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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Mapping the evolving urban design curricula: A model framework and its application in the Turkish case

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Abstract
Curriculum scholarship emerges as one of the key yet underexplored areas, considering epistemological and institutional construction of the urban design field. This article develops a transferable methodology as an investigative lens and applies this to map the evolution of urban design curricula in the higher education system of Türkiye. Combining diachronic and synchronic analysis, it traces curricular models and shifts across four periods, highlighting how programs negotiated the pedagogy and the identity of urban design. Qualitatively, it considers the role of international higher education models, national policies, and institutional historiographies; quantitatively, it maps curricular structures, content, orientations and areas of specialization. Findings highlight multiple pathways in shaping educational programs prior to the increasing structuration of curricula to balance disciplinary theory and methods with other specialization domains while centralizing design studio-based pedagogy. The study demonstrates that an evolutionary perspective is needed to explore the transformation in urban design education more broadly.

Keywords Higher education · Urban design education · Curricular models · Curriculum scholarship

Introduction

Semantically meaning "running of a course" (Maxwell 2002), the approaches and definitions towards curriculum expand as a plan, an experience, a subject matter, an objective, a system, and a field of study (Ornstein 1987). Regarding the extent that nature and function of curriculum entail, one could argue that a curricular inquiry may reveal how education systems have been shaped and how disciplines have been construed epistemologically, pedagogically, and institutionally.

One could also argue that higher education models originated in Europe—i.e., Napoleonic, Humboldtian, Anglo-Saxon, and Anglo-American (Sam and van der Sijde 2014; Olo et al 2021), have been influential in shaping and characterization of educational curricula, historically, considering that these models have been diffused and contextualized to structure higher education systems around the world. The literature is vast in terms of international influences over situated practices of higher education (de Rudder 2015; Sam 2016; Huisman, 2019; Deniz, 2025). Although there are a handful of writings laying the groundwork with a focus on spatial planning and design education (Andrea, 2013), a holistic, comparative, and evolutionary perspective over curricular trajectories to trace these influences remains largely underdeveloped.

This requires blending historical analysis with curriculum scholarship [1]. Although curricular scholarship is rich in terms of the ideological stances aligned with curriculum development and reform from developer and advocate perspectives, the literature on evolving substantive aspects of spatial planning and design curricula is comparatively limited, often lacking systematic inquiry considering the institutional and curricular complexities. While undergraduate education has been frequently examined in this body of literature, graduate programs receive little attention, despite

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[1] Curricular scholarship takes various forms considering the objective and the ideology of the curriculum workers as practitioners, disseminators, evaluators, advocates, developers, and theorists (Schiro 2013)

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the fact that they play a critical role in shaping professional specialization and advancing disciplinary knowledge.

Substantive inquiries into interdisciplinary fields such as urban design, the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological underpinnings of which are still much debated without a consensus, and the educational accreditation and professional licentiate of which are still ambiguous, are even more scarce. Considering that scholarly debates are preoccupied with the disciplinary ties between the domain of urban design and so-called parent disciplines such as architecture, urban planning, and landscape architecture, especially over the last two decades [2], curriculum scholarship emerges as one of the key sites to unravel how these ties have been substantively formed. It also becomes a key avenue for clarifying its formation and identity, establishing coherent educational frameworks, and guiding the development of specialized competencies that bridge theory and practice.

At that point, Türkiye can be seen as an interesting test case for exploring the diffusion of higher education models into the long-standing curricular history of urban design education, given the successive waves of educational reforms [3], the involvement of international actors [4], and the Europeanization efforts in higher education in the course of modernization over the past century. Furthermore, the institutionalization of urban design as both a field and a profession has a long-standing history in this context. Therefore, this research sets out to develop a model approach to trace the contextualization of these globally influential higher education models through arrangements in urban design curricula; to characterize these curricular formations; and to shed light on the disciplinary construction processes of this still evolving field in the context of Türkiye.

This calls for a broadly adoptable methodology based on a model approach, which includes a rigorous analytical framework that enables diachronic and synchronic reading. In this direction, the paper asks two major sets of questions:

1st set of questions related to methodology:

- How can curriculum be deployed to trace adopted higher education models and disciplinary formation in time?
- What are the metrics and corresponding indicators of analysis?

2nd set of questions related to urban design education:

- How have urban design curricula formed and evolved in terms of structure and content?
- What are the concurrent curricular divergences and convergences across schools?

Based on these two sets of questions, the research strands of this paper are twofold: (I) developing a methodological model that is adaptable and capable of addressing the cross-sectional and longitudinal requirements of this study; (II) applying this model framework to a specific national context selected as a case. Therefore, in the 'Methodological Model Proposal' section, the authors explicate the construction process and the steps of the proposed model in detail. In the 'Illustrative Case' section, step by step, the authors apply this model to five first-generation urban design graduate programs in the case of Türkiye. To that end, the programs founded at Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University (MSFAU), Istanbul Technical University (ITU), Dokuz Eylül University (DEU), Izmir Institute of Technology (IZTECH), and Middle East Technical University (METU) are taken under scrutiny. By doing this, the influence of higher education models on evolving curricular formations and the disciplinary formation of urban design are pinpointed. Finally, the paper concludes with the conceptual and theoretical connotations of this model application.

Theoretical background

This research is based on the two different streams of literature on higher education. The first stream is the higher education models of the West. The second stream is the curriculum scholarship in spatial design and planning disciplines. Among various curriculum scholarship positions, this research blends both a curriculum historian and analyst position, adopting an analytical/inductive perspective.

Development of Western higher education models

Theorizations of higher education in modern Europe often hinge on how institutional models have been shaped and evolved to meet changing needs at the local or national level aligned with shifting political, economic, social, and cultural rationales (Carpentier 2019). Despite the constant reforms and restructuring, the European models—i.e., Humboldtian, Napoleonic, and Anglo-Saxon—have been seen influential in the shaping of modern higher education systems worldwide (Sam and van der Sijde 2014).

As higher education systems evolve locally or diffuse globally, their underlying models retain distinctive characteristics: the Humboldtian model centers on academic

[2] One of the key debates took place in JPER 31(2) through responses to the commentaries of Steiner (2011) and Gunder (2011) by Banerjee (2011) and Talen (2011).

[3] Redefiniton of institutional frameworks include 1933 University Reform, 1969 Fine Arts Academy Reform, 1981 Higher Education Law, and 2002 Bologna Process.

[4] The profile of international actors includes German émigré architects between 1930 and 1950s, and technical experts commissioned in UNESCO and UNDP missions.

freedom, research–teaching unity, and university autonomy; the Napoleonic model emphasizes state control, centralized governance, and professional and vocational training; while the Anglo-Saxon model highlights institutional autonomy, professionalism and personality development through liberal education (Sam and van der Sijde 2014, p. 51). The Anglo-American model, rooted in European models, was later brought back to Europe and has been seen globally influential, particularly in terms of massification, governance, program organization, and independent funding mechanisms.

Early critiques framed globalization in higher education as a coercive and homogenization process oriented towards a single development model (Schildermans and Tröhler 2024). Within the scope of the curricular reform or restructuring in spatial design and planning education, the alignment has been grounded on the basis of accreditation or on broader political ideology. Scholarly works on affiliation or harmonization (Lubaale et al 2015) and retrofitting local curricula to the curricular standards of an international organization (Frank 2013; Frank et al 2014; Watson and Odendaal, 2012) delve into this aspect of curricular reform.

On the other hand, later accounts of global movements drew on critical and counter-hegemonic orientations, highlighting the multifaceted, context-dependent interactions shaped by social, cultural, economic, and technological processes. Indigenizing, decolonizing, or queering architecture and planning curriculum (Mateo-Babiano et al 2023; Wesely and Allen 2019; Letsoko et al 2025; Lessard et al 2023) emerge as scholarly reflections aiming at curricular reforms, from this perspective.

Curricular trajectories of urbanism disciplines

The work of curriculum scholarship could also be characterized by attention to the philosophical underpinnings of architectural and urban planning education, as well as how these foundations have shifted over time. Regarding architectural education, curriculum scholarship has been long established, particularly through seminal analyses of the Beaux-Arts (Cret 1941; Carlhian 1979; Crinson and Lubbock 1994) and Bauhaus (Bayer et al, 1938) models. Regarding urban planning education [5], historical perspectives on curriculum have been developed to trace the disciplinary trajectory of urban planning, often described as oscillating between physical design and the social sciences (Lang 1983; Hemmens 1988; Long 2012; Anacker 2024). Although historical inquiry into urban design education has remained somewhat peripheral compared to these disciplines, the initial institutionalization of the urban design program has been documented in the literature (Krieger and Saunders 2009).

The epistemological shift in architectural thinking from stylistic concerns to questions of method, organization, and technology in relation to the internal structure of cities and settlement patterns (Lewis 1967) gave rise to new conceptualizations of spatial organization, articulated through terms such as *der Städtebau*, *urbanisme*, *urbanistica*, civic design, city design, and eventually urban design in the English-speaking world (Birch 2011).

Before the 1950s, urban design practice and education remained embedded within architectural traditions shaped by Beaux-Arts and later pedagogical interpretations of the modernist movement, although departmentalization of Civic Design (Posas 2018), and City Planning programs in the beginning of the twentieth century marked the efforts to address the complexities of the modern, post-industrial city (Alofsin 2002, p. 11).

The decisive break occurred in the mid-twentieth century with the 1956 Urban Design Conference at Harvard GSD and the launch of the post-graduate Urban Design program in 1960, formalizing the field with an aspiration for collaboration between architecture, landscape architecture, and city planning upon graduation. Urban design pedagogy was further developed as a collaborative synthesis in response to postwar urban crises and the dissolution of CIAM (Günay 1988; Alofsin 2002, p. 249; Mumford 2009). Simultaneously, urban design education was aligned with liberal education through lengthening and extending the architecture program with a specialization focus integrating social and ecological knowledge (Perkins 1964), or through a joint studio framework linking planning research with architectural design (Williams 1964).

After the 1970s, urban design education expanded its theoretical basis, 'composite-minded' orientation as well as geographical affluence through 'glocalization' efforts, reinforcing a humanistic, community-centered approach (Shoshkes 2006). In the subsequent decades, urban design education has become a globally recognized graduate specialization characterized by diverse institutional and pedagogical configurations. To this day, educational practices have constantly responded to shifting urban, technological, and socio-political conditions. While an in-depth comparative historical study is still needed to discuss whether the institutionalization of urban design education follows shared patterns, this trajectory provides a critical grounding on which diverse, historically constituted educational practices can be situated.

[5] An exceptional bibliographic synthesis has also been compiled to consolidate existing knowledge on curricular structures, course contents across various contexts, and pedagogical approaches in applied courses of planning education (Frank 2006).

Curriculum scholarship on urbanism disciplines

Scholarly works in curriculum evaluation lean toward analytical inductivism. These works include curriculum mapping based on content analysis and review using qualitative criteria or quantitative metrics. These metrics are used to assess the distribution of themes, domains, or skills within educational programs. Most of these studies adopt a synchronic, cross-sectional approach, using a single point in time as a reference. In many cases, cross-sectional analyses have been conducted in a comprehensive and context-specific manner, aiming either to identify generalizable patterns or to highlight local curricular characteristics. For instance, the core curricula of urban planning programs have been examined to identify substantive domains, areas of specialization, and common pedagogical approaches (Friedmann 1996; Peña, 2023) or demands, bringing together the debates in professional practice and education (Ozawa and Seltzer 1999; Edwards and Bates 2011). Some studies set out to develop an international analysis either highlighting general core knowledge areas for guiding local curricular practices (van Horen et al 2004) or adopting a comparative approach for assessing disciplinary conceptual or epistemological underpinnings (Belof and Kryczka 2024; Dashtgard et al. 2019; Dabagh 2019).

Several studies have examined urban planning and design curricula with focused scopes such as the alignment between academic discourse and curricular content (Maged and Abdel-Moneim 2024), the institutional positioning and curricular divergence (Letsoko et al 2025), learning outcomes for future-oriented skills (Wright 2023), and the prevalence of design-focused courses (Doğan and Ocakçı, 2014).

Despite these contributions, graduate-level urban design curricula have received limited attention. One of the few comparative analyses examined postgraduate programs with a focus on structures and thematic emphases concerning studio pedagogy (Jasper 2017). Diachronic studies are even rarer: Dalton (2001) traced the evolution of planning knowledge and pedagogy in the US, while Szumilas (2023) mapped the historical transformation of an urban design curriculum within a single institution.

Through this review, several critical gaps in the literature have been identified. Graduate-level education is underexplored despite its critical role in fostering specialization, bridging theory and practice, and shaping professional trajectories. Research on urban design, particularly from the perspective of its epistemological and disciplinary formation, is especially limited, even though the field has been institutionalized at the postgraduate level globally. Though there is substantive research in other fields, there is a lack of systematic elaboration of holistic, robust, and analytically grounded methodology that adequately reflects the complex structures and layered content of spatial planning and design curricula. While existing research provides valuable insights, whether through cross-sectional analysis or context- or institution-specific historical inquiry, an integrative approach combining both diachronic and synchronic analysis arguably sheds light on the evolution of curricular practices and current state of the art.

A methodological model proposal

Although the existing body of literature on curriculum studies offers coherent methodologies and frequently employs specific metrics to assess curricula for various ends, an advanced methodology that is integrative, combining both diachronic and synchronic approaches as well as different orders of education system, particularly in the context of spatial planning and design curricula, has yet to be fully developed. While earlier works address more focused aspects of curricular content or structure, the present study expands these insights into a more integrative and systematic framework. To achieve this, the proposed methodological model was developed as an original contribution through a theory-informed and empirically engaged iterative process rather than as a direct adaptation of existing models.

To that end, first, an extensive review of literature on higher education models, curriculum studies, and urban design education was conducted to compile relevant information on disciplinary formation and pedagogical organization. This theoretical background guided the initial set of analytical categories related to higher education models and systems, and curricular dimensions.

Secondly, this framework was applied to a context with a long-established higher education system and curricular materials to test its explanatory capacity and internal coherence. During this stage, conceptual categories were refined, merged, or redefined in response to empirical ambiguities and overlaps. This iterative process continued until the model framework consistently enabled systematic comparison across cases and periods. The final model represents a stabilized framework grounded in both theoretical reasoning and empirical engagement. Structurally, the model proposal consists of three phases: (I) construction of the methodological model; (II) case selection and data collection; (III) testing and application of the model.

Construction of the methodological model

The proposed model is aimed to operate as an analytical framework to identify the influence of broader higher education models, to map curricular orientations, and to trace their historical change comparatively as constructive forces behind the disciplinary formation of urban design. Therefore, the model essentially has three constituents. The



contextual grounding entails case selection, the temporal grounding of the model requires the construction of a timeline, and the analytical grounding necessitates a measurement index.

Since this work is founded on the constructivist interpretive framework, arguing that education is a socially constructed system, its contextual framing for analysis includes human and non-human agencies of a certain geography selected as *a case*. Although the context of analysis in this paper is bounded by a country, this model could be rescaled to encompass various definitions based on the research objective, whether an in-depth case study or cross-comparison.

As a basis of any diachronic and synchronic analysis, *a timeline* constitutes two axes; one is horizontal—rows—and the other is vertical—columns. The longitudinal reading of rows from left to right in a timeline informs about the change in time of the value attributed to the horizontal axis for a selected entry in the vertical axis. This diachronic analysis enables the identification of institutional trajectories as well as convergent or divergent patterns in these trajectories without a shared time frame. The cross-sectional reading of columns from top to bottom enables comparing the value attributed to the horizontal axis between different entries of the same sort in the vertical axis for a selected time segment. This synchronic analysis enables the identification of temporal intervals through which the trajectories display contemporaneous patterns of convergence and divergence.

The horizontal axis to trace the historical evolution of selected attributes for this research consists of three layers, from theoretical to contextual. First layer is the broader internationally affluent higher education models, schools, and ideologies that have become a paradigm and left their place to another in time. The knowledge basis regarding the first layer is adopted from the previous work on the European higher education models (Sam and van der Sijde 2014; Carpentier 2019). The second layer concerns the organization of the higher education system in the selected context. The information regarding this layer is gathered from the literature on the higher education history of the selected context. The third is the academic and curricular organizations of selected programs. The collection of data regarding this layer included interviews and archival research.

While the data regarding the first two layers is in textual or verbal format, the analysis of which could be performed through qualitative methodology, the third layer additionally includes numerical values based on curricular data. The analysis of this component requires quantitative methodology. Setting forth *a measurement index* becomes an essential part of this methodological model, since these measurements form analytical components of the timeline. The development or the application of a quantitative measurement system in curricular analysis is not new as a scholarly endeavor. Frequency coding (Peña, 2023) or weight analysis of certain thematic or structural domains of curriculum (Doğan and Ocakçı, 2014; Szumilas 2023) have been used as methods of analysis in the literature. However, the metric system needs recalibration for every individual study based on the interpretive framework of the study, research questions, and the contextual properties of the data. Therefore, while the metrics in the Disciplinary Domain Index used in this study were adapted from the previous studies, the indicators of each analysis—curricular structure, core content, curricular orientation, and specialization— were redefined within the context of this study based on the collected curricular data.

This threefold framework was tested through its application to multiple institutional cases and historical periods in a selected case, assessing its capacity to capture higher education models, curricular variation, and pedagogical orientations. The workflow in the application of the model entails a five-step protocol, the details of which are described in the following sections (Fig. 1).

Case selection and data collection

To operationalize the proposed methodological framework, the first two steps could be outlined as the case selection rationale and identification of temporal boundaries through the collection and preparation of the data before testing and analysis procedures.

Step I: Contextual framing

Identification of the geographical—whether international, regional, cross-comparative, or a national case—and the institutional scope of study forms the first step, aligning with the contextual grounding of higher education and curriculum studies. This emerges as a primary step since the adjustments to the analytical protocols depend on the context-driven data. This study benefited from the chronological listing of the design schools where urban design programs were established. Thereby, the authors were able to rationalize the institutional scope of the research.

Step II: Temporal framing

Following the identification of the case, institutions, and programs, data collection constitutes the second step of the methodology, enabling the construction of a timeline in line with the temporal grounding of the model.

Data sources vary from officially approved curricula, course catalogs, program handbooks, to archival documents obtained from university archives or institutional repositories. This study draws on multiple data sources to ensure triangulation. Simultaneously, it benefits from semi-structured interviews with faculty members to identify key milestones

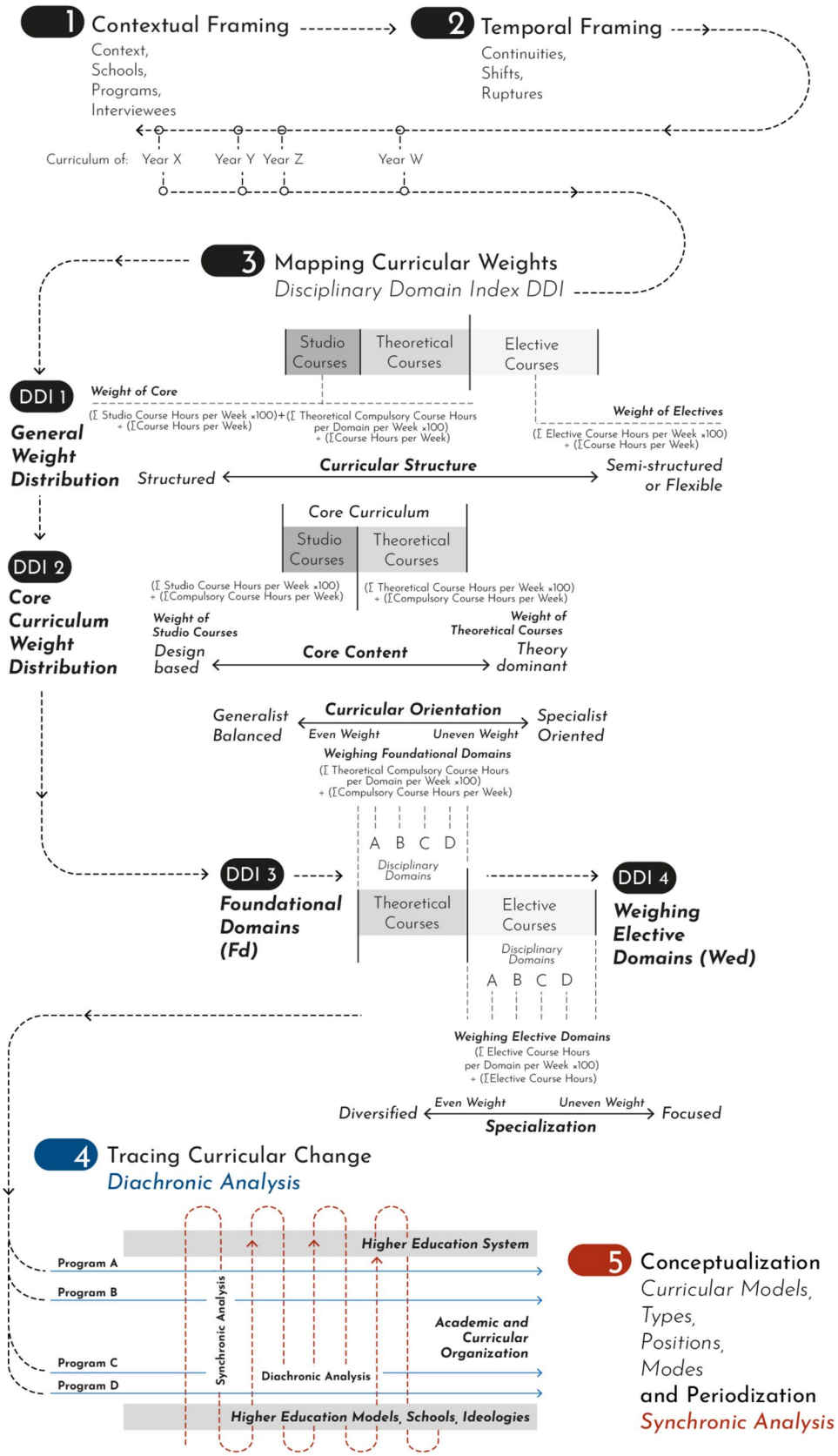


Fig. 1 The workflow of the curriculum analysis model framework

and shifts in institutional and curricular organizations, while also elucidating the dynamics driving these transformations, particularly because such changes are often shaped by tacit institutional knowledge not captured in formal documents. The interview in this study consists of open-ended questions inquiring about *the year*, *the content,* and *the major drivers of change* in two major topics: the institutional identity/departmentalization schemes and the structural and content-wise organization of the curriculum.

The identification of interviewees followed a backward snowball sampling strategy. Initial contact was made with the current program coordinators, who then provided information about previous coordinators from whom they had taken over the position. Accordingly, the list of interviewees emerged progressively rather than being defined a priori. In total, nine semi-structured interviews were conducted over 6 months with both active and retired faculty members who had held program coordination or administrative roles.

Interview data were analyzed using a qualitative thematic analysis. Transcripts were coded, incorporating the codes derived from the analytical components of the model, especially in the case of DDI—curricular structure, core content, orientation, and specialization—with inductive themes that emerged from the interviews, such as informal decision-making, external constraints, and negotiation processes.

The interviews informed the identification of key milestones, transition points, and periods of relative stability. They played a critical role in the contextualization of curricular data by revealing the rationales, negotiations, and institutional constraints underlying observed curricular changes. To overcome methodological challenges of this phase, an audit trail was maintained to ensure transparency, documenting data collection, analysis, and decision-making. Interview data supported triangulation a posteriori by confirming, deepening, or contesting interpretations derived from archival and quantitative analyses. Prolonged engagement in the research setting strengthened contextual understanding, while triangulation, member checking, and repeated analysis protocols enhanced credibility and validity. Thereby, interviews contributed to the iterative refinement of the methodological model, especially in the case of analytical components, by helping the validation and adjustment of these analytical categories. The process ensured that the model was not only analytically coherent but also grounded in institutional practice, strengthening its explanatory capacity and transferability to other contexts.

Testing and application

The remaining steps of the model proposal include empirical testing of each selected curriculam, which represents the shift best in the historical period it belongs to, through the DDI framework and the transferring of the findings to the timeline.

Step III: Mapping curricular weights

The third component involves the application of a quantitative methodology, the Disciplinary Domain Index, developed to assess curricular change over time and across institutions. To this end, four distinct analyses based on curricular weights were conducted to examine the composition:

1. General weight distribution: Relative weighting of Core Courses (Studio, Theoretical Courses divided into Disciplinary Domains) and Elective Courses.
   Indicator of curricular structure: Generalist | Structured and Predetermined vs. Specialist | Semi-Structured or Flexible

2. Core curriculum weight distribution: The weight distribution of Theoretical Courses and Studio courses within Core Courses.
   Indicator of core content: Theory-dominant vs. Design-based foundations of urban design education

3. Foundational domains: The weight distribution of disciplinary domains in the compulsory part of the curriculum.
   Indicator of curricular orientation: Generalist / Balanced if foundational domains weigh equally, Specialist / Oriented if foundational domains weigh unevenly

4. Weighing elective domains: The weight distribution of disciplinary domains in the elective part of the curriculum.
   Indicator of specialization: Diversified if domains weigh even vs. Focused if domains weigh uneven

The formulation of the DDI framework entailed iteration. To address limitations in this phase, systematic data coding was employed: initial codes were categorized, compared with new data for coherence, and refined as additional codes emerged. Following the analysis of each curriculum, the workflow involves the representation of changes in curricular weights through line graphs[6] and the mapping of indicator values onto the relevant interval of the timeline. This step later enables the diachronic tracing of institutional change,

[6] Data visualization for line charts was made through an open-source platform: https://app.flourish.studio/.

while also allowing the synchronic analysis of convergences between institutions as well as moments of divergences in institutional characteristics.

Step IV: Tracing curricular change – diachronic analysis

The fourth component includes the diachronic reading of the institutional trajectories of academic and curricular organization, which were already analytically mapped out in the previous step. This historical reading of the two layers of the timeline—organization of higher education and academic and curricular organizations of urban design programs—lays the ground for synchronic reading as the last step of the workflow.

Step V: Conceptualization and periodization – synchronic analysis

The fifth component of the model operates at three analytical levels, corresponding to its triple-layered structure. At one level, the analysis identifies which broader European higher education models functioned as influential, as organizing principles within the selected context, to conceptualize systemic characteristics. This level also captures how such centralized organizational frameworks shaped institutional trajectories. At another level, the analysis entailed the identification of the phases of organizational shifts in the higher education system. Finally, the analysis focuses on the cross-reading of evolving curricular trajectories across institutions, enabling the identification of temporal convergences and divergences. While periods of convergence are interpreted as moments of formation or consolidation, divergences indicate variation of institutional responses to systemic conditions.

An Illustrative case: Model application in the Turkish context

This study focuses on Türkiye as the illustrative case for model application for several reasons. On the one hand, its layered higher education history and repeated waves of reform create a rich context for observing the diffusion, adaptation, and hybridization of international influences. On the other hand, urban design education presents a particularly revealing subfield considering the five decades of educational practices within this domain, which is rarely publicly documented.

Application of step I: First-generation urban design programs in Türkiye

As the first step, the authors identified the design schools and programs to be studied. The accumulations and the gaps in this chronology inform us about the two different generations of urban design programs. The institutionalization of the urban design program in Türkiye was officially started after the University Reform and the formation of the Higher Education Council in 1981. Between 1982 and 1996, five urban design programs were established, respectively in Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University (MSFAU), Istanbul Technical University (ITU), Dokuz Eylül University (DEU), Izmir Institute of Technology (IZTECH), and Middle East Technical University (METU), which were addressed by the authors as the first-generation urban design programs. Two decades later, the number of urban design programs had multiplied. These were addressed as the second-generation urban design programs. The scope of the research has been narrowed down to the first-generation programs within the method application.

Application of step II: Temporal boundaries of curriculum formation

After brief research on program histories through the literature, the second step entailed the interviews with academic members, providing input on the temporal framing of the research. Then, the authors collected the curricula from different time frames, representing curricular transformation (Table 1). Data gathering process included literature research through books and academic writings on program history, document retrieval from institutional repositories, and online research through official web pages. Finally, curricular information such as the name of the courses, the status of the courses as electives and compulsories, hours of courses per week for both theoretical and applied work, credits of the courses, and special conditions have been listed. (Supplementary Material 01).

Application of step III and IV: Mapping curricular trajectories for each program

The third step entailed mapping of curricular data based on DDI framework and construction of a timeline depicting shifts within each institutional trajectory (Supplementary Material 02). This process was followed by diachronic analysis, which shows that specialization in urban design education did not emerge through a single linear evolution pattern, but through multiple institutional pathways.

A first pattern concerns shifting *curricular structuration*. The balance between compulsory and elective courses indicates that programs have gradually moved from highly structured and fixed models towards semi-structured or more flexible formats. While each curriculum was highly predetermined, later revisions expanded elective domains, enabling thematic diversification and varied modes of specialization.



Table 1 No text of specified style in document. The design schools, programs, and shifts in curricular organizations

School	Program	Year	Curriculum
MSFAU	City design specialization	1980	Curriculum integrated into higher architecture education
	Urban design graduate program	1982	The first curriculum
		1997	Joint model curriculum
		2016	Structural revision
		2020	Content revision
ITU	Urbanism graduate program	1979	Urbanism curriculum
	Urban design graduate program	1989	The first curriculum
		2008	The interdisciplinary curriculum
		2016	Content revision
		2023	Content revision
DEU	Urban architecture program	1978	Urban architecture curriculum
	Urban design graduate program	1998	The first curriculum
		2013	Structural revision
		2023	Content revision
IZTECH	Urban design graduate program	1994	The first curriculum
		2007	Structural revision
		2011	Content revision
		2023	Content revision
METU	Urban design graduate program	1980	The proposed curriculum I
		1992	The proposed curriculum II
		1996	The First curriculum
		2023	Content revision

A second pattern emerges from the *content of the core curriculum*. The ratio of theoretical to applied courses demonstrates a transition from theory-heavy orientations toward more design-centered configurations. Studio education has gradually become a central component of urban design education.

A third pattern relates to *foundational and elective domain weighing*, showing that what constituted the urban design field was neither stable nor uniform. By categorizing compulsory and elective courses and calculating domain weights, it becomes evident that curricular compositions vary based on the relative weighing of general domains, disciplinary domains, and field-based domains in each curricular trajectory (Table 2). While the weight of planning and architectural design domains decreased, the weight of theory and history and research methods domains gained prominence over time as foundational domains. Field-based domains have grown as a part of elective compositions, revealing multiple interpretations on the field's specialization tracks.

These diachronic patterns demonstrate that curricular formation in urban design education in Türkiye is not the outcome of a singular disciplinary maturation process, but the result of institutional negotiations between structure, content and domain compositions.

Table 2 Emerging categories of curricular domains in urban design graduate education

General domains	Research & method
	Theory & history
Disciplinary domains	Urban planning
	Architectural design
	Environment and landscape
	Conservation
Field-based domains	Form & morphology
	Practice of the profession
	Special topics in urban design (+Climate)

Application of step V: Four phases of curricular (trans-)formation of urban design education

The findings are presented by bringing together influential higher education philosophies and trajectories on institutional models, curricular structures, and curricular content within disciplinary domains. The curricular formation processes in these schools run parallel in four periods, respectively. (Fig. 2).

First, the *Humboldtian spirit* in higher education and the urbanistic roots in the earlier formation of urban design

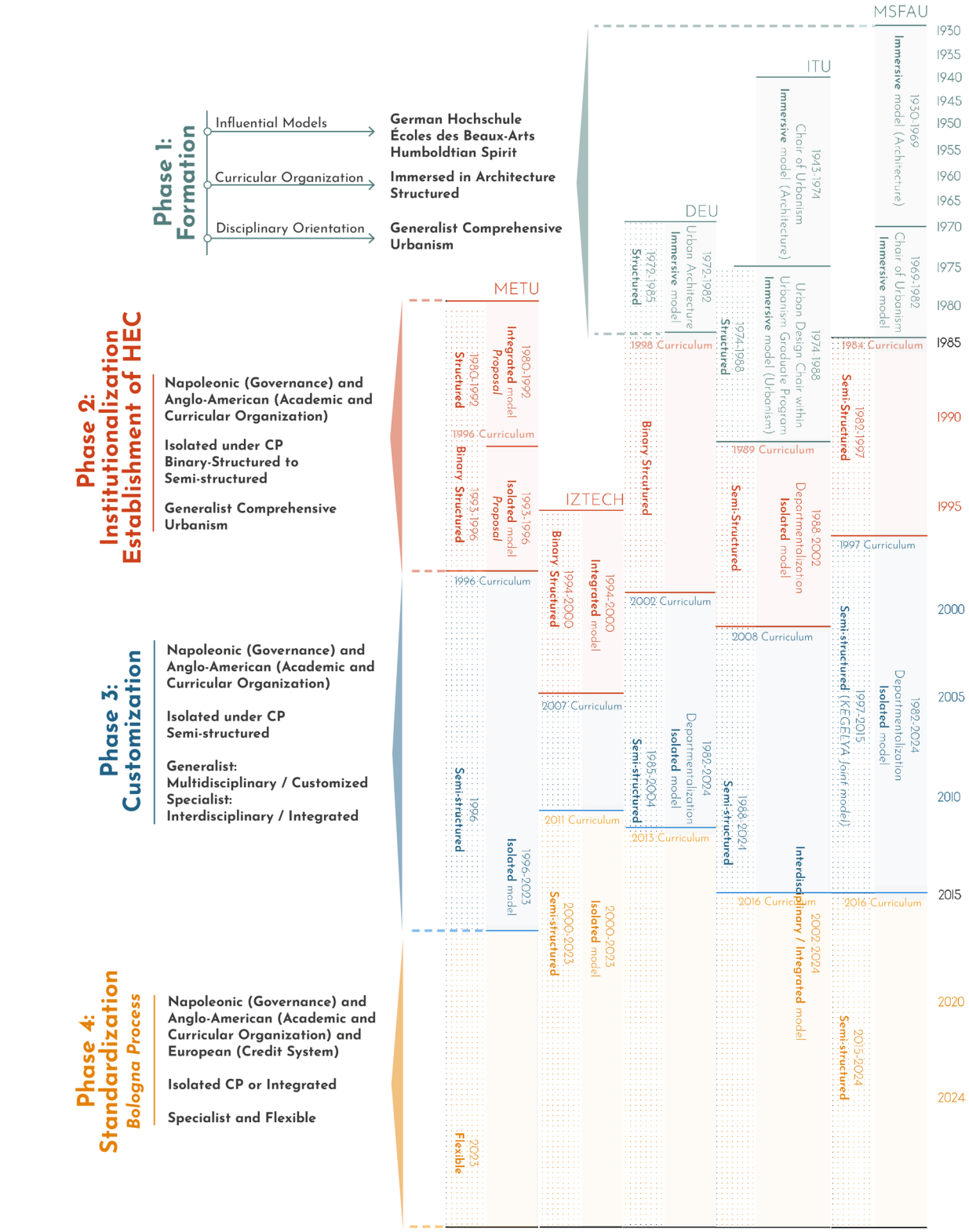


Fig. 2 Curricular phases of urban design education through synchronic analysis

education are briefly touched upon. Secondly, *Napoleonic features* at the system level governance after the establishment of the Higher Education Council and the *Anglo-American model* in academic organization and *cross-pedagogical* curricular formations in the institutionalization of urban design as graduate programs are discussed. Third, the proliferation of the *Anglo-American model* in departmental and curricular organization of higher education programs, despite *Napoleonic governance logic* and different approaches in restructuring existing curricula to organize urban design education as *a multi- or interdisciplinary field*, is detailed. Fourth, the sustenance of *Anglo-American features* through the Bologna Process as a standardizing and restructuring attempt and how the trajectories refracted to form current practices are elucidated.

First phase | 1930s–1980s: Urbanistic roots in the formation of urban design education

The first vein of urban design education has been rooted in the institutions standing since the Ottoman period. These are Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University (The Academy—MSFAU) and İstanbul Technical University (ITU). While ITU was modelled as a German *Technische Hochschule* with strong emphasis on vocational training of applied sciences and technical training for professions within clearly bounded disciplines (Balamir Keskin cited in Acar 2017, p.106), the Academy was directly inspired by *Écoles des Beaux-Arts* with centrality of atelier pedagogy and reliance on competitions (Demir 2008; Acar 2017, p. 106). Nevertheless, the Academy was later aligned with the *Hochschule* model [7], organized as a professional school (Nicolai,2011; İpek 2001; Hızlı and Aysel 2016).

The reforms made by German and Austrian émigré scholars in these institutions infused the *Humboldtian* spirit by introducing professorial autonomy and research-teaching unity in higher education and cultivating an urban art and urbanism culture integral to architecture during the 1930s and 1940s. Still, higher education unfolded inside a strong state-directed framework due to the 1933 University Reform.

In both ITU and The Academy, the notion of urban design was first formed, immersed in architecture education (Özaydın, 2023). The urbanism understanding was later matured through the Urbanism Graduate Program at ITU (Özdeş, 1987, p. 1), the City Design Specialization at MSFAU (Çubuk 2012, pp. 121–128), and Urban Architecture Graduate Program at DEU (Süel 1987) as programs offered to architects starting from the 1970s[8] The programs were autonomous in shaping departmental (chair) and curricular organizations. Although academic organization of urbanism education differed, as a common characteristic, the curricula of these programs were structured/fixed and comprehensively integrating the various dimensions of physical design of the built environment as well as planning topics, methods, or techniques aligned with a generalist urbanism formation. (Fig. 3).

The prevailing view of an urban designer was that of an integrated practitioner embodying a comprehensive, unified design expertise based on a "total designer" model. This conception emphasized a professional capable of navigating across scales and disciplines, from architectural details to matters of planning, to address complex urban challenges holistically. These academic formations based on graduate urbanism education laid the groundwork for the first urban design programs.

Second phase | 1980s–1990s: Institutionalization after the founding of the Council of Higher Education

The second phase, which took place during the 1980s, was based on significant turns in higher education that took place earlier. While the first vein of urbanism education was integral to architecture at the long-standing institutions, the second vein has been formed integral to public administration and urban planning in republican institutions such as Ankara University. This alternative approach to urbanism was proliferated by the international experts who were commissioned to assess the needs and to develop a higher education model for the country in the 1950s (Tekeli 1987; Ersoy 2010; Günay 2020). An Anglo-American model was cultivated through the establishment of new institutions such as METU, where the first urban planning undergraduate program was also founded, presenting alternative governance structures, departmentalization[9] schemes, curricular and pedagogical organizations as well as the language of

[7] Both German *Technische Hochschule* and *Écoles des Beaux-Arts* specifically refer to the traditions that influenced the two of the formation of earliest institutions of architectural education as distinguishing characteristics in the Turkish context. Since both schools had been reformed through a similar approach or reorganized for standardization purposes later, conceptualizing urban design education based on these traditions do not fit within the objective of revealing the underlying characteristics. Instead, this paper adopts Sam and van der Sijde's (2014) framework on broader higher education models in tracing the influences over the national higher education system and how this central organization affected the reshaping of urban design education.

[8] The program was initially established at the Aegean University Faculty of Fine Arts, which was the continuation of the Academy of Architecture in İzmir. This faculty was later transferred to Dokuz Eylül University during its establishment.

[9] Bilsel (2016, p. 113) states that the initial curriculum of the Faculty of Architecture were based on the Bauhaus approach interpreted through Harvard School of Design after the Second World War.

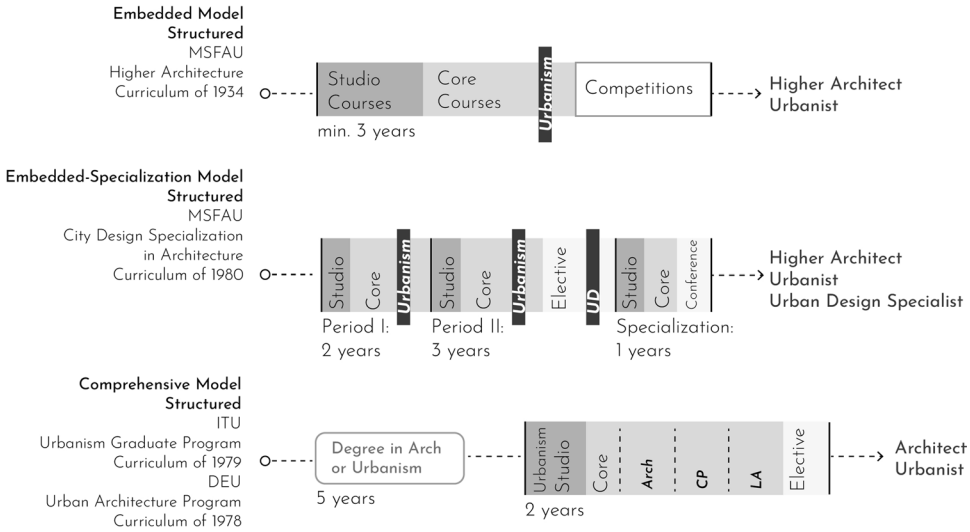


Fig. 3 The curriculum models introduced in the first phase of urban design education in Türkiye

instruction. This adoptable and replicable university model, based on disciplinary professionalization in departmental organization—that resulted in the proliferation of the urban planning programs and two-cycle degree programs rather than prolonged higher architecture/engineering education—was later decentralized at the regional level.

Although universities were granted autonomy based on after the re-establishment of the constitutional state during the 1960s (Güven 2022 cited in Deniz 2024, p. 4125), strengthening Anglo-American approaches, Napoleonic features were introduced at the system level governance after the establishment of the Higher Education Council in 1981. Nevertheless, this centralized, state-controlled institution functioned to proliferate the Anglo-American model in academic organization mentioned above through standardization.

In terms of spatial planning and design education, first, this led to departmentalization of city and regional planning as a separate undergraduate program in the faculties where urbanism education was previously integrated into architecture—i.e. ITU and MSFAU (Çubuk 2012, pp. 147–166; Oruç Ertekin et al. 2023, Akpınar et al., 2016, p. 26). This way, the content of graduate urbanism, city design, or urban architecture education encompassing multi-dimensional subjects of urban planning, which cultivated the roots of urban design education, has started to be integrated in the curricula of undergraduate planning programs elsewhere. Secondly, it led to the multiplication of planning programs—i.e., DEU. Thirdly, it implied the institutionalization of urban design as second-cycle graduate programs in these schools. Lastly, it resulted in the positioning of urban design programs under the departments of city and regional planning.

During the earlier stages of this transition, admission to urban design graduate programs in the schools that had previously followed the *Hochschule* model was restricted to graduates of architecture. Nevertheless, in this period, a semi-structured type of curriculum was first developed in an urban design program—i.e., MSFAU. Alternatively, the schools that reflected an Anglo-American model in higher education—i.e., METU, DEU, and IZTECH, introduced cross-pedagogical approaches through a binary structured type of curricula for students with either an architecture or an urban planning degree, which still sustained a multi-disciplinarily unified and a generalist understanding of the urban design field (Fig. 4).

The semi-structured and binary structured curricula adopted in this phase still represents a comprehensive approach to urbanism through an intense compulsory workload in which the planning domain is intensified instead of design-based or specialized core curriculum. This later emergence of graduate urban design programs corresponds to global mid-century shift toward collaborative synthesis.

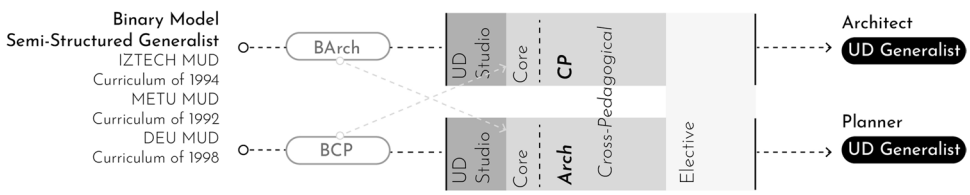


Fig. 4 The curriculum model introduced in the second phase of urban design education in Türkiye

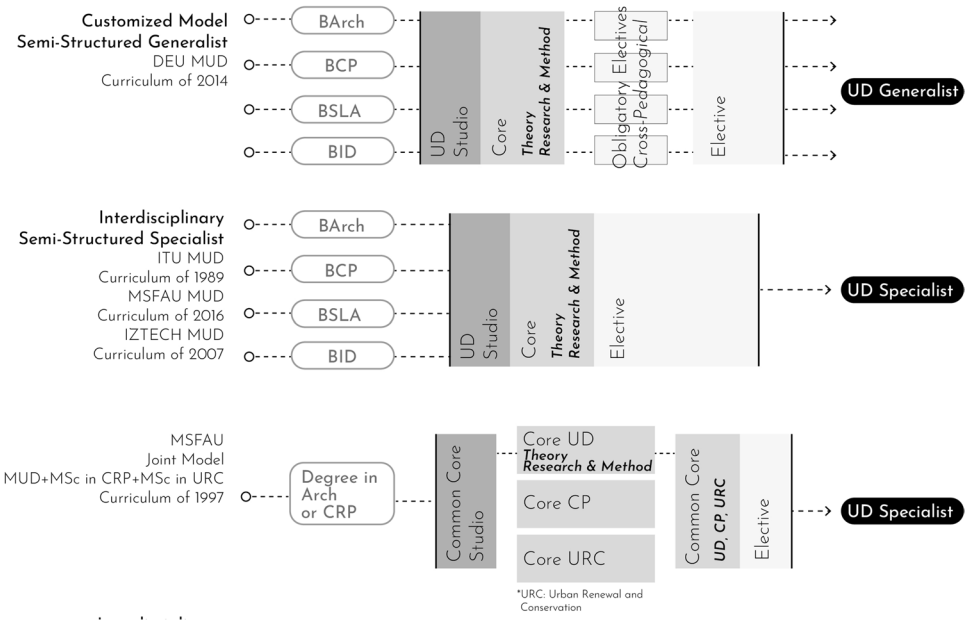


Fig. 5 The curriculum models introduced in the third phase of urban design education in Türkiye

Third Phase | 2000s: Customization of urban design curricula

The third period presents the settling of *Anglo-American model* in departmental and curricular organization of higher education programs and varying institutional responses to standardization despite *Napoleonic* top-down governance logic. Significantly, the disciplinary transposition of urban design progressed not only through departmental organization but also in alignment with paradigmatic shifts in urban planning. Urban design, once criticized for its 'piecemeal' approach, evolved into an operational component of action planning in line with the shift from comprehensive and zoning planning to strategic planning (Gürel 1997, p. 4). However, instead of curricular isolation of the field under urban planning, this strengthened the idea of in between disciplinary position of urban design and eligibility of students with various backgrounds for urban design specialization, leading to curricular revisions aligned with a multi- or interdisciplinary organization.

While the schools previously adopted binary structured curriculum, switched to a semi-structured type, DEU displayed path-dependency in curricular organization. Even after revisions, formerly compulsory courses switched to electives have become conditional based on the graduation profile of the student. These divergent institutional behaviors resulted in the restructuring of curricula in various modes, such as multidisciplinary/customized[10] and interdisciplinary/integrated[11] , both aiming at enabling the transitivity of knowledge and skills between different disciplines and fields. (Fig. 5).

Regardless of these minor differences, the third period is marked by revisions which transformed all curricula into a unified semi-structured type, which constituted both predefined compulsory courses and an articulated elective list. While specialist urban design education was aimed at in the interdisciplinary model, multi-disciplinary customized model still reflected a generalist tendency which aims to equip students with the knowledge of various disciplines.

In this phase, the implications of the Higher Education Council culminated in shifts in the weight of Studio coursework in the overall education program. The shift from a structured, comprehensive urbanism curriculum based on an intense, compulsory workload to a semi-structured, multi- or interdisciplinary curriculum based on a balance between elective and compulsory workload resulted in an increase in the weight of the Studio courses as a major trend. This

[10] In DEU, two customized curricula were developed from a multidisciplinary perspective for students holding different degrees between 1985 and 2012.

[11] In MSFAU, a Joint Curricula and a Joint Studio Framework were developed for Urban Planning, Urban Renewal and Conservation and Urban Design Graduate Programs. Although these programs were isolated institutionally, a collaborative framework was applied in the program between 1997 and 2015. In ITU, not only was an interdisciplinary curriculum developed but also the academic organization of the program was structured in an integrated model.

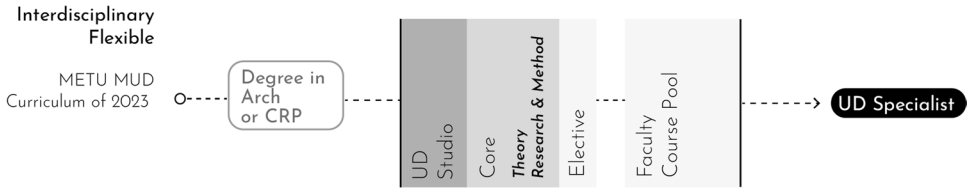


Fig. 6 The curriculum model introduced in the fourth phase of urban design education in Türkiye

reflects that core curriculum has shifted from theory-led to a design-based configuration.

Furthermore, specialization within the field was intended to be achieved through more specific topics in urban design offered as elective courses. Besides the studio education that was located at the core, the specialization in the particular dimensions of urban design was prioritized instead of delivering lateral knowledge of the allied disciplines.

Fourth Phase | 2010s–today: Standardization after bologna process

In the fourth phase, the higher education system has become even more hybridized in terms of the adopted models and approaches. While Anglo-American curricular and institutional elements and state-regulated governance logic were sustained, a new *European standardization* procedure was followed through the Bologna Process[12] which stipulated another standardization scheme. Bologna introduced ECTS—European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (similar to US credit hours) to synchronize the credit system in the three-cycle education to foster common international standards, comparability, and mobility. In that scope, the conditions of minimum and maximum credit requirements within a semester, total credit requirements, and the percentage of courses that ought to be taken as compulsory for the successful completion of the program, and core/elective ratios in the overall curriculum were redefined. Through these, Bologna Process emphasized competencies and employability within an outcome-based education framework.

The curricular structure adopted in the urban design programs during this period either remained semi-structured or shifted towards a flexible type[13] of configuration (Fig. 6). This contemporary studio-centered yet more flexible configurations reflect both inherited synthesis models and adaptation to systemic reforms.

The revisions in the curricula of urban design programs led to an increase in the weight of elective courses and a decrease in the weight of compulsory courses (Supplementary Material-03). Some programs gravitated towards specialization through the composition of electives, leaving comprehensive urbanism pedagogy. This could also be traced through the decrease in the weight of Planning as the foundational domain. Nevertheless, other programs exhibited a kind of path dependency in customizing the curriculum in a more generalist fashion through predefined elective courses to be taken based on students' degree background. Nevertheless, it could be suggested that in the last period, the weight of disciplinary domains in the elective part reached an equilibrium, and the weight of studio is saturated, consisting of one-third or half of every curriculum in every program.

The standardization process led to changes in the elective compositions since formerly compulsory courses were mostly transferred to this part of the curriculum. The weight of the domains of Planning, Theory & History, Research & Method either showed a decrease or fluctuation in the elective part of the curricula. The domain of Form & Morphology waned from most of the curricula. Though Environment & Landscape peaked in earlier phases, the domain's weight has been decreased. On the other hand, the domain of Special Topics in electives increased in each school, reflecting the depth of the knowledge forming within the field of urban design in its disciplinary formation process.

The diachronic and synchronic analyses of urban design curricula in Türkiye reveal the evolutionary trajectory within which diverse models were simultaneously embodied. Even though the state provided the structural scaffolding, the curricular basis of urban design education refracted into distinctive paths. This is because the faculties had a certain degree of control over crafting curricular models and the content of urban design education. Although expertise in urban design has primarily been considered to be developed through the integration of knowledge from multiple discipline, curricular endeavors in urban design specialization in Türkiye reflects a search for or laying out distinctive epistemological, methodological or representational frameworks in the construction of disciplinary knowledge.

[12] Türkiye has been included as a member of the Bologna Process in 2011. This higher education alliance across Europe aimed to increase transparency, recognition and mobility in higher education systems of member countries in accordance with the objectives of Lisbon Strategy published in 2000 by the European Union (EU). In that scope, The National Qualifications Framework for Higher Education in Türkiye (NQ-HETR) was started to be constructed in 2006. This framework brought about a curricular standardization, which was applied at the national level starting from 2012.

[13] The METU MUD sets an example to flexibly structured type of curriculum.

Discussion: Curricular analysis model framework

This research was based on two central assumptions. The first assumption was that European higher education models have been influential in shaping educational curricula through diffusion and contextualization elsewhere. The second assumption was that the curriculum can serve as an instrument to narrate both institutional curricular historiographies and the disciplinary formation of a field over time.

This was explored by developing a methodological model that integrates both historical reading and empirical analysis to produce a coherent interpretation. Within this model, qualitative inquiries were designed to illuminate the *when* and *why* of curricular change, emphasizing chronological and causative aspects of curricular development. Quantitative inquiries, on the other hand, sought to answer questions of *what* and *how*, emphasizing the content-wise and structural aspects of curricula, operationalized through a set of metrics and indicators. By combining these two dimensions, the model was designed to function both diachronically – tracing institutional trajectories across time – and synchronically – highlighting phases of curricular formation based on the convergent and divergent qualities among programs at specific periods. In this way, the method provided a systematic framework to identify how the urban design field has been constructed in the education system.

Applied to the Turkish case, the model successfully revealed institutional trajectories diachronically.

- Structure of the curriculum: The balance between compulsory (theoretical and applied) and elective courses indicated the degree of structuring. Over time, curricula in Türkiye shifted from highly structured/fixed to semi-structured or more flexible formats.
- Content of the core curriculum: The ratio of theoretical to applied courses revealed whether a program was theory-dominant or design-based. In Türkiye, this balance evolved from a theory-heavy orientation to a more design-centered configuration.
- Foundational and elective domains (Fd & Wed): By categorizing compulsory and elective courses and calculating the weight of disciplinary domains, it was possible to identify what constituted the urban design field and how this composition changed. In Türkiye, domains varied significantly across institutions and shifted over time.

By synthesizing these institutional trajectories, the model also worked in capturing the synchronic evolution of urban design pedagogies. The four-period trajectory of urban design curricula in Türkiye underscores not only the change in the institutional, regulatory, and disciplinary structures but also shifts in the identity of the field. It also highlights that some of the orders in the higher education system—e.g., governance logic, academic organization and curricular organization-, could be decoupled in terms of the adopted higher education models.

The earliest schools rooted in *German Hochschule* and *Beaux-Arts tradition* positioned urban design as immersive to architecture and urbanism practice, cultivating a generalist orientation in the institutions where the *Humboldtian* spirit was present. With the reforms introduced under state-centralized *Napoleonic* logic but following the *Anglo-American model*, urban design was simultaneously legitimized and redefined: formalized as a graduate-level specialization but structurally integrated within planning departments, while introducing alternative models towards interdisciplinarity with the binary integration of architecture and urban planning, although still reflecting a generalist view of the field. Later curricular revisions at each institution reflected growing recognition of the field's hybrid nature, broadening access to students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, and experimenting with multidisciplinary, customized and interdisciplinary integrated formats. Again, realized under the control of centralized authority, yet sustaining Anglo-American elements, the Bologna Process added another layer of standardization by recalibrating credit systems, producing divergent paths between specialist and generalist programming of the field.

Taken together, the application demonstrates that European higher education models have been influential in shaping educational curricula in Türkiye and curriculum analysis is not only a diagnostic tool to measure change in knowledge domains, but also a means to capture the broader pedagogical underpinnings of urban design. Beyond the Turkish case, the methodological model offers a transferable framework for analyzing curriculum in other contexts, allowing comparative insights into how higher education is shaped and how disciplines evolve within different educational settings.

Conclusion: Towards an evolutionary understanding in urban design curriculum scholarship

This research demonstrates that education is a highly *adaptive system* shaped by shifting institutional and regulatory environments that are fundamentally influenced by higher education models, philosophies and ideologies. In that sense, adopting an evolutionary perspective provides a valuable lens for understanding the dynamic processes through which institutional and curricular formations in disciplines related to urbanism unfold. The evolving and refracted trajectories observed in the Turkish case arguably amplify broader global conditions. Diverse models could co-exist in shaping



the elements of higher education systems. Higher education could be governed under a model, which is based on strict state regulation, while simultaneously borrowing academic and curricular organizations of a model which is based on institutional autonomy. Furthermore, while programs with autonomous institutional settings may develop divergent curricular models that are historically shaped by differences in schools of thought, centralized standardizations can eliminate this possibility. However, *path-dependency* could still emerge as counteracting behavior. Nevertheless, pedagogies in urbanism, diachronically shift or synchronously diversify along a spectrum between *generalist vs. specialist orientation, mono-disciplinary vs inter-disciplinary formation,* and *fixed vs. flexible organization.*

The curricular shifts identified in this study also inform about the strong connection between epistemological basis of education and *professional identity*. The evolution of the urban designer—from expert model with unified knowledge of many domains to that with focused specialization—brings broader transformations in other professional fields into question. In this case, this evolution should not be read as *fragmentation* but rather as the *maturation* of a field in which diverse practices can coexist.

The curriculum emerges not only as an epistemological content, but also as an area of pedagogical, institutional, and organizational negotiation. These remarks the value of curriculum analysis for theorists exploring how knowledge is structured, transmitted, negotiated, and localized along formative processes, for reformers tracing how particular discourses emerge and decline, and how new ones might be integrated, for practitioners revising programs to address emerging requirements.

Looking ahead, two key directions stand out to expand the disciplinary remarks outlined here. One of them is through *comparative research*, where this model is applied in other contexts to investigate how higher education has been shaped and how the urban design field has evolved under different educational settings. The other one is through *cross-disciplinary applications*, through which this model is tested in adjacent disciplines, especially in the urban planning discipline, which is characterized by consisting of multiple domains such as sociology, economics, politics and so forth, or other interdisciplinary fields where curricular negotiation and identity formation are equally critical. Overall, by underscoring *evolutionary and hybrid* perspectives as defining characteristics in urban design education, this study offers a transferable methodological and conceptual framework for understanding how urbanism-related fields are cultivated, transformed, and situated within wider cultural and institutional ecosystems.

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Author Contributions I.Y.Ö. and O.Ç. made the conceptualization and designed the methodology. I.Y.Ö. conducted the phases of data gathering and analysis, wrote the draft, and prepared figures. O.Ç. supervised the research, reviewed and edited the manuscript.

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Data Availability All data supporting the findings of this study are available within the paper and its Supplementary Information.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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