

PRODUCTION OF AN IMAGINARY URBAN ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore transformation of Istanbul's urban landscape from a state of material reality into a cultural imagery on the purposes of cultural tourism focusing on the transformation processes around Taksim. Through the analysis of ongoing projects in Taksim region, it attempts to understand the contradictions of the neoliberal project that has been transforming the city on the way to become a global city as a gate to the world economy. Especially recently, Taksim became a unique example for understanding urban restructuring processes of public spaces in Istanbul as neoliberal urban policies has been implemented and creative destructions has been taking place in Taksim for the grand project of converting Istanbul into a "vision city" in the global urban tourism competition. These policies and projects have led Taksim's uneven social and physical transformation through processes like gentrification or commodification of the public spaces.

The beautification of the city for image production has been justified based on economic imperatives. Construction of a new image for the city required destruction or transformation of urban landscape together with embedded local history and collective memory. To this end, many enterprises were privatized throughout Istanbul and many public resources were channelled to Ministry of Culture and Tourism. However, the project succeeded and in 2012 Istanbul became the fifth most visited city worldwide. While the demand for spaces with a unique cultural experience increased, a dramatically altered global order that requires a new understanding of the role of tradition and heritage has been formed in the production of social space. The rapid transformation of urban space and the demolition of vernacular or commemorative parts of the city for the sake of tourism and economic welfare destroyed the city's cultural landscape, which is central to national memory. Through the transformations taking place around Taksim, the promise of this paper is to reveal and understand how social and physical urban transformation processes of the city have been triggered by political power and economic interests.

Keywords: Tourism, Representation, Urban Transformation Processes, Istanbul, Taksim

1. INTRODUCTION

As in the case of other global cities worldwide, in the last century, Istanbul has undergone an uneven development both in terms of social justice and urban form. The urban landscape became a medium of material and representational space in which different ideologies are transformed to concrete forms to produce cultural, national meanings or political control. There is much in recent critical literature regarding the control of state over urban landscape as a *dispositif*, where planning or design became a political apparatus for the government of societies (Foucault, 1989, 257). Urbanism has been a tool for governing citizens through space, a tool to shape order and prevent or control revolution. The question of governing the city through space is and has always been an important aspect for governments, those holding political power since cities are the chaotic environments that are seen as a threat for the governments, carrying the tensions of proletariat or the contradictory groups. In the discourse of Foucault's *dispositif*, urban landscape is defined as a disposition of space for economical and political reasons¹.

When we take urban space as a dispositive or a regulatory apparatus mediating between heterogeneous elements the space itself is becoming a political medium, which produces the social through space. In the age of neoliberalism, this political medium is eroding with the investments of capitalists and state power. The public space becomes commodity with the urbanization of the capital. Private interests are taking over public space within different formations (Low, 2006). Tourism is one of the most dominant and growing determinant in the transformation processes of the cities in developing countries. The re-production and marketing of tradition and heritage compelled the transformation of urban landscape as a show-case for tourist gaze. Accordingly as in many cities worldwide the designed vision cities are transforming to a fragmented image, replacing the real thing itself.

2. ISTANBUL BECOMING A GLOBAL CITY

In 1980, under developmentalist policies, rapid economic expansion and chaotic growth in the financial market was an inescapable signal of the internationalization of the Turkish economy (Keyer, 1999). The state sector lost its power on the economy. The International Monetary Fund became a tool to restructure the economy within the global capitalist logic. Istanbul as a global city became the medium to attract foreign capital. During this period, with the oil boom, Istanbul attracted many Arabs and Middle Eastern businessmen, being the interface between eastern raw materials and western finance (Keyder, 1999). The move to privatization and a new identity as a global city in the world market reflected in the urban landscape, with ATM machines, head quarters, five star hotels, shopping malls, department stores, fast food sectors, world cuisine restaurants and international festivals. As Keyder states during the last decade 'Istanbul lived through its own version of casino

¹ Foucault's *dispositif* is translated to English as apparatus, which denotes 'tools and devices' to operate or control the institutionalized praxis (Ploger, 2008). Foucault defines the elements of the *dispositif* as an ensemble of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions. He states that these elements constitute a heterogeneous system of relations, which is the *dispositif*. In Foucault's discourse *dispositif* also entails for the nature of the networks or the relations between elements (Foucault, 1980, 194). Additionally Foucault claims that the term *dispositif* is a formation functioning to respond an urgent need in a historical threshold. In his words 'the apparatus (*dispositif*) has a dominant strategic function' (Foucault, 1980, 195). Parallel to Foucault, Deleuze states that 'our present day reality takes on the form of dispositions of overt and continuous control' (Deleuze, 1992, 164). The control mechanisms generate through non-visible surveillance or cognitive expressions such as norms, values, discourses, ideologies (Ploger, 2008).

capitalism and yuppie exuberance' (Keyder,1999, 15). Istanbul became a showcase for Turkey's integration into the world scene (Keyder,1999, 17). It was the time of transformation for Istanbul, with a series of urban renewal projects to adorn and aestheticize Istanbul, which was simultaneously ravaged by rapid immigration, in a manner worthy of it being the global city. The city was replanned and designed with touristic centers for rapid cultural consumption. As the center of the city, Taksim has become the one of the major sites for the urban transformations. It was not a coincidence that the first branch of Mc Donalds in Turkey was opened during this period (1986) in the Taksim.

The mayor of the period, Bedreddin Dalan (1984-1989) was the main actor of the publicized renewal projects of the consumption spectacle (Bartu, 1999). As Harvey states under different ideologies, on the way to globalization many metropolises had similar processes as consumption spectacles under circulating conditions of hyper modernity (Harvey, 1990). Metropolitan areas served up as market objects. Parallel to this discourse, to create a more global city, Dalan's aim was to use the elegant cosmopolitan image of Istanbul for international acceptance, by sanitizing the city. In line with this goal the revitalization projects took place in Istanbul. Taksim was the prominent part reflecting the urban renewal ideology of this era. With the revitalization plan prepared by a groupⁱⁱ from Essen University of Germany, Istiklal Street was pedestrianized and a 36 meters wide Boulevard was opened in Tarlabaşı, following the demolition of 386 historical buildings dating back to 19th century (Akbulut, 1994, 219). The demolitions required also the relocation of thousands of people who were living in those houses in slum conditions. In his explanation the mayor Dalan said that the buildings that are planned to be demolished will not be a big loss since there are hundreds of Greek houses with narrow facades, oriel and ornaments in Istanbul (Arpad, 1987). He also argued that he is against the preservation of historical sites if it prevents the development of the city (Üçok, 1987,78-79). On 29th of May 1986 the demolitions at Tarlabaşı started with a ceremony of the anniversary of Istanbul conquest. Tarlabaşı demolitions, which seemed to be a solution to traffic congestion of the inner city and for the social rehabilitation of the area from prostitution and drug traffic, dominated the public discourse in the middle of 1980s (Bartu, 1999).

With this regard there were many critiques especially from Chamber of Architects, interpreting the past regarding the demolitions. They claimed that the apartment block's in Tarlabaşı which was designed by Armenian architects, had to be preserved as stylistic examples of Levantine architecture of the city. With the demolitions polarization and oppositions grew to government. Some argued that the attempt to demolish Tarlabaşı, which belonged to Armenians and Greeks to open the boulevard was the result of a racist approach (Bartu, 1999).

The struggles against the demolitions brought into focus the urban identity of Istanbul. It was not a detriment of a neighborhood and its historic building only; with the demolitions it was also erasing the traces of minorities from the urban landscape. The erasure of Armenian community from the city was a symbolic act of state in which the roots had already taken by the beginning of the republic (Mills, 2010).

ⁱⁱ Essen Planı olarak planı hazırlayan ekip, Achen Trafik Dairesi Başkanı Oskar Gerdom, trafik psikoloğu Michael Geiler, mühendis Wolfgang Bielke, sinyalizasyon uzmanı Peter Philip'ten oluşmaktadır (Cumhuriyet, 1 Ağustos 1986).

1. THE VISION CITY: ISTANBUL

A chaotic period started under political and economic crisis in Turkey after the Marmara Earthquake. The 2002 general elections with strong pre-election promises for economic revitalization and speeding up the EU integration process, AKP (Justice and Development Party), which was established in 2001, as the reformist wing of Islamist movement, became the single party government getting the widespread support from public, media and business world. The party's strategy to solve the economic crisis was an implementation of foreign capital oriented export-based economic program with IMF. Another solution to generate employment was to increase tourism income. For this purpose tourism cities were created to make Turkey a "brand mark" in tourism industry. Istanbul became the face of the vision city of Turkey of the so-called National Tourism Vision-2010 in 2004. Eventually, like many contemporary metropolises, Istanbul has undergone major restructurings to become more competitive in the world market. The beautification of the city for image production has been justified based on economic imperatives. The construction of the new image of the city required the destruction or the transformation of the landscape, in which local history and collective memory were embodied. The imposition of artificial images on city marketing reduced the diverse identity of place in to an image reflecting the values, lifestyles and expectations of potential investors or tourists (Broudehoux, 2001).

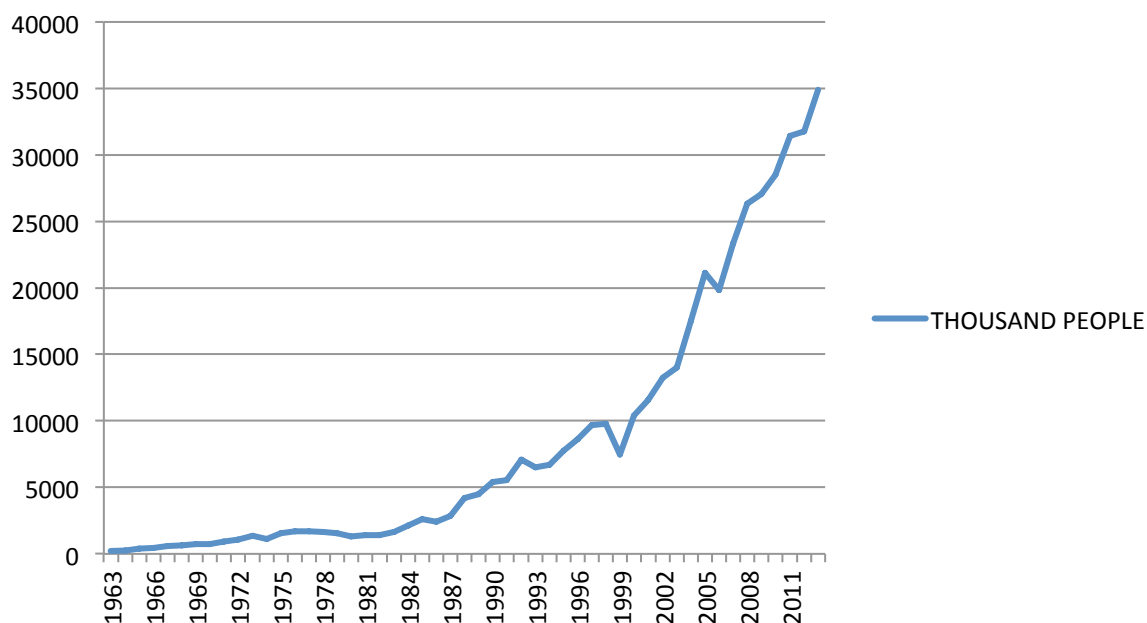
Urban districts such as Taksim were seen as branded products of real estate industry and consumer driven economy of selected target groups (Klingmann, 2007, 81). The transformation of cultural and natural resources into synthetically branded experiences transformed also the landscape into a brandscape. As Harvey states in his book *The Urbanization of Capital*, in the capitalist city, which is organized for producing profit, urban landscape and architecture played a fundamental role to represent and support the ideology of capitalism by generating commodified identities (Harvey, 1985).

Accordingly cultural identity of places started to be redefined or revitalized by global brand industry (Klingmann, 2007, 83). With this regard it was the time to rebuilt or revive the history or the old culture of the city, which was just a creation of an image for tourists. For the goal of creating a past the state had to produce space (Mitchell, 2001). Eventually the minority and the Ottoman legacy was reapplied as an image and sign in the cosmopolitan life of Istanbul. Islamist native culture emerged as an authentic chic and became popular in media to create a global, nostalgic, touristic or Disney imageⁱⁱⁱ. By that time the traces of minority and Ottoman remnants left symbolizing Islamist debate became a consumption spectacle. As Lowenthal states 'memory, history and relic of earlier times shed light on the past. But the past they reveal is not simply what happened, it is in large measure a past of our own creation molded by selective erosion, oblivion and intervention.' (Lowenthal, 1985, 1).

For the revitalization of the city the '3 Istanbul' urban project was initiated to transform and revitalize Istanbul as a culture, tourism and business city. To this end many enterprises were privatized and many public resources were channeled to Ministry of Culture and Tourism. However, the project succeeded and according to 2012 statistics Istanbul became the 5th most visited worldwide (Table 1). The fee of this success was the unstoppable destruction of the cultural, natural and historic heritage.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Disney expression was used in the book *Variations on a Theme Park* of Michale Sorkin. It describes the urban imagineering or the engineering of maginary places to attract tourists and investors.

Table 1. Tourist arrivals to Turkey according to years



While the demand for built environments with a unique cultural experience increased, a dramatically altered global order that requires a new understanding of the role of tradition and heritage in the production of social space has formed. It was a transformation of the public space from a material reality into a cultural imaginary for touristic reasons. The *imagineering* of the urban environment as an interpretation of the history is an alienating change of a contemporary malaise (Lowenthal, 1985). The efforts of rapid urban transformations and demolition of the vernacular or the commemorative to a reversal of policy for the sake of tourism and state economy destroyed the memory embedded in the cultural landscape of the city, which is central to the imagining of the nation. Landscape as a material discourse, transforms the ideologies into a concrete forms to produce cultural meanings.

Taksim played an important role as a crucial culture, tourism and business center for the new image of the city. Moreover, the establishment of Istanbul Metropolitan Planning and Urban Design Center (IMP) in 2005 together with Istanbul Public Housing Corporation and Mass Housing Administration restructured the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and played an important role in the transformation of the city.

After the construction of Taksim-4.Levent metro line in 1999, some important revitalization activities were undertaken, such as Taksim- Kabatas funicular line, 2002, which extended the metro line to the airport. The shift in public transformation system from motorized to railway was one of the biggest moves that made Taksim square more accessible for pedestrians and especially tourists coming from the airport.

In the 2000s as a part of the revitalization and rehabilitation projects a gentrification process started in many regions. Eventually, as a part of the gentrification processes Talimhane region was

pedestrianized in 2004. In 1970s the basement of Talimhane blocks were occupied by small automotive industry and garage hast. The upper levels of the blocks were sheltered to immigrants. When the revitalization project which would dislocate the users of the area, was announced there were many oppositions from the owners and shopkeepers. However besides the oppositions and protests the project was implemented. Eventually, today Talimhane become a touristic region with many luxury hotels and restaurants where the property values have doubled. While becoming the attractions of tourism the gentrified areas lost their character spatially and socially. As Lefebvre states in his book *Urban Revolution* like many cities under neo capitalist system, the system demonstrated it is organization of consumption in the street by its power (Lefebvre, 1970). The new image of Taksim Square was a creation of a theme park in which the history will be redrawn as a reflection from the past. The danger of creating urban disguises for tourism is the strong power of the new consumption space, which relegates the urban form. The production of space as a landscape of consumption created theme parks like French Street, Demirören Shopping Mall, Emek Cinema and Markiz Passage (Sorkin, 1992). The landscape of consumption transformed Taksim into an enclosed mall by pedestrian zones for the development of concentrated shopping. In other words, as Lefebvre explains, in the late capitalist metropolis 'the street becomes a display, a corridor flanked by tores of various kinds. Merchandise became spectacle (provocative attractive) and transformed the individual into a spectacle for others' (Lefebvre, 1970).

Together with the rise of imageneering (image making) for tourism the minority past became currency to reflect the cosmopolitan life of Istanbul. As a result of this the old neighborhoods from minorities, such as Cihangir, Asmalımescit, Galata, Talimhane and the Tarlabası, were gentrified. In 1990s, under Turkification policies, most of these neighborhoods became an attractive destination as a shelter for immigrants and ghettoized since many of the apartment blocks had low rents or the abandoned. In 2005, the renewal projects at historic sites were legitimized with the renewal law Preservation by Renovation and Utilization by Revitalizing of Deteriorated Immovable Historical and Cultural Properties (2005, Law no. 5366). The restoration or redevelopment of the material landscapes recall Istanbul's cosmopolitan past from Ottoman through remembering and forgetting took place where minorities lived. The neighborhoods became a focus of urban investment and were renovated, articulating an elite Europeanized life style and were gentrified. By that time the traces of the remnants left from minorities became a consumption spectacle (Mills, 2010). One of the most drastic examples of these gentrified regions is Tarlabası district where a renewal project started in 2012, to create the Champs Elysees of Istanbul. The aesthetical values of the proposed environment are severe, since the historic buildings are not preserved and the new blocks are designed with interpreted replica facades from the originals. This radical transformation occurring at the region was to actualize the new vision, which would carry Tarlabası from a severe dilapidation to aestheticized culture, tourism center, to a new chic identity for the elite class.

On 5th of November 2012, a new project has started be constructed at Taksim Square which threatens both the square and the Gezi Park. The aim of the project is to pedestrianize the square, by relocating major traffic routes, including Tarlabası and Cumhuriyet Boulevards, underground. Today, the project is constructed creating 10m deep subterranean tunnels one at Tarlabası-Harbiye direction, 400meters long, and the other one at Harbiye-Tarlabası direction, 320 meters long. Taksim sqare is pedestrianized creating 100 thousand square meters of concrete traffic-free area. A grand scaled similar project, reconstruction of Taksim Artillery Barracks functioning as a shopping mall was also proposed as a part of Taksim Pedestrianization Project to emphasize the Ottoman image of the square while serving as a consumption space for tourism. The project for the reconstruction of the

Artillery Barracks is a part of the Islamist ideology which uses replica images from Ottoman to create a global, nostalgic, touristic, Disney image. The remade past will create an alienating landscape for the city. It is also a reflection of the capital-oriented ideological content of urban transformation. As Adanalı states 'urban transformation as 'a process of market fetishism that makes references to concepts such as privatization, flexible labor markets, non-producing state, small bureaucracy, good governance; while, on the other hand, economic policies facilitate capital accumulation for the sake of big capital directly through the use of state and public resources' (Adanalı, 2011). Despite being a public initiative, the Metropolitan government has not provided any means for public discussion, while ignoring the voices of various groups and individuals who have the expertise to evaluate the effects the project on the urban fabric of Taksim. The Project was criticized in public, private sectors and turned into a hot debate, questioning the feasibility and the benefits of the transformation. Professionals such as authors, critics, architects, planners, artists, lawyers, activists, academics, politicians and concerned citizens have condemned the project. In October 14, 2012 one thousand people gathered in Taksim Square, occupied Gezi Park to protest the project. Despite of all the oppositions Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Assembly started the construction of the project in November 5, 2012. The quite occupation of the park turned into huge riots when police attacked the protestors with plastic bullets, water cannon and tear gas. During protests 8 civilians lost their lives. Protest turned into a countrywide rebellion opposing the neoliberal politics of AKP. Although the demonstrations were against the neoliberal ideology, ironically, the legacy of the protests was later commercialized. Memorabilia related to the protests was later produced and offered to tourists. Among these products were portraits of the victims made into fridge magnets.

The decision under the reconstruction of Taksim Artillery Barracks is to create a consumption space for tourism that looks ethnic, authentic enough to recapture the lost cultural heritage from Ottoman Dynasty. However creating replicas or imaginaries from the past will not preserve it. Lowenthal observes the recreated pasts as follows; 'Less idiosyncratically encountered, the remade past is more monolithically interpreted: the restorers and guides through whose eyes we see it fit us all with the same distorting lense.'(Lowenthal, 1985). As Nazer Alsayyad claims such image making fabricated planning actions or large scaled projects are simple solutions of governments towards political necessity and economic expediency (Alsayyad, 2001). Remaking Taksim Square as a tourist object for city marketing and image making reduced the square into an authentic landscape of visual consumption. Using historical images and remaking or reconstructing them to create an authentic, dream landscape where all cultural aspects are reduced to their basic representations as icons of manufactured culture for commercial consumption has become a trend for the development and spread of tourism. The shaping and reshaping processes of public space is a tool to understand the framework of reinforcing ideologies of different actors and power relations. As Lefebvre claims 'Urbanism is a mask and a tool: a mask for the state and political action, a tool of interest that dissimulated within a strategy and a socio-logic. Urbanism does not try to model space as a work of art. It does not even try to do so in keeping with its technological imperatives. The space it creates is political' (Lefebvre, 1970). The politics of identity reflected within the state hegemony and media as its representative forms through the urban landscape, play an integral role in the production of urban imaginaries. In other words, it is a way of seeing in which the state hegemony and the nation building, intertwines with society, and shapes the forgotten and re-created cultural memory. The nostalgia derived from imaginary cultural memories is an apparatus to obscure difficult tensions of the past. Lowenthal delineates the past has become a foreign country for the locals. 'The past is a foreign country whose features are shaped by today's predilections, it is strangeness domesticates by our own preservation of its vestiges '(Lowenthal, 1985).

2. CONCLUSIONS

Istanbul is restructuring through neoliberal processes, like other global cities worldwide. As Peck, Brenner and Theodore mention, neoliberalism and urbanization of the neoliberal ideology DEVELOP indirect proportion to each other (Peck, Brenner and Theodore, 2009). Istanbul as the vision city of Turkey has undergone major restructurings to be more competitive in the world market. With the imposition of neoliberal ideologies Istanbul, especially its regions embodying the collective cultural memory have transformed into fragmental alienated images for the sake of tourism. Projects in and around Taksim like Tarlabaşı 360, Reconstruction of Taksim Artillery Barracks as a shopping mall, Demirören shopping mall, Markiz Passage, Emek Cinema, Inci Patisserie, French Street were designed on such ideological purposes of the capitalists and the state.

Taksim as an urban landscape is not only a representation of the collective cultural memory but also is the stage for each individual to perform urban memory (Mills, 2010). Accordingly, as Harvey argues, the inhabitants have the right to shape the urban memory, to transform their city, and to decide in which urban environment they want to live (Harvey, 2012). The image making efforts taking place at Taksim Square simply represent the relationship between capital, urban environment and state power. Urban image construction has become not only a package of urban products serving the dominant elite group and tourism but also a tool to manipulate public opinion and control social behavior. On a larger scale, public opinion has not been included in the decision making processes and thus urban space has been controlled increasingly by elites and large corporations. From this point, looking at these top-down implementations of urban revitalizations in Taksim Square, it is questioned according to what decision makers decide on the transformations in urban landscape and in parallel to that, who decided on how people want to live.

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