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Not Just a Place: Emotional Belonging and Class Distinction in Nişantaşı-Istanbul

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores how residents of the historic Nişantaşı neighborhood in Istanbul have experienced, remembered, and narrated the area throughout Turkey's modern urban history. Drawing on in-depth interviews and archival materials from newspapers and magazines, it interprets these sources as subjective memory rather than objective record. By tracing shifts in personal experiences, daily routines, and emotional geographies, the study reveals how urban change is understood beyond spatial transformation alone. Using a periodization framework aligned with Turkey's urban transformation, it maps recurring themes and emotional tones across time. These include a persistent tension between nostalgic loss and the embrace of modernization, where nostalgia also emerges as a subtle form of resistance to urban change. This diachronic perspective highlights tensions between continuity and rupture, belonging and memory, and the interplay of material and imagined spaces. In doing so, the article emphasizes memory as a multilayered cultural construct, shaped by overlapping narratives of class, modernization, and everyday life, thereby revealing how cultural conflicts and integrations are inscribed in the urban fabric of Nişantaşı. Moreover. the study's approach also offers a framework that future research can adapt to examine how affective attachments and classed narratives mediate processes of urban change in different cultural settings.

Keywords: Nişantaşı; Teşvikiye; Urban Memory; Place Attachment; Nostalgia; Habitus

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1. Introduction

The Teşvikiye-Nişantaşı neighborhood in Istanbul was established in a planned manner by the Ottoman Palace during the Late Ottoman period and has a history of approximately 150 years. The district commonly referred to as Nişantaşı lies at the intersection of the Teşvikiye, Meşrutiyet, Harbiye, and Maçka neighborhoods. Among these, Teşvikiye stands out as a planned settlement of Ottoman modernization. While this study focuses in depth on Nişantaşı, it does not exclude the other neighborhoods, which are historically and socially deeply intertwined. Compared to Istanbul's significant history, extending from antiquity to the present day, it is a relatively new district compared to many older districts. However, when considered in terms of modern urbanization, it holds a significant place in the city's history. The neighborhood can therefore be read as a layered site where class distinction, cultural aspiration, and modernization intersect, producing both integration and exclusion.

This paper explores memory, change, and attachment in the Teşvikiye-Nişantaşı neighborhood by engaging with newspaper archives, residents' narratives, and the dynamics of urbanization. It asks: how has the relationship between Nişantaşı's spatial formation and the experiences and daily practices of social actors changed over time? How have these transformations been reflected in newspapers, and what traces have they left in the memories of residents? By focusing on the interactions, tensions, and adaptations between different social groups, the article emphasizes how local memory and emotional belonging shape the coexistence and segregation of classes in urban space.

The concepts of memory and attachment to place are most often discussed in spatial and human studies in relation to conditions such as migration, displacement, war, and political repression [1–4]. In urban-focused social research, dynamics of cultural diversity are usually framed through the exclusion of different communities [5, 6]. Yet, it is equally important for urban and cultural studies to understand the desires, conditions, and motivations of the urban middle- and upper-middle classes, whose lives also generate cultural data. The paper therefore highlights Nişantaşı as a site where cultural conflicts and integrations are continuously negotiated through everyday practices, memory transmission, and emotional belonging.

The paper adopts a grounded theory approach while also drawing on the classical ethnographic tradition of urban anthropology. Understanding Nişantaşı's social and spatial identity requires close observation of local actors' experiences and everyday practices in relation to broader historical and social processes. Within this framework, long-term fieldwork and in-depth interviews are employed to analyse how the neighborhood has been constructed in both individual and collective memory, as revealed through the narratives and practices of its residents.

2. Materials and Methods

Experiences shared by urban users and homeowners provide unique insider narratives of the city's past. Such "insider experiences" shape not only personal stories but also the neighbourhood's collective memory, precisely because these actors actively inhabit and transform the space [7]. In parallel, newspaper archives function as primary and enduring sources in the construction of social memory. Journalism actively shapes this memory by deciding which events deserve record and how they are framed. Tuchman's concept of "gatekeeping" underscores a dimension often overlooked by memory theorists such as Connerton, Halbwachs and Le Goff archives operate as repositories of public remembrance [8–11].

This paper employs newspaper archives from 1923 to 2025 as primary historical sources to trace transformations in Nişantaşı's social and spatial identity. A content-focused analysis identifies key themes across different periods and cross-reads these findings with in-depth interviews. This multilayered approach integrates written records with living memory to capture the complex, multi-scalar processes at play [12]. It also enables the study to uncover how urban change is not only material but also embedded in cultural conflicts and integrations, as different class and cultural groups negotiate their place in the neighborhood.

2.1. Archive

We searched national newspapers and magazines available in the digital archive of *Gaste Arşivi*, which provides searchable scans of original publications from the late Ottoman to Republican periods [13]. The research was conducted between April and July 2025, covering the years 1923 to 2023, using the keywords Nişantaşı and Teşvikiye. We reviewed all news items in which these terms appeared. For

publications after 1950, we conducted the same search in Milliyet's official digital archive (**Table 1**). We compiled the results by year, converted accompanying visuals into text, and carried out a frequency analysis. In addition to national publications, we examined the archive of *Mimar/Arkitekt* magazine, accessed via the Chamber of Architects' database, to trace professional debates on the neighbourhood (**Table 2**). This combined approach highlights how discussions of Nişantaşı emerged both in national media and within architectural circles.

Table 1. National newspaper and magazine archive search.

Publication	Details	Publication Period	Accessed Period	Issues Accessed
Akşam	daily national Turkish newspaper	1918–1982; 1994–	1929–1964	8008
Son Posta	daily national Turkish newspaper	1930–1960	1930–1950	6185
Cumhuriyet	daily national Turkish newspaper	1924–	1929–	10352
Milliyet	daily national Turkish newspaper	1926–	Gaste arşivi: 1929–1935 Milliyet's official Online archive: 1950–2007	2209 All issues
TV'de 7 Gün	Weekly television magazine		1975–1992	524
Nokta	weekly magazine	1982–2016	1982–1993	76
Hey	weekly music and youth magazine	1970s–1980s	1971–1986	179
Ses	weekly art, cinema, fashion, and music magazine	1956–	1961–1973	144

Table 2. Architecture-focused archive search.

Publication	Details	Publication Period	Accessed Period	Issues Accessed
Mimar/Arkitekt	Architecture, Urbanism, and Municipal Studies Journal, variable (periodical)	1931–1980	All periods	All issues

We organised this analysis according to the historical periods that outlined later in the study. It examines the themes and intensity of debates about the neighbourhood across different years. One key limitation of the archival research stems from the Ottoman-period newspapers: although they are accessible, their Ottoman Turkish script prevented detailed examination. As a result, we used certain early Republican sources as reference points. Columnist Mustafa Ragıp Esatlı's pieces from 1940 and 1944 served as valuable materials, offering insider observations from the period and reflecting its nostalgic and interpretive memory.

2.2. Researcher's Field Position and In-Depth Interviews

This study draws on the insider observations of one researcher who lived in Nişantaşı for fifteen years, raising children and forming social ties there. This position allowed deep personal and ethnographic insight into the neighborhood.

To explore Nişantaşı's spatial transformation and emotional attachments, we conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with open and non-judgmental questions, focusing on how individual memories and daily experiences shape collective memory. These narratives reveal how memory and belonging simultaneously foster a sense of shared continuity across generations while reinforcing distinctions and boundaries between different social groups, thus shaping both coexistence and segregation in the urban fabric. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling.[14] We included both long-term residents (native participants) and newcomers (participants who settled later) to ensure diversity across time and social networks.

In total, we conducted ten in-depth interviews but focused our analysis on five whose narratives offered the rich-

est theoretical and historical scope. These accounts were distinguished by the breadth of life stories they covered and by the way they connected personal memory with successive phases of the neighborhood's transformation. They offered the most nuanced reflections on how social distinction, aesthetic judgment, and experiences of change are intertwined with memory and belonging in everyday life. Their narratives intertwined everyday experience with social and aesthetic meanings that illuminated longer continuities in Nişantaşı's urban life. These included long-time residents of listed heritage apartments and middle-class participants who settled later. We coded the data thematically using inductive content analysis and cross-referenced it with media archives, enabling a multi-layered understanding of the neighborhood's physical, historical, cultural, and emotional dimensions (**Table 3**).

Table 3. Participants and questions.

Semi-Structured Questions
- Could you briefly introduce yourself (age, background, connection to the neighborhood)?
- Could you share your personal story and connection with the neighborhood?
- What are your observations and memories of the neighbourhood during your childhood or the period when you first moved here?
- How do you perceive the physical changes in the neighborhood over time?
- What are your observations regarding the social and cultural composition of the neighborhood?
Participant Profiles (in their own words)
Participant 1, registered family apartment resident, Native, 2. Phase: An artist born in 1936 in a registered family apartment; after spending many years abroad, returned to live in the same apartment.
Participant 2, registered family apartment resident, Native, 3. Phase: Born in 1936 in a registered family apartment; lived in the United States for a period before returning to reside in the family apartment.
Participant 3, resident since 1969, Participant who settled later, 3. Phase: Integrated into the neighbourhood through the pharmacy he opened in 1969; his family had previously lived in Kıztaşı.
Participant 4, resident since 1979, Participant who settled later, 4. Phase: Moved from the provinces to Istanbul with his middle-class teacher family; settled in Nişantaşı in 1979 and spent his childhood and youth there.
Participant 5, 41 years old, resident since 2010, Participant who settled later, 5. Phase: A lawyer representing the contemporary urban profile; has lived in Nişantaşı for the last 15 years, residing in an apartment built in the 1960s.

2.3. Analysis

This paper builds a historical narrative that traces the social and spatial transformations of Nişantaşı and Teşvikiye. To situate the research within a broader framework, we drew on the periodisation of urban modernisation in Türkiye proposed by İlhan Tekeli[15]. He identifies four key phases of transformation, each reflecting how Western modernisation ideals were internalised in Turkish urban planning:

  i. Late Ottoman period (mid-19th century–1923): Introduction of Western-style planning, grid layouts and early public infrastructure.
  ii. Early Republican era (1923–1950s): Centralised planning, construction of national identity through urban space, and emergence of bourgeois neighbourhoods.
  iii. Post-war expansion and migration (1950s–1980): Rapid urbanisation, rise of *gecekondu* (informal housing), and new urban peripheries.
  iv. Neoliberal restructuring (1980–2000): Market-driven planning, privatisation and fragmentation of the urban form.

To capture contemporary changes, we added a fifth phase (post-2000) that reflects the radical reconfiguration of Nişantaşı's social structure, architecture and symbolic status. This periodisation provides a diachronic lens to interpret material and discursive shifts in relation to broader socio-political dynamics in Türkiye.

We first mapped the newspaper archive data onto these periods, then extracted themes from interviews, and finally cross-analysed both sources to produce a period-based reading. This approach reveals how socially debated images of Nişantaşı intersect, and sometimes conflict, with lived

experiences.

The analysis initially used Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital and Sara Ahmed's theory on affect as guiding frames but prioritised data-led interpretation[16]. During open coding, we developed concepts grounded in the data. Axial coding examined how these concepts related to Bourdieu's and Ahmed's frameworks without forcing alignment.

3. Temporal Analysis: Living Through Change in Archive

3.1. First Phase (mid-19th century-1923)

From the mid-19th century onwards, new neighborhoods emerged in Istanbul as part of modern urban ideals inspired by European cities. Following the relocation of the Ottoman court to Dolmabahçe, the Pangaltı, Harbiye, Şişli axis became a key residential zone; Teşvikiye, opened for development in 1867, formed part of this modernisation project. With its wide boulevards, masonry buildings and planned layout, the area was designed as a residential enclave for the royal entourage, senior bureaucrats and elite families.

Mustafa Ragıp Esatlı notes that Sultan Abdülmecid encouraged masonry construction in Teşvikiye and Nişantaşı to replace the wooden houses typical of old Istanbul. Yet this preference was never formalized in writing, and wooden mansions continued to proliferate over time[17, 18]. Contemporary accounts frequently emphasize Istanbul's recurring fires, contrasting the destruction of wooden houses with the perceived safety and modernity of masonry buildings. The major fire of 1920, which damaged many elegant homes, reinforced this narrative: masonry buildings commissioned by Sultan Abdülmecid survived "unscathed," becoming symbols of pride and resilience.

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the royal family left the country and the court's properties in the area were transferred to the Emlak ve Eytam Bankası[17, 18]. Esatlı's archival narratives, representing this first period up to 1923, intertwine nostalgia with traces of modernization. He depicts the transformation of Teşvikiye and Nişantaşı into privileged spaces aligned with the court's Western-oriented ambitions. Fires serve as a recurring motif: their destructiveness contrasts with the durability of masonry buildings, reflecting both pride in architectural modernity and longing for a vanished social world. Written retrospectively, these texts frame "old Nişantaşı" as a nostalgic counterpoint to the spatial and social changes of later periods. These accounts suggest an early layering of memory in Nişantaşı, where pride in modern masonry buildings coexisted with nostalgia for wooden mansions, revealing cultural tensions between tradition and Western-oriented modernization.

3.2. Second Phase (1923–1950)

During this period, both *Mimar* magazine and the national press frequently debated Istanbul's planning problems, often focusing on Nişantaşı. Commentators criticised street disorder, inadequate pavements, misplanted trees and the lack of public toilets as evidence of planning failures[19]. Reinforced concrete buildings were likewise attacked for "degrading rather than beautifying the city" due to poor planning and lack of aesthetic concern[20].

Concerns over the neighbourhood's loss of identity appeared in nostalgic tones: *Milliyet* lamented, "A copy of Beyoğlu is being built… Old Nişantaşı has died, never to be revived"[21]. Under Mayor Lütfi Kırdar, new works guided by Henri Prost's plans widened Vali Konağı Avenue to 25 metres, demolishing gardens and apartments for road expansion[22]. Authorities promised to preserve the parkland extending to Beşiktaş Stadium "against any intervention that would harm its beauty."

At the same time, informal settlements at the district's edges, labelled "tin shacks", were framed as aesthetic and social threats legitimising the exclusion of lower-class residents from the urban core[23, 24]. Infrastructure problems such as inadequate sewage, water cuts, fires and dumped rubble also dominated public complaints. Interventions largely concentrated on main avenues while neglecting peripheral streets.

Another striking issue of the era involved residents selling books, magazines and artworks to junk dealers, often by the *okka,* reflecting a perceived devaluation of cultural heritage[25]. (*Okka* is historical Ottoman unit of weight, approximately 1.3 kg (2.8 lbs), traditionally used for measuring goods such as food, spices or valuables.) By 1940, roughly a third of Nişantaşı news items concerned land-for-sale advertisements, signalling speculative pressure amid urban transformation. The press also reported elite obituaries and the expansion of private schools, portraying Nişantaşı simultaneously as a privileged and problem-ridden urban space.

The early Republican era marked a spatial and social rupture as wooden mansions gave way to reinforced concrete apartments. Family-owned and rental flats embodied modern lifestyles, yet planning deficiencies, infrastructure problems and overcrowding dominated public debates. Frequent nostalgic references in the press expressed longing for gardened neighbourhood life, while green-space loss and the emergence of informal settlements heightened class tensions. Extensive land sales by the Emlâk ve Eytam Bankası further boosted the district's speculative value. Amid these shifts, Nişantaşı retained its elite character through prestigious schools and cultural references, blending modernisation, social stratification and nostalgia into its evolving urban memory. Public discussions of the period often emphasized planning failures and elite nostalgia, yet simultaneously contrasted the district's celebrated 'modern' image with peripheral informal settlements and infrastructural neglect, thereby revealing underlying spatial and cultural disparities.

3.3. Third Phase (1950–1980)

The 1956 Development Law and the 1965 Condominium Law were decisive in shaping the spatial transformation of the period. These regulations reframed housing not only as shelter but also as an investment and a marker of social status[26, 27]. As green spaces at the district's periphery were opened for development, architectural journals such as *Arkitekt* increasingly featured modern reinforced-concrete apartments designed by prominent architects. İhsan Bilgin highlights Teşvikiye as an example of how architectural input raised design quality; during the 1960s, the work of architects such as Affan Kırımlı and Ayhan Tayman left visible traces on the neighborhood[28].

Urban problems like traffic and parking spurred experimental projects along the Nişantaşı and Mecidiyeköy axis[29]. Rapid physical change accompanied the rise of unlicensed construction[30]. National newspapers criticized the area as "Istanbul's most expensive yet dirtiest district", pointing to high rents, inadequate services, street rubble, litter, street vendors and neglect in public assistance[31].

This era also witnessed the opening of one of Türkiye's first boutiques in Nişantaşı (Milliyet 1961)[32]. Boutique culture reframed consumption as a lifestyle, performed through classed shop design and fashion narratives[33]. Auctions of collectible items and increased coverage of Nişantaşı in popular magazines reinforced its new visibility.

From the 1960s onwards, shifts in the district's social scene became evident. The Teşvikiye Health Centre remained a place where prominent figures received treatment, and the Teşvikiye Mosque continued to host celebrity funerals, albeit less ceremoniously than in previous decades. Local schools featured more prominently in the press through year-end exhibitions, fashion shows, balls and teas. Unlike earlier periods, the "Artist Addresses" column in *Ses* magazine listed Nişantaşı as the home of beloved singers and actors. The neighbourhood became a stage for American-style consumption and a showcase of new social life, where boutique culture and fashionable lifestyles were celebrated, yet critical accounts of traffic, hygiene, and rising costs revealed a more fragmented reality behind the glamorous façade.

3.4. Fourth Phase (1980–2000)

From the 1980s onwards, newspaper archives depict Nişantaşı primarily through society news and advertisements. Unlike previous decades, school advertisements nearly disappeared, replaced by ads for luxury goods such as Zodiac boats and shops selling computer games, a sign of shifting consumer culture. While boutiques dominated earlier decades, this period sees a rise in video, music and electronics stores. Nişantaşı also emerges as an important cultural hub: although concerts and theatre remained centre in Beyoğlu, art exhibitions increasingly gravitated to Nişantaşı's galleries.

Real estate notices for rental and sale properties, including office buildings, account for roughly 40 per cent of archive items, indicating the large housing stock produced by earlier waves of construction. Yet, despite this boom, the neighbourhood's cultural visibility declines. "Artist Addresses" columns show artists relocating to Etiler, Levent and Moda, signalling a shift of the cultural magnetism away from Nişantaşı.

By this time, the district is associated less with artists and more with society life, art galleries and luxury consumerism. The surge in real estate ads contrasts with a drop in the neighbourhood's social vibrancy, suggesting that Nişantaşı's elite image was beginning to transform.

3.5. Fifth Phase (Post–2000)

This period marks a radical transformation. The 2012 Urban Transformation Law (Law No. 6306) accelerated the

demolition and reconstruction of many apartment buildings. Housing became not only an investment but also a marker of prestige and nostalgic attachment, turning into a consumer object [34]. Nişantaşı emerged as a symbolic center where values and identities materialized in space [28, 35].

After 2000, terms such as luxurification, urban design, and contemporary function dominated public discourse, re-shaping the district's identity. The press frequently described it as home to global brands and Turkey's most expensive shopping street. Mustafa Sarıgül's tenure as mayor of Şişli (1999–2014) epitomized this shift; accounts of the period highlight widened pavements and red carpets rolled out so "ladies could comfortably walk in high heels," symbolizing a new urban spirit [36].

This rebranded image became a marketing tool. Kadir Topbaş, then mayor of Istanbul, promised that the transformation of Zeytinburnu's earthquake-prone neighborhood would create "a new Nişantaşı" with modern amenities, parking, and retail [37]. About 30 per cent of the news focused on investment and redevelopment, reflecting rising interest from younger, affluent groups. Another quarter centered on cultural events, luxury consumption and aesthetics. Yet criticism surfaced around escalating costs and the loss of historical fabric. In 2019, Sarıgül nostalgically remarked that "fifteen years ago Şişli was a global brand... now I see Nişantaşı's light has faded" [38]. Sarıgül thus remained one of the most influential figures of this period, and his reflections reveal an enduring desire to restore Nişantaşı to its former days of glamour. Urban branding portrayed Nişantaşı as Turkey's luxury showcase, while critical voices noted escalating costs and fading historic fabric, pointing to a disjunction between its marketed image and lived inequalities.

4. Space, Memory and Time: Temporal Readings of Interviews

This section presents the emotional expressions and key themes, such as belonging, displacement and the meaning of housing, emerging from the individual interviews. Each interview is treated as a coherent account and interpreted. Together, these narratives demonstrate how different social positions, whether long-standing residents, upper middle-class newcomers, or recent arrivals. produce overlapping yet sometimes conflicting memories of Nişantaşı, reveal-ing how local memory and emotional belonging shape both coexistence and subtle forms of segregation.

4.1. Participant 1

This interview is coded around the themes of bond and memory through place, social status, and built environment, change, aesthetics and resistance.

It offers a striking example of how spatial belonging is constructed not only through physical residence but also through historical continuity, social positioning and aesthetic regimes. The participant, born in 1936, is an artist who returned to the same building after years abroad: "I was born in Vehbi Apartment. in my aunt's house. I was born in 1936. and I returned to the family apartment again." This cyclical settlement frames the apartment not merely as a home but as an inheritance of cultural lineage: "This flat is my art collection. I built it here; it's a sign of my resistance."

The participant's memories reveal how daily and emotional practices are interwoven with place. Statements such as "We used to picnic on rugs in the big daisy field where the Hilton Hotel now stands," "we witnessed an era," and "I was at the tram stop with my peers" transform personal recollections into shared urban memory. One of the most evocative memories evokes pre-disco social life: "In my youth, there were no discos, there were house parties. We dressed nicely and went just two buildings away. All the neighborhood girls and boys met in those homes. Izmir Palas, Maçka Palas, these were very important places." Here, the apartment is not only a residence but also a stage for collective sociability, merging the materiality of space with lived experience.

Belonging is constructed not solely through nostalgia but also through notions of exclusivity: "Being from Nişantaşı means living in a district of well-bred, seasoned families... We were a minority; there were few of us. Things changed with migration from Anatolia." This sentiment reflects a regime of taste that defines the neighbourhood through civility, refinement and social capital, both by who is included and who is excluded.

The participant recounts the family's migration from Erzurum and their construction of Narmanlı Apartment: "When my grandparents built Narmanlı Apartment… they thought, 'Only if I give Istanbul a beautiful building can I become urban.'" This narrative illustrates how migration intersects with aesthetic and symbolic aspirations of urbanity,

resonating with Pierre Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital. One of the most striking aspects of the interview is the tension between past and present migration narratives. While the family's own migration story is framed as a "gain of urbanity," contemporary migrations are perceived as a threat: "Things changed with migration from Anatolia." This implies hidden power relations over the right to inhabit and define the space. Similarly, the family's concerns about safety for children highlight how the new demographic landscape is experienced as insecurity and loss of social cohesion: "They didn't find it safe for the children… it seemed wiser to leave the crowds behind."

This sense of exclusivity, however, proves difficult to maintain. The participant critiques today's transformations using expressions such as "lack of taste," "distorted order," and "lack of education": "We can't even call it renovation... it's nothing like what I saw during my years in Italy... here there's a savage order." This critique targets not only architectural change but also the collapse of public aesthetic sensibilities.

In sum, this interview demonstrates how belonging is formed through temporal-spatial continuity, aesthetic resistance and exclusivity. Here, spatial attachment is not merely a memory of place, but a mode of identity constructed through place itself.

4.2. Participant 2

This interview is coded around bond and memory through place, roles in built environment and change, and social status and symbolism.

The participant's narrative reflects layered emotional, historical and class-based ties to Nişantaşı, portraying it not only as a residential space but as a geography of belonging rooted in property ownership. Their detailed memory of family plots illustrates the transmission of urban memory through ownership: "As far as I understand, this entire plot belonged to our family."

Nostalgia stands on contradictory ground. The participant states, "We are not demolishing ours; we are not doing anything… we are very happy with our building, we have no intention to demolish it," yet notes that only doctors can afford the rents, revealing tacit acceptance of profit when it benefits them. Childhood memories suggest communal life but also class hierarchies: "Downstairs there were big

laundries... Everyone had their washerwomen, usually Greek and Armenian women... Starch was boiled, and those strong women did the ironing with big irons."

Social status narratives invoke a noble lineage "My grandfather was a banker... they came to Istanbul from Aleppo", and exclusivity: "Not everyone can enter our building. Not everyone can live here. There are very high-quality people." This reflects a desire to maintain a "closed exclusivity regime." Architectural critiques further reveal aesthetic loss: "There was, for example, the İkbal Apartment... They demolished it, looking at what they built instead. They stuck on plaster mouldings... ugly things." Similarly, "They could have built something like Narmanlı... I wish they wouldn't mess those up either."

The participant laments the neighborhood's decline after the departure of minorities: "In 1974 they left, and groups from Anatolia with weaker cultures came in." These ties value not only to architecture but also to who inhabits the space. Perceptions of prestige shift cyclically: "This place became run-down. For 10–20 years there wasn't even a light on in the street," followed by renewed value linked to local leadership: "Sarıgül is a visionary man."

Overall, the interview highlights how belonging intertwines with property, aesthetics and social composition, depicting Nişantaşı as a space where prestige and meaning are constantly renegotiated.

4.3. Participant 3

This interview is coded around the themes of bond and memory through place, socio-demographic change and migration, physical change, agency, rejection and adaptation, and cultural capital and imagined exclusivity.

It offers insight into how middle-class rooted belonging emerged and evolved in a district of high symbolic capital such as Teşvikiye-Nişantaşı. The participant moved to the area with their family in 1969 and opened a pharmacy, building a public connection with the neighbourhood. Unlike older aristocratic narratives of settlement, centred on "banking" or "owning mansions", this story represents an acquired urbanity rooted in profession rather than inheritance.

The participant's sense of belonging is grounded in social memory: "I love this neighbourhood. Because it feels like a small town... People still greet each other; everyone knows who's who." This reflects both a rejection of big-city

anonymity and nostalgia for an idealized communal fabric. Accessibility shapes this attachment: "Life is easy here... we can walk everywhere; not every place is like this." Yet cultural capital also draws boundaries; selectivity is explicit: "For example, we wouldn't sell to a Kuwaiti." Such statements reveal place-based discrimination shaped by cultural codes.

Their relationship to the family apartment mixes pragmatism with ambivalence. From the outset, ownership was tied to transformation: "It was bought in '76, and even then, my mother wanted it rebuilt." Here, economic functionality overrides historical or aesthetic value. This is striking given the building's early Republican Art Deco features. The participant describes it as "a building with no historical value," illustrating a disconnect between personal taste and architectural heritage frameworks. Awareness of preservation exists, "Thankfully it couldn't be demolished, it turned out to be a historic building. It was declared a protected site" yet shifts when their own property is concerned.

Critique of new developments centres on aesthetics and fit: "Maçka Plazas are horrible, things that don't suit here at all." The participant laments losses framed through "appropriateness," idealising past architecture: "Back then, these buildings' façades could have been kept in the same style, like Narmanlı or something similar." This reflects not just nostalgia but a desire to reproduce an imagined architectural order tied to status.

Recollections of past residents underscore perceived decline: "The İpekçiler used to live here; there was gentility, there was respect..." In contrast, present shifts evoke disillusionment: "Now the people living here were families who contributed to Turkey's production and were wealthy. I don't know what kind of rich people there are now." This signals a cultural judgement on changing forms of wealth and a generational rupture in social composition.

4.4. Participant 4

This interview is coded around the themes of class transition and urban rootedness, belonging, neighborhood memory and collective practices, physical transformation and critique of speculation, class critique and collective memory.

The participant, who moved to Nişantaşı in 1979 as a child with a middle-class teacher family, reflects both the traces of upward mobility and a sensitivity to spatial transformation. Their family, arriving from the provinces to the metropolis, embodies a position open to modernization yet culturally "outsider." The father's story of arriving in Nişantaşı is framed through a search for safety: "Nişantaşı was the most protected place. Out of fear, he rented a flat on the top floor, paying seven thousand Lira (Turkish currency) in rent while earning seven thousand Lira in salary." This highlights both the symbolic prestige of the neighborhood and the cost of securing a foothold in the city.

For the participant, Nişantaşı is more than a childhood setting; it is a layered site of sensory and social memory. The smell of pastry shops, the local eccentric, schools and shopkeepers sustain this continuity: "Every street corner, the shops, the smell of Şenlik Pastry Shop, the madman, the eccentric, the dog... You slowly see all these withdrawing." Such memories show that belonging is forged not only spatially but temporally and emotionally. Yet beneath this attachment lies a subtle cultural exclusion. The participant recalls confronting the upper-class "White Turk" codes of the district: "I didn't want my grandmother, wearing just a regular headscarf, to come to the parent meeting at Nilüfer Hatun School. As a child, I didn't want that. This White Turk domination. I still struggle with it." This reveals how presence in the neighborhood depends on cultural recognition and acceptance. The terms White Turk and Black Turk denote Türkiye's enduring class and cultural divide. White Turks represent the secular, Western-oriented urban elite, while Black Turks refer to more conservative or peripheral groups, a contrast that gained prominence in the early 2000s (Paksoy, 2018; Demiröz & Öncü, 2005; Ergin, 2008)[39–41]. This binary, reinforced through media and politics, continues to shape how urban space and social belonging are perceived.

Over time, this spatial relationship evolves into neighborhood activism, reframing belonging as local citizenship. The participant describes new forms of organizing: "The neighbor's door is now organized like this. We build memories, we love this work, we pickle vegetables. We plant fruit trees in Nişantaşı's streets, calling them back gardens. We fight against Dap Yapı." This activism signals that place is not only remembered but defended and reimagined. Their conception of the right to the city shifts from party politics to autonomous local belonging: "It's no longer about being an MP, brother; it's about the mukhtar, autonomy, self-

governance."

Finally, the participant frames the neighborhood's physical and social transformation as both cultural loss and alienation. The children of the families who built the area, in their view, no longer produce but treat property purely as an asset: "The guy is second generation, earning five thousand Euro. He owns an apartment named as his surname. He sells the antiques and buys a cupboard from Ikea." Such statements reveal how gentrification entails not only spatial but cultural and intergenerational ruptures. The narrative thus offers a layered reading of class dynamics, belonging and the active construction of urban memory.

4.5. Participant 5

This interview is coded around the themes of everyday life, neighborhood and memory, gentrification and aesthetic erosion, and transformation, resistance and class positions.

It focuses on the experience of a resident who consciously chose to live in Nişantaşı, moving to the neighborhood in 2009 after marriage. The participant lives in an apartment dating from the 1960s, building a bond with the area through daily routines shaped by an imagined "old Istanbul neighborhood": "It feels like a small town… everyone knows each other… we greet each other morning and evening." This narrative produces a form of public memory grounded in nostalgia yet still experienced as current.

Belonging is reinforced by urban accessibility and familiarity: "My child goes to the neighborhood school… Our office is here too… the park, the café, the market, everything is within reach." Here, settlement is tied not only to residence but to a neighborhood lifestyle embedded in daily routines.

The participant praises the architectural qualities of their 1960s apartment as spaces that foster attachment: "High-ceilinged, spacious flats… one flat per floor, not cramped… I really like the architecture." This appreciation is both physical and symbolic, evoking historic aesthetic codes. The meaning of "Palas" crystallises this sentiment: "Some apartments are called 'Palas'… when you enter, you feel like you're stepping into a time capsule. They even roll out a red carpet." "Palas" thus signifies not just a building but a symbolic form of belonging to the past.

By contrast, new "residence"-type developments and blocks transformed by major construction firms are seen as threats to this spatial identity. Recent changes, proliferation of cafés, noise pollution and the replacement of local shops are described as "the loss of the things that gave the neighborhood its soul": "The long-standing gallery, the framer, the publisher closed down and became shops." This reflects the erosion of a place-based cultural capital and frames nostalgia as collective loss rather than purely personal memory.

The participant also voices concern about foreign investors purchasing property and displacing long-term residents: "The old residents are slowly moving away." While this worry does not carry overt exclusion, it implies a boundary through phrases like "people like us who live in the neighborhood." This narrative illustrates how attachment blends personal routines, aesthetic ideals and anxieties about social change into a distinctive form of urban belonging.

5. Thematic Cross-Reading

This study seeks to connect qualitative data with theory following grounded theory principles. Themes emerging from the interviews are later reinterpreted through selected theoretical frameworks. These intersections show how concepts derived from the data, such as emotional production of place, class-based belonging and aesthetic resistance, dialogue with Scannell & Gifford's place attachment model, Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital and Boym's theory of nostalgia[42–44]. Building on these frameworks, this study also emphasizes how memory and emotional belonging not only anchor individuals to place but also structure boundaries between groups. In Nişantaşı, place attachment and nostalgia operate as mechanisms of both cultural integration and subtle exclusion, showing how urban space becomes a field where class distinctions and cultural negotiations are continually enacted.

5.1. Class and Emotional Belonging

Attachment to place is built not only through the physical environment but also through emotional, social and cultural meanings. For the participants, the neighbourhood is more than a place to live; it carries memory, belonging and identity.

The concept of place attachment refers to the multilayered emotional, cognitive and social bonds individuals develop with places[45]. This perspective considers people's

relationships not only with their homes but also with neighbourhoods, cities, and symbolic spaces, viewing place as a field of both spatial and social production.

The literature on place attachment has developed along three main axes. First, emotional and cognitive dimensions emphasise feelings of belonging, love and security, along with mental representations of memory, where nostalgia and identification with place are central [44, 46, 47]. Second, place serves as a context where both individual and collective identities are shaped. Scholars such as Gieryn, Relph and Tuan highlight not only the physical aspects of place but also its meanings, values and histories [48–50]. Finally, attachment is not purely romantic or emotional; it also encompasses responses to displacement, dispossession and gentrification, aligning with Lefebvre's notion of "the social production of space" [51]. Brown and Perkins, Low and Dovey further connect these dynamics to property, spatial justice and resistance [52–54].

This research adopts Scannell and Gifford's tripartite model of place attachment to analyse the complex bonds participants form with space [42]. Their model asks three questions: Who is attached? How do they attach? To what do they attach? This framework helps interpret affective (love, pride, nostalgia), cognitive (memory and identity representations) and behavioural (staying, protecting, resisting) dimensions observed in the interviews. It also accommodates the cross-reading of themes derived from grounded theory methodology. Here, attachment is framed as not merely an experience but also a social habitus, an aesthetic regime and an identity position reproduced through space.

The tripartite model can be summarised as follows: Who attaches? Individually, bonds stem from personal memories; socially, they emerge from ties with family, neighbours and local communities, as seen in participants' childhood recollections and neighbourhood routines. How do they attach? Emotional bonds (love, pride, longing), cognitive representations (memory and identity) and behavioural tendencies (resisting relocation, protecting place) interact, evident in statements like "We are not demolishing our building." What do they attach to? Both physical spaces (apartments, streets, parks) and symbolic meanings (history, culture, status), with sites like Narmanlı Apartment or Maçka Palas serving as layered archives of memory.

Among Participants 1 and 2, both born and raised in the neighbourhood and representing its elite strata, attachment is multi-layered, spatially (streets, buildings, routines) and temporally (childhood memories, intergenerational narratives). Emotional, cognitive and behavioural dimensions overlap, rooted residents sustain deep, inherited bonds, while newcomers often form quicker, status-driven attachments grounded in aesthetics or lifestyle.

Participant 1's return to their birthplace, declaring "I built this place, it is a sign of my resistance," reflects personal memory embodied in space. Nostalgic recollections, from "all the neighbourhood girls and boys would gather in those houses" to "the daisy field where the Hilton stands", connect physical surroundings with collective sociability. Architectural details of family apartments (marble, doors) reinforce continuity and heritage.

Participant 2 identifies strongly with property "the family's parcel," "our apartment" and frames belonging through exclusivity: "Not everyone can enter our building." Their attachment blends nostalgia with symbolic ownership, rooted in family histories and social filters that maintain class distinction. Protecting buildings and regulating access exemplify this selective belonging.

Participant 3, from a middle-class pharmacist family arriving in 1969, describes Nişantaşı as "like a small town" where "everyone knows each other." Their attachment grows from everyday familiarity and neighbourhood memory yet also includes pragmatic views: dismissing their 1940s Art Deco apartment as lacking value and buying units for profit, while praising protected neighbouring buildings. This conditional bond merges heritage rhetoric with economic rationality.

Participant 4, the child of a teacher family from Anatolia, recalls 1980s memories that mix belonging and exclusion: "I didn't want my grandmother… This White Turk domination, I still struggle with it." Over time, their bond evolves into local activism: "We build memory, we pickle vegetables, we plant fruit trees… We fight against Dap Yapı." Here, attachment is not only emotional but also civic, rooted in collective rights to the city.

Participant 5, who moved in 2008, represents newer middle-class residents drawn by lifestyle rather than lineage. They praise 1960s apartments "high-ceilinged, one flat per floor" and romanticise "Palas" buildings as "time capsules." At the same time, they lament cultural loss: "The

long-standing gallery, the framer, the publisher closed down and became shops." Their nostalgia often reaches for an imagined past they never experienced yet drives a desire to remain rooted and preserve daily routines.

5.2. Habitus, Nostalgia, Emotional Spaces

Pierre Bourdieu's work offers a powerful framework for understanding how social space is structured by class, culture and aesthetic preferences. For Bourdieu, social relations are shaped not only by economic but also by cultural, social and symbolic capital[43]. His key concept, habitus, refers to internalized ways of thinking and acting formed by past experiences; it is both shaped by and shaping individuals.

As Bourdieu argues in Distinction, aesthetic judgements indicate class positions as much as personal tastes. Architectural preferences and ideas of what is "beautiful" reflect social hierarchies; "taste is embodied distinction." Cultural capital, such as education or familiarity with aesthetic codes, functions as an invisible but effective form of privilege. In elite neighborhoods like Nişantaşı, evaluations based on ceiling height or the "quality" of neighbors illustrate these classed perceptions. As seen in Aydoğan's research in Kadıköy, the persistence of middle-class belonging even after physical relocation demonstrates how collective memory and moral ownership over urban spaces are maintained across generations[55]. Jerome Krase similarly notes that urban boundaries are drawn not only by physical structures but also by shared experiences, memories and everyday practices, a dynamic visible across all interviews[56].

Participant 1 captures this dynamic, stating: "Being from Nişantaşı means belonging to well-bred families... We were a minority, few. Things changed with migration from Anatolia." Here, Nişantaşı emerges as a habitus: a distinct system of values and behavior. Participant 2's comments "Not everyone can enter our apartment. Only very refined people can" and "Apparently the entire parcel belonged to our family", reflect symbolic capital (lineage, family name), property continuity and exclusivity. Likewise, Participant 3 observes: "Society decides who belongs here and who doesn't," highlighting how inclusion and exclusion draw the social boundaries of belonging. Newcomers are often positioned as outsiders within this framework.

Urban change, however, is not only material but also effective. Svetlana Boym's concept of nostalgia shows how longing for the past functions as critique: rather than literally restoring what was lost, nostalgia questions present transformations[44]. In historically charged areas like Nişantaşı, this nostalgia may be restorative (seeking to rebuild past elegance) or reflective (recognising loss and interrogating it).

Sara Ahmed argues that emotions are collectively produced and bound to place[57]. Her concept of affective atmosphere highlights how spaces hold both tangible and felt histories, while emotional stickiness explains how emotions adhere to objects, figures and locations. In this sense, neighborhoods are defined not only by physical traits but also by emotions, pride, longing, fear, and loss, that circulate around them.

Taking together, these perspectives reveal that attachment to urban space is constantly re-created through memory and emotion, not just physical presence. Phrases from the interviews "we are losing this place," "the old days were beautiful," "this is my childhood" capture a collective emotional response to transformation, where nostalgia becomes both personal memory and a shared critique of urban change.

Participant 1's return to their birthplace highlights both personal and familial belonging. Statements such as "This flat is my art collection… I built this place" reveal attachment that is simultaneously material (property) and aesthetic (a curated space). This reflects restorative nostalgia, the desire to reconstruct past elegance, social codes and exclusivity. The reference to Narmanlı Apartment exemplifies a wish to reproduce architectural and class-based memory. In Ahmed's terms, the apartment is more than a living space; it is infused with emotional capital through art and memory.

Participant 2's narrative combines restorative and reflective nostalgia. On the one hand, there is a claim of inheritance and pride "It used to belong to us… it was beautiful" while on the other, a recognition of loss "I wish they couldn't manage to pull it off… I wish they hadn't been demolished… we can't live there anymore." The effect extends beyond the individual, expressing collective family belonging. Class boundaries are reinforced through exclusionary remarks such as "Very refined people live here; not everyone can come in," showing how affect both binds and excludes.

Together, Participants 1 and 2 idealize the architecture, social relations and etiquette of the past while harshly criticizing present-day decline. Here, nostalgia operates not only

as an emotion but as an ideological stance, a narrative of cultural decay used to position oneself against urban transformation.

Participant 3 foregrounds economic pragmatism in their account: "When we bought it in 1976, my mother wanted it rebuilt from the start." Nostalgia is absent here, yet aesthetic critique re-emerges in complaints such as "Maçka Plazas are horrible" or appeals to "build something like Narmanlı." This aligns with Boym's reflective nostalgia: an awareness that the past cannot return yet still valuing its aesthetic codes as a critique of the present. Ahmed's framework captures this ambivalence, a place simultaneously loved and resented for its transformation.

For Participant 4, nostalgia fuels collective memory-making and activism: "Neighborhood doors are organized this way now. We build memory, we love doing this." This aligns closely with Boym's reflective mode, past traces cannot be revived but inspire collective practices to preserve them. Ahmed's concept of emotional stickiness is also evident: sensory details like bakery smells, eccentric neighbors and school uniforms cling to the neighborhood, embedding it as an affective object.

Participant 5's attachment centers on everyday life and architectural qualities. Their notion of "Palas" buildings as "time capsules" illustrates nostalgia's symbolic dimension. Laments such as "The gallery, the framer, the publisher closed and became shops… the soul is gone" express both aesthetic and emotional loss. Here, reflective nostalgia critiques cultural and social erosion, while Ahmed's framework highlights how familiarity and comfort define belonging. The phrase "people like us who live in the neighborhood" reveals how affective attachment also delineates social boundaries.

The findings show how nostalgia and belonging work as affective mechanisms that translate emotional memory into everyday social boundaries and practices. Among long-term residents, attachment to "good taste" and historic architecture becomes a moral filter that distinguishes insiders from outsiders, expressed through aesthetic judgements ("ugly buildings," "lack of education") and selective interaction ("not everyone can enter our building"). For middle-class participants like Participant 3, however, this aesthetic stance is intertwined with pragmatic interests: while criticizing new developments as "inappropriate" or "horrible,"

they also treat their own early Republican Art Deco building as a replaceable investment, calling it "a building with no historical value." This ambivalence exposes how economic self-interest can override preservationist sentiment, turning aesthetic judgement into a conditional, status-oriented practice.

In contrast, Participant 4's account illustrates an opposing dynamic: experiences of exclusion under "White Turk domination" lead to neighborhood activism and collective care, from organizing shared gardens to opposing speculative redevelopment. In this way, emotional attachment produces both soft exclusion and grassroots inclusion, revealing how memory and classed affect mediate segregation and coexistence in everyday life.

6. Conclusion

Findings from both archival research and interviews indicate that Nişantaşı has maintained a consistent class character and spatial identity over the past century. The Early Republican period (1923–1950), documented in archival sources as a transition from timber mansions to modern reinforced concrete apartments, is reinterpreted in participants' family narratives through varying forms of nostalgia. Archival records from 1950–1980 reveal a shift in the neighbourhood's social structure, while the 1980s onwards are marked by an intensification of real estate advertisements, signalling significant physical transformation. Both archives and interviews frame these changes as problematic disruptions to the neighbourhood's fabric.

The participants' individual attachments to place resonate with the collective memory narratives observed in the archival findings. When examined through Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, the emphasis on "elite families" and "Republican elites" that emerges in archival sources up to the 1950s corresponds to the class-based sense of belonging expressed by the interviewees [40]. In later periods, this emphasis persists in participants' accounts, while the archives reflect the transformation of this social structure. Those who were native participants and had directly experienced these earlier periods were more likely to perceive and articulate the change, whereas those who settled later tended to interpret the transformation as an inherent feature of the present.

Statements such as "Being from Nişantaşı means be-

longing to well-bred families," or "Society decides who gets to live here" underscore how spatial identity is constructed through class distinctions. Experiences of "being born in the neighbourhood" or "growing up in a family apartment" play a key role in sustaining local culture and identity, anchoring the neighbourhood within a collective urban memory.

Building on Boym's typology, two modes of nostalgia emerge across data sets[41]. Restorative nostalgia appears in longings for "old garden neighbourhoods" and desires to reconstruct a refined past, while reflective nostalgia surfaces in laments such as "it turned into shops, the soul is gone," acknowledging loss yet using it as a lens to critique present changes. These findings highlight nostalgia not merely as longing for the past but as a form of resistance to ongoing urban policies, a critique of transformation articulated through memory. This reframes nostalgia beyond Boym's dichotomy, suggesting its potential as a strategic tool in negotiating urban change.

Overall, the study demonstrates that Nişantaşı's spatial identity and class character have remained recognisable but are continuously reconfigured through different mechanisms: from the state-driven elitism of the early Republic to later consumerism and luxury living discourses. Spatial attachment, both individual and collective, emerges as multi-layered, shaped by intertwined social, cultural and economic factors rather than a single cause.

Conducted with a limited number of participants within one neighbourhood, this research nonetheless opens avenues for further study. Comparative research across different socio-economic districts could deepen understanding of how class and nostalgia shape urban identities.

By connecting empirical findings with the theoretical frameworks of place attachment, habitus and nostalgia, this study offers a robust analytical lens for understanding identity shifts within urban transformation. It shows how narratives of nostalgia function not only as memories of the past but also as critiques of the present, providing fertile ground for broader theoretical debates on affect, memory and class in the urban context.

The study seeks to connect qualitative data with theory following grounded theory principles. Themes emerging from the interviews are later reinterpreted through selected theoretical frameworks. These intersections show how concepts derived from the data, such as emotional production of place, class-based belonging and aesthetic resistance, and dialogue. Taken together, these dynamics illustrate how memory and emotional belonging not only preserve continuity but also draw boundaries, shaping coexistence as well as subtle forms of segregation. The analysis further shows that nostalgia and belonging are not only emotional responses to change but also mechanisms through which residents negotiate power, distinction, and everyday coexistence within the neighborhood.

Nişantaşı thus emerges as a site where cultural conflicts and integrations are negotiated through everyday practices, media representations, and class-based attachments. Beyond a local case, the findings contribute to broader debates on how urban memory mediates tensions between exclusivity and inclusion in rapidly transforming cities.

This article contributes to wider scholarly discussions on cultural conflict and integration by showing how class, memory, and urban identity intersect in the everyday life of Nişantaşı. Although the empirical focus is specific to one Istanbul neighborhood, the findings resonate with broader debates in the humanities and social sciences about the negotiation of cultural identities, the persistence of social boundaries, and the ways in which local attachments mediate global transformations.

Author Contributions

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there are no conflict of interest.

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