

Urban Atölye

THINKING OUTSIDE THE CONCRETE BOX

A CREATIVE WORKSHOP AND RESEARCH SPACE IN MASLAK
IS CHALLENGING THE WAY PEOPLE THINK ABOUT A MUCH
MALIGNED MATERIAL: CONCRETE

TEXT Jane Akatay

PHOTOS Merve Göral & Urban Atölye's archive



Pebbles candle holder
designed for Urban Atölye
by Melike Altınışık



Decorative works displayed at Urban Atölye's workshop in Maslak.



Who is Nilüfer Kozikoğlu?

Born in Ankara in 1968 and raised in the Kadıköy neighborhood of Selamiçeşme, Kozikoğlu is an architecture graduate of Mimar Sinan University. She developed an interest in concrete in the mid-1990s while studying for a master's degree in architecture and urban design at the prestigious Architectural Association School of Architecture in London. On returning to Istanbul, she set up an architectural practice and various design studios, and is now a guest lecturer at several universities.

Water, aggregate, and cement mixed together make concrete. It's a simple material that has been used to create architectural masterpieces throughout the world, ranging from the Pantheon of ancient Rome, to the Sydney Opera House, and the Sancaklar Mosque in Istanbul. Concrete is also used in many of the more prosaic buildings where the majority of us live and work.

Yet, there has been increasing concern about the widespread use of concrete and its effect on the environment and human health. We too often see concrete as something completely removed from art or the natural world. Many find it aesthetically unattractive and monotonous, and it is often repudiated for its heavy carbon footprint.

However, some architects, urban planners, and educators in Istanbul are convinced that it doesn't have to be this way; including Nilüfer Kozikoğlu, the architect and founder of the research, design, installation and manufacturing workshop Urban Atölye. She considers concrete to be a potentially beautiful material, as well as a creative art-form, if applied on a human scale and brought together with nature.

Much of Urban Atölye's work is concerned with rebranding concrete and transforming its creative possibilities.

CONCRETE BEAUTY

"We had been discussing how we needed to have an independent, dedicated creative space for our work," Kozikoğlu told The Guide Istanbul, speaking about why she first established Urban Atölye along with her sister Aymelek and some other colleagues.

They had been through a series of unsuitable workshops. Then, in 2009, they found an ideal place in Maslak, surrounded by an industrial environment rich in artisanal workshops, car repair yards, and metalwork and sculpture studios.

"Urban Atölye is about devising new ways of using raw and manufactured goods, digital fabrication and handcrafts, including organic and synthetic operations, in terms of research and production," says Kozikoğlu. "Urban Atölye has become a production and know-how lab, a place where digital techniques converge with handcraft. The work we produce is now being displayed across the world in exhibitions, shows, and biennials."



CONCRETE REVOLUTION

Concrete has a two millennia history. During Roman times, an early form was used to remarkable effect in a wide range of civil engineering structures; ranging from amphitheatres and aqueducts to baths and bridges. It was used to build the Pantheon, including the dome, which even today remains the largest dome made from unreinforced concrete ever built. There is also evidence that a lightweight cement material incorporating volcanic ash—pozzolana—was used in the construction of Hagia Sophia. But the use of concrete reinforced with steel was an early twentieth century innovation that has changed the world.



Kanyon vase designed for Urban Atölye by Ceren Dabağ

Urban Atölye employs cutting-edge design and production techniques, such as in-house 3D printing and Computer Numerical Control (CNC), in which in which pre-programmed computer software controls the movement of factory tools and machinery. While their main material is concrete, they also use wood, plaster, fabrics, paper, glass, copper, and other metals. Above all, the work is guided by Kozikoğlu's passion for biophilic design; a philosophy that seeks to create places, structures, and products in accordance with nature. For Kozikoğlu, this usually means reintroducing concrete to nature.

BIOPHILIC DESIGN

Kozikoğlu is the first to admit that, when concrete is used to excess or in an inappropriate way, it can produce eyesores and blots on the landscape.

"A major aspect of the work we carry out at UA is to show that—when used in synthesis with nature—concrete is a remarkable and versatile substance," she argues. "It is also of great historical significance; a material that allows for strength, scale and design flexibility."

Paşabahçe, the Turkish glass company, saw the potential in her work and approached Urban Atölye to ask them to manufacture the bespoke concrete parts for products in their new series *Nude*. Kozikoğlu says that such products are made using plasticized cement and innovative casting methods that brings their biophilic design philosophy to the fore; exemplified by terrarium and sculptures based on *alveolur*—a sort of swiss-cheese or honeycomb effect that naturally occurs over time as a result of erosion in rocks and gypsum.

"Concrete can also be used to create artefacts," she concludes, "on a domestic as well as an industrial scale, of the most extraordinary delicacy, refinement, and beauty." □

Urban Atölye's designs range from decorative to functional pieces.



Under the Urban Atölye banner—and usually working in collaboration with Kozikoğlu—various designers, artists, and architects carry out projects and bespoke applications for interior and garden design, as well as installation sculptures.

One notable example is the 'concrete candle' by Melike Altınışık: a 60 cm high product comprised of three candles attached to a base that incorporates a cementitious mixture, pumice, and paraffin—all poured by hand.

Another is the 'AlveOsis' project; a manufacturing technique that was part of an installation at the International Architecture Biennale Antalya 2017, and then presented at a conference for structural shells at MIT, Boston in July 2018. "Imagine, if you will, a rhizome—a multi-branched, multidirectional tubular root formation—hollow inside and porous outside, created by applying spray-on cement onto a textile-covered structure, using inflated casting," explains Kozikoğlu.

A: Intema Yaşam in Kanyon, Modül Istanbul at 42 Maslak

W: pomstore.net, hipicon.com, hamm.com.tr

I: @urbanatolye