

Social Reconstruction of the Working Class by Mass Housing Policies in Turkey

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February 28, 2026

1 Introduction

When we explore the concept of gecekondu, we often picture these irregular settlements as if they were lands ripped away from their rightful owners. They are typically envisioned as very poorly made structures, and, as their name suggests, built instantly during a single night. However, the reality is much more complex than this. These buildings were often constructed on land that was purchased and unofficially permitted to be built upon. This informal "permission" was systematically used to foster a relationship with the gecekondu residents. While the government's legitimacy was not built solely on this relationship, Umut Turem (in *The State of Property*) explores the idea of land being a tool to build political legitimacy, a very important remark for understanding how gecekondu districts are shaped.

In this essay, I will analyze the economic and political significance that the gecekondus stand based on the works of Ayse Bugra and Umut Turem. Subsequently, I will try to examine how mass housing projects turn into gentrification projects by alienating and displace the previous gecekondu dwellers from these areas.

2 A Dynamic Structure



(a) Gecekondu



(b) Apartkondu



(c) Decentkondu

Figure 1: Forms of the Gecekondu Evolution

Before examining how these buildings are used as tools to form a relationship between the state and their dwellers, we must first understand how they came to be.

Gecekondu can develop significantly over time. We can observe three levels of this development: 1) Poorly built single-family houses 2) Poorly constructed apartments 3) Decent apartments built using modern techniques

Depending on the owner, the gecekondu can ultimately develop into a structurally decent apartment building.[3, 11]

This development ,which depends on how long the dwellers resided on the city, can result in the infrastructure of an average gecekondu street surpassing the standart quality of the rest of the city, depending on the area. [5]

This physical evolution from a temporary shelter to a permanent apartment is not a matter of architectural or expertise progress. It reflects the growing permanence of the rural migrant in the urban fabric. As these structures solidified into the cityscape, they necessitated a more formal institutional response. This led to the emergence of housing cooperatives and state-led mass housing initiatives, which sought to standardize and regulate the housing market that the gecekondu had informally started.

3 Cooperatives and Mass Housing

Cooperative housing first appeared in Turkey during the 1930s with the Bahçelievler Housing Cooperative in Ankara. This was part of a Garden City plan designed by German city planner Hermann Jansen. The housing cooperatives were primarily formed to construct the dwellings and were intended to dissolve after the construction was complete.

However, cooperative housing remained mostly the preserve of high- ranked state employees until the 1950s, as they were the only people who could raise the necessary capital by pooling their money together. The number of housing cooperatives grew slowly in the early years, starting with just 4 in 1939 and rising to 26 by 1942. By 1946, that figure had nearly doubled again, reaching a total of 50 cooperatives.

In 1952, the Social Security Organization began to finance projects directed at low and middle-income people, which subsequently increased the number of co-ops. Despite the goal, these financing plans mostly resulted in the construction of more middle-class or luxurious apartments using subsidized credits. The gecekondu residents either lacked awareness of the subsidized credits or could not benefit from them because they lacked the necessary employment in the formal sector required to access the credit.

Notable projects supported by institutions like the Turkish Real Estate and Credit Bank (Türkiye Emlak ve Kredi Bankası—which later became Anadolu Bank and Türkiye Emlak Bankası) include the Levent, Koşuyolu Emlak Konut Evleri, and Emekli Subay Evleri developments in İstanbul. Additionally, the bank was instrumental in the creation of the Ataköy Konutları complex, which stands as one of the city's most significant planned residential areas. [4]

With the foundation of the Housing Development Administration of Turkey (TOKİ),

cooperative housing saw significant development. In 1988, TOKİ produced 167,517 cooperative units, which represented 35 percent of the total building permits issued that year.

While the rise of cooperatives and the establishment of TOKİ provided a formalized path to homeownership, these frameworks did not exist in a vacuum. They were deeply intertwined with the broader economic shifts of the Turkish Republic. To understand why the state moved from indirect permission to the mass housing structure, we have to examine the economic logic that governed land value and the labor force during this era of rapid industrialization.

4 Economical Aspects of Gecekondu

A significant characteristic of gecekondu ownership in major metropolitan areas like İstanbul, Ankara, and İzmir is that residents rarely enclosed the land themselves. Instead, most acquired their plots through secondary markets, primarily purchasing from the original appropriator—a practice accounting for 56.22% of cases in İstanbul, 51.58% in Ankara, and 47.58% in İzmir. A smaller portion of the land was secured through relatives or real estate agents, representing 19.20%, 9.48%, and 15.45% of ownership in those cities, respectively. [6]

Table 1: Sources of Land Acquisition by City (%)

City	Initial Appropriator	Relative or Agent
İstanbul	56.22%	19.20%
Ankara	51.58%	9.48%
İzmir	47.58%	15.45%

Source: DPT (1991)

Although there is not much information available about the initial enclosure processes and the semi-illegal selling of these properties, this situation is generally attributed to land mafia activities. People either enclosed these lands with wire and claimed them as their own, or they were controlled by local strongmen.

Following this initial stage of ownership, the legal status of the land fell into a legal and moral limbo. Economically and physically, the gecekondus provided the only viable shelter alternative for a growing urban population, which forced the state to approach the subject with caution. This housing situation was crucial at the start of industrialization, as the need for a growing workforce for emerging industries, combined with the ability for factories to lower wages due to the reduced cost of housing, was a significant factor.

The 1930s-1940s were marked by a peasant-worker phenomenon, where agriculture remained the main source of livelihood for the average worker, but industrial jobs provided crucial extra income. It was suggested at the time that severing workers' ties with the village was a prerequisite for the emergence of a genuine industrial working class

and, hence, for the industrialization of the country. This could only be achieved through mechanisms designed to generate both a rural push and an urban pull. This original suggestion will later manifest itself in the adoption of TOKİ mass housing projects, where the social marks of rurality becomes a tool for stigmatizing previous gecekondu dwellers.

There was also extreme inequality between rural and urban areas. In the first half of the 1960s, 60% of Turkish villages lacked drinkable water resources, 98% lacked electricity, and 90% did not have proper road access. Crucially, the reciprocal relationship between the rural immigrants and their home villages actually dulled the economic harshness of relocating to the cities. These village connections allowed for many benefits, such as food support for the rural immigrants.

This entire situation left the gecekondu in a state of limbo. On the one hand, these settlements were established enough to be recognized by institutions like the "Association for the Beautification of the Gecekondu" (Gecekondu mahallesi güzelleştirme dernekleri), which could even demand the allocation of a certain portion of the Marshall Plan funds. At the same time, however, these settlements caused middle-class concerns about the spread of diseases in their districts.

Not all gecekondu owners resided in these buildings. There is also a dynamic movement of population: previous owners may move up the social ladder but lack the capital to build a better house outright. Consequently, they rent the gecekondu and use the income to finance their new house or rent. This is one of the reasons why some gecekondus do not develop into apartkondus (apartment-style gecekondus) or more decent apartments. The state's indirect permission to build paved the way for it to build a reciprocal relationship with the rural population. The state and municipalities could cultivate this relationship with the population through amnesty laws and staged land ownership. Ownership status varied, with some residents having formal permissions to build and own the land, and others only being granted permission to own the land itself. Depending on the place, the state could turn this into a tool to change certain districts or reshape the social structure by allowing certain landowners (who were not allowed to build on that land) to sell it in return for a cooperative apartment residence.

Although, in the last 20 years, we are witnessing a major shift in this paradigm. The redistributive role of the state, built by allowing land appropriation by rural migrants, is shifting toward the "clearing" of these settlements (*The State of Property*). According to Türem Umut, while the genesis of the state and the Republican Turkish meta-field used land appropriation as a tool for the legitimization of the state in the eyes of the population, this legitimization and the centrality of the state in land affairs have shifted over the last two decades with the development of Turkey's market economy. Türem states that the 1984 amnesty law was particularly a "redistributive measure" taken in the face of a sharp decline in wages caused by structural adjustment programs. While the pre-1980 state needed land to facilitate the economy, after the 1970s, the land itself slowly became a commodity that could be bought and sold by the people more directly. Türem further discusses how the state uses this paradigm shift to its own benefit by employing complex mechanisms to both produce land as a commodity for the market and act like a private market player.

The transformation of land from a tool for building state legitimacy into a marketized commodity set the stage for a new kind of urban intervention. As the state's role shifted toward clearing these settlements to facilitate capital accumulation, the focus moved beyond the physical land itself. This transition necessitated a reconstruction of the residents themselves, as the state began to use mass housing projects to replace the informal social structures of the gecekondu with a new, disciplined urban identity.

5 Social Reconstruction Behind Mass Housing

One key suggestion made in the 1940s was that, in order to develop a genuine industrial working class, it was necessary to break the rural ties of the peasant-workers. The very rurality that allowed these settlements to be established and made living in the city possible in the first place has now become a stigma to be eradicated in order to fit in with the modern city.

The interesting part of this stigmatization is its connection to the reconstruction of consumption habits. Most of the time, rural origin itself is not the core reason for stigmatization; rather, the social control enforced in these new sites target specific behaviours and consumption styles. For the modern city dweller, the daily problems are met through quicker consumption patterns. While the self-help ethos that is mostly linked with gecekondu lifestyle is looked down upon. The regulations in the coop sites, such as those restricting maintenance to specific hours, may be based on sensible concerns like noise reduction, yet they effectively discourage any options other than hiring professional services.

We can see more of these examples on the ethnographic study of Tahire Erman, where gecekondu dwellers relocated to a mass-housing complex are often discouraged or outright not permitted to practice their traditional habits. For instance, the simple act of putting shoes in front of their door, a restriction that subtly enforces a middle-class standardization by requiring indoor shoe rack. Similarly, residents are barred from growing fruit and vegetables or making noise after specific hours, regulations that effectively discourages frequent socialization in the housing space or prevent the residents from altering the housing space for any other purpose than basic residency.

Another interesting aspect that Erman's study indirectly exposes about the mass housing complexes is that gecekondu dwellers frequently find themselves living in apartments alongside predominantly middle-class neighbors. It becomes increasingly difficult for them to gain any meaningful footing within the majority-rule framework of site regulations and decision-making mechanisms. Consequently, residents are often left with no choice but to alter their lifestyles or relocate to another area.

These accumulated stress points, though they may seem trivial to the middle-class residents of these areas, manifest in a sentiment often expressed by former gecekondulu: 'They are telling me how to live in my own house'. Ultimately, this proves to be a grounded realization rather than an overinflated reaction.

When these projects are analyzed by the results they produce, mass housing sites

are more easily understood as tools for reshaping social structures rather than merely architectural endeavors aimed at improving resident well-being. These projects systematically alter the socioeconomic demographics of an area to gentrify these zones. In way way that displaces low-income workers rather than improving their economic standing.

Ultimately, the standardization enforced in these mass housing sites serves as the final step in the alienation of the gecekondu dweller. By replacing self-help mechanisms with rigid consumption patterns, the state concludes the process of turning a peasant-worker into a modern urban consumer or displacing them entirely. This systematic reconstruction of the working class finds its most visible expression in the contrast between the organic growth of the old neighborhoods and the sterile, regulated environments of the new projects.

6 Conclusion

The transition from the organic gecekondu settlements to the structured environment of mass housing represents more than just a change in architecture: it signifies a fundamental shift in the social contract between the state and its urban working class. As Ayse Bugra's work illustrates, the gecekondu was once a vital, informal welfare mechanism that allowed the peasant-worker to survive the hardships of industrialization through rural solidarity and self-help. Umut Turem argues, the neoliberal era has transformed land from a tool of political legitimacy and social redistribution into a purely marketized commodity.

In this new paradigm, the rurality that once enabled urban survival and industrial development has been rebranded as a social stigma. Through the ethnographic lens of Tahire Erman, we see that mass housing projects like TOKI do not merely provide shelter; they act as instruments of social engineering. By enforcing middle class consumption patterns, these spaces effectively strip former gecekondulu of their traditional autonomy they practiced. The resentment expressed in the phrase "They are telling me how to live in my own house" is not just a trivial complaint, but a grounded reaction to the systematic destruction of multi-functional living spaces.

Ultimately, these mass housing projects serve as a form of state-led gentrification, where the previous dwellers are not just physically relocated, but socially and economically alienated from the city they helped build.

References

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