

Conversations⁶

↳ ON
CONSTRUCTION:

A
CONVERSATION
WITH

CEVDET
ALAN
AND
CEMAL CAN
ARSLAN

Melis Uğurlu:

I would like to start by hearing about your background in construction, what kind of construction sites have you worked on before?

Cevdet Alan:

I came to Istanbul from Gümüşhane in 1987. After that, I went abroad, lived 11 years in France, two years in America, and another two and a half years in Siberia and Russia. The conditions in Turkey are, of course, very different from the conditions in Europe. For one, they inspect the work a lot in Europe. Here's an example from my personal experience: I went there because I thought I was a master craftsman, but I had to go through the stages of being an apprentice again for at least another three to four months. After that—due to the differences in the system—I went through a tough period of adaptation.

M.U.:

What areas or situations, in particular, did you find it hard to adapt to?

C.A.:

Mostly things about the system. For example, everything is rushed in Turkey. At the end of the day, the master-builder always asks the construction worker, "Why did you only build five meters and not 10 meters?" But that is not the case in Europe. They are not as interested in the amount of work; on the contrary, they care more about workers' honesty, cleanliness, set-square, level, and so on. In Turkey, what's important is not the quality, but the quantity of the work. So, the situation is exactly the opposite. That's because workers' wages are cheap. Labor doesn't pay. So, the employer is also right from his point of view. For example, let's say a meter of the material was bought for 20 Turkish Liras, and the worker

completed three meters until the evening. In this case, the business owner can't cover the costs. Therefore, most of the time work has to be done in a quick, hasty, rushed manner. Does this mean that there's no craftsmanship in Turkey? No, of course, there is—be it tiling, marble, rough work... but the system being what it is, not much can be done.

Let me tell you about something else that we don't have here in Turkey. Cleanliness is very important over there. In the evening, the worker stops what he's doing at exactly 4:30 p.m., then he cleans the place and takes out anything that needs to be thrown away. It's definitely not like that here. The electrician makes a mess and leaves; the plumber makes a mess and leaves; the bricklayer makes a mess and leaves; everyone leaves their mess behind. If nothing else, they damage someone else's work. Over there, no one damages someone else's work. If you were to damage anything, a report would be filed and fines would be issued immediately. Let's see if you're willing to do it again after paying the fine. Mistakes are not repeated because hefty fines are imposed. Over here, unfortunately, things don't work like that. We are far behind in matters of cleanliness, attention, and care.

M.U.:

Do you think that the reason for this carefulness is primarily due to the enforcement being stronger through penalties? If not, what would you say is the reason?

C.A.:

No. First of all, the guy there is paid his due. Even if he completes only three meters, he'll be alright. Let me tell you something that happened to me: We were packing up; ¹ I laid four stones, I looked around, the Portuguese were laying three. One of them said, "Look at the Turk, he's laid 4 stones today!" If you did that in Turkey, they'd probably kick you out on the second day. They'd say, "If you're going to work like this, leave, this won't do." Over there, if your work is clean, even if it isn't a lot, that's not a problem. But it's not like that here. Here in Turkey we're used to working in a big rush, rush, rush. What's important is to finish the job as quickly as possible, no matter how it's done. Nobody asks themselves if it's beautiful or ugly. Or if it is possible to correct it. Nobody asks, we just keep on working in a rush, day after day.

M.U.: Speaking of rushing a job, during our research for the Pavilion of Turkey, we came across an interesting document. The table is called "Human Per Hour," and it documents how many hours it takes a worker to do a unit of each job.² I would be curious if you had a look at the numbers in this table and see if you find them more or less accurate compared to the actual hours on the construction site?

C.A.:

In fact, these time frames are shorter than what it takes during the real process; they might be statistically correct globally, but if you try to apply them here, you'll never get it to work. For example, if it says a meter here, you might hear them saying "I can't set off the cost if you work at this pace, you've got to do five meters." What can you say to that? That you can't? But if I compare it to my experience abroad, in France, for example, it's not like that. If you have to build a meter, you can build that meter the best you can. In any case, you'll cover the cost and profit. Here, work is cheap and jobs are scarce. So, you don't have any value, it's not like that over there.

1 Packing, pack-up: To fill in the hollow spaces left around a wall made of large stones with smaller stones, sand, cement, chips, and/or mortar.

2 See Paperwork 1 on this website publication. Curatorial Team, "Measurable Human Value," *Architecture as Measure/ Ölçü Olarak Mimarlık*, December 7, 2020. <https://pavilionofturkey21.iksv.org/en/paperwork/the-measurable-human-value>

M.U.:

Do these conditions effect the rate of error? Do you observe that more mistakes are made in order to work faster or do more work?

C.A.:

Of course, when you try to do a job quickly, mistakes happen. But who cares? The boss doesn't care how the job is done, as long as it's done. In Turkey, workers aren't paid what they deserve. So, what do they do? They do rush jobs, cut expenses and move on. Then what happens is that interest in construction work starts to decline. Now that there are no people interested in working in the construction industry, the workers start coming from abroad. The government must find a solution to this, we should be training master craftsmen at vocational high schools. If not, the plumber will come from abroad, the plasterer, the molder, the painter will all come from abroad. Then we'll be known as the country of construction. Take whatever job there is on a construction site, all the way from the carpenter to the roof, no skilled workers are raised in these jobs. If the government doesn't care about training master-builders or training skilled workers, then who will construct these buildings?

M.U.:

Would you say then you do most of the teaching on the construction site?

C.A.:

Exactly. The architects coming in these days who have graduated from universities with degrees don't know a thing about construction. Let me be frank, I've met and trained a lot of architects. Yes, they know how to draw, but they haven't seen any actual construction. They don't have material knowledge; they don't know what workmanship is. They need to learn these things. The only thing taught at schools is drawing. They don't know how a wall is built, or how plumbing is installed. So they draw incorrectly, or can't even draw it at all. You know, there are a lot of unemployed architects and engineers who have graduated, who cannot find a job because they are inexperienced. So, what do architects and engineers learn during their studies? If they had learned at least some of these applications, they wouldn't feel so inexperienced on construction sites.

M.U.:

How is communication conducted through the architectural drawings at the construction site? Let's say a project the architect drew at his office is sent here and hung on the wall, how do you conduct the application process?

C.A.:

Usually projects are drawn independently, and we apply them. Each subcontractor has an engineer or an architect; the architect or engineer of that subcontractor also establishes the dialogue with workers over the current project. We check whether the work they draw is applicable, suitable to the location, or not.

Sometimes the communication process can be a bit difficult. It's not easy to dismantle a job and put it back together again. We waste both time and money. So, we try hard to understand the architectural drawing thoroughly and spot the mistakes early on.

M.U.:

How is your relationship with the workers at the construction site?

C.A.:

I generally believe that it is necessary to act according to the psychology of people working on construction sites. We can't know what troubles they are going through in their private lives, families, finances, etc. It's also important to keep in mind that they might bring their personal issues to work just as anyone else might. At this point, conscience comes into play. An unscrupulous construction site does not make anyone happy, not the boss nor the worker.

M.U.:

I am curious to hear more about how the hiring and dismissal procedures work. More specifically, are the employee's rights protected in case of dismissals?

C.A.:

Sure. The state already protects employee rights. Everyone gets their severance pay, but it takes some time after being laid off. No one can enter a construction site without insurance. Nobody takes that risk. First, you go through a medical examination. Everything about you goes into the health report; fear of heights, blood sugar, blood pressure. You go through many tests and finally get the "fit for work" report. And after you get the report, you come to the occupational health and safety department over here, they check your documents. If health and safety say everything is in order, you can work. And then the worker enters the site.

[CEMAL CAN ARSLAN JOINS]

M.U.:

Could you talk about the problems you encounter most frequently on construction sites regarding work safety?

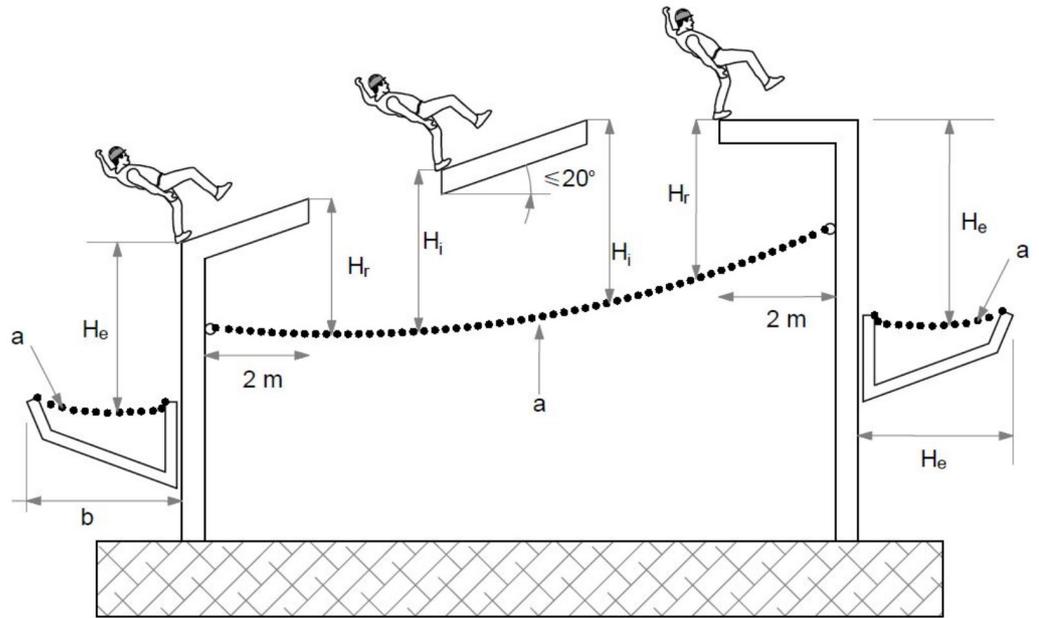
Cemal Can Arslan:

The answer to this question is very simple: workers do not have any work safety habits but lots of excuses. For example, they don't want to wear a helmet, saying, "it makes my hair fall out, gives me a headache, makes me sweat, I have sinusitis." Or some say that the safety belt "feels heavy, I can't work comfortably." Sometimes they question the rules. For example, under the definition of safety harness in Occupational Safety and Health Regulations, it is stated that "Construction workers are required to wear safety harnesses whenever there is a possibility of injury caused by falling and a difference in level." Now, normally we are required to make them use safety harnesses indoors, but that sounds "illogical" to workers. They're already on a floor, they're not on the edge, they're indoors, and that is why they start questioning why they should wear it.

But the regulation imposes the complete opposite. It aims to protect. For example, previously, the law stated that the use of a safety harness was mandatory for heights of two and a half meters and more, but the state became liable when a worker who fell from two meters was injured in an accident. So, by making changes to this article, everywhere that has a difference in level, which cannot be reached without a ladder, was called "work beyond height." This is completely a self-defense mechanism because the state also doesn't want to take any risks.

M.U.:

If I'm not mistaken, according to research, most accidents in the construction sector are caused by falls.



Among all the occupations in Turkey, the construction industry is recorded to have the highest and most severe amount of work accidents outcomes. So much so that the construction industry is included in the "Very Dangerous Occupations" class according to the Social Security Institution in Turkey. Accidents due to falling remain on the top of the list among all sites, including building, road, canal, and tunnel constructions. When looking further into the sub-groups of accidents caused by falling, the most frequent occurrence is falling off the edge of the flooring platform while the second one is falling from the scaffolding. Image: Falling heights and safety nets. "Yapı İşlerinde Kullanılan İş Ekipmanlarının Asgari Sağlık ve Güvenlik Şartları," [Minimum Health and Safety Conditions of Work Equipment Used in Construction Works], Resmi Gazete 28786, Ek-5 (2013).

C.C.A.:

Yes, most accidents occur due to falls from a height or objects falling on a person from a height. Material falling on a person from a height mostly occurs due to a tower crane. When the material is lifted with the tower crane, either the rope breaks or the chain comes off, or the material slides, and it falls. So, we have to take precautions ourselves. For example, when lifting wooden materials, we need to attach a cloth sling to the tower crane. When lifting and securing iron, it's necessary to use the tower crane's steel cable.

M.U.:

Are these being implemented on construction sites; are the rules observed?

C.C.A.:

To answer your question, let me tell you about something that happened to me recently. We were working on the exterior of a 21-story building. There was a suspended platform on the exterior, but the balconies were puzzling. Now, as the platform moved adjacent to the wall, extra arms extended from the front of the working platform, and they were pulled back where there were balconies. When you get clear of the balconies, you push the arms forward and close that gap. Now you put the scaffolding on the extending arms, and you have to assemble the scaffold planks. If you don't assemble it, there's a chance that it will slide. One of our workers doesn't install it when he's plastering, it's his mistake because he doesn't do it even though he knows he should. He's thinking of getting his work done and getting out as quickly as possible. In any case, one of the biggest problems is the "get it done quick, get out quick" approach—most accidents happen because of this. He's thinking about getting more work done so that the boss makes a bigger profit, that's what's important to him. The system imposes this belief on the worker. The scaffolding slides, the man hangs in the air with his safety harness on, luckily for him the place he hangs coincides with a window, so

he saves himself by going through the window. It just so happens that I had seen the same worker a day before without a safety harness and had warned him. I took his photo and issued a fine of 250 Turkish Liras and warned him that the fine would be doubled if I saw him without a safety harness again. Had I not penalized this worker just the previous day, he would probably have kept on working without a safety harness. The general logic in this industry is based on a belief of “I’ll be fine.”

M.U.:

So, what are the legal proceedings in the event of an accident, and who is held responsible?

C.C.A.:

First of all, a “root cause analysis” is performed to determine why the accident occurred. By answering all the questions such as what, how, why, etc. it becomes clear who is responsible in the conclusion section. Railings, scaffolding, and other such equipment we use for safety purposes on the construction site must be TSE (Turkish Standards Institution) certified and comply with the laws. Otherwise, when the inspector comes and examines the construction site, he may find the site management responsible. As construction site management, many safety issues such as these need to be considered and maintained. You can’t forgo these things to make a profit. For example, railings should be able to support up to 125 kilograms, there should be a 15 centimeters base plate at the bottom, where and at what height to position the safety ropes and safety nets are all defined. You can’t just say I’ll do it however I want to.

C.A.:

These issues have been on the agenda for the last ten years or so. Before that, safety barriers, railing, etc. weren’t used that often, because these become added expenses. Of course, the contractor aims to profit, so he avoids such costs where he can. Things are somewhat better now. In the past, there were back-alley or under-the-counter contractors. They wouldn’t use railings, safety nets, or anything of the sort. When an accident did happen, the rich boss would pay it off, and hush the situation. Naturally, the poor worker remains silent and only comments, “accidents happen.” The boss gets off scot-free. He immediately puts the blame on us workers. Of course, now that people are better informed, they immediately file a complaint when a small accident occurs.

C.C.A.:

Of course, it doesn’t end with setting up a safety net. Poles used in the installation of the net must also be welded, manufactured, and assembled in accordance with established standards. And the person doing the job can’t be just anyone. They have to be certified and accredited. Otherwise, it doesn’t make any sense, because there are TSE numbers in the regulations clearly stating which standard net is to be used with which standard pole. You can’t say anything goes. We control the work, for example, if it’s a safety net, the scaffolding must be TSE certified and it also has to be installed in accordance with TSE standards. Everything will be investigated when there is an accident, and if it is found that the installation hadn’t followed the stages specified by the TSE, they’ll be responsible for any fall or injury. For example, when you put third-class steel where first-class steel should be used and put a heavy load on it, there is a chance that the steel will break taking down the entire net, and this time instead of making a small profit, it ends up damaging the area and costing money. What I really mean is that everyone’s motivation in doing this might not be worker safety!

What they don’t like is that work safety officers slow them down, less work gets done because we slow down, and less progress payment is received because less work gets done. Even an hour is very valuable to the boss. For

example, there was once a worker who forgot his safety shoes, until his shoes arrived, he chose to go in and do his job, even though he knew it wasn't safe. The reason for this is that the worker who gets more work done has a better chance of being hired for the next project, and thus won't be out of work.

C.A.:

There's also the idea of getting in the good graces of the boss.

C.C.A.:

That's especially important nowadays because the construction industry is in trouble.

C.A.:

The jobs are scarce, but there are also master-builders, let's hand it to them, who say my share is five meters, I'll do my five meters. If the employer knows the job, he takes a look at his work and says, "Okay, your job is good, it's enough for me even if you complete five meters." There are such people.

M.U.:

Is this attitude more often encountered in fine work?

C.C.A.:

Absolutely. During the rough stage, there are instances when the reinforced concrete is finished in a slapdash manner, but it is hidden by the coating layer applied over it. But for example, ceramics is the final stage. You can't cover it with anything else, the paint is the final stage, nothing else goes over those. So, quality becomes as important as quantity. If a master tiler completes five meters, and if the employer knows the job, he may say, "OK, you completed your five meters properly, the job is good, your due is 100 Liras, keep it up." That's what they should say anyway. Among different bosses, some regard the quality of work, and there are those who overlook it. It's not the boss' house, after all, he's not going to live in it. The only measure is to sell it to the customer. He might put pressure on the worker and try to cut his losses by saying things like "finish it as soon as possible, so I can deliver it," or "it took too long to sell it," or "I sold it too cheap." But that's not how it's supposed to be.

[CEVDET ALAN LEAVES]

M.U.:

Last of all, how is the safety rules and measures training conducted at the construction site?

C.C.A.:

Applied training courses are conducted by us, work safety experts. There are also active training sessions in the field. In addition, the work safety expert has to train for 16 hours a year in a very dangerous classroom. A medical doctor gives four hours of this training and the expert gives 12 hours, or the expert gives 14 hours and the doctor gives the remaining two hours. Generally, many standards and rules need to be explained to people with lower levels of education. But, thanks to legislators, laws, rules, and regulations are not written in a language that is easy to read or understand. That's where we come in. Finally, at the end of the training, we also give an exam. Anyone who fails the exam cannot enter a construction site.

M.U.:

There doesn't seem to be much of a problem on the part of training and precautions on paper but being in the field is different. For example, does this training help in practice when there is an accident on the field?

C.C.A.:

There is not much need for employee intervention on large construction sites. Because after 250 employees, having a full-time doctor or other medical staff like a nurse on-site is mandatory.

M.U.:

What about if it's below 250 employees?

C.C.A.:

In that case, medical staff is also required, but for a limited period of time. The workplace physician is determined by the number of employees: for instance, the physician's duration of stay is five minutes for each employee. It is calculated according to that and the medical staff is onsite for that duration. The doctor comes in one day per week on small construction sites. Because having a doctor on-site every day is too expensive. There are doctors going from one construction site to the other. It has become a line of business.

M.U.:

So, who responds to accidents that occur outside of this period?

C.C.A.:

First of all, we don't want such situations to occur, but they can happen. For example, one Sunday, there was no doctor on-site. While working on concrete grinding, a worker accidentally attached a regular iron cutting stone instead of a concrete grinding stone. He began to grind the concrete, and because the carbon inside the iron cutting stone is an explosive material, it exploded. It hit the worker right on his eyebrow and gashed it. During the incident, they were in the basement, and by coincidence, I was upstairs for an inspection. We immediately called 112, notified the paramedic, and tried to stop the bleeding until the ambulance arrived. Our first response, of course, is limited, since we are not medical professionals. But we do anything we can to prevent injuries from getting worse.

About the authors

Cevdet Alan worked as a field foreman in Russia between 1997-1999 and conducted ceramic and marble work at the construction sites in Barbados Island in South America between 1999-2000 and hotel construction sites in France between 2002-2013. Since 2013, he has been working as a field foreman at a construction company in Turkey.

Cemal Can Arslan entered the profession after completing studies at the Occupational Health and Safety Department at Istanbul Aydın University in 2015. Among his six years of work experience, Cemal Can has conducted inspections mainly in the construction sector and in areas such as machinery industry, food industry, chemical industry and plastics manufacturing, mining and quarrying, furniture manufacturing, and warehouses.