

ISTANBUL'S GECEKONDUS

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Originally a technical term, *gecekondu* derived from everyday language to signify a specific housing and settlement typology of self-service urbanisation that occurred during Turkey's industrialisation and rural migration in the period between 1945 and 1985. Gece means 'the night' and konu 'landed', hence *gecekondu* translates as 'landed at night'. The term has evolved to encompass a variety of informal settlements and building typologies. Its usage denotes a bottom-up, spontaneous action, especially prevalent during the first wave of mass-migration, to provide mass housing under conditions in which conventional or government-initiated models of housing supply failed.

In Istanbul, this act of land-taking was by no means legal, but was nonetheless sanctioned as it allowed the government to pass the costs and political hurdles of urbanisation on to the migrants themselves. In doing so, businesses were able to disregard housing expenses when calculating labour costs and politicians could tie votes to the provision of land alone. This arrangement was accepted as long as these newcomers provided for their own welfare; and by growing food in their own courtyards and walking to jobs in nearby industrial factories, these newcomers were able to reduce the costs of urban living.

All was made possible by the availability of publicly owned lots on what was then the urban periphery. Residents of the *gecekondu*s were spared the full-scale expropriation and economic expulsion that commonly occurs during periods of intense urbanisation. Instead, they became urban without being forced to change too much, occupying a self-built garden town that was both rural and urban. The names of the original *gecekondu* settlements frequently ended with *tepe*, meaning 'hill', to denote their location on the steep slopes of the valleys surrounding the city's new industrial zones. The emergence of *gecekondu*s

followed industrial developments alongside four main axes: the Golden Horn, the primary location for industrial activity along the waterfront and its adjacent river valleys; the historical northern ridge of the Buyukdere; and two arteries to the West (the E5 motorway historically known as the London Road) and to the East (the Ankara motorway) both of which also serve some older industrial settlements behind the Marmara coast. As transport shifted away from the coasts to road networks, the older Bosphorus industrial settlements also attracted *gecekondu*s, although much more moderately.

Residents organised their communities and their own economic networks: the construction, transport and distribution of consumer goods, and sometimes even the infrastructure needed for water and electricity supply for their households. Demolitions and conflicts with authorities were not unusual but when demolition did occur, new homes were frequently reconstructed on nearby land, with former lots taken over by migrant groups backed by more influential political actors.

In the early 1960s, *gecekondu* settlements became an officially accepted solution to housing the majority of new migrants. From then onwards, Istanbul experienced a unique socio-political climate, which temporarily diminished the initial scepticism among the middle classes about the *gecekondu*s. This wave of sympathy and identification continued beyond the events of June 1970 when Istanbul became occupied by the industrial working class. Thus after World War II, residents of the *gecekondu*s found they could convert their inherent rural poverty into comparative wealth within the space of one generation. At a time when the city's population was close to 4 million, originally barren settlements had already become blossoming garden cities. However, large-scale urbanisation in the 1980s and 1990s almost

totally displaced such manifestations of the golden age of informal urbanisation, which is remembered by some older Istanbulites as the ‘innocent’ period of migration. As a consequence the *gecekondu* vanished as abruptly as it appeared on the stage of Istanbul’s history.

It is the ‘neo-liberal revolution’, which began in the mid-1980s, that has made Istanbul what it is today: a post-*gecekondu* city whereby developers convert households in the former *gecekondus* to middle-class standards. A socio-economic heterogeneity now defines this post-*gecekondu* condition and has helped original migrants improve their economic status. After the 1999 earthquake, a ‘top-down neo-liberalism’ agenda emerged which expropriated the property obtained through informality, and downgraded development rights obtained through informal urbanisation to a second-class status. This has resulted in the empowerment of new large-scale developers and actors dominating the production of urban areas.

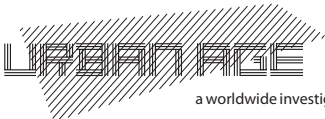
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