slum'. While these translations aim to convey their informal and extra-legal character, they carry distinct discursive connotations that risk flattening their nuanced socio-political and spatial dimensions. 'Squatter housing' foregrounds unauthorised land occupation, emphasising agency and economic necessity in the act of settling without legal tenure. 'Slum', in contrast, focuses on material deprivation, highlighting the substandard living conditions and lack of access to basic services such as sanitation and electricity. Although both terms evoke images of precariousness, marginality, and exclusion from formal urban life, they fail to fully capture the historical, morphological, demographic, and ideological complexities specific to *gecekondu* within the Turkish context. *Gecekondu* not only denotes informal spatial practices but also evokes broader concerns about socio-economic inequality and political resistance, particularly in relation to socialist discourses. Therefore, this article contends that the term *gecekondu* should be preserved in its original Turkish form across academic discussions, owing to its distinctive linguistic, semantic, and discursive specificity.

The analysis of the 110 postgraduate theses was conducted by identifying the predominant conceptual frameworks employed in each work, organised by decade. Key terms and frequently recurring concepts were systematically documented for each year, allowing for a critical mapping of how *gecekondu* has been theorised over time. This approach reveals the evolving discursive foundations of architectural engagement with *gecekondu*, shedding light on how the phenomenon has been variously constructed and problematised within academic architecture literature.

This article regards the employed periodisation as a crucial methodological tool for constructing a taxonomy of conceptual shifts within architectural literature and systematically examining these changes. Given the epistemological diversity and empirical richness encompassed by the 110 theses, organising the analysis into decadal chronological frameworks facilitates a clearer understanding of evolving conceptual trends across different periods. Although these theses do not always provide contemporaneous empirical data that fully capture the evolving realities of the *gecekondu* phenomenon, their discourse patterns unmistakably reflect the academic paradigms shaped by their historical contexts. Consequently, this chronological reading enables the taxonomic classification of diverse modes of architectural knowledge — ranging from theoretical to methodological and practice-based perspectives — aiming to clarify the direction and content of transformations in *gecekondu* discourse through the systematic documentation and classification of the core conceptual sets articulated in these theses.

The 1980s

The 1980s in Turkey marked the advent of neoliberal economic reforms characterised by a shift towards market-oriented urban planning and development.[37] Influenced by IMF-backed structural adjustment programmes and export-oriented growth strategies, public investment increasingly focused on large-scale infrastructure and capital-intensive sectors, such as finance, tourism, and real estate, predominantly concentrated in metropolitan centres, leading to expanded employment opportunities.[38] To meet the resulting demand for housing and urban facilities, substantial investments were made in the construction sector, accompanied by the enactment of Mass Housing Law No. 2928. This neoliberal restructuring accelerated internal migration by generating increased employment demand in metropolitan areas, while simultaneously fuelling the expansion of *gecekondu* settlements due to an inadequate housing supply and the limited purchasing power of incoming migrants.

Within this context, the first architectural thesis on *gecekondu*, written in 1989, examined the phenomenon through three interrelated concepts: 'industrialisation', 'urbanisation', and the 'housing problem'. While 'industrialisation' framed *gecekondu* as an economic necessity for impoverished rural migrants, 'urbanisation' highlighted issues of irregularity and lack of planning, and the 'housing problem' emphasised broader social challenges, such as the right to shelter and inadequate urban infrastructure.

This thesis underscored the dialectical relationship between space and society, conceptualising *gecekondulaşma* [squatterization] as an inherent outcome of Turkey's industrial-era economic, social, and cultural structures.[39] It highlighted the role of *gecekondu* in addressing the housing crisis by emphasising its participatory production process rooted in communal solidarity among residents. Moreover, the use of local materials, traditional construction methods, limited initial investment, and phased building processes are presented as key advantages in modelling environmentally responsive, flexible, and affordable spatial production, contributing to urban development. Thus, this thesis reflected the scientific perspective of the 1980s in architecture, framing *gecekondu* not merely as a physical structure but as a complex social phenomenon that encapsulates a dynamic relationship between industrialisation, urbanisation, and social transformation.

The 1990s

The 1990s witnessed the intensification of the economic reforms initiated in the previous decade, resulting in the rapid expansion of *gecekondu* settlements on urban peripheries. During this period, large-scale state security operations in the eastern and southeastern regions of Anatolia resulted in the forced displacement of local populations, as part of state efforts to maintain control and stability in the region. These forced migrations significantly contributed to the growth of *gecekondu* settlements in cities.[40]

This not only highlighted the insufficiencies of prevailing housing policies but also prompted a more critical academic engagement with the structural determinants underlying informal urbanisation. This period marked a critical and policy-oriented architectural approach that began to interrogate power structures and urban justice. During the 1990s, 26 academic theses — comprising 6 doctoral dissertations and 20 master's theses — were produced within architecture departments across Turkey, engaging predominantly with three central concepts: 'urbanisation', 'social housing', and '*gecekondulaşma*' ['squatting']. The recurrent emphasis on these concepts reflected an evolving perspective that positioned *gecekondu* both as a necessary response to socio-economic marginalisation and as an expression of spatial resistance, thereby expanding the theoretical discourse surrounding 'urbanisation' in terms of city planning, land tenure, and social solidarity.[41]

A significant portion of these examined *gecekondu* prevention zones established under Türkiye's *Gecekondu* Law, evaluating them as ineffective mechanisms for curbing illegal construction and inadequate frameworks for developing fully serviced settlements for low-income populations. The limited capacity of housing produced in these zones to accommodate rural migrants, combined with their inaccessibility due to high costs, was frequently cited as evidence of the law's failure to achieve its objectives for preventing '*gecekondulaşma*'.[42]

This shortcoming was also conceptualised not merely as a legal deficiency but also as a planning challenge, with settlement projects seen as intertwined with broader industrialisation policies, population, and employment policies. In light of these interdependencies, it was argued that local governments must adopt a

more proactive role in the development of 'social housing' by implementing systematic construction protocols and regulatory standards — governing not only the quality and cost of materials but also the allocation of building land — to ensure both affordability and long-term sustainability.[43] Through these critiques, architectural discourse in the 1990s increasingly incorporated terminologies and analytical frameworks from urban theory, signalling a significant shift toward interdisciplinary engagement in the study of *gecekondu* settlements (Fig. 5).

The 2000s

The 2000s marked a period of accelerated spatial transformation in *gecekondu* neighbourhoods in Turkey. With the enactment of the Municipality Law (Law No. 5393), municipalities were granted the authority to declare specific areas as 'urban transformation and development zones' and to develop projects in

Year	Concepts		
1990	Urban space	Urbanization	Social houses
1991	Squatting	Human-environment interaction	Social houses
1992	Squatting	Urban space	Urban design
1993	Urbanization	Social houses	Squatting
1994	Dwelling house	Urban poverty	Urbanization
1995	Urbanization	Urban morphology	Sustainable development
1996	Squatting	Social house	Urbanization
1997	Social houses	Dwelling house	Housing
1998	Squatting	Urbanization	Urban poverty
1999	Social houses	Squatting	Urbanization

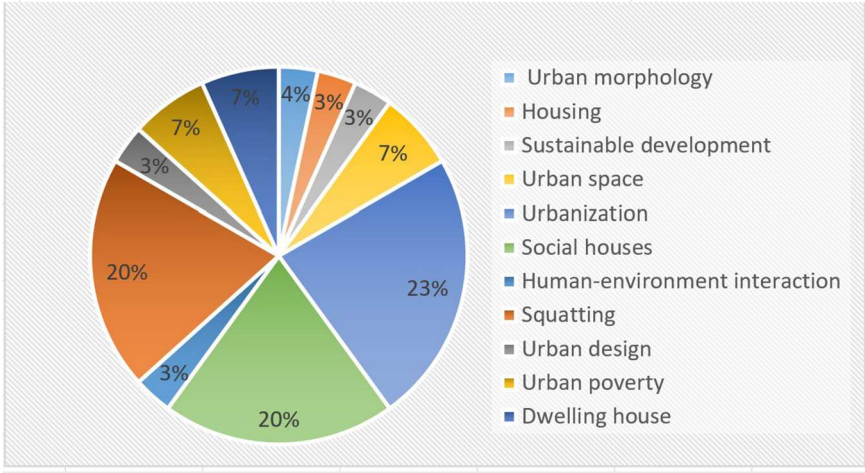

Figure 5.
An analysis of the range of conceptual frameworks in architectural theses on gecekondu in the 1990s, compiled by the author, 2024

collaboration with the private contractors. This provided a legal framework that facilitated urban redevelopment initiatives. In practice, these transformations were largely driven by agreements known as *flat-for-land* exchanges, in which residents handed over their land rights in return for flats in newly constructed buildings, leading to the rapid demolition of *gecekondu* dwellings and their replacement with apartment buildings. Enabled by municipal zoning regulations, this process fundamentally reshaped the urban fabric, introducing new housing typologies, infrastructures, and morphological characteristics into formerly informal neighbourhoods.

Within this context of rapid urban change, a total of 19 architectural theses — comprising 2 doctoral dissertations and 17 master's theses — were produced across Turkey, introducing new conceptual frameworks distinct from previous discussions: 'human-environment interaction', 'space usage', and 'traditional dwelling'. The concept of 'human-environment interaction' investigated how residents negotiated their spatial environments, adapted to urban conditions, and engaged in the construction of everyday life. *Gecekondu* was conceptualised as a self-organised spatial response to the exclusionary mechanisms of formal urban planning — a living environment shaped by immediate needs and evolving social dynamics.[44]

Through the lens of 'space usage', these examined how transformations in the built environment — whether in urban renewal zones or newly planned settlements — impacted the social and economic fabric of the city and redefined the relationship between space and its users.[45] Given the specific implications of these changes for *gecekondu* neighbourhoods, it was emphasised that new developments must respond to the spatial dynamics and lived needs of residents. Accordingly, it was argued that local projects should be grounded in detailed case studies, ensuring that planning and design models were informed by the everyday practices and lived experiences of their users.

Similarly, the concept of 'traditional dwelling' enabled the examination of how architectural forms and lifestyles rooted in rural areas were transplanted into the urban settings, facilitating an analysis of the cultural transition from 'rural' to 'urban'. By investigating the continuities between traditional housing typologies and *gecekondu* settlements, the spatial dynamics of cultural life within these environments were reconsidered as potential models for future urban developments.[46] By engaging with these conceptual perspectives, architectural scholars reframed *gecekondu* as a socio-cultural structure, moving beyond its conventional classification as an 'irregular settlement' and recognising its active role in shaping urban development (Fig. 6).

The 2010s

Building upon the proliferation of apartment buildings that reshaped *gecekondu* areas in the 2000s, the 2010s marked a shift towards more centralised and large-scale transformation initiatives, predominantly led by the Mass Housing Administration (*Toplu Konut İdaresi*, TOKİ). Established in 1984

Year	Concepts		
2000			
2001	Traditional dwelling	Space Usage	Mass houses
2002	Urban space	Urban design	Space Usage
2003	Urban poverty	Housing Policies	Housing Policies
2004	Space Usage	Traditional dwelling	Urbanization
2005	Urban Transformation	Space Usage	Housing Policies
2006	Urban Transformation	Human-Environment Interaction	Urban renewal
2007	Traditional dwelling	Human-Environment Interaction	Housing
2008	Human-Environment Interaction	Urban poverty	Urbanization
2009	Gentrification	Human-Environment Interaction	Traditional dwelling

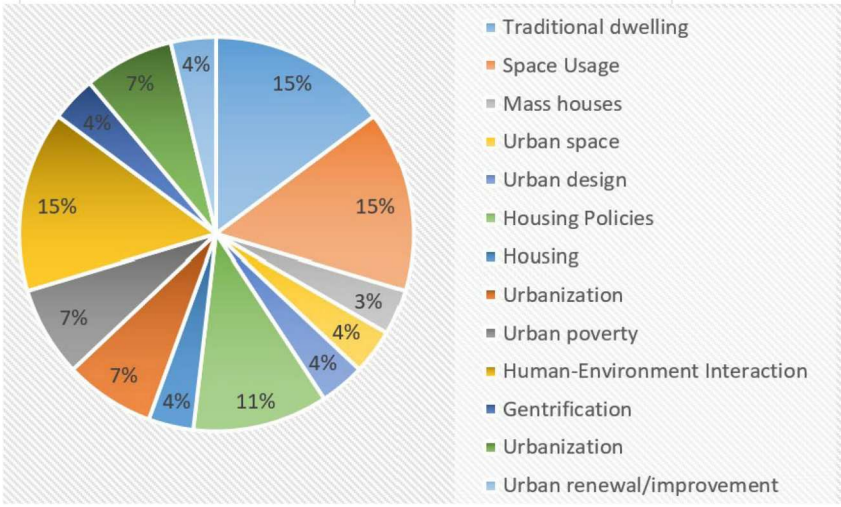

Figure 6.
An analysis of the range of conceptual frameworks in architectural theses on gecekondu in the 2000s, compiled by the author, 2024

(under Law No. 2985) to provide affordable housing and regulate informal settlement growth, TOKİ emerged as a dominant actor in **state-led redevelopment**, implementing standardised residential projects across the country. With the issuance of Decree Law No. 648, the authority of the Ministry of Environment and Urbanisation was significantly expanded, reinforcing centralised control over urban **planning and implementation** processes. As a result, TOKİ, operating under this ministry, became one of the leading agencies in national-scale housing provision, further consolidating its role in shaping urban landscapes.[47] Consequently, *gecekondu* neighbourhoods became key targets for redevelopment, typically involving the demolition of existing structures and their replacement with uniform high-rise apartment complexes.

This decade also witnessed a marked increase in academic engagement, with 7 doctoral dissertations and 40 master's theses in architecture addressing the *gecekondu* phenomenon. These works increasingly adopted the concepts of 'urban transformation', 'urban renewal', and 'stakeholder participation' as central analytical frameworks. Within the 'urban transformation' discourse, *gecekondu* areas were frequently portrayed as transitory and underdeveloped spaces requiring modernisation — a perspective that aligned with state policies advocating for their replacement with formally planned environments. However, many theses critically interrogated TOKİ's top-down interventions, arguing that such practices often disregarded the socio-cultural fabric of neighbourhoods and the lived experiences of their residents. Scholars emphasised the need for housing policies attuned to geographic, climatic, and socio-cultural specificities, underscoring the limitations of TOKİ's homogenised, typological approach.[48]

By contrast, the 'urban renewal' framework promoted more incremental and participatory strategies aimed at revitalising *gecekondu* areas without displacing their residents. Rather than complete demolition, this approach sought to enhance physical conditions and improve the quality of life while preserving existing community structures. Its overarching aim was the creation of sustainable, inclusive environments that resist socio-spatial marginalisation.[49]

The concept of 'stakeholder participation' further enriched the discourse by highlighting the significance of inclusive planning practices. Many theses framed participatory processes not merely as procedural tools but as mechanisms for ensuring spatial justice, social legitimacy, and long-term sustainability. A recurring critique addressed the systematic exclusion of *gecekondu* residents from decision-making processes, resulting in friction between local communities and public institutions. Effective stakeholder participation was thus conceptualised as requiring multi-actor collaboration, institutional coordination, and transparent communication mechanisms.[50] By integrating these conceptual approaches, architectural scholarship in the 2010s expanded the *gecekondu* discourse, offering multidimensional analyses that linked spatial strategies to broader socio-political dynamics. In doing so, these theses positioned *gecekondu* not only as an object of transformation but also as an active agent shaping urban trajectories (Fig. 7).

The 2020s

The 2020s marked a period in which the spatial implications of urbanisation policies in Turkey became especially pronounced. Rapid urban expansion, fuelled by population growth and capital accumulation strategies, positioned the construction sector as a central driver of economic activity. During this time, housing production exceeded basic needs and evolved into a lucrative investment instrument, transforming residential units into commodities circulated through financial markets. As a result, urban transformation efforts increasingly targeted *gecekondu* neighbourhoods, rebranding them as high-

Year	Concepts		
2010	Urban poverty	Urban space	Urban transformation
2011	Housing	Traditional dwelling	Urban renewal/improvement
2012	Urbanization	Urban transformation	Urban renewal/improvement
2013	Urban transformation	Urban space	Gentrification
2014	Stakeholder Participation	Urban transformation	Urbanization
2015	Urban renewal/improvement	Urban transformation	Housing
2016	Urban renewal/improvement	Stakeholder participation	Urban transformation
2017	Stakeholder participation	Urban space	Urban renewal/improvement
2018	Urbanization	Urban transformation	Mass houses
2019	Urban transformation	Housing	Stakeholder participation

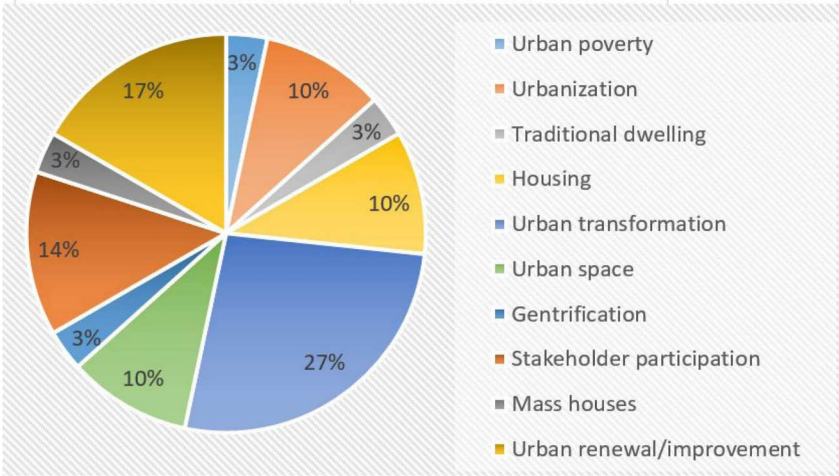

Figure 7.
An analysis of the range of conceptual frameworks in architectural theses on gecekondu in the 2010s, compiled by the author, 2024

return development zones that had been formerly peripheral and gained centrality through urban sprawl. These shifts were supported by a series of legislative instruments — particularly the expanded application of Law No. 6306 on the Transformation of Areas Under Disaster Risk, the 2021 reorganisation of the Ministry of Environment, Urbanisation and Climate Change, and the broad use of 'reserve area' designations — enabling extensive clearance and redevelopment of *gecekondu* neighbourhoods for real estate speculation. Major construction firms spearheaded the demolition of these settlements, replacing them with upscale residential complexes designed for affluent populations. This process not only reshaped the physical landscape of cities but also intensified socio-economic inequalities by reinforcing class-based spatial divisions.[51]

In this context, architectural scholars in Turkey began to critically engage with the changing urban landscape. In the first half of the 2020s, a total

of 17 architectural theses — comprising 2 doctoral dissertations and 15 master's theses — addressed the *gecekondu* phenomenon by evolving conceptual frameworks, notably 'urban transformation', 'urban renewal', 'urban morphology', and 'gentrification'. These studies adopted a multidisciplinary perspective that emphasised the sustainable reconfiguration of urban environments by integrating economic, social, and ecological dimensions. Within this framework, both national and international legal and financial instruments were scrutinised, with particular attention to environmental certifications such as LEED, which served as proxies for ecological accountability and long-term urban resilience. Technological developments further reinforced the discourse of sustainability, advancing frameworks that emphasised minimising human spatial impact, reducing environmental degradation, implementing efficient resource management, and enforcing ecologically informed land-use policies. Many theses called for a global outlook that accommodates climatic and geographical diversity while simultaneously advocating for improved rural conditions as a strategy to curb internal migration and mitigate unplanned urbanisation.[52]

The concept of 'urban morphology' was especially instrumental in unpacking the organic expansion and spatial logic of *gecekondu* settlements, focusing on neighbourhood-level dynamics and informal construction typologies. These analyses illuminated how irregular and self-built urban forms were embedded within broader patterns of formal urban growth. Empirical methodologies — particularly case studies and urban mapping — were widely employed to examine the effects of transformation projects on the socio-spatial fabric of gecekondu neighbourhoods across diverse Turkish cities.[53]

Crucially, many of these theses approached urban transformation through an economic-political lens, interpreting large-scale redevelopment projects as vehicles of gentrification. The replacement of informal settlements with high-end housing was shown to not only alter the material configuration of the city but also displace long-standing communities, eroding social diversity and accelerating processes of socio-economic polarisation.[54] Compared to previous decades, the 2020s saw a notable expansion of the architectural discourse on *gecekondu*, with the integration of concepts such as 'urban morphology' and 'gentrification' enabling a more nuanced, critical, and multi-scalar analysis of how urban space is restructured under contemporary conditions of neoliberal urbanism (Fig. 8).

To summarise, architectural theses beginning in 1989 predominantly addressed the *gecekondu* phenomenon through the lens of the housing crisis precipitated by industrialisation and rural-to-urban migration. From the 1990s onwards, the discourse gradually shifted to frame *gecekondu* settlements within the context of social housing strategies, shaping both analytical perspectives and policy-oriented responses. In the 2000s, interdisciplinary collaborations gained prominence, expanding the scope of inquiry to encompass broader socio-spatial analyses, as urban transformation policies accelerated through municipal initiatives and public-private partnerships

Year	Concepts		
2020	Urban morphology	Gentrification	Urban renewal/improvement (sustainability)
2021	Urban transformation	Urban morphology	Urban renewal/improvement (sustainability)
2022	Urban morphology	Traditional dwelling	Urban transformation
2023	Stakeholder Participation	Urban space	Gentrification
2024	Urban morphology	Gentrification	Urban renewal/improvement (sustainability)

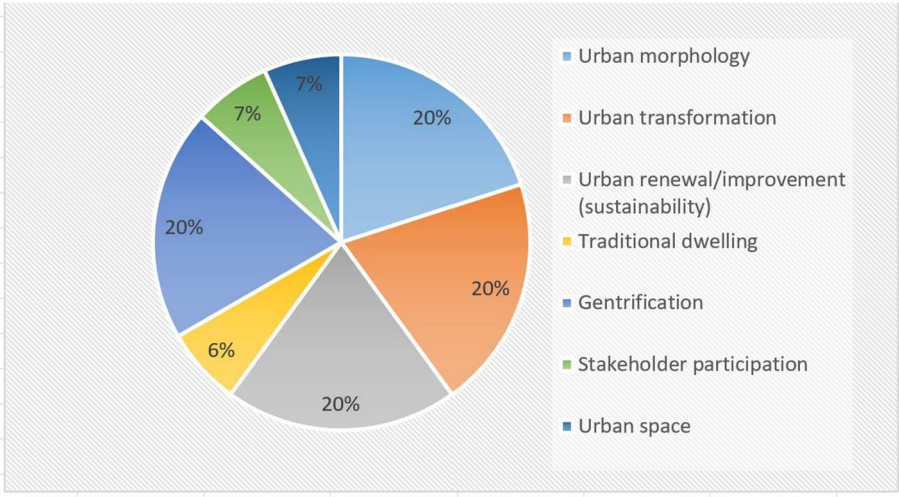

Figure 8.
An analysis of the range of conceptual frameworks in architectural theses on gecekondu in the 2020s, compiled by the author, 2024

that restructured *gecekondu* areas via flat-for-land exchanges and zoning-based redevelopment. These studies focused on the everyday lives of *gecekondu* residents, their spatial practices, and the representational dimensions of their environments. The surge in academic work on *gecekondu* during the 2010s corresponded not only to the increasing influence of the Mass Housing Administration (TOKİ) but also to growing critical engagement with large-scale urban transformation projects marked by demolition and displacement (Fig. 9). As TOKİ-led interventions became a centralised apparatus for urban redevelopment, standardising housing production across diverse urban contexts, scholars began to interrogate dominant housing policies more explicitly, highlighting the socio-spatial consequences of rapid urban restructuring. This critical trajectory has continued into the 2020s, with these adopting more comprehensive urban planning frameworks and analysing transformation processes through economic-political lenses, particularly focusing on the dynamics of neoliberal urbanism supported by legislative instruments. Across these decades, despite evolving conceptual frameworks, architectural scholars have consistently underscored the political nature of the *gecekondu* issue, one deeply embedded within the social and economic forces that shape urban space.

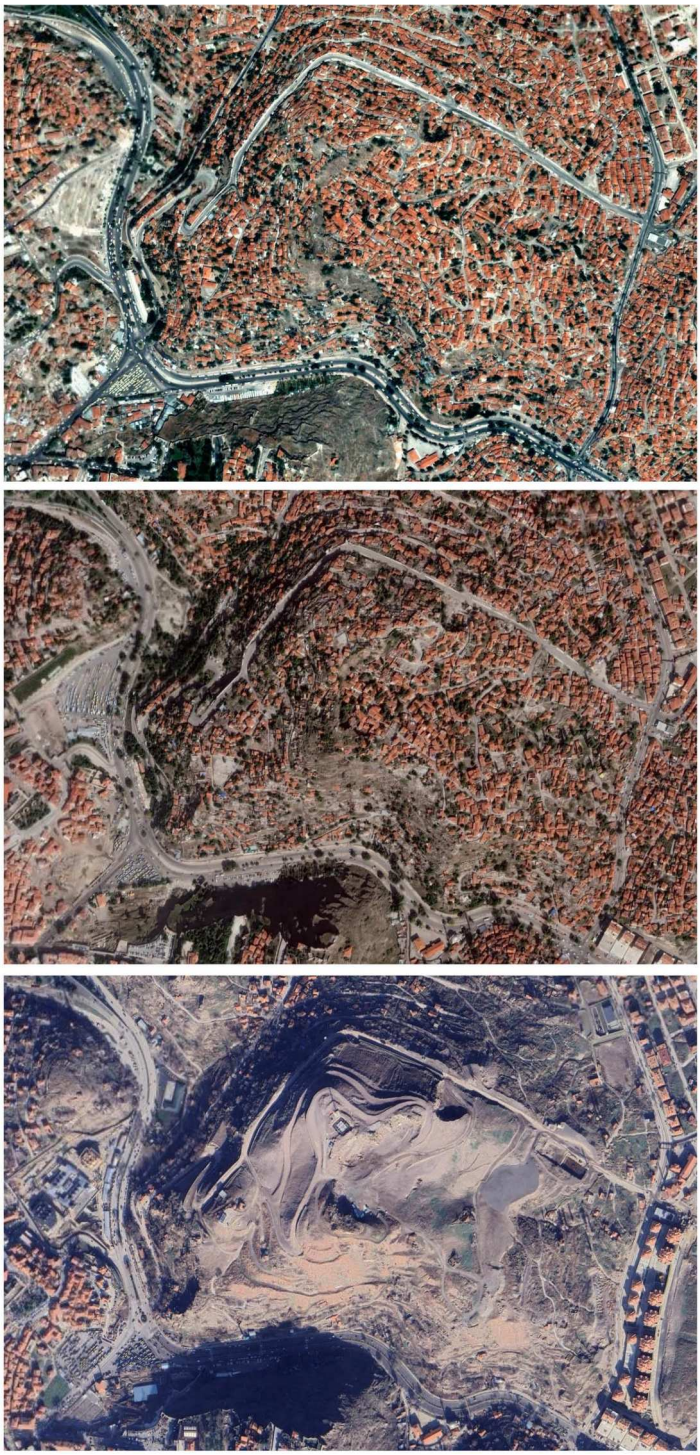

Figure 9.
The demolition of a gecekondu neighbourhood, Hıdırlıktepe, as part of an urban transformation project, captured via Google Earth, in the public domain

Conclusion

The formation and dissemination of discourse play a critical role in shaping knowledge and its social structures. This article has focused on the linguistic and conceptual interpretation of *gecekondu* as a key urban phenomenon in Turkey by sheltering a large portion of the urban population after industrialisation. That is why the production of discourse surrounding *gecekondu* is not merely a spatial interpretation of the built environment but a political process that frames the social and economic landscape of Turkey.

In this respect, *gecekondu* emerged not only as a phenomenon linked to spatial conditions of rural-to-urban migration but also as a politicised concept shaped by state policies and socialist ideologies in architectural discourse by intellectuals and scholars since the 1970s. Through the production of discourse on *gecekondu*, architectural theory, and language have increasingly adopted a more politicised lens, engaging with the socio-economic realities that shape these settlements. By emphasising the lived spaces of *gecekondu* settlements and the structural conditions of urban poverty, this discourse has introduced a critical perspective to architecture. Ultimately, the conceptualisation of *gecekondu* within architectural discourse has deepened the discipline's engagement with the intersection of space and politics, compelling it to address the power dynamics embedded in urban development in Turkey.

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Disclosure statement

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14. Migration from rural to urban areas in Turkey often followed kinship networks and hometown affiliations, leading newly arrived migrants to settle near relatives or acquaintances who had previously established themselves in *gecekondu* neighbourhoods. These proximity-based settlement patterns facilitated the reproduction of familiar rural social structures and cultural practices in the urban context, contributing to the emergence of a localised habitus shaped by common dispositions. As a result, *gecekondu* neighbourhoods evolved not merely as spaces of economic necessity but as socially and culturally constructed enclaves that reflected the identities of their settlements. This process fostered differentiated spatial formations within the *gecekondu* fabric — such as 'Alevi neighbourhoods' or 'Kurdish neighborhoods' — which emerged through ethnic and sectarian distinctions. In the context of Turkey's political history, the construction of the 'ideal citizen' has been premised on a supra-identity — defined as Sunni Muslim and Turkish — positioning it as the normative standard of national belonging. Communities not encompassed by this supra-identity — such as Kurds and Alevis — were often rendered invisible or subjected to structural discrimination in social, cultural, and political domains. The shared experience of exclusion enabled these neighbourhoods to become centres of collective mobilisation for practices of solidarity and resistance. See Ece Yoltay, 'Queering Trialectics Among the Subject, Power and Space: Spatial Representations and Practices of Othered Identities In Turkey', *Identities*, 31.4 (2023), 487–505; Tahire Erman, 'A Neighborhood of "Revolutionaries" in the Urban Periphery: The Changing Meaning of the Neighborhood and the Struggles and Contestations over it between the 1970s and 2000s', *İdealkent*, 2 (2010), 170–95; and Şükrü Aslan, *1 Mayıs Mahallesi: 1980 öncesi Toplumsal Mücadeleler ve Kent* [*1 May Neighborhood: Social Struggles and the City before 1980*] (İstanbul: İletişim, 2008).
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