

# A Modern Social Space of the 1930s in Turkey: Çubuk Dam and Its Buildings

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## Abstract

One of the most significant and iconic spaces of Turkey during the early years of the republic was the Çubuk Dam and its surroundings. The Çubuk Dam, which opened in 1936, was built to provide water for Ankara. However, Çubuk Dam did not only address a functional need, rather it was envisioned as a social space for the new capital that was being shaped with modern, rational, and secular approaches in line with the ideology of the state. This study aims to examine the Çubuk Dam and its two significant buildings positioned in the area to highlight its iconic value as a modern and social environment. While one of those two buildings, the Atatürk House was restored and is currently open to visits; the other one, the Casino and Restaurant building was demolished in 2016, which is a significant alteration in the area. In this research, archival documents such as photographs and newspaper clippings were utilized to understand significant changes that occurred over the years in the area and compare the current state of the Çubuk Dam and its buildings. Even though Çubuk Dam and its surroundings are open to visits as a social space today, some changes, specifically the demolition of the Casino and Restaurant building and the removal of the island on the dam lake, can be seen to have a significant impact on the social and cultural experience of the area.

**Keywords:** Çubuk Dam, Early Republican Architecture; Çubuk Casino and Restaurant; Çubuk Atatürk House; Modern Architecture

## 1. Introduction

Capital cities tend to carry symbolic meanings as they are the seat of governments. Ankara, which became the capital of Turkey in 1923, can be considered a significant example of this phenomenon since there was a rapid construction process in line with the ideologies of the newly founded republic.<sup>1</sup> The declaration of Ankara as the new capital signified a difference from the past since the old capital Istanbul was associated with the Ottoman Empire. This change was also reflected in architectural production since architectural works have been used and are continuing to be used to convey various ideas and concepts. Examples of this phenomenon can be seen in many periods of architectural history in various geographies, as in the cases of the pyramids, triumphal arcs, or palaces, which operated as representations of concepts such as power and/or success among other things.

The representation of different concepts and/or ideologies through architecture was also true for the case of Ankara in the 1930s, which occurred after the changes in the country following the proclamation of the republic. Before the ideological changes of the republic, “Turkish Nationalism”, whose foundation rested on the dual cultural theory of Ziya Gökalp was prominent in the country (Holod & Evin, 1984). The dual cultural theory of Gökalp was focused on two concepts that were *Hars* (Culture) and *Medeniyet* (Civilization) (Tunaya, 1988). Gökalp expressed that while *Hars* carried “national” traits and was a corpus of the social and cultural heritage of the nation, *Medeniyet* had more of an international character, and traits from other cultures could be obtained and infused into the national culture (Gökalp, 1968). The architectural production in Turkey in the early 1920s, a period commonly referred to as “The First National Architecture”, was in line with these ideas of “Turkish Nationalism” since elements of Ottoman architectural heritage were combined with the recent building technologies of the time (Holod and Evin, 1984).

Following the proclamation of the republic and Ankara’s declaration as the capital, the official ideology of the state began to shift from “Turkish Nationalism”, and a more internationalist approach was taken in all fields. As a series of reforms were being implemented and transforming various fields, such as law, culture, and education, the built environment of Ankara was also changing (Turan, 1995). Ankara, a modest town in the early 1920s, began to change significantly and the city became one of the representations of the new, modern, and secular Turkish state (Altan Ergut, 2006; Öz, 2014). The architectural language of “modernism”<sup>2</sup>, in line with the ideology of the state, was utilized and became the dominant approach in the construction of new buildings in Ankara during the 1930s (Holod & Evin, 1984). In other words, elements that incorporated elements of Ottoman Architecture

were mostly abandoned, which could be seen in the newly constructed buildings of the capital that were designed by utilizing modern architectural elements with an internationalist approach while also corresponding to the needs of the people.

While there are numerous examples of the representation of the idea of “modernism” through architecture, which can be seen in various state institutions; cultural; educational; commercial, and residential buildings of the time, one of the most iconic materializations was in the vicinity of Ankara.<sup>3</sup> The Çubuk Dam, the Casino and Restaurant building, and the surrounding landscape were built as social spaces in the republic’s early years. Çubuk dam was firstly a response to the need to distribute water to the developing modern city, however, the area was also envisioned as a space for people to socialize.

## 2. Çubuk Dam and Its Buildings

The survey studies for the Çubuk Dam began in 1927, which was followed by the decision to make a dam on the Çubuk<sup>4</sup> stream to provide drinking water and to supply water to agriculture, as well as to industrial facilities of Ankara (Cumhuriyet Newspaper Archive, 04 November 1936). The water for the city came partly from Elmadağ and partly from an underground water barrage, which was supplemented by impounding the water of the Çubuk stream (Paton & Barton, 1943). The construction of the dam, which began in 1930, was completed and opened with an official ceremony by the then Prime Minister İsmet İnönü in 1936 (Özgen & Büyüktolu, 2016; Demirtaş, 2021). Two significant buildings were added to the complex of Çubuk Dam between the years 1937 and 1938. One of those buildings, the Çubuk Casino and Restaurant designed by the French architect Théodore Leveau was open to the use of people; the other was built as an “Atatürk House”<sup>5</sup> for the visits of Atatürk to the Çubuk Dam (Özgen & Büyüktolu, 2016). It is known that Mustafa Kemal Atatürk himself, the great leader of Turkey and its first president, had boat tours in the lake of the Çubuk dam during his various visits to the area (Özgen & Büyüktolu, 2016) (Figure 1).



Figure 1 – Newspaper Clipping from Cumhuriyet Archives showing Atatürk in one of his visits to the Çubuk Dam. The title reads: The Great Chief at the Çubuk Dam (Cumhuriyet Newspaper Archive, 9 May 1938)

Considering its functional value and scale<sup>6</sup>, the Çubuk dam can be viewed as the main structure that shapes its surroundings (Figure 2). The park and the Çubuk Casino and Restaurant building were positioned beneath the dam structure with a vision to utilize the area as a social place for people (Dinçer, 2017). The Atatürk House, on the other hand, was built on the slopes of the valley with a clear view of the dam structure and social spaces (Figure 3). The Çubuk Dam and its buildings, which quickly became a famous visiting spot, were accessed through busses during the day that sometimes extended to the nighttime (Dinçer, 2017).

The Çubuk dam can be understood as a technological and cultural icon of the early years of the republic (Bozdoğan, 2001). The curved dam structure itself was accessed through a portico with classical details (Bozdoğan, 2001). The opening ceremony was held in front of this portico (Figure 4), where the Prime Minister of the time İsmet İnönü spoke. Two commemorative plates were placed on the sides of the door that led into the dam structure. On the first plate, it was expressed that the Çubuk Dam was built to provide water to Ankara between the years of 1929 and 1936, during Atatürk's era as its first president.<sup>7</sup> On the second plate, it was explained that the dam construction had ended in 1936, while also paying respect to the Turkish engineers; building contractors, and builders.<sup>8</sup>

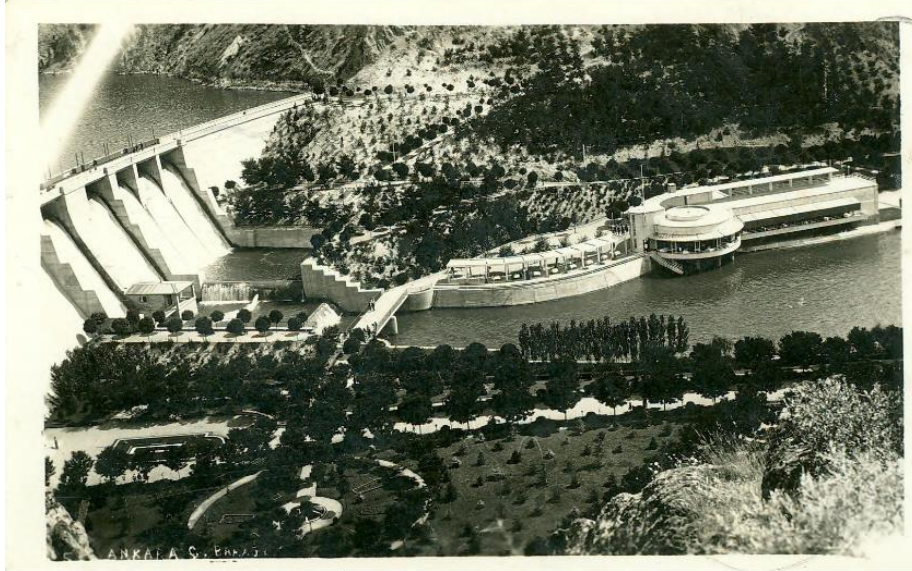


Figure 2 – Çubuk Dam Postcard from 1940. In the postcard, the Çubuk Dam (on the left), the Casino and Restaurant building designed by the French architect Théodore Leveau, and parks in the area can be seen. (*Çubuk Barajı*, Postcard. (1940). Koç University Vehbi Koç Ankara Studies Research Center (VEKAM))

The second significant building in the area, which was positioned near the dam lake, beneath the high concrete structure, was the Casino and Restaurant building. Here, it is considered significant to express that the casino (*gazino*) in this context is not related to gambling, rather, as Gürel (2011, 168) explains that in this context, “the term usually suggested a restaurant, a cafe or a place that accommodated live music, dancing and/or shows”. The Çubuk Casino and Restaurant building, designed by Théodore Leveau, can be viewed as one of the early examples of modern architecture in the early years of the republic, which was in line with the modern, secular, and rational ideologies of the state. In the dominant architectural language of the 1930s, elements that were associated mainly with the Ottoman Empire were abandoned, as in the case of the Çubuk Casino and Restaurant building, which resulted in a difference from the immediate past through the utilization of architecture (Holod & Evin, 1984).

Aslanoğlu (2010, 237) explains that Casino and Restaurant had its kitchen and service areas on the lower level of the building (Figure 5). The curved casino building, and the rectangular restaurant that was attached to the casino, were located on the first floor, in addition to the service areas of both social spaces (Aslanoğlu, 2010, 237). Indeed, as can be seen in the plans of the building, the circle-formed section of the building was defined as a dancing floor (*pist*),

and the restaurant (*lokanta*) that led to that area was in a rectangle form (Figure 5). The circular casino section was raised on top of the pilotis and stood above the dam lake, which further emphasizes the modern architectural language utilized in this building (Figure 2). In the early years of its construction, boats would approach the building through a circular staircase that was attached to the casino section (Aslanoğlu, 2011, 237)(Figure 2).

The modern building also had a terrace area and included a small circular garden. As can be seen in the plans (Figure 5) the Casino and Restaurant, were designed with a mindset that prioritized the views of the dam structure and the dam lake. Accordingly, the horizontal emphasis of the building with its continuous windows emphasized modern aspects of the architectural work, while also connecting people with the lake and the view. The importance given to the exterior areas can also be seen in the circular exterior space that extends from the Casino and Restaurant, where people could view the lake; greenery around and across the lake; as well as the dam structure itself (Figure 2). However, this connection between architecture and nature is perhaps most visible in the case of the island of the dam lake (Figure 6). The small island positioned on the dam lake was located near the entrance of the Casino and Restaurant building and was accessed with a bridge. The tables that were positioned on this roughly oval-shaped island allowed people to sit and enjoy the view of the lake from on top of it, with a view of the dam structure; greenery surrounding the area; and the Atatürk House located on the slopes across the lake (Figure 7).



Figure 3 – Photograph taken from the front of the Atatürk House that shows the dam and its surroundings. In the view, the Çubuk Dam and the Dam Lake; walking paths; and bike roads in their current state can be seen. The Casino and Restaurant building, which was demolished in 2016, was positioned near the dam lake (Figure 2), which would have been on the right side of the photograph. (Photograph taken by the author, 2023)



Figure 4 – Photograph showing the current view of the portico as attached to the curved structure of the dam with its classical architectural elements.

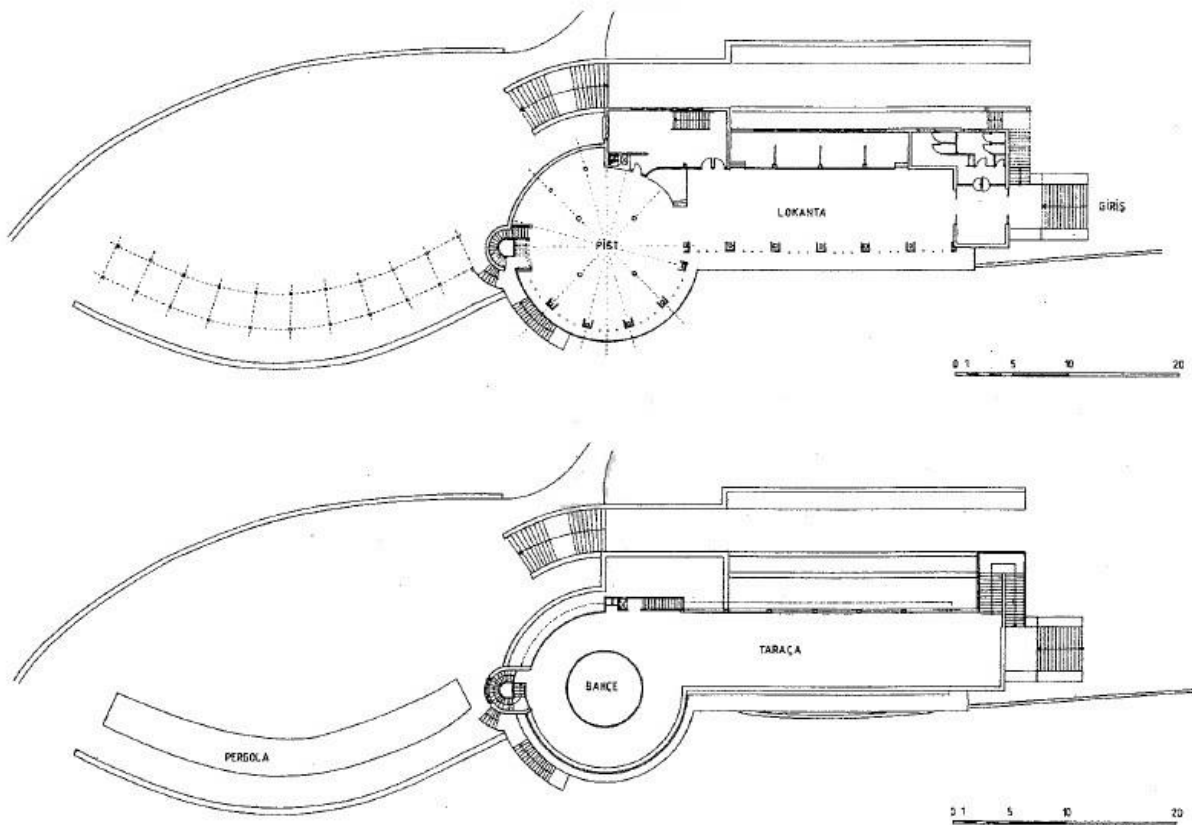


Figure 5 – Plans of the Casino and Restaurant Building of the Çubuk Dam.  
(Aslanoğlu, 2010, 239)

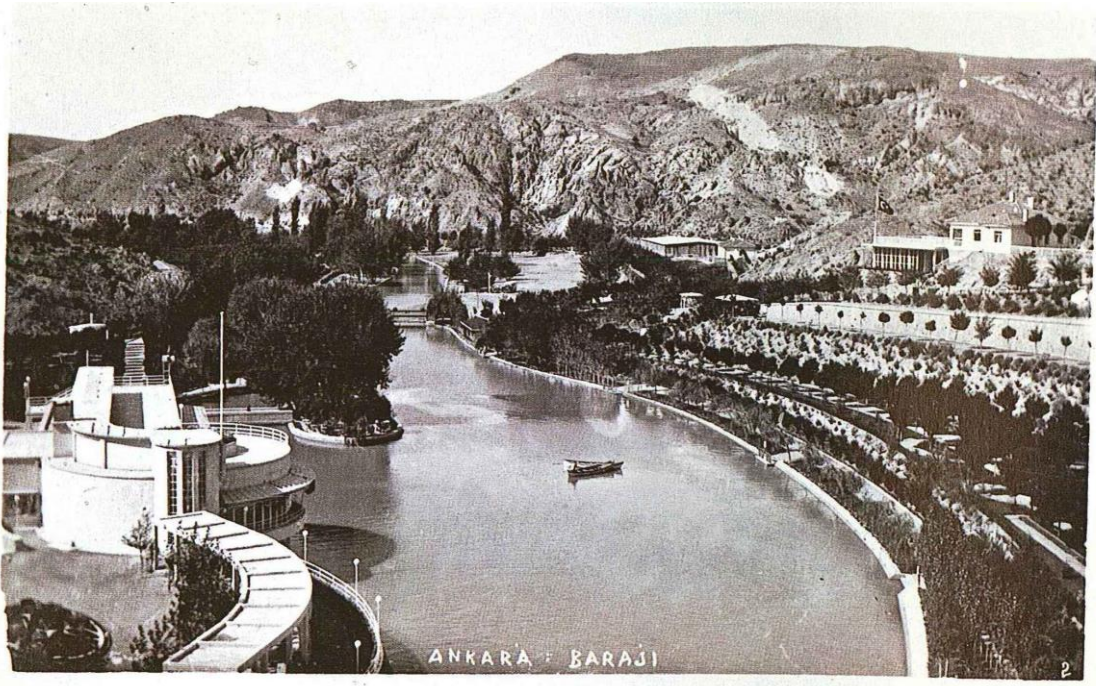


Figure 6 – Photograph from 1940 showing the Casino and Restaurant; the Çubuk Dam Lake with an island connected with a bridge from near the entrance of the Casino and Restaurant Building, and the Atatürk House positioned on the slopes across the Casino and Restaurant on the upper right corner of the photograph. (Atılım University Digital Archive of Ankara City)



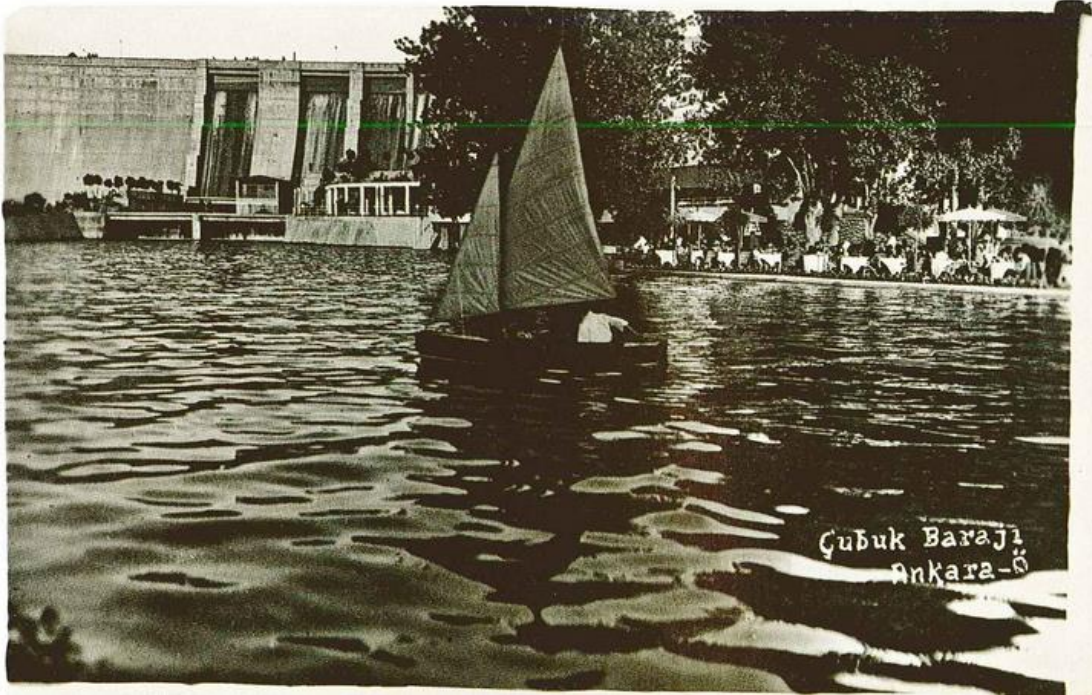


Figure 7 – Photograph from 1938 showing tables lined up on the island overseeing the lake with the dam structure in the background (Atilim University Digital Archive of Ankara City, Ankara Metropolitan Municipality Collection)

The last building that needs to be mentioned in the Çubuk Dam area is the Atatürk House, which was built around the same time as the Casino and Restaurant building. Atatürk House was constructed mainly to provide a resting and accommodation for Atatürk and his visitors during their trips to the Çubuk Dam. The building that was positioned on the slopes across the Casino and Restaurant, was also built in line with the ideology of the state since it was designed as a modern and modest two-level building (Figure 6). Following Atatürk's death, some additions were made to the Atatürk House and it operated as the management building of the Çubuk dam (Araz, 1999). During the mid-nineties, the Çubuk dam came to an inactive phase, and the Atatürk House became an unused building for almost twenty-five years (Özgenel et.al, 2022). In 2020, the Atatürk House began to be restored by the initiatives of Ankara Metropolitan Municipality and is currently open for visitation.

A comparison between the existing photographs of the Atatürk House and the current state of the building shows that the upper floor of the building had been significantly enlarged over time with possible growth on the back side of the building (Figure 8). It can be seen that the terrace area was envisioned as a large open space, with a view of the Çubuk dam, the lake, and the Casino and Restaurant building across the water. Today, despite the expansion of the

building, there is still a terrace, with the addition of wooden beams that provide some shade (Figure 9). The entrance facade with large full-height windows, which create a bright interior area, continue to exist as one of the main modern architectural features of this building (Figure 8).

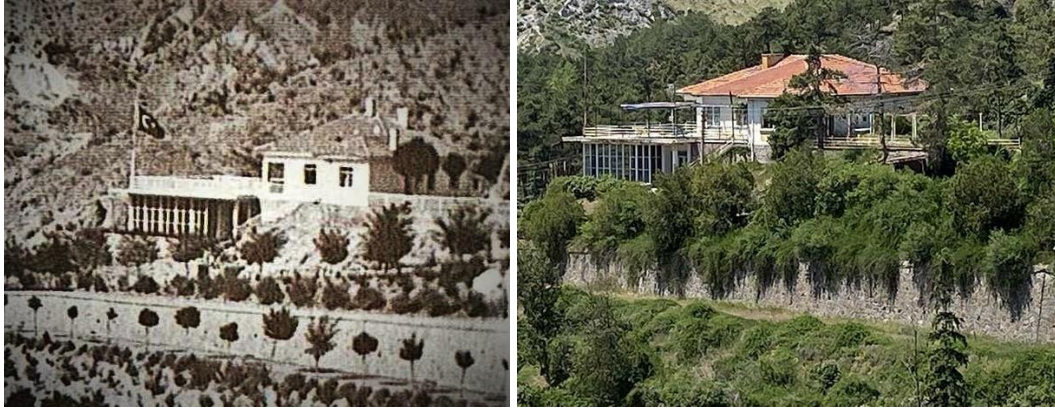


Figure 8 – Photograph showing the changes made to the Atatürk House over the years. Left: Atatürk House in 1940 (Atilim University Digital Archive of Ankara City); Right: Photograph of the Atatürk House in the Cumhuriyet Newspaper in 2020 (Cumhuriyet, 16 May 2020)

One of the main differences between the old Çubuk Dam area and its current state, however, is the loss of the Casino and Restaurant building. During its ruinous state, the Casino and Restaurant building, which was a modern architectural heritage of Ankara as one of the iconic buildings of the early republic, was demolished in 2016. The island that was positioned near the building is another lost element of the Çubuk dam in its current state since today the water follows a much narrower and straight path. Despite the changes in the area, today Çubuk Dam and its surroundings provide a place of socialization to its visitors, following the recreation project of the area.



Figure 9 – Photograph showing the wooden beam additions on the terrace area. The photograph was taken from the stairs that lead to the upper floor of the building. The landing of the staircase serves as the entrance platform. (Photograph taken by the author)

## Conclusion

In this study, it was shown that the Çubuk Dam and its surroundings were planned both as a functional and technological response to the need to distribute water to Ankara and was envisioned as a modern socialization and entertainment place for the new capital of Turkey. Considering the ideological changes in the history of Turkey, specifically the change from “Turkish Nationalism” to the official ideology of the state following the proclamation of the republic, which had a more international character, it could be seen that Çubuk Dam and its buildings were the representation of “modernism”, as well as the idea of “modernity”. Recent technologies of the time were utilized to construct the curved structure of the dam, making the structure itself a technological and cultural icon for the country, while also responding to the modern needs of people in Ankara, a city that was under rapid construction with an internationalist approach. The representation of “modernism” was also evident in the design of the Casino and Restaurant building, which incorporated new building methods with modern architectural characteristics, which included a horizontal emphasis, the use of piloti-like columns that raised the building from the ground, the façade that was retracted from the structural system to reveal the columns while creating a balcony through which people could enjoy the view of the dam, as well as the man-made lake beneath the structure, among other things. The representation of modernism was also visible in the glass façade of the Atatürk House, which was located on the slopes of the valley, which could be seen while experiencing the overall site by the people.

In other words, it was seen that the use of modern architecture, which was in parallel with the dominant architectural approach in the 1930s in Ankara, contributed to this space being read as a modern environment, in addition to being a representation of the ideology of the state in terms of its modern, rational, and secular approaches. It was also seen that the Çubuk Dam and its buildings operated as a representation of “modernity”, considering that people experienced the modern facilities of the area in a secular and international manner while enjoying the views of the water, the dam as a large-scale technological achievement and the casino and restaurant building where they could entertain in a modern space. In that sense, the importance given to the exterior spaces could be understood as part of this experience, since the outdoor experiences provided people with the opportunity to view these facades and enjoy the modern architectural language on the site.

The Çubuk Dam and its surroundings were seen as a significant place of socialization for Ankara following the 1930s, within which modern life was experienced and viewed by people, in line with the official ideology of the period. However, this began to change after the Çubuk Dam became inactive in the mid-nineties. The Çubuk Casino and Restaurant building and the Atatürk House became unused buildings over the years. The process led to the Casino and Restaurant building being demolished in 2016 due to its ruinous state, even though it was one of the most iconic buildings of the early republic. The loss of this modern architectural heritage, alongside the loss of the small island positioned next to it, had a significant impact on the area since it was one of the two social structures, the first being the dam itself, that shaped and framed the landscape. Today, in the place of the Casino and Restaurant where people used to gather and socialize, there is an open park for people to walk or come together under the shades of gazebos. The dam lake is no longer a lake that people socialize on top of since the small island is also gone, or where people take boat tours, rather it is a narrow stream with parks on each side of it. Even though people visit the area today, we observe that one of the most famous visiting spots of Ankara has gone through significant changes over time, changing the way people socialize in the Çubuk Dam and its surroundings. And yet, the Çubuk Dam structure continues to stand as a technological, social, and cultural achievement of the 1930s and continues to be a representation of the ideas related to “modernism” and ideology of the period in that historical period of Turkey.

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<sup>1</sup> Ankara became the capital city of Turkey following the War of Independence, which was led by the leader Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who is also the first president of the Republic of Türkiye (Turan, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Here the term “modernism” is being used in quotation marks to draw attention to the idea that terms such as “modernism” and “modern architecture” may convey plural meanings rather than singular and fixed ones. In the context of Turkey, the term “modern architecture” corresponds to different architectural languages in different periods and localities.

<sup>3</sup> The Ankara Municipality borders were broadened to include Çubuk Dam and Casino with a governmental decision in 1941 (Directorate of State Archives Republican Archives, 1941 Document). When the dam was opened in 1936, it was 12 km away from the city of Ankara (Cumhuriyet Newspaper Archive, 04 November 1936).

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<sup>4</sup> Çubuk is a district of Ankara, which is approximately 39km away from the city center (Çubuk Municipality Official Website. Available: <https://www.cubuk.bel.tr>)

<sup>5</sup> Atatürk House in Çubuk, Ankara is one of the many accommodation places of Atatürk in the country. These buildings are also referred to as “Atatürk Pavilion”; “Atatürk Residence”; and “Atatürk Kiosk”.

<sup>6</sup> The height of the concrete Çubuk dam from its basis is 58 meters (Özgen & Büyüktolu, 2016).

<sup>7</sup> The two commemorative plates on the portico can be still seen today. The statement is based on the commemorative plate that is located on the left side of the door.

<sup>8</sup> The statement is based on the commemorative plate that is located on the right side of the door.