

Re-Staging Modernism: Competitions, Memory and the Making of Heritage in Ankara's Ulus Square

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Abstract

Ankara's Ulus Square has long represented the spatial and ideological core of the Turkish Republic's modernization project. Since 1923, the square and its architecture form a layered urban palimpsest of nation-building where competitions played a key role in shaping both the physical and symbolic dimensions.

This paper examines two emblematic modernist buildings from mid-century competitions: the Ulus Business Center (1952–53) and the 100. Yıl Shop (1967), once central to the square's civic and commercial life but now facing obsolescence.

In 2022, a new competition for the 100. Yıl Shop site promoted by Ankara Metropolitan Municipality introduced public voting on demolition versus preservation, signaling a shift from technocratic planning to participatory heritage discourse. Through these competitions, the paper analyzes how competitions have acted as mechanisms of both construction and erasure of heritage, revealing the fragility of modernist architecture in politically layered sites.

Keywords

Modernist heritage, Ulus Square, Architectural competitions, Participatory heritage, Preservation challenges.

Introduction

Ankara's Ulus Square, at the northern end of Atatürk Boulevard, has been the symbolic core of the Republic since 1923. Once on the edge of the old city, it quickly became a showcase for state-led modernization, hosting key political and cultural functions, layering architectural expressions of shifting political agendas. From early Republican ideals to mid-century modernism, many landmarks emerged from state-organized competitions: Atatürk Boulevard (1927), Sümerbank (1935), Ulus Business Center (1952–53), and the 100. Yıl (Centenary) Shop (1967). Initially conceived as symbols of modernity, these projects are now central to heritage debates in Türkiye, where modern architecture remains weakly defined in law and vulnerable to demolition. The 2022 competition for the 100. Yıl Shop, which included a public vote on demolition versus reuse, highlights both participatory shifts and ongoing conflicts in defining heritage.

This paper situates Ulus as a case where competitions both construct and erase heritage across a century. It situates the square as a case study for the broader challenges of recognizing and negotiating modern heritage, drawing on the author's prior research, archival work, and field studies.



Fig. 1 Ankara, Sömerbank building after the conversion into Ankara Social Sciences University (photo by G. Uzgören, 2019).

Ulus Square as the stage of modernism and nation building in the early years of the Republic

Ankara, a mid-sized Anatolian town in the Ottoman Empire was chosen to be the capital of newly established Turkish Republic in 1923. Ankara's development was closely tied to the success of the new regime as it was envisioned as the 'display window' of this vision¹ as opposed to Istanbul and everything it represented. Thus, modern architecture was introduced as both an effective tool and a symbol of this radical program aimed at creating a modern, secular, fully westernized nation away from its own Ottoman and Islamic past.²

Ankara's first master plan was commissioned to Carl Christoph Lörcher which started to be implemented in 1925 where he suggested a new city in the south alongside several cultural institutions and residential amenities in Ulus, creating a recreational area *Millet Bahçesi* (Nation Garden) and spearing the already existing First Grand National Assembly (İsmail Hasip Bey; 1915-19) building in Ulus Square.³ Following Herman Jansenn's plan won the invited international competition, it was approved in 1932 and the city kept growing towards southbound with Atatürk Boulevard as the main circulation and prestige axis. During this period, state authority was reshaping what was then known as Taşhan Square.⁴ In 1927, a monument dedicated to Atatürk and the War of Independence (Heinrich Krippel) was installed at the square resulting it to stand as a prominent symbol of state power and Republican ideals during the formative decades of the Republic, at least until the mid-20th century. The demolition of Taşhan in 1936 to construct the Sömerbank headquarters marked a turning point in the square's symbolic and functional evolution. Organized through a state competition and built between 1937 and 1938 by Martin Elsaesser⁵, the headquarters embodied the architectural ambitions of the early Republic illustrating how competitions constructed Republican identity precisely by erasing Ottoman layers (Fig.1). The building's bold form, with its concave façade emphasizing the square's geometry, and its associated store positioned Ulus as a center of commerce (Fig.1). Today, this act of erasure and replacement illustrates how competitions were instrumental in redefining urban identity, while also reminding us of the layered memories now at stake in current preservation debates.



Fig.2 Ankara, Ulus Business Center 14-story block and Victory Monument on the left, and its commercial and office block on the right (photo by G. Uzgören 2019, 2024).

From national identity to global modernism

By the mid-20th century, Türkiye's transition to a multi-party system brought the Demokrat Parti (DP) to power, steering the country away from its early Kemalist vision toward a more liberal, market-oriented agenda. In Ankara, and Ulus Square, this shift materialized through new state-run competitions that embraced international modernist aesthetics as Türkiye's Westernization project moved from a continental-European model toward an American-influenced one.⁶ Turkish architects increasingly adopted the language of international modernism, where it became a means of asserting national pride through global integration.⁷ The Ulus Business Center and the 100. Yıl Shop embody this paradigm shift: both conceived through competitions yet shaped by liberal economic aspirations transforming Ulus Square from a locus of Republican symbolism into a hub of commercial and cultural activity.

Ulus Business Center (Orhan Bozkurt, Orhan Bolak, Gazanfer Berken; 1954) (Fig 2), was the first high-rise on Atatürk Boulevard. Commissioned through a competition organized by the General Directorate of the Retirement Fund (*Emekli Sandığı Genel Müdürlüğü*), the 14-story complex combined retail spaces and offices, the high block serving for the General Directorate of Sports and Youth (Fig.2). The Business Center significantly reshaped Ulus Square, its perception, appearance, and function, while influencing the broader urban character of Ankara.⁸ Its bold presence, defined by a glass curtain wall and a vertical block structure, symbolized a shift in state power; architectural forms now embodied the liberal economy and American influence. The choice of Ulus Square carried additional symbolic meaning, as the square had been central to the founding of the Republic.⁹ The construction followed by the removal of the Ministry of Education building just in the south and the relocation of the Victory Monument. These interventions, coupled with the Grand National Assembly's relocation in 1961, diminished the square's original role as a locus of state power.

The momentum continued with the construction of the 100. Yıl Shop, designed by Semra Dikel and Orhan Dikel as a competition-winning proposal. The building reinforced Ulus Square's commercial identity and centrality, complementing surrounding landmarks such as Sümerbank and the Ulus Business Center. Constructed on the former site of the Millet Garden and located on a prominent corner across from the First Grand National Assembly, the 100. Yıl Shop also reflected the evolving architectural approaches of the 1960s.¹⁰ Its design framed the

intersection of two avenues with low-rise blocks, while positioning a taller block toward the rear, a gesture that respects the square's scale and urban fabric. Therefore, once again, competitions mediated both continuity and rupture, constructing new identities while erasing older meanings.

Heritagization of Modernism

While Ulus Square was initially envisioned as a stage for state-led modernization, its mid-century modernist buildings have been sites of heritage debates. Legislation, listing practices, and participatory mechanisms, including competitions and public mobilization, have mediated their transformation from functional symbols of modernity into cultural assets, though often in fragmented ways. In Türkiye, the listing of heritage properties is governed by Law No. 2863 on the Conservation of Cultural and Natural Properties, enacted in 1983.¹¹ Article 6 of the law automatically protects all buildings constructed before the end of the 19th century, regardless of architectural value. In contrast, Republican-era and later modernist structures may be designated as cultural property only if considered significant by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. This vague legal framework has long left the identification, registration, and conservation of modern heritage open to debate.¹²

The first modernist building in Ulus Square to enter the registry was Sümerbank in 1980. Its later conversion into Ankara Social Sciences University in 2016 illustrates how adaptive reuse reshapes the symbolic meanings of modernist buildings, layering new institutional functions onto sites of collective memory.¹³ Broader urban-scale conservation initiatives began in the early 1980s, when the High Council of Immovable Monuments and Antiquities designated the 150-hectare historical center as an 'Urban, Historical, Natural and Archaeological Site'. A conservation master plan for Ulus followed, but it was never fully implemented. In 2005, despite legal prohibitions (Law No. 2863, Article 6), the plan was formally annulled by the Municipal Council (Decision No. 210), and Ulus was redefined as a 'Renewal Area'.¹⁴

This policy shift paved the way for the Ulus Historical City Center Project (2004), which proposed demolishing several mid-century modernist landmarks, including the 100. Yıl Shop, and Ulus Business Center to create an expanded square around the Victory Monument. Although conceived as a strategy of 'urban renewal,' the plan effectively endangered the integrity of Ulus Square, erasing competition-winning modernist projects that were key to its layered history.¹⁵ Opposition quickly emerged, the Ulus Initiative (*Ulus Girişimi*) together with the Chamber of Architects Ankara Branch, organized shopkeepers, artisans, NGOs, and local residents against the demolitions. Through weekly meetings and petitions to the Conservation Board, the movement succeeded in achieving the registration of the Ulus Business Center in 2010 as a first-degree cultural asset, though other structures such as the 100. Yıl Shop were excluded from protection.¹⁶ The partial recognition of these buildings highlights the ongoing fragility of modernist heritage in Ankara: while some icons are saved through citizen activism, others remain vulnerable to demolition and redevelopment pressures.

From Competition to Demolition: The Story of the 100. Yıl Shop

A recent emblematic case is the 2022 demolition of the 100. Yıl Shop, completed in 1981. While earlier losses of modernist buildings in Ulus Square and its surroundings were tied to liberal or neoliberal politics, rent-seeking, and economic or ideological agendas, this case was different: responsibility lay with Ankara's CHP mayor



Fig.3 Ankara, 100. Yıl Shop before demolisiton towards Atatürk Boulevard in 2019, the urban green area also referred as Millet Garden that replaced 100. Yıl shop in 2023 (photo by G. Uzgören, 2019, 2024).

Mansur Yavaş, elected in 2019. Under the CHP's new political approach, principles of participation, transparency, and democracy were promoted across cities. In architecture and urban design, this translated into a revival of competitions.¹⁷ Inspired by the series of competitions and public voting practices initiated in Istanbul under Ekrem İmamoğlu¹⁸ Yavaş sought to apply a similar participatory model to the 100. Yıl Shop site.

To delve into participation in heritage debates, we go back to 2005 when 1989 Ulus Center Conservation and Rehabilitation Plan had been annulled, which redefined the area as the 'Ulus Historical and Cultural Urban Renewal and Development Project Area'¹⁹. Proposals included reconstructing the Taşhan on the former Sümerbank parcel while calling for the demolition of modernist structures. Civil society organizations, professional chambers, and the Urban Council resisted these demolitions, arguing that the 100. Yıl Shop should be preserved and that its future should be determined through a design competition.²⁰ An ideas competition eventually launched by the Ankara Metropolitan Municipality in 2022 leaving the question of demolition or adaptive reuse deliberately open.²¹ Of the 64 submitted projects, most proposed conserving and adaptive reuse. However, the process ended with a public vote reduced to a binary choice: preservation and reuse through three prize-winning projects, or demolition and conversion into an open square. The result was decisive, out of 28,765 total votes, 19,959 favored demolition and the creating a square. Critics argued that the participatory process was deeply flawed. As Acar notes, the matter was reduced to a 'multiple-choice' survey without adequate public information; the target group and sample were undefined; and the lack of accompanying publications or forums undermined deliberation.²² Despite being framed as participatory, the process functioned more as populist legitimization than as democratic decision-making. As a result, the site once occupied by the 100. Yıl Shop—ironically itself built on the footprint of the demolished Millet Garden – was transformed not into an open civic square as originally envisioned, but into an urban park (Fig.3). The episode illustrates both the fragility of modernist heritage and the paradoxes of participatory rhetoric in contemporary Türkiye: the very competition framework that had once generated modernist renewal in Ulus was repurposed to justify its erasure.

This contradiction becomes even sharper when viewed against recent international heritage policies. In 2025, Türkiye got the '*Ankara: The Planning and Building of a Republican Modern Capital City*' to the UNESCO Tentative List, framing the districts of Ulus and Kızılay and the Atatürk Boulevard as key components of the capital's modern heritage.²³ Yet, even as the state positions these very areas for potential World Heritage recognition,

landmark modernist works within Ulus Square – such as the 100. Yıl Çarşısı – have been demolished through contested local processes. The dissonance between international projection and local neglect highlights the fragility of modernist heritage in Türkiye.

Conclusion

Ulus Square, once the emblem of Türkiye's modernization, now embodies the paradoxes of modernist heritage. Shaped by competitions that built national identity and later embraced global modernism, it also shows how the same mechanism has legitimized demolition, as in the 2022 erasure of the 100. Yıl Shop. Framed as participatory, the decision exposed both the fragility of modernist heritage under weak legal protection and the risks of populist outcomes. Meanwhile, Ankara's 2025 nomination to UNESCO's Tentative List points out a conflict: internationally celebrated as modern heritage, yet domestically vulnerable to loss. Ulus Square thus illustrates heritage as a contested field shaped by politics, law, civic activism, and shifting urban imaginaries. Its fate highlights a central challenge for modern heritage worldwide: reconciling architectural value with democratic participation, economic pressures, and international recognition.

¹ İLHAN TEKELİ, *Ankara'nın Başkentlik kararının ülkesel mekan organizasyonu ve toplumsal yapıya etkileri bakımından genel bir değerlendirilmesi* (1984), in *Tarih İçinde Ankara*. Ankara, METU 1984, p.234.

² SİBEL BOZDOĞAN, *Modernism and nation building: Turkish architectural culture in the early republic*. Seattle, University of Washington Press 2001, p.18.

³ ZEYNEP KEZER, *Building modern Turkey. State, stage and ideology in the early Republic*. Pittsburg, University of Pittsburg Press 2015, pp. 30-32.

⁴ Ulus Square was originally known as Taşhan Square, taking its name from the hotel Taşhan (Hotel d'Angora) built in the late 1800s.

⁵ Sümerbank competition was won by Turkish architect Seyfi Arkan, but the project was commissioned to Elsaesser who did not participate the competition.

⁶ SİBEL BOZDOĞAN, ESRA AKCAN, *Turkey. Modern architectures in history*. London, Reaction Books 2012, p.105.; İLHAN TEKELİ, *The social context of the development of architecture in Turkey*, in R. Hold, et alii (a cura di), *Modern Turkish Architecture*, Ankara, Chamber of Architects of Turkey 2005, p.28.

⁷ SİBEL BOZDOĞAN, ESRA AKCAN, *Turkey modern architectures in history*. London, Reaction Books 2012, p.114.

⁸ GÜNCE UZGÖREN, *Conservation of architectural heritage in Atatürk Boulevard in Ankara*. Unpublished master's thesis. Ankara, METU 2019, p.145.

⁹ *Ibidem* İvi 146

¹⁰ *Ibidem* İvi 160

¹¹ See: Kültür ve Tabiat Varlıklarını Koruma Kanunu, No.2863 (1983), <http://www.kultur.gov.tr/teftis>

¹² GÜNCE UZGÖREN, 2019, p.174.

¹³ *Ibidem* İvi 257

¹⁴ *Ibidem* İvi 204-205

¹⁵ *Ibidem* İvi

¹⁶ YÜKSEL YEŞİM UYSAL, *Ankara'nın cumhuriyet mirasları tehlike altında*. «TMMOB Mimarlar Odası Ankara Şubesi Bülten», XXXI, 2005, p.2.

¹⁷ GÜNCE UZGÖREN, *Architecture, power, and ideological propaganda. Decisions and directions in XXI century competitions in Istanbul*. Unpublished PhD thesis, Rome, University of Rome La Sapienza 2023.

¹⁸ *Ibidem* İvi 103

¹⁹ BAYKAN GÜNAY, *Ankara çekirdek alanının oluşumu ve 1990 nazım planı hakkında bir değerlendirme*. In T. Şenyapılı (a cura di), *Cumhuriyet'in Ankara'sı*, Ankara ODTÜ Geliştirme Vakfı Yayıncılık 2006, pp. 61-118.

²⁰ ELİF SELENA AYHAN KOÇYİĞİT et alii, *100. Yıl Çarşısı koruma- yıkım tartışmaları ve Ulus tarihî kent merkezine bütüncül yaklaşım önerisi*, «Mimarlık», CDXV, 2020, pp. 10-23.

²¹ YİĞİT ACAR, *Populizm ve Katılımcılık: Türkiye'de Son Dönem Deneyimleri*, «Mimarlık» CDXXVII, 2022, pp. 12-15.; ANKARA METROPOLITAN MUNICIPALITY, *100. Yıl Çarşısı ve Yakın Çevresi Fikir Proje Yarışması Sorular ve Cevaplar*. Ankara, 2022.

²² YİĞİT ACAR, pp. 14-15.

²³ Unesco Tentative List, *Ankara: The Planning and Building of a Republican Modern Capital City*, 2025.