BALAT

Irem AZAK

Contemporary Turkish Architecture

Scattered Stage

Participa-

A decentralised art ecosystem that activates forgotten spaces through collective performance and spatial adaptation.

A decentralised art ecosystem rooted in Balat, where contemporary Turkish architecture meets the performative everyday.

Adaptive Reuse

Amateur Theatre

Urban Layering

Decentralisati

Spatial Intervention

Amateur theatre becomes a tool to question façadism, historic simulation, and displacement in today's architectural practices.

PAG. 02

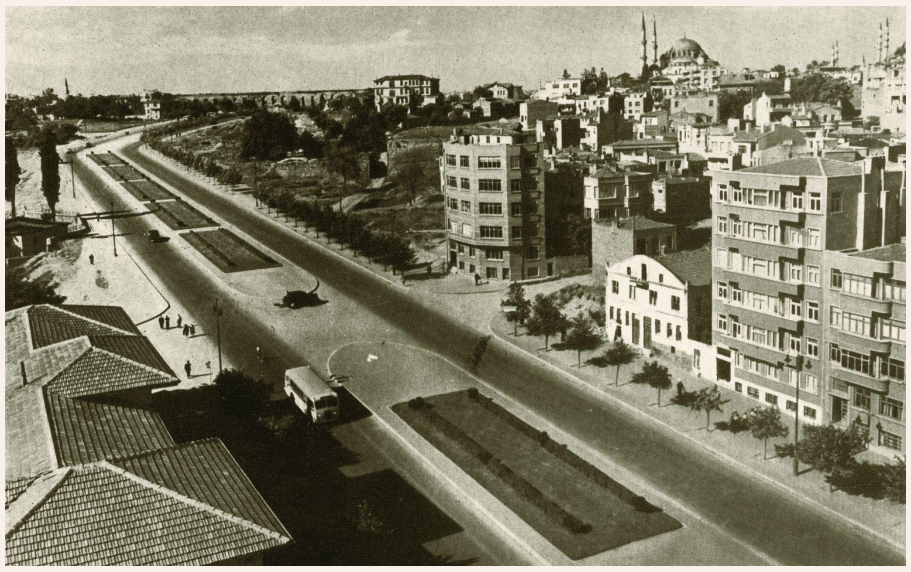
Through collective production and adaptive reuse, the project offers an alternative vision of urban space beyond neoliberal narratives.

PAG. 06

This project reimagines architecture not as a monument, but as a scattered network of informal, lived, and shared experiences.

PAG. 12

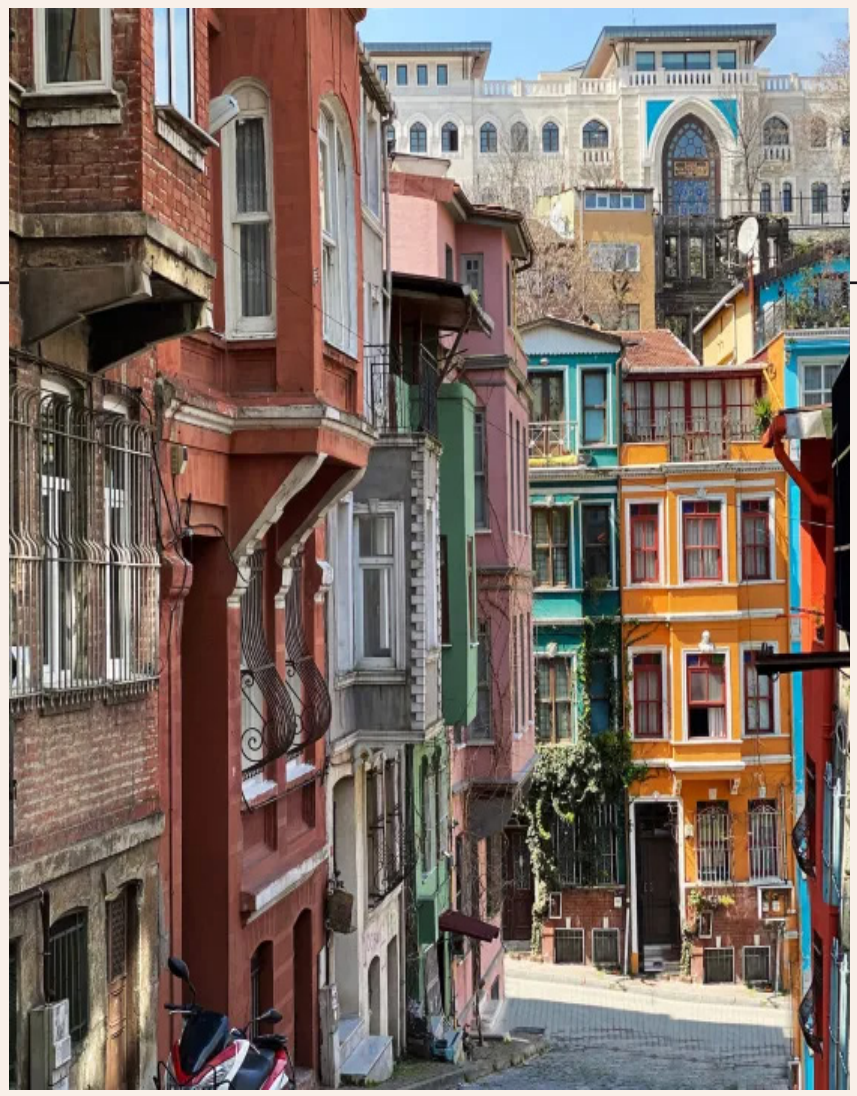
CONTENT



Introduction

This Compendium is structured as a layered narrative, combining architectural history, contextual mapping and a site-specific reading of Balat.

THIS COMPENDIUM UNFOLDS A LAYERED INVESTIGATION INTO TURKEY'S ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY, MOVING FROM NATIONAL NARRATIVES TO A NEIGHBOURHOOD-SCALE



3-From City to District:

A contextual transition from the urban scale of Istanbul to the local scale of Balat, focusing on why this district offers a meaningful ground for architectural reading.

balat

A chronological look at Turkey's architectural evolution from the early Republican era to the present, with attention to ideological and stylistic shifts.

1- A Brief History of Contemporary Turkish Architecture

-1.a - Early Republican Modernism (1923–1950)

-1.b - Second National Architectural Movement (1950–1960s)

-1.c - Pluralism and Experimentation (1970s–80s)

-1.d - Post-1980 Neoliberal Turn

-1.e - 21st Century: Identity Crisis, Speculation & Globa-

2-Urban Shifts in Istanbul: A Background Context

This section outlines how Istanbul's urban fabric has transformed since the 1990s — shaped by population growth, neoliberal policies, earthquake regulations, and gentrification — leading to architectural change, typology loss, and shifts in identity within neighbourhoods like Balat.

This booklet invites the reader to walk through Balat not only as a place, but as a living archive of architectural memory.

Introduction

In what ways have political, economic and cultural forces shaped the architectural transformation of Balat — and how can a new

Context

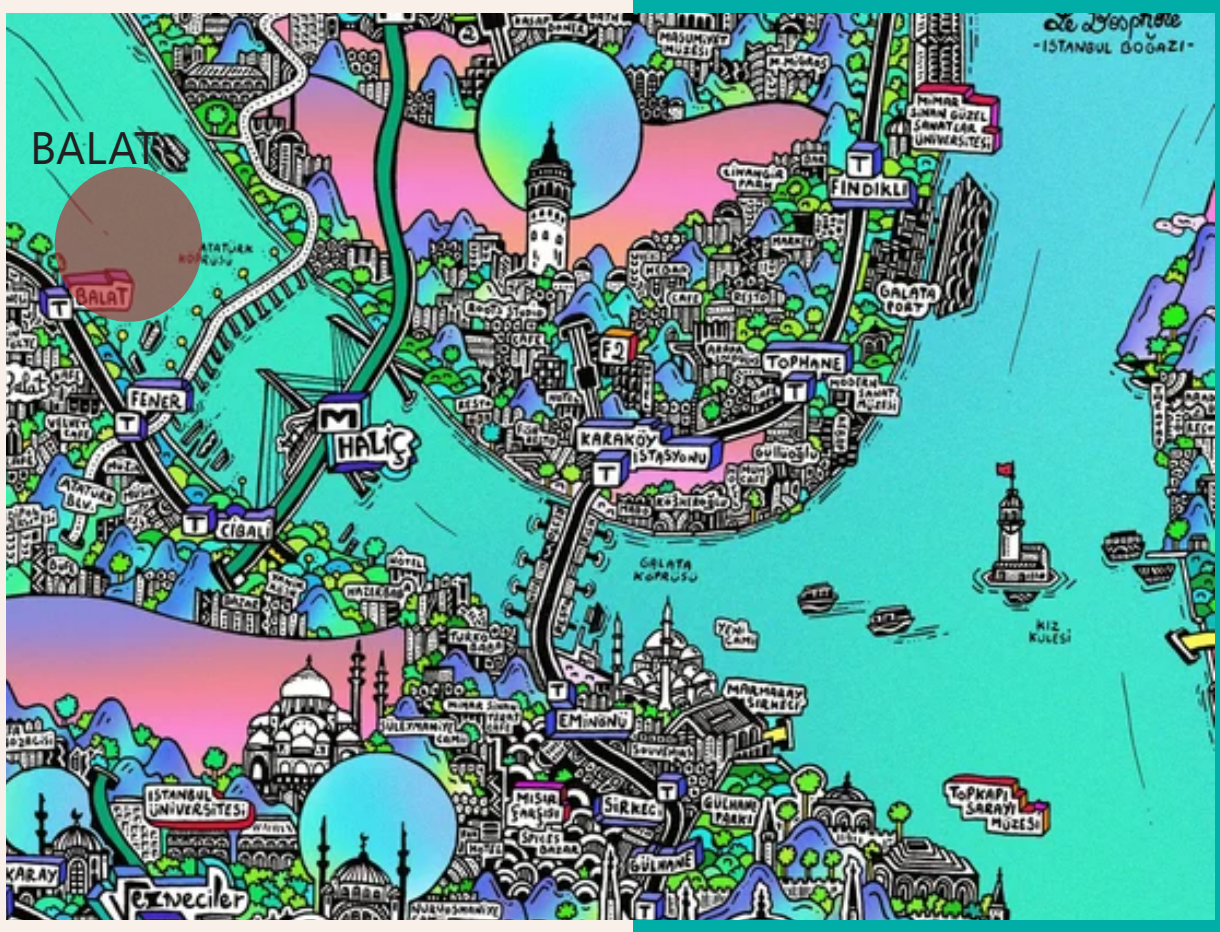
Architecture is more than the construction of space — it is a reflection of the identities, ideologies and transformations embedded within a place. This Compendium explores the evolution of contemporary Turkish architecture through a layered, site-specific reading of Balat, one of Istanbul's most historically rich and socially complex districts. It aims to understand how architectural identity is shaped, challenged or erased through time, and how a neighbourhood like Balat can serve as a micro-scale reflection of national architectural narratives.

The choice to focus on Balat stems from its unique spatial fabric, where diverse historical layers — from Ottoman wooden houses and early Republican buildings to post-1980 interventions and recent urban renewal projects — coexist, overlap, and sometimes clash. These fragments not only carry architectural value but also represent deeper political, cultural and social tensions within Turkey's urban landscape. This complexity makes Balat an ideal lens through which to examine the tensions between preservation and erasure, tradition and transformation, or ideology and everyday life.

Description here Luptas aut adi dolor am nestemo dipsam, volorrora aligeni doluptias sam adi blaborepro magnis ipsunt volupta ab in plab ipsapel iquiatque volora quuntem fugit as nis debiscia dolorem que quat es dolorest mil intcitam que dest ius re dignam sunt.Peritatias exerfereium quam utatur simene nulluptatqui unt quametur soluptatem illautectur, utatectur modic torest, simusda aut minti consequosab il eum

Framing the Research

map of istanbul



This Compendium is structured in three interconnected parts. It begins with a concise historical overview of Turkish architecture, outlining key periods and ideological shifts from the early Republic to the present. It then zooms into Istanbul to examine how urban and architectural change has been shaped by disaster, policy and market-driven forces since the 1990s. The final and central part offers a glossary of architectural and social terms observed in Balat, linking physical elements to their wider historical and cultural significance. These entries not only document what is seen but question what they mean — and what they might still become.

Rather than presenting Balat as a static site of nostalgia, this Compendium approaches it as an evolving architectural archive. It asks: what does Balat remember, what has it forgotten, and what kind of future could be imagined through design? The aim is to use this reading to inform a design proposal that responds to, rather than overwrites, the existing identity of the place — offering an alternative cultural layer through architecture.

where is balat in istanbul ?

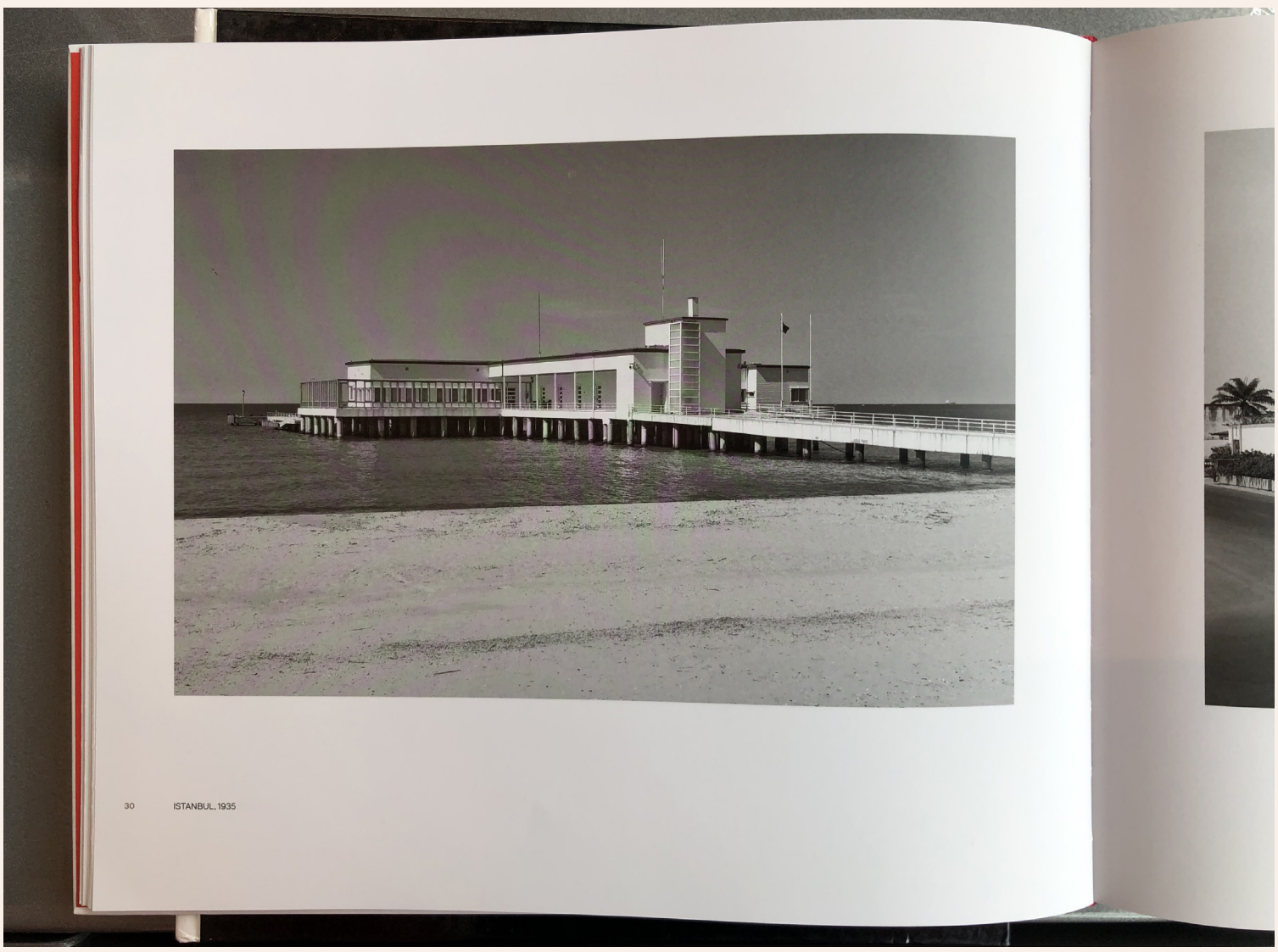
Geographically:
It sits between the neighbourhoods of Fener and Ayvansaray.
It's just a short distance from the historic peninsula — not far from landmarks like the Fatih Mosque and the Grand Bazaar.
The area slopes down towards the Golden Horn, with narrow, winding streets and a dense urban fabric.

Historically:
Balat was historically home to Istanbul's Jewish population, especially from the Byzantine and Ottoman periods.
It's known for its multi-ethnic past — where Jewish, Greek Orthodox, Armenian, and Muslim communities lived side by side.
Today, it's famous for its colourful houses, historic churches, synagogues, and a growing number of cafes and cultural venues.

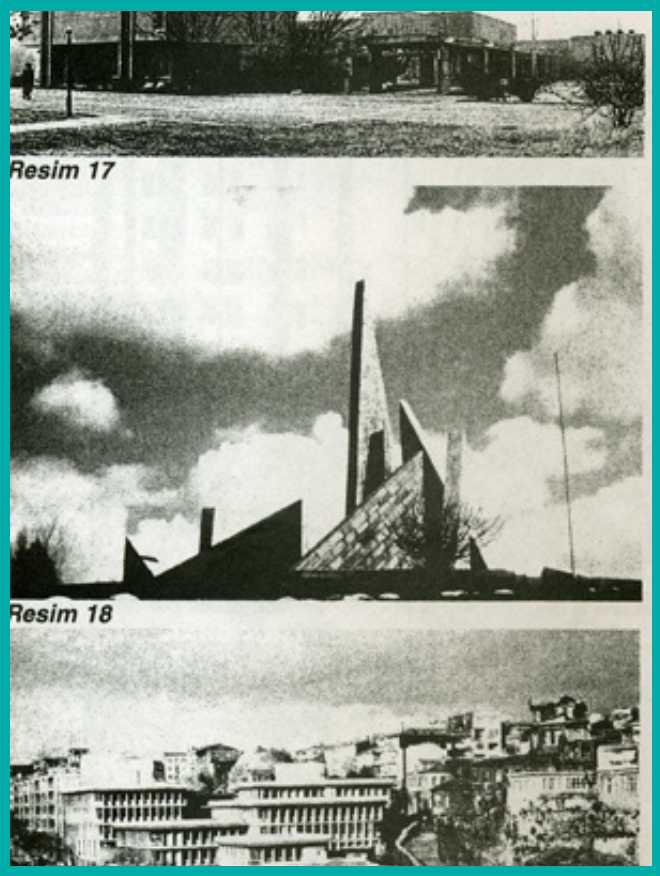
1. A Brief History of Contemporary Turkish Architecture

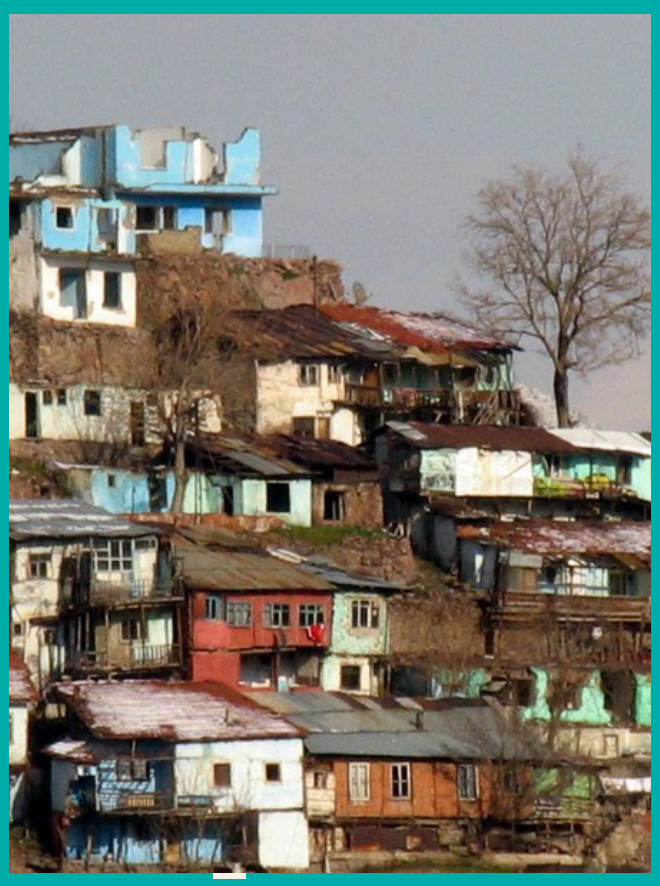
A modernist beach pavilion extending into the sea, reflecting the early 20th-century architectural emphasis on horizontality, leisure, and functionality in coastal developments.

Source: Photo from an architectural publication (exact title and author unknown).



A Periodical





Analysis of Architectural History in Turkey

-1.a - Early Republican Modernism (1923–1950)
-1.b - Second National Architectural Movement (1950–1960s)
-1.c - Pluralism and Experimentation (1970s–80s)
-1.d - Post-1980 Neoliberal Turn
-1.e - 21st Century: Identity Crisis, Speculation & Globalisation

Analysis of Architectural History in Turkıye

Before understanding the architectural transformations of modern-day Turkey, it is essential to look back at the late Ottoman period. For centuries, Ottoman architecture was characterised by its integration of Islamic forms, monumental domes, intricate ornamentation, and inward-facing residential layouts. Architecture was shaped by religious institutions, imperial patronage, and a deep hierarchy of space that reflected the social and political order of the empire. While the 19th century introduced some Western influences through Tanzimat reforms, Ottoman architecture largely remained distinct in its aesthetics, symbolism, and spatial logic.

This changed radically with the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Determined to sever ties with the imperial past, Atatürk envisioned a secular, modern, and Western-oriented state. Architecture became one of the most visible tools for communicating this new national identity. The new republic sought not only political and educational reform, but also a complete reimagination of space — from government buildings and schools to housing and public squares. In contrast to the inward, religious symbolism of Ottoman structures, Republican architecture turned outward: adopting European modernism, geometric clarity, and functional design as symbols of progress and rationality.

Public buildings were commissioned to embody the ideals of the young republic: transparency, secularism, and discipline. This was not merely a change in style, but a transformation in worldview — from empire to nation, from religious tradition to civic modernity. Architecture became a visual language of reform, a statement that the new Turkey was part of a forward-looking global order. This period, led by state-driven modernist architecture, laid the foundation for how space, identity, and ideology would remain entangled in Turkey's architectural discourse throughout the 20th century.

Atatürk's Vision in Early Republican Archi-

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk saw architecture as a tool to express the ideals of the new Republic — modern, secular, and forward-looking — and encouraged a break from Ottoman styles in favour of clean, rational forms inspired by European modernism. Atatürk supported the use of modernist principles and rational planning, especially in the new capital, Ankara. He encouraged the invitation of foreign architects and urban planners, mainly from Europe, to bring new ideas and establish a contemporary language of design. However, this modernism was not meant to erase all tradition; it aimed to create a synthesis — combining international influences with local cultural references, especially through public buildings like schools, government offices, and train stations.

In short, Atatürk viewed architecture as a political and cultural instrument — a visible expression of the Republic's progressive ideals, aiming to educate citizens and shape a modern, collective identity.

This foundational shift in architectural language — from imperial symbolism to secular modernism — was not a one-time event, but the beginning of a long, evolving dialogue between space and ideology in Turkey. While the early Republican era relied heavily on European architects and imported styles to rapidly communicate modernity, subsequent decades saw Turkish architects begin to reinterpret modernism through local needs, regional materials, and emerging cultural debates. From the 1930s to the 1950s, architectural discourse was shaped by the tension between universal ideals and national identity — a question that would remain central throughout the 20th century.

In the following decades, Turkey's architecture was continuously reshaped by changing political agendas, economic reforms, population movements, and global architectural trends. Each period — whether marked by state-led nationalism, post-war reconstruction, or neoliberal urbanisation — introduced new aesthetic languages and spatial practices. However, what remained consistent was the deep entanglement between architecture and national identity. Buildings were rarely neutral; they were active participants in shaping how the Turkish state saw itself and how it wished to be seen.

Understanding this complex and often contradictory architectural evolution is essential before analysing a specific district like Balat. As a neighbourhood layered with imperial, republican, and contemporary interventions, Balat offers a micro-scale reflection of these broader transformations. But before zooming into its narrow streets and diverse typologies, we must first trace the timeline of Turkey's architectural journey — from the idealism of early modernism to the fragmentation of today.

Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, a group of officials and planners inspecting an urban model during the early Republican period in Turkey. This image reflects the state-driven approach to modernisation and the centralised planning efforts that shaped the urban landscape.

Source: Archival photo from Turkey's early Republican era, circa 1930s

-1.a - Early Republican Modernism (1923–1950)

The Architecture of Nation-Building and Ideological Clarity

The founding of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 marked not only a political revolution but also a profound cultural and spatial rupture. Under the leadership of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the early Republican regime embarked on a radical project of Westernisation and secularisation. In this context, architecture emerged as a central medium through which the state could materialise its ideological vision — breaking ties with the Ottoman-Islamic past while visually asserting its modern and rational future.

One of the first architectural gestures of the Republic was the symbolic relocation of the capital from Istanbul to Ankara. This decision was not simply practical; it was loaded with ideological intent. Istanbul, with its centuries-long imperial grandeur, was a space dense with religious, dynastic, and multicultural associations. Ankara, on the other hand, represented a tabula rasa — a physical and psychological void upon which a new, modern state could be inscribed. The first public buildings constructed in Ankara during the 1920s and 30s — ministries, parliament buildings, schools and housing blocks — embodied this transformative narrative.

Balat's Marginal Position in the Early Republican Period (1923–1950)

During this period, Balat was largely excluded from state-led modernisation efforts. Its dense Ottoman-era fabric, narrow streets, and timber houses did not align with the new Republic's modernist ideals. While a few concrete apartment buildings began to appear in the 1930s and 40s, they remained isolated insertions. Balat slowly declined in status, as investment flowed into newer districts and wealthier residents moved away. The neighbourhood retained much of its historical character, but increasingly became seen as outdated and peripheral.

FORMAL PURISM

FRAGMENTED URBAN FABRIC

HYBRID FAÇADE AESTHETIC

STRIPPED CLASSICISM

glossary

Formal Purism /▫f▫▫ml ▫pj▫▫r▫z(▫)m/ n.
An architectural approach that emphasizes geometric clarity, clean lines, and visual order, often rejecting ornamentation in favor of compositional purity.

Fragmented Urban Fabric /▫fræ▫m▫nt▫d ▫▫▫b▫n ▫fæbr▫k/ n.
A spatial condition where the continuity of the city is broken by disjointed developments, vacant plots, or inconsistent architectural language, reflecting socio-political or economic disruption.

Hybrid Façade Aesthetic /▫ha▫br▫d f▫▫s▫▫d ▫s▫θet▫k/ n.
A design strategy combining elements from multiple styles or time periods on a building’s exterior, often blending historic references with contemporary materials or forms.

Stripped Classicism /str▫pt ▫klæs▫s▫z(▫)m/ n.
A modern reinterpretation of classical architecture where traditional proportions and symmetry are retained, but decorative elements are removed to express formal austerity and monumental presence.

The architectural language of this period was largely shaped by European modernist ideals, particularly the Bauhaus and International Style. Flat roofs, whitewashed façades, vertical windows, and the rejection of ornamentation characterised the dominant aesthetic. These formal decisions were not merely stylistic but profoundly political. The aim was to reflect an ethos of rationalism, progress, and universality, in direct opposition to the Ottoman's ornate, symbolic, and hierarchical architectural vocabulary.

The state's architectural ambition was supported by a generation of foreign architects invited to Turkey. Names such as Ernst Egli, Bruno Taut, Clemens Holzmeister, and Giulio Mongeri played formative roles in designing early Republican institutions. While their works were diverse, they shared a common purpose: to build a visual identity for the Republic that was recognisably modern and deliberately non-Ottoman. However, this top-down production of modernism also exposed tensions between imported aesthetics and local spatial practices — an issue that would resurface repeatedly in Turkish architectural discourse.

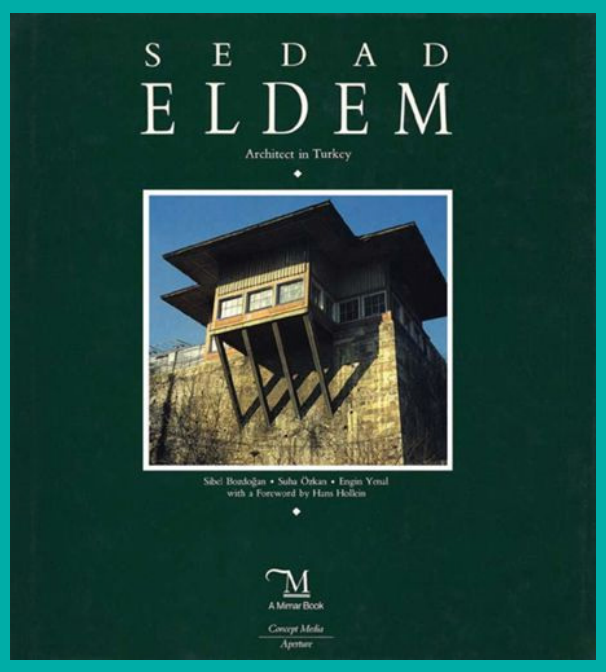
Some of Mongeri's works in Ankara: Ziraat Bank (1926-1929) and İş Bank (1929) buildings

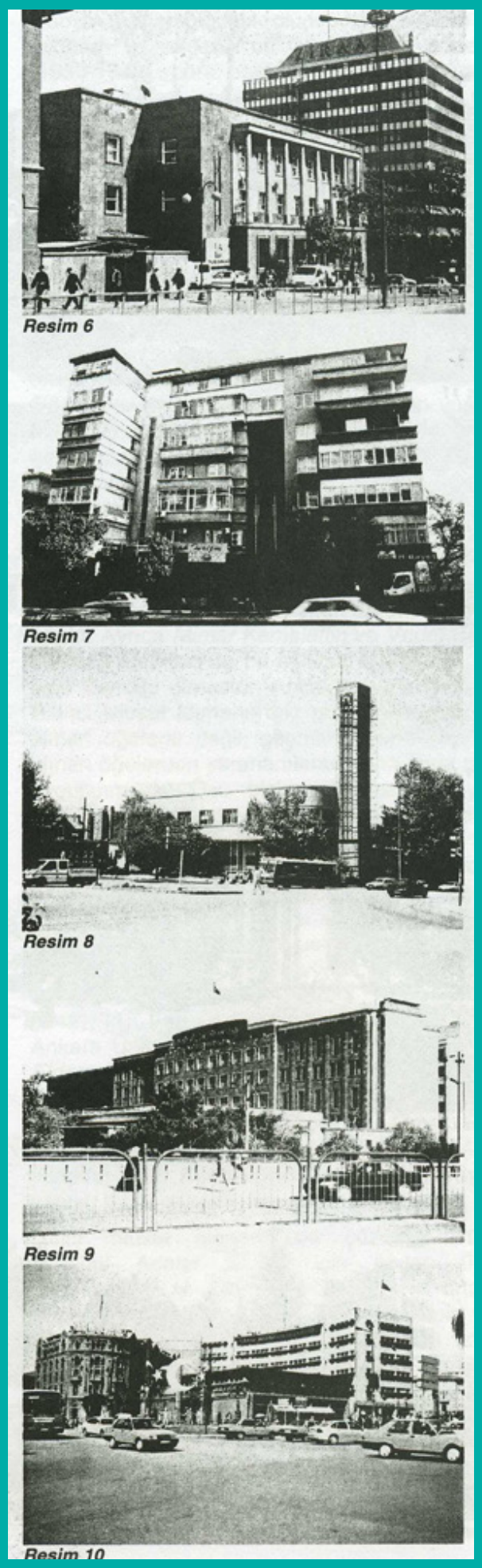
Designed by Seyfi Arkan, Florya Atatürk Marine Mansion (1935) is a notable Bauhaus style building in Istanbul.

Ankara Opera House, designed by Şevki Balmumcu (1933–34) and renovated by Paul Bonatz (1946–47).

Designed by Şekip Akalın, Ankara Central Station (1937) is a notable Art Deco design of its era.

The Faculty of Languages, History and Geography building (1937) of Ankara University was designed by Bruno Taut.





ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Sedad Hakkı Eldem
A prominent Turkish architect known for integrating the spatial logic of the traditional Turkish house into moder nist design, advocating for a contextual and vernacular approach to architecture.

Sedat Çetintaş
An early Republican architect who emphasised Ottoman classical forms and monumental aesthetics as the founda tion of a national architectural identity.

At the same time, the debate over what a national architecture should look like began to take root. Two figures exemplify this debate: Sedad Hakkı Eldem and Sedat Çetintaş. While Çetintaş advocated for a return to Ottoman imperial forms — particularly classical domes and monumental arches — Eldem sought inspiration from the spatial logic of the traditional Turkish house, especially its timber construction, inward-facing courtyards, and flexible room arrangements. For Eldem, modernity did not require rejection of tradition, but rather its reinterpretation through a rational, stripped-down lens. His approach attempted to synthesize modernist principles with vernacular sensibilities, giving rise to what he termed “Turkish House Modernism” — a regional modernity grounded in local spatial heritage.

Despite the ideological clarity of this era, housing architecture in Istanbul reflected more of a stylistic hybridity. The city, having lost its status as political capital, experienced relatively slower development in public architecture compared to Ankara. However, the private sector, particularly in neighbourhoods like Teşvikiye, Şişli, and Gümüşsuyu, witnessed the construction of residential buildings that drew from a mixture of Art Deco, neoclassical, and early modernist motifs. These apartment blocks, typically four to six stories high, often replaced traditional timber houses and reflected the aesthetic preferences of non-Muslim or upper-middle-class communities that remained in the city.

More importantly, the rise of reinforced concrete as a building material began to transform Istanbul’s urban fabric. Traditional typologies — such as wooden row houses with cumba (projecting bays) — were increasingly replaced by concrete-frame apartment blocks. This shift was not only material but also social and spatial: neighbourhood life began to lose its horizontal and relational quality, gradually giving way to anonymous, vertically arranged dwellings. Streets lost their permeability; the separation between private and public space became sharper; and shared courtyards disappeared in favour of enclosed stairwells.

While this transformation was less intense in peripheral or older districts like Balat, its effects were nevertheless visible. Scattered examples of modernist interventions from the 1930s and 40s can still be found in Balat’s street fabric — often identifiable by their simpler façades, geometric window arrangements, and reinforced concrete frames. These buildings, inserted into a predominantly Ottoman-era street texture, disrupted the rhythm of the historic built environment. Their presence suggests a shift not only in material logic but also in cultural identity, mirroring the larger ideological realignment of the early Republic.

In this sense, the story of Early Republican Modernism is not limited to the monumental avenues of Ankara or the academic circles of state-sponsored architects. It is also embedded in the micro-transformations of Istanbul’s streets, façades, and domestic interiors. And perhaps most interestingly, it survives in fragmented form in neighbourhoods like Balat — not as a dominant style, but as a trace, a contradiction, or a rupture in an otherwise continuous historical narrative.

1.b - Second National Architectural Movement (1950-1960s)

Following the intense ideological and aesthetic clarity of the early Republican period, Turkish architecture in the 1950s entered a new phase of identity construction — one that attempted to synthesise local traditions with modern architectural language, but now within a more populist and visually symbolic framework. This period is commonly referred to as the Second National Architectural Movement, and it emerged in parallel with political, economic, and cultural transformations that redefined the nature of modernity in post-war Turkey.

Unlike the First National Architectural Movement (which had drawn heavily on Ottoman imperial forms), the Second National Movement was primarily inspired by traditional Turkish civil architecture — especially the timber-based domestic structures found in Anatolian towns. The aim was to express national authenticity through spatial and material familiarity, while also responding to the technological demands of modern life.

One of the most influential figures of this era was Sedad Hakkı Eldem, who had already laid the groundwork for this approach in the 1940s through his “National Architecture Seminars” at the Academy of Fine Arts in Istanbul. Eldem’s key argument was that Turkish architecture did not need to imitate Western styles, but rather reinterpret its own traditions through a modern lens. His essay titled “Towards a Local Architecture” (1940) set the tone for a generation of architects who would seek a modern but culturally embedded architecture .

This movement coincided with the political rise of the Democrat Party in 1950, which shifted the ideological atmosphere from top-down secular modernism to a more inclusive, nation-oriented populism. Architecture followed suit. While modernist principles of clarity and function were still present, buildings began to display more symbolic features — pitched roofs, colonnaded façades, symmetrical compositions, and references to historical typologies. These gestures were intended not as literal revivals, but as visual anchors for national identity in a rapidly changing society .

Architectural Typologies and Programmes of the Period
During this era, the typological focus also changed. While the early Republic had prioritised ministries, schools, and public housing, the post-1950 period saw the rise of banks, hotels, office buildings, industrial plants, and courthouses. The expansion of public infrastructure was complemented by an increase in private-sector investment, especially in urban centres like Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir. Notable competitions such as Anıtkabir (1941), Istanbul Courthouse (1948), and Izmir Central Bank (1950) became testing grounds for the new architectural idiom.

These projects often integrated local motifs into large-scale public architecture. For example, the Anıtkabir, designed by Emin Onat and Orhan Arda, is often cited as a symbolic peak of the Second National style. It employed monumentality, axial planning, and restrained ornamentation to combine modernist structure with nationalist expression. Similarly, many courthouses and municipality buildings during this period featured massive entrances, arcades, and limestone façades — referencing both Anatolian fortresses and rationalist classicism.

Criticism and the Transition Towards Internationalism
By the late 1950s, the stylistic rigidity and representational character of the Second National Movement began to draw criticism. Although it had succeeded in visually rooting the Republic in a recognisable architectural language, its symbolic repetition risked becoming formulaic. A new generation of architects, increasingly exposed to international debates and educated abroad, began to question the relevance of stylised “national forms” in the age of global architectural experimentation.

The 1952 Istanbul Municipality Building Competition is often marked as a turning point: Sedad Hakkı Eldem and Emin Onat — leading figures of the Second National Movement — submitted a project that adopted a more international, functionalist vocabulary, moving away from national motifs. This signalled not only a stylistic evolution but also a paradigm shift: the desire to become part of the international architectural discourse while still negotiating local values

Balat and the Symbolic Absence of the Second National Movement

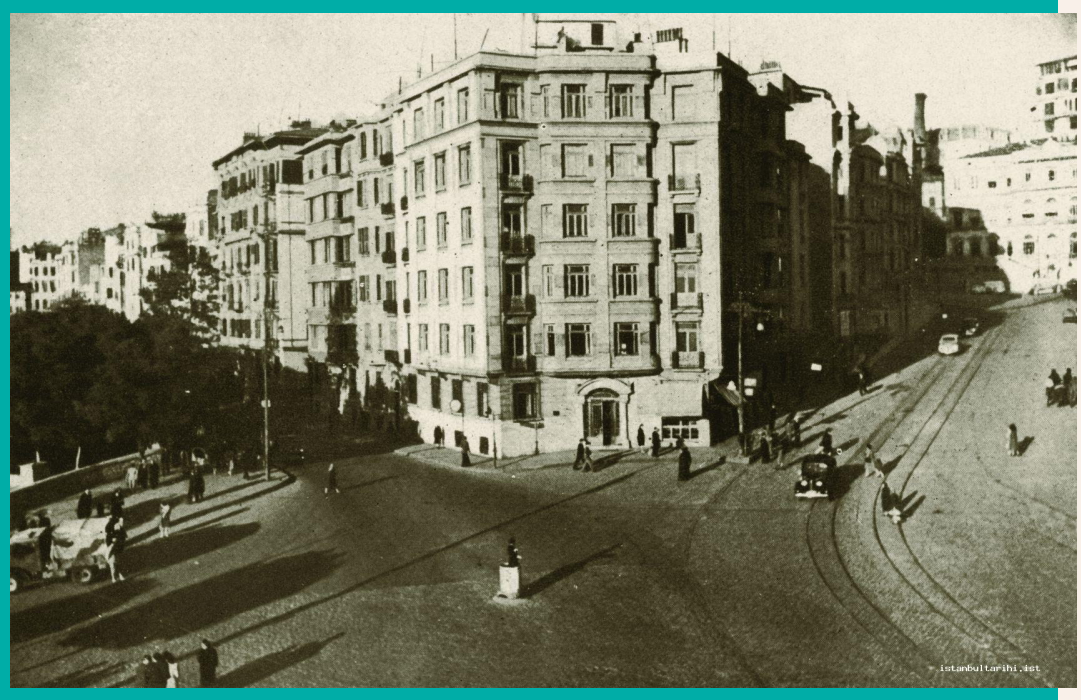
Interestingly, the architectural language of the Second National Movement had little direct influence on neighbourhoods like Balat. While central areas showcased monumental public buildings, Balat retained its layered and vernacular character — spatially too complex and historically too fragmented to fit the state’s vision of architectural modernity.

Yet this absence is meaningful. Balat, by resisting simplification, exposes the tensions between formal and informal, visible and marginal. It stands as a reminder not only of what was constructed during this era, but also of what was intentionally excluded.

“The real problem is not how to imitate the West, but how to reinterpret our own architectural tradition with modern principles.”

Eldem, S.H. (1940). Towards a Local Architecture [Yerli Mimarlık Meseleleri Üzerine]. Istanbul: Academy of Fine Arts Publications.

Anıtkabir – The monumental architectural language of the Second National Movement."



With reference to apartment facades built in the 1950-60s (Teşvikiye, Şişli)

-1.c - Pluralism and Experimentation (1970s-80s)

The 1970s and 1980s marked a period of significant transformation in Turkish architecture. Following decades of more defined stylistic programmes — particularly those of the First and Second National Architectural Movements — a new and less cohesive atmosphere emerged. Instead of a dominant architectural language shaped by the state, the architectural scene of this period became pluralistic, fragmented, and experimental, influenced by a rapidly shifting political and social context.

This transformation cannot be understood without acknowledging the intense socio-political instability of the period. The 1970s were characterised by economic crisis, rising political violence, and increasing urban migration. The 1980 military coup brought a short-lived sense of control, but also deepened the depoliticisation and individualisation of professional practice. Within this complex backdrop, Turkish architecture began to shift away from ideologically loaded narratives and move towards diverse, context-sensitive, and formally experimental approaches
.

A Search for Meaning Beyond Style

Unlike earlier periods where form followed ideology, this era was shaped by a search for meaning, often pursued outside traditional disciplinary boundaries. Influenced by global currents such as postmodernism, critical regionalism, and semiotic theory, Turkish architects began to reject the formalism and rationalism of modernist architecture, particularly its tendency to impose universal solutions regardless of local context.

Instead, architectural expression became less about representation and more about interpretation. Elements such as local materials, fragmented historical references, spatial ambiguity, and narrative layering entered architectural vocabulary. This shift paralleled the broader move within the arts and humanities away from grand narratives and towards multiplicity, irony, and historical discontinuity
.

Theorists like Kenneth Frampton, and Turkish academics such as Cengiz Bektaş and Doğan Kuban, encouraged a critical re-engagement with vernacular traditions—not for nostalgic replication, but for rooted innovation. Turkish architects increasingly sought to position themselves not as state instruments but as cultural agents, reflecting the contradictions of modernity rather than trying to resolve them.

Architectural Competitions as Laboratories of Pluralism

A particularly important platform for this emerging pluralism was the architectural design competition system. Through the 1970s and especially the 1980s, open competitions allowed younger architects to question prevailing norms and propose radical alternatives. As highlighted in post-1980 analyses, competitions became laboratories for formal experimentation, where diverse influences — from structural expressionism to metaphoric storytelling — could coexist without the need for consensus

.Many projects submitted during this time challenged conventional typologies, introduced mixed-use programmes, or explored non-hierarchical spatial compositions. The redefinition of publicness, reinterpretation of residential blocks, and abstract references to traditional elements were all recurring themes. Although not all projects were built, the competitions facilitated a culture of critique and dialogue that reshaped architectural pedagogy and discourse.

Istanbul as a Site of Informal Experimentation
While theoretical experimentation flourished in academic and professional settings, Istanbul's actual urban development during this time was shaped largely by informal, unregulated growth. With the influx of internal migrants from Anatolia and declining centralised planning, the city expanded rapidly through gecekondu (informal housing) settlements and spontaneous infrastructural additions. These changes redefined the physical and social geography of Istanbul, particularly in districts like Balat and the Golden Horn area.

Balat became a repository of spatial improvisation, as single-family timber houses were subdivided and adapted to accommodate working-class families — especially after the departure of non-Muslim communities due to discriminatory policies and forced migration. The built environment deteriorated, but at the same time, new forms of adaptive reuse and informal urban logic emerged.

Balat and the Pluralism and Experimentation (1970s-80s)

Unlike formal projects proposed through design competitions, Balat's transformation was not led by architects or planners. Yet paradoxically, it reflects many of the pluralist values that were being theorised at the time: heterogeneity, informality, layering, negotiation. It resisted totalising visions of modernity, surviving instead through a blend of decay, adaptation, and lived continuity.

In this sense, Balat becomes an unintentional mirror to the discourse of pluralism. While it was not celebrated in journals or competitions, it captured — in real terms — the tensions between preservation and transformation, identity and anonymity, tradition and necessity. Today, as the neighbourhood undergoes waves of gentrification and top-down regeneration, these layers of the 1970s–80s urban condition are at risk of being erased. But for architectural history, they remain critical to understanding how pluralism unfolded not only on paper, but in space.

glossary

ARCHITECTURAL PLURALISM

INFORMAL URBANISM

ADAPTIVE REUSE

POSTMODERN FRAGMENTATION

URBAN LAYERING

Architectural Pluralism /▫▫▫k▫▫t▫kt▫▫r▫l ▫pl▫▫r▫l▫z(▫)m/ n.
A condition in which multiple architectural languages, ideologies, and stylistic approaches coexist without a singular dominant narrative. Often emerges in periods of cultural or political transition, as seen in Turkey during the 1970s–80s in response to social fragmentation and critiques of modernist orthodoxy.

Informal Urbanism /▫n▫f▫▫ml ▫▫▫b▫n▫z(▫)m/ n.
Urban development that occurs outside formal planning and regulatory frameworks, often through self-built or unplanned settlements. Common in rapidly urbanizing contexts, such as Istanbul's gecekondu areas and informal spatial adaptations in districts like Balat.

Adaptive Reuse /▫▫dæpt▫v ri▫▫ju▫s/ n.
The process of repurposing existing buildings for new functions while maintaining their original structures and spatial qualities. A sustainable strategy often seen in the transformation of traditional houses to accommodate new social or economic needs.

Postmodern Fragmentation /▫p▫▫stm▫dn ▫fræ▫m▫n▫te▫▫(▫)n/ n.
The disintegration of a unified architectural language into multiple, often conflicting forms and expressions. Reflects both theoretical postmodernist influences and the complex realities of late 20th-century urban transformation.

Urban Layering /▫▫▫b▫n ▫le▫▫r▫ŋ/ n.
The visible accumulation of historical, cultural, and architectural elements over time in a city or neighbourhood. Creates a stratified urban fabric that embodies political, social, and economic changes, as observed in areas like Balat.

AKŞAM 21 Ocak 1951

Yeni «Levend mahallesi» ndeki evlerden bir kaçı

istanbul yepyeni bir mahalle kazandı: Levent

Mahallenin kurulmasında Levend arazisi niçin tercih edildi — Karşılaşılan müşküller — Boğaz güzelliğinde bir çıbana mâni olundu — Belediyenin bu yeni mahalleden faydası...

Emlâk Kredi bankası tarafından, Mecidiye köyünde Levend çiftliği arazisinde inşa edilen 391 eve havagazı, su ve elektrik verildi; Belediyece bir de otobüs servisi ihdas edilmek suretiyle İstanbul, yepyeni bir mahalleye kavuştu.

Herhangi bir teşebbüste tenkid, bizde âdeta bir itiyat haline gelmiştir. Netekim Levende bu yeni mahallenin kurulması da az mı tenkide uğradı: «Şehir içi dururken dağ başında mahalle mi kurulur?» diyenler olduğu gibi evlere «Gündüz

(Arkası 7 nci sahifede)

Mahallenin 14 bin liralık evlerinden biri

Newspaper clipping announcing the foundation of Levent as a modern neighbourhood in Istanbul. The article highlights the planned housing development led by Emlak Kredi Bank in

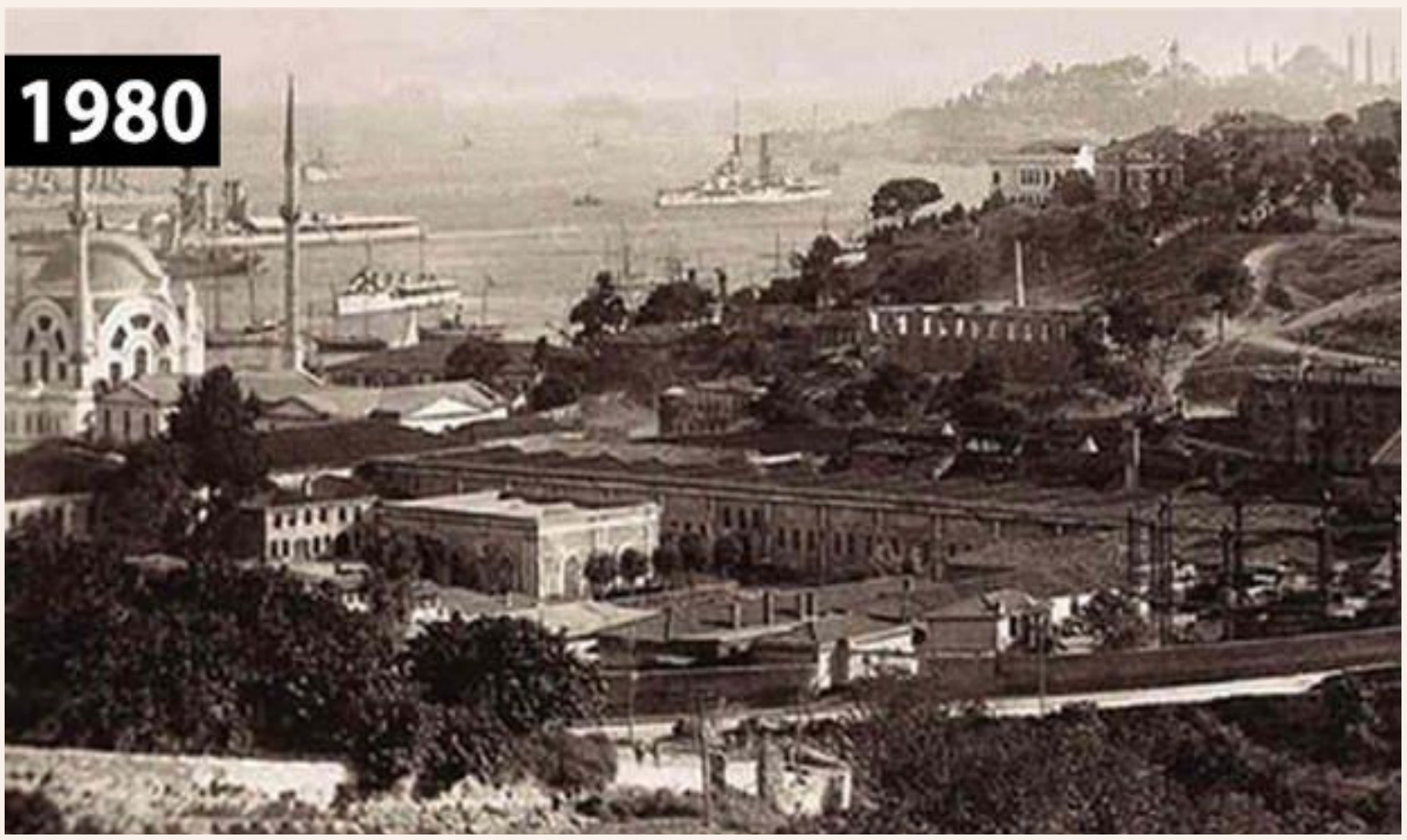
A narrow street in Balat, Istanbul, showing everyday urban life with hanging laundry, dense residential facades, and traces of informal adaptation. This image captures the layered, lived-in character of the neighbourhood.

Source: Photo by Ersin Kaplan, Flickr. https://www.flickr.com/

An example of modernist apartment block architecture in Istanbul from the 1970s–80s, featuring commercial use at the ground level and repetitive vertical façade articulation.

View of Istanbul’s Bosphorus-facing hills in 1980, showing a lower-density urban fabric and historic structures before the wave of large-scale redevelopment projects that followed in the late 20th century.

Source: Archival photo, public domain. (Year indicated: 1980)



1.e - 21st Century: Identity Crisis, Speculation & Globalisation

The architectural environment of 21st-century Turkey has undergone a profound shift — not just in terms of style, but in how architecture is produced, represented, and valued. While the 20th century was marked by ideological and intellectual debates over national identity and modernisation, the new millennium brought architecture increasingly under the influence of neoliberal market forces, centralised planning, and global visibility politics.

This period has not yielded a unified architectural language. Instead, it has generated a fractured and often contradictory built environment, one in which visual spectacle overrides local meaning, and architectural identity is increasingly shaped by economic and political agendas rather than cultural reflection or spatial dialogue.

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Another defining feature of this period is the proliferation of globalised visual languages. Glass façades, imported cladding materials, monumental scales, and anonymous forms became the norm — regardless of the local climate, history, or urban grain. In the race to compete with other global cities, Istanbul began to adopt a skyline of mirrors, reflecting aspirations rather than roots.

This tendency is not unique to Turkey, but its consequences are particularly stark in Istanbul, a city with centuries of layered urban history. The turn toward generic aesthetics not only visually disconnected new developments from their context, but also flattened urban experience, making it harder to distinguish between cities, neighbourhoods, or even buildings.

Many of the new projects — towers, gated communities, waterfront megadevelopments — actively erase traditional urban forms. Narrow streets are replaced by wide access roads. Courtyards and semi-public thresholds disappear. The dense social fabric of neighbourhoods is lost in favour of privatised, interiorised spaces.

The overarching condition of 21st-century Turkish architecture can be described as a deep identity crisis. On one hand, architecture is more present than ever in public discourse — showcased in media, celebrated in real estate campaigns, and used as a tool of soft power. On the other hand, it has lost much of its capacity to express collective memory, civic value, or spatial meaning.

New buildings tend to float above their context — visually polished but socially disconnected. The tension between what is shown and what is lived has widened. In many cases, architecture no longer reflects who we are or where we are, but what we want to appear to be.

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Balat Heritage as Simulation: The Touristification of Historic Districts

One of the more paradoxical aspects of this transformation is the selective preservation and reproduction of history. In places like Balat, Fener, Sulukule, and Tarlabaşı, the physical character of the architecture is often superficially maintained — façades are restored, cobblestone streets re-laid — but the communities that gave these spaces meaning are displaced.

In this context, architecture becomes a simulation of identity rather than an authentic expression of it. Restored buildings are no longer homes or shops for locals but are converted into cafés, boutique hotels, or curated Airbnb rentals. As Evren Aysev Deneç notes, this leads to a reproduction of the historical centre, where the past is consumed as aesthetic rather than lived experience

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Aerial view of a recent TOKİ housing development in Turkey, showcasing uniform low-rise blocks, red-tiled roofs, and repetitive spatial organisation. This top-down planning model reflects the state-driven response to urban housing demand.

Source: Image from TOKİ housing archive, exact location and date unspecified.

Aerial view of a densely built-up district in central Istanbul, illustrating the layered, unplanned, and highly fragmented urban fabric. The contrast between high-rise towers and older low-rise buildings highlights the city’s rapid and uneven development.

Source: Archival aerial photograph of Istanbul, photographer and date unspecifie

Aerial view of Istanbul’s Levent business district, representing the city’s shift toward vertical expansion, financialization, and globalized architectural forms. The contrast with surrounding residential areas underscores spatial inequality and uneven development.

Source: Getty Images, “Istanbul Skyscra-

NEOLIBERAL URBANISM

FAÇADISM

SIMULATED HERITAGE

HISTORIC CORE REPRODUCTION

SOCIAL DISPLACEMENT

Neoliberal Urbanism /▫ni▫▫▫▫l▫b▫r▫l ▫▫▫b▫n▫z(▫)m/ n.
A form of urban development driven by market logics, privatization, and minimal state intervention, often linked to gentrification, social inequality, and global investment strategies.

Façadism /f▫▫s▫▫d▫z(▫)m/ n.
The practice of preserving only the façade of a historic building while demolishing or altering the rest, typically for redevelopment purposes.

Simulated Heritage /▫s▫mj▫le▫t▫d ▫h▫r▫t▫d▫/ n.
A reproduction or imitation of historical architecture or aesthetics that lacks authentic historical context, often used in tourism and gentrified areas.

Historic Core Reproduction /h▫▫st▫r▫k k▫▫ ▫ri▫pr▫▫d▫k▫(▫)n/ n.
The deliberate reconstruction of buildings or urban forms to resemble a stylized version of the historic city centre, sometimes used to reinforce cultural identity or attract investment.

Social Displacement /▫s▫▫▫(▫)l d▫s▫ple▫sm▫nt/ n.
The process by which original residents are forced to leave a neighbourhood due to rising costs, redevelopment, or loss of affordable housing, often tied to urban transformation.

2-Urban Shifts in Istanbul: A Background Context

How policies, disasters, and capital reshaped the city since the 1990s,

Since the 1990s, Istanbul has experienced major changes in its urban landscape. These changes were caused by a combination of population growth, economic liberalisation, stricter earthquake regulations, and gentrification. Together, these forces transformed the architecture of the city and the identity of its neighbourhoods.

One key reason for this transformation was rapid population growth. Istanbul's population more than doubled between 1990 and today, rising from around 7 million to over 15 million (Demographics of Istanbul, 2023). This caused pressure on housing and services. New apartment blocks were built quickly, often replacing low-rise traditional houses. The city expanded toward its outskirts, and many informal settlements were legalised or replaced by new developments (Gibson & Gökşin, 2016).

Alongside this, neoliberal policies became more dominant, especially after the 2000s. The government began to treat the city not only as a place to live, but also as a space for real estate profit (Citego, 2014). Public land was sold to private developers, and projects such as luxury housing, malls, and highways took priority over public needs. Large-scale housing estates were built for middle- and upper-class residents, while poorer residents were often pushed to the city edges or out entirely (Citego, 2014).

Another major influence was the 1999 Marmara earthquake, which killed over 18,000 people. After the disaster, new earthquake laws were introduced. While these rules helped improve safety, they were also used to justify the demolition of older neighbourhoods, often for commercial development (Gibson & Gökşin, 2016). In many cases, buildings were torn down not because they were dangerous, but because the land they stood on was valuable.

This process often took place through urban transformation projects, supported by laws like Law No. 5366. This law allowed municipalities to declare historical areas as “renewal zones,” opening the door for redevelopment by large construction companies (Bianet, 2014). While some historic buildings were restored, others were only kept as façades, and their interiors were completely changed (WIT Press, 2016). Residents were displaced, and social life was broken apart.

One of the most visible outcomes has been gentrification. Neighbourhoods like Tarlabaşı and Sulukule were declared “unsafe” and later rebuilt with expensive housing. The original working-class or minority residents were either removed or priced out (OpenDemocracy, 2015). In many cases, local culture was lost. Streets that once held diverse communities now feature boutique cafés, glass buildings, and short-term rentals.

The neighbourhood of Balat reflects these broader patterns. Once home to Jewish and Armenian communities, Balat became a working-class area after the 1950s. In the early 2000s, an EU-funded project restored some buildings and improved infrastructure. While the goal was to help current residents, it also made the area attractive to investors and middle-class newcomers (Erkan & Altıntaş, 2017).

Later, Balat was declared a renewal zone under Law No. 5366, and a government-friendly developer was assigned to create a new housing and commercial plan. Local resistance delayed the project, but gentrification continued through the private market (Bianet, 2014). Over the last decade, old houses have been repainted, renovated, and turned into cafés, galleries, and boutique hotels. Rents increased, and many long-time residents had to leave.

3-From City to District: Why Balat?

Historical maps of Istanbul and Balat. The left map shows a general overview of the city, while the right highlights the detailed parcel layout of the Balat district along the Golden Horn. These maps reveal the early urban fabric and street morphology.

Source: Ottoman-era city plans, public archives (early 20th century).

A naïve-style painting of a colourful street in Balat, Istanbul, representing the district’s distinctive architectural facades, communal street life, and playful urban memory through artistic abstraction.

Source: Illustration by an unknown artist, widely circulated online depiction of Balat.

When studying the architectural and social transformation of Istanbul, focusing on a single district allows us to understand broader urban dynamics at a more detailed and human scale. Balat, located along the Golden Horn in the historical Fatih district, offers a unique and meaningful lens through which to explore these changes.

Balat is not just another old neighbourhood — it is a place where multiple layers of Istanbul's identity intersect. Historically, it was home to Jewish, Armenian, and Greek Orthodox communities. These groups shaped Balat's architecture with synagogues, churches, schools, wooden houses, and narrow streets. This multicultural past created a built environment that reflects coexistence, diversity, and modest domestic life. In many ways, Balat has preserved the spatial structure of the Ottoman urban fabric longer than many other parts of the city.

Over time, however, Balat has also become a space of neglect, migration, and transformation. During the 20th century, many of the original residents left due to political and economic reasons. Their departure opened the area to new waves of rural migrants, often arriving with different cultural backgrounds and economic needs. The physical environment of Balat slowly decayed, but its layered social history remained visible in the streets, courtyards, and building details.

In the 21st century, Balat was selected for urban renewal, first through rehabilitation projects and later through more aggressive redevelopment plans. As discussed in earlier sections, this made Balat a site of conflict between preservation and gentrification. Colourful façades were restored, but the risk of social displacement increased. Tourists arrived, cafés opened, and the character of the neighbourhood began to shift. This change was not only physical — it raised questions about who the city is for, and what should be preserved: the buildings, or the life inside them?

Today, Balat holds a mirror to Istanbul's wider urban story. It shows how economic interests, heritage policies, migration, and global culture all converge in one district. For this reason, Balat is more than a background — it is an active participant in Istanbul's transformation. It allows us to explore how architecture carries memory, how neighbourhoods adapt or resist, and how identity is formed, preserved, or lost in the modern city.

Figure.1

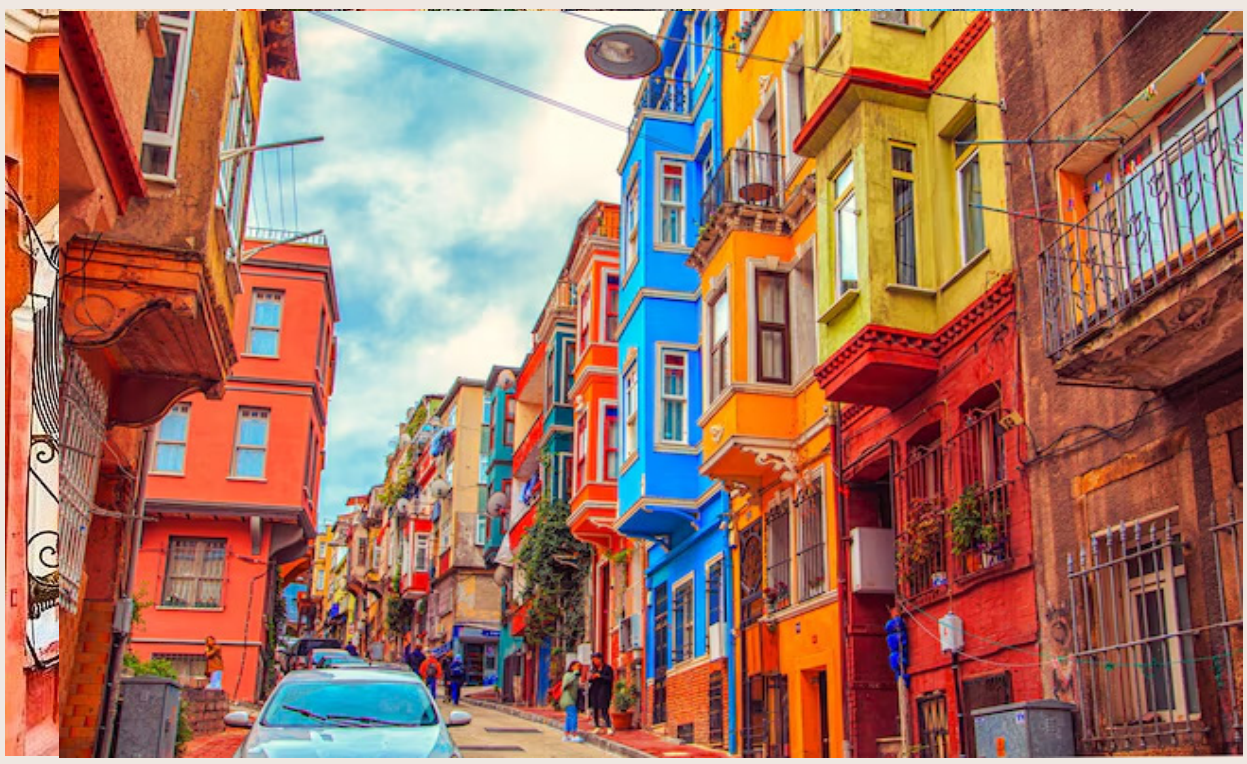

Figure.3

Figure.2

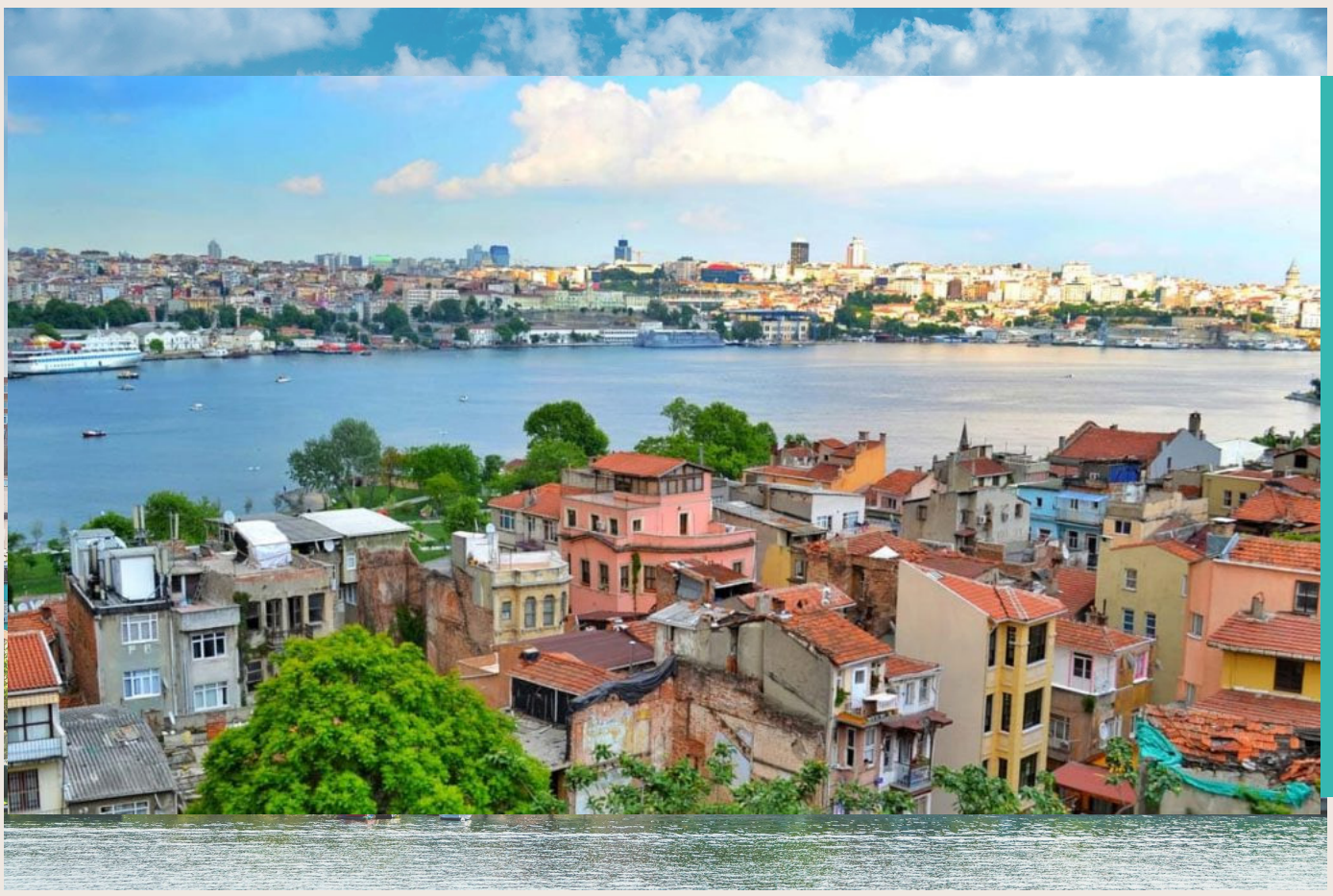

Figure.4

- Figure.1 **Colourful historic facades in a narrow Balat street.**
- Figure.2 **View of Balat’s rooftops and the Golden Horn.**
- Figure.3 **Vibrant Balat street with traditional houses.**
- Figure.4 **Wider view showing Balat and Golden Horn.**

glossary

This glossary offers a spatial reading of Balat through a selection of architectural and social terms observed during fieldwork. Each entry connects a physical trace in the neighbourhood — such as a bay window, a façade or-

Bay window	A projecting, enclosed window element, often found in Ottoman-era housing. In Balat: Used to increase interior space and overlook narrow streets; symbolizes the blending of private and public realms.
Elevated Ground Floor / Substructure Zone (Subasman)	A traditional architectural strategy separating the living space from the street level.
Brick-Clad Base Façade	A material expression of grounding, repair, or stylistic layering in urban façades. In Balat, the brick-clad base becomes a layered narrative tool — telling stories of damage, survival, adaptation, and changing aesthetic preferences in response to tourism and gentrification.
Decorative Relief	A carved or molded architectural detail that communicates stylistic identity and craftsmanship. I n Balat, decorative reliefs are most commonly seen on the upper stories of older apartment buildings and around bay windows (cumbas), serving both aesthetic and representational functions. They signal a time when façade design was closely linked to craftsmanship, status, and architectural identity. In some cases, these details were mass-produced from plaster; in others, they were hand-carved into stone or wood.

By decoding these details, the glossary bridges the gap between academic research and on-site experience. It allows us to see how history, identity, and contemporary tensions are embedded in the smallest architectural elements. In this

adress:

Balat, 34087 Fatih/İstanbul, Türkiye

Çıkma (Overhanging Upper Floor)

A spatial extension of the upper floor that projects over the street, balancing density with habitability.

A çıkma refers to an upper-floor extension that protrudes beyond the ground floor footprint, typically supported by cantilevers or corbels. This traditional architectural element was widely used in Ottoman

In Balat today, çıkmalar often coexist with later additions like balconies or concrete overhangs, highlighting the layering of historical and modern design practices. Their presence helps maintain a sense of vertical rhythm and intimacy in the street section, and serves as a living memory of user-oriented vernacular logic. and early Republican housing, especially in narrow, organically formed streets like those in Balat.

Narrow Street Section

Intimate street width that shapes sightlines and pedestrian interaction.

In Balat: Inherited from Ottoman planning logic; intensifies the verticality of buildings and the dominance of façades.

Exposed Balconies

Open, protruding platforms often made of concrete or metal.

In Balat: Seen in newer residential buildings; contrast with traditional cumbas that are enclosed and wooden.

Reinforced Concrete Structure

A modern construction technique using concrete and steel reinforcement.

In Balat: Post-1950s buildings like the red one on the right clearly show exposed concrete frames, representing the shift from timber to modern materials.

adress:

Balat, Kiremit Cd. No:33, 34087 Fatih/İstanbul, Turkey

Segmental Arch Window

A spatial extension of the upper floor that projects over the street, balancing density with habitability.

A çıkma refers to an upper-floor extension that protrudes beyond the ground floor footprint, typically supported by cantilevers or corbels. This traditional architectural element was widely used in Ottoman

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Shuttered Windows

Wooden shutters attached to exterior windows, commonly seen in historical homes in Balat.
They provide protection from sunlight and wind, while also offering privacy.
Shutters reflect Mediterranean and Ottoman traditions of domestic life, where indoor comfort and outdoor interaction were carefully balanced.

In Balat, they survive as markers of an older architectural rhythm and are often repainted as part of visual restoration efforts — blending memory, function, and aesthetics.

Arched Stone Entrance

A semi-circular or segmental arch framing a building's main door, often made of stone or brick.

In Balat, these entrances reflect 19th and early 20th century craftsmanship and suggest a sense of permanence and formality.
They often appear on older buildings, marking thresholds with architectural dignity and connecting public streets with private interiors.

Layered Masonry Façade

A wall surface combining different materials — such as exposed brick, plaster patches, and painted areas — often due to repair, decay, or time.

In Balat, these façades tell stories of ongoing adaptation, showing how buildings evolve through economic shifts, ownership changes, or neglect.
They reflect the lived history of a structure, where res-

adress:

Balat, Çorbacı Çeşmesi Sok. No:38, 34087 Fatih/
İstanbul, Türkiye

Interview Excerpt: Local Reflections from Balat

interview

Balat Forno is a local restaurant in Balat, known for its stone oven dishes and handmade recipes. Run by Mehmet and his family, the space reflects his architectural background in both design and atmosphere. Recently listed in the Michelin Guide, it stands out as one of the few places in the area that still preserves a sense of local identity despite

Introducing Mehmet: A Local Voice with an Architect's Eye
To gain a more grounded understanding of Balat's recent transformation, I spoke with Mehmet, a restaurant owner whose family business was recently listed in the Michelin Guide. Mehmet is not only a local resident but also a trained architect, which gives him a unique perspective: he lives above the space he runs, sees the neighbourhood daily through the eyes of both a designer and a citizen, and experiences the contrast between the Balat that was and the Balat that is becoming.

After graduating from architecture school, Mehmet chose not to follow a conventional path in the profession. Instead, he returned to Balat with his family to open a restaurant rooted in local culture. Over the years, he has witnessed the neighbourhood change — architecturally, economically, and socially. His reflections offer a valuable window into the lived experience of a space often discussed in policy papers or tourism brochures but rarely in everyday, personal terms.

"Balat looks like it's alive, but in reality, it's only performing."

In our conversation, I asked Mehmet about who he thinks Balat belongs to now, what kind of daily rhythm the neighbourhood has, how he interprets the changes happening around him, and whether the growing tourist presence has helped or harmed the local identity. Finally, I shared with him my own design idea, Scattered Stage, to hear how someone like him — both local and architect — might respond.

Q: In your view, who does Balat belong to today?

Mehmet: That's a difficult question. Technically, it belongs to everyone, but practically, it feels like it belongs to no one right now. The neighbourhood has become a stop on a tourist map rather than a living space. Many of the people who gave Balat its original rhythm have already left — pushed out slowly, over the years. Today, it's a mix of visitors passing through and newcomers who rarely stay long enough to engage deeply

Q: How would you describe the daily flow and population in Balat?

Mehmet: The circulation here is temporary. In the mornings, it's quiet. Around noon, people start arriving for photos, food, and coffee. Most are outsiders. You don't see many regulars on the street anymore — no one who really "lives" the space. My family and I live above the restaurant, so we see this shift daily. There's a constant coming and going, but not much staying. It's vibrant on the surface but hollow underneath.

Q: As an architect and local business owner, how do you interpret Balat's transformation over the years?

Mehmet: It's been a layered change. First came the restorations — which were good in some ways. But they also marked the beginning of a shift in purpose. Buildings were repaired, but people disappeared. Now it feels like Balat is performing a version of itself. It has become photogenic, but in the process, it has lost some of its rough edges, its honesty. It no longer reflects real, local life. I often think about what's missing — and I'd say: continuity. We lost the thread that connects the past to the present.

Q: Do you think the rise in tourism has caused Balat to lose its local identity?

Mehmet: Yes, but not because of tourism itself — tourism can be a good thing. The problem is how it was handled. There was no careful strategy, no balance. What we got was surface-level preservation. The façades are colourful, yes. But what about the inside? What about the people who once knew everyone on the street by name? That sense of belonging — of place — is very fragile. And here, I think it was broken too easily.

After listening to Mehmet's reflections on Balat's changing identity, I introduced my design proposal: Scattered Stage. I explained that instead of creating a single, fixed cultural centre, the project imagines a network of small-scale art hubs distributed across Balat. These hubs would be placed in vacant or underused spaces—empty plots, courtyards, side streets—without disturbing the existing architectural fabric.

Each hub would serve a different purpose: one might be an open-air stage, another a costume-making workshop, another a rehearsal area or a community storytelling point. The structures would be lightweight, low-tech, and flexible, designed to be assembled and disassembled easily, and shaped by the input of both artists and residents.

Inspired by the values of amateur theatre, the project embraces collective production, improvisation, and collaboration over polished perfection. The aim is to bring art back into daily life—not as a highbrow activity hidden behind closed doors, but as something spontaneous, local, and shared. These hubs would not just host performances, but invite participation, creating moments of interaction and shared ownership in public space.

I told Mehmet that, in a district where so much has been curated for tourists, this project hopes to give something back to the people who live here. Instead of viewing Balat as a stage set, Scattered Stage proposes that it becomes a real stage once again—a place where culture grows from the ground up, not from the top down.

> "I think it would remind people that this place isn't finished. It's still alive. It just needs the right invita-

Mehmet responded with quiet enthusiasm. "If something like that could really happen," he said, "I think it would remind people that this place isn't finished. It's still alive. It just needs the right invitation."

HEARING MEHMET'S REFLECTIONS MADE IT CLEAR THAT BALAT'S CURRENT VISIBILITY DOES NOT EQUAL VITALITY. WHILE PLACES LIKE BALAT FORNO MANAGE TO PRESERVE TRACES OF REAL LOCAL LIFE, MUCH OF THE NEIGHBOURHOOD HAS BECOME CURATED RATHER THAN LIVED. THIS TENSION—BETWEEN FAÇADE AND FUNCTION, PRESENCE AND PARTICIPATION—INSPIRED MY DESIGN PROPOSAL. SCATTERED STAGE RESPONDS TO THIS CONDITION BY OFFERING A DECENTRALISED CULTURAL SYSTEM THAT DOESN'T RELY ON SPECTACLE, BUT ON REACTIVATION. INSTEAD OF BUILDING A SINGLE, CENTRAL ART VENUE, THE PROJECT PROPOSES A SCATTERED NETWORK OF LIGHTWEIGHT, LOW-TECH HUBS THAT GROW OUT OF UNUSED URBAN SPACES. THESE HUBS, SHAPED THROUGH COLLABORATION WITH RESIDENTS, AIM TO RESTORE EVERYDAY CREATIVITY AND RECLAIM PUBLIC SPACE AS A SITE OF SHARED CULTURAL LIFE.

Cultural Design Proposition: A New

hubs and ba-

Throughout this research, I explored the history of contemporary Turkish architecture, from the early Republican ideals of national identity, through modernist experiments, to the fragmented and speculative developments of the 21st century. What became clear is that architecture in Turkey today often struggles to reflect cultural memory or social life. Instead, buildings are shaped by economic forces, fast development, and visual impact. As a result, many cities — and especially Istanbul — have lost parts of their unique architectural identity.

This is especially visible in Balat. Once a lively and diverse neighbourhood, Balat now stands at the intersection of tourism, gentrification, and staged heritage. Many of its buildings have been restored, but often only in appearance. Behind the façades, local life is disappearing. The district looks vibrant on the surface, but feels disconnected underneath. This made Balat an important example — a place where the issues within contemporary Turkish architecture can be seen clearly, at a small and human scale.

In response to this, I propose a design project called Scattered Stage. Instead of designing one large art centre, the project imagines a network of small, temporary cultural spaces, spread across Balat. These spaces — or “hubs” — would use empty plots, forgotten corners, and underused parts of the neighbourhood. Each one would serve a different function: small performances, workshops, storytelling, or community gatherings.

The structures are designed to be low-cost, flexible, and easy to build — using simple materials like wood, fabric, and scaffolding. More importantly, they are shaped with the help of local residents and artists, not imposed from outside. The idea comes from amateur theatre, where creativity grows from collaboration, not from formal rules. In this system, people are not just audiences — they become part of the space.

This proposal does not aim to make Balat more touristic, or to copy the past. Instead, it tries to bring daily life and creativity back into public space. By filling small gaps with culture and participation, the project offers a new kind of local identity — one that grows slowly, from inside the neighbourhood itself.

From National Narratives to Local Fragments: Arriving at Balat

Throughout this research, I traced the evolution of contemporary Turkish architecture—from the early Republican idealism of the 1920s, through nationalist revivalism in the 1950s, to the pluralist experimentation of the 1980s and the identity-fractured urbanism of the 2000s. This architectural trajectory has not only reflected political agendas but also reshaped the physical and symbolic fabric of cities like Istanbul. While Ankara was built as the rational, modern capital of the Republic, Istanbul became the testing ground where old and new collided—where historical erasure, neoliberal redevelopment, and partial preservation unfolded simultaneously

.

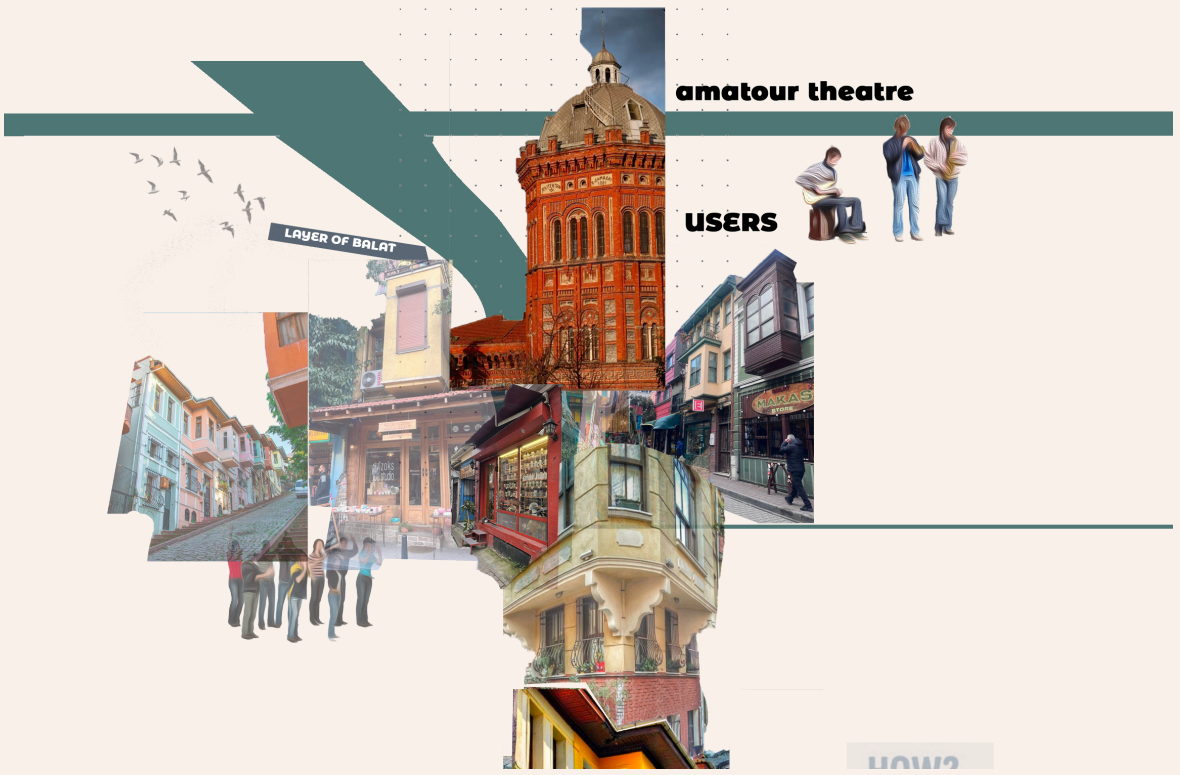
Among Istanbul's many districts, Balat stands out as a site that has absorbed, resisted, and exposed these shifts. Once a multi-ethnic, working-class neighbourhood filled with wooden houses and shared courtyards, Balat has seen both neglect and staged restoration. In recent decades, urban transformation projects targeting heritage value have led to colourful façades masking deeper forms of displacement, gentrification, and identity loss

.

Despite these changes, traces of the past remain visible. Narrow streets, projecting bay windows (cumbas), fragmentary façades, and community rituals survive—but often only as aesthetic references rather than lived experiences. This paradox—of preservation without continuity—made Balat a crucial case study for this project.

for Balat

Layer



Summary

This research began with a question: how has Turkish architecture, over the past century, shaped and been shaped by shifting ideas of identity, modernity, and belonging?

To explore this, I studied the trajectory of contemporary Turkish architecture — from the early years of the Republic, when architecture was used as a tool for building national unity, through later decades marked by ideological shifts, stylistic experimentation, and finally, the market-driven, fragmented developments of the 21st century. What emerged was a clear pattern: while architecture in Turkey has often been used to reflect power and progress, it has also struggled to maintain meaningful ties to local context, memory, and everyday life.

This tension becomes especially visible in Istanbul, where history and modernisation constantly overlap. Among its many districts, Balat stood out — not just for its visual charm or layered heritage, but because it holds the traces of every stage of this architectural evolution. Once a multicultural neighbourhood, Balat today reflects both the consequences of neglect and the risks of over-curated restoration. Its colourful façades and rising tourism mask a deeper fragmentation — a place caught between image and reality.

By reading Balat through this lens, I began to ask: is there a way for architecture to respond to this disconnection? Can design help reintroduce cultural meaning without romanticising the past or repeating the mistakes of top-down transformation?

This led to my proposal: Scattered Stage, a decentralised art ecosystem embedded in the small, forgotten spaces of Balat. Instead of a single, dominant structure, the project introduces a flexible network of temporary hubs — for performance, storytelling, or making — shaped with and by the local community. The system takes inspiration from amateur theatre, valuing collective action, low-tech tools, and participation over polished results.

In a context where contemporary architecture has often prioritised image over engagement, Scattered Stage offers an alternative — a way to turn empty spaces into living ones, and to reconnect Balat with its cultural depth, not through nostalgia, but through shared presence and creative use.

“A response to the fractured identity of Turkish architecture, rooted in Ba-lat’s forgotten spaces.”

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