Hello, my name is Nihal Evirgen. I am an architect and a PhD candidate at the Department of Architecture at METU based in Turkey. My research focuses on architectural production, labor and class relations in architecture, and financialization and the political economy of the built environment. I am also one of the coordinators of the collective *Uncomfortable Questions in Architecture*. Thank you very much for inviting me.

I have structured my talk today around the questions that were shared within the scope of this panel, so I will address them one by one.

What are the most significant problems in labor relations faced by working architects and technical workers in each country?

As in many countries, the most common problems faced by working architects and technical workers in Turkey are low wages, long working hours, unpaid overtime, and a strong sense of alienation from their work.

The decline in wages is especially striking. After the most recent increase, the minimum wage in Turkey is around 550 euros per month at the current exchange rate. However, newly graduated architects are often not even offered this amount. Unpaid work, presented as "internship" or "gaining experience," has become increasingly widespread. For example, during my PhD research, I interviewed a newly graduated architect who had been working unpaid for nine months in a well-known office in Istanbul. Many young architects accept these conditions by holding on to the hope that they might eventually become paid employees.

The main reason behind this situation is the rapidly increasing youth unemployment rate. According to data from August 2025, the broadly defined unemployment rate in Turkey is around 30 percent. Narrowly defined youth unemployment is about 15 percent, and this rises to 21.7 percent for young women. Under these conditions, architects feel constantly threatened by unemployment and are pushed into accepting all kinds of rights violations in their working lives.

What is the broader political, social, and economic context shaping the production of the built environment?

In Turkey, political and economic dynamics strongly shape social life and, as a result, our professional fields and the production of the built environment. Geography is a key factor here, especially the fact that the country lies on a major earthquake zone. Shortly after the 1999 Istanbul earthquake, the political party that is still in power today came to office. Since then, earthquakes and disasters have been used as tools to reorganize legal frameworks in ways that reproduce land and urban rent. With the introduction of successive urban transformation, disaster, and renewal laws, large-scale processes of displacement, expropriation, and gentrification took place, particularly in city centers. Valuable urban land was seized, people were forced out of their neighborhoods, and pushed toward the peripheries of cities.

At the same time, neoliberal policies were implemented in combination with political Islam. Through zoning plan changes, parks, agricultural land, forests, and coastal areas were opened to construction in clearly illegal ways. Public spaces and streets—places where people could gather and organize—were either neglected and degraded, occupied by luxury developments, or transformed into religious facilities in order to limit collective social life. While monotonous and low-quality public housing projects were built for the working class and the urban poor on the outskirts of cities, luxury residences, mixed-use projects, and high-rise buildings rapidly spread across city centers.

Following the pandemic and especially after the devastating earthquakes of 2023, the country is now facing deep economic poverty. The earthquakes affected 11 provinces, with particularly severe destruction in Hatay. Today marks the third anniversary, yet people in the region still struggle to access basic needs such as safe housing, education, and utilities.So-called “reconstruction” efforts have largely bypassed planning processes and focused only on rapid construction. Hatay has effectively become a massive construction site. Olive groves, agricultural land, and protected natural areas are under threat, both from construction itself and from the enormous amounts of excavation waste. Infrastructure systems—electricity, water, ventilation, and internet—remain fragile or non-functional.

Meanwhile, the production of the built environment continues to be dominated by a small group of large construction and architecture firms. In Hatay, selected pilot areas were divided into parcels and assigned to starchitects. International firms such as Foster + Partners and BIG were invited to prepare masterplans for cities like Kahramanmaraş, Hatay, and Malatya. Bjarke Ingels even visited the site for media appearances. Once again, a familiar spectacle is being staged—celebrating starchitecture—while, in the background, society, nature, and everyday life are being destroyed.

Are there trade unions or collective bodies that represent working architects and technical workers, and if so, what kind of actions do they undertake?

There is no trade union specifically for architects or technical workers in Turkey. Individuals can technically join unions based on the sector they work in, which is more common in public employment, but extremely rare for office-based architecture workers. However, there is a constitutionally recognized professional organization: the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TMMOB. It includes separate chambers for architects, engineers, and urban planners, with branches in every city and a total membership of around 750,000.

Its structure differs from organizations like the AIA or RIBA. It does not function simply as an association of employer-architects. Influenced by the political climate of the late 1960s and 1970s, it has historically followed a socially oriented and oppositional line, emphasizing public interest, environmental protection, and resistance to urban and ecological exploitation. A well-known example is the Gezi Park protests. The Chambers of Architects and Urban Planners actively opposed the redevelopment of the park, pursued legal action, and acted as spokespersons for the Taksim Solidarity platform. As a result, the lawyer of the Chamber of Architects and the former head of the Chamber of

Urban Planners have been imprisoned for over four years on charges of "attempting to overthrow the state."

Because the chambers often take an oppositional stance, their authority has been increasingly restricted by the government, and efforts are made to replace elected boards with government-aligned candidates.That said, the chambers' capacity to address labor rights and working conditions is very limited. Their actions mainly consist of meetings, reports, and occasional press statements. They have no authority to negotiate collective agreements, regulate wages, inspect insurance conditions, or develop employment policies. Additionally, executive board positions are often held by older generations, while younger architects—who experience precariousness most directly—have historically been underrepresented. This is slowly changing as younger architects become more politicized and begin to run for these positions.

There is also a very recent initiative: a Technical Workers' Assembly formed by different unions. They held a symposium last week and are discussing new forms of unionization. It is a hopeful development, but still too early to evaluate its impact.

What initiatives does your collective pursue?

Our collective is called *Uncomfortable Questions in Architecture*. As the name suggests, we aim to raise questions that unsettle hegemonic relations and normalized practices within the architectural field. We focus not only on architectural practice but also on architectural education. We emphasize that precarity, unpaid labor, and excessive working hours are not isolated to professional offices, but form a cycle that begins during education. For this reason, we also seek to make precarity in academia visible.Our main audience includes architecture students, early-career academics in intermediate positions, and architectural workers. We believe that this cycle of exploitation can only be broken through non-hierarchical communication, equal participation, and a shared political consciousness among these groups.

Within the framework of The Architecture Lobby's *Architecture Beyond Capitalism School*, we have independently carried out work in Turkey under the theme "Hacking the Institution." We organized discussions in architecture schools addressing pedagogy, studio culture, curricula, as well as class relations and gender issues. Over time, these discussions expanded to include architectural workers more directly. We have also engaged with broader topics such as creativity, knowledge and labor production, public space and social movements, and the relationship between university youth and political resistance—always in dialogue with the country's current political context.

What are their goals, and what could be done in the future to improve the conditions of the working majority?

For the coming period, we aim for the questions we raise in all these fields to resonate more widely—to be asked by many more people—and to create deeper discomfort within the existing system. Today, there are many institutions in architecture and the production of the built environment that

actively contribute to maintaining the current system. We want to “hack” these institutions and make these uncomfortable questions echo from within them.Our goal is not to provide definitive answers or ready-made solutions. We do not have a magic wand. We believe that answers can only emerge when many more people collectively and in an organized way articulate this shared discomfort.

Finding ways to sustain ourselves financially and spatially is also among our long-term goals. The question of how radical practices can survive is one that still awaits answers worldwide. Otherwise, we are condemned to working within networks of exploitation, spending our labor only to make the rich even richer.In the long run, we also aim to work more extensively in the media sphere in order to challenge mainstream architectural discourse and the hegemony of starchitect culture.

Looking toward the future, what is needed above all is international organization and solidarity across all fields. When we look at the terrible conditions the world is facing today—genocide, war, exploitation, climate crisis—it becomes clear that improving working conditions only in our immediate workplaces will not be enough. That is why I find this collective gathering and shared search here today extremely important.Thank you very much for inviting me and for creating space for this exchange.