

The Public Square: Memory and Meaning

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The term *public* has a rather ambiguous and broad meaning so does public space. Considering “its full development as a product of modern capitalist society,”¹ public space is constructed alongside private space. Kostof points out the organizational and legal consequences of “explicitly defining and articulating an outdoor space for the common good” in that “the people assume a double responsibility: the upkeep of this space and its preservation as public property.”² As such, public spaces can serve as sites where public identity and meaning are negotiated in complex ways. Today, even in countries governed by western style democracy, the use and access to public spaces are often restricted and policed. Public spaces can be highly politicized when they become the setting for the glorification of leaders, social activism, political uprisings, conflict and violence. Since public spaces are one of many settings where citizens experience their city, what happens when public spaces are under attack? What if the memory and the meaning are transformed into fragmented and irrelevant pieces by business interests or the government? What happens to public life when public spaces are stripped off of their spaceness?

Mumford observed that the city has an “inherent dynamism” magnetizing outsiders to itself with its beginnings “as a meeting place to which people periodically return” for the purposes of “intercourse and spiritual stimulus” in addition to trade.³ The city, produced a different kind of space to be experienced by its dwellers: public space. Throughout history, public spaces appeared in numerous forms; as a street in the Neolithic village of Khirokitia (Cyprus), a bazaar in the Sumerian city of Ur (Iraq), an agora in Miletus (Turkey), a basilica or forum in the Roman Empire, marketplaces in Medieval Europe, piazzas of Renaissance Italy, and many others. The imagery of the Athenian agora where democracy was born forged an association “between the proper shaping of urban public space and the proper

functioning of democratic governance.”⁴ However, access to pre-modern public spaces varied significantly based on gender, class and social status.

Public space with its “ever-changing meaning, contested uses, social conflicts ... is an outcome of contextual and on-going dynamics between social actors, their cultures and power relations.”⁵ In 2013, the Turkish government’s desire to transform an existing green space in Istanbul, Taksim resulted in violent clashes between the police forces and the very public which they had sworn to protect. What started as peaceful passive demonstrations for the defense of green public space in Gezi Park, resulted in loss of five civilian lives (eleven in Turkey), and over 8,000 injuries; some serious resulting in loss of sight as a result of excessive and abusive use of force by law enforcement officials. The youngest victim to be fatally hurt was only fourteen years old. In addition to loss of human lives, there were several animal casualties: birds, stray dogs and cats were poisoned by tear gas. Numerous human rights violations, 4,900 detentions from the scene of the protests and the denial of the right to peaceful assembly were recorded.⁶

Yet, the removal of the bodies from public spaces started even before the detentions of the protesters. A number of city centers in Turkey underwent significant changes under their respective local AKP (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi- Justice and Development Party) governments. Vital components for any successful urban public space are either not included or can only exist reluctantly on the periphery in the newly constructed schemes. It was not only the public space to be hollowed out but the bodies which conditioned the cities’ public life. The reactionary force of the government is expressed in the violent destruction of trees. The “totalitarian threat” and one of its three forms Žižek writes about; “the new religious-ethnic fundamentalism”⁷ is well and alive in architectural form in these non-spaces. The lack of trees create open spaces where surveillance of bodies become ever more accessible for authorities. Public display of affection, consumption of alcohol in public or any other behaviors in violation of orthodox Islamic lifestyle are discouraged and easily policed. In these non-spaces, the body loses its depth and its three-dimensionality while it transforms into a “flat body.”⁸ The body with its sinful internal flesh does not pose a threat anymore. The possibility of worldly



Figure 1: Konya, Mevlâna Square and its transformation

pleasures or at least their display in public is eliminated by the displacement of public space at once. All bodies are forced to perform within the guidelines of the new Islamic bourgeoisie. The public space is sanitized by the hands of an autocratic agency. The bodies now belong in the interior spaces; imprisoned in the home, the mosque, the workplace more than anywhere else.

The new plaza does not tolerate potentiality and its open-endedness. It is suspicious of the body. The bodies are anxious; unable to rest. "Various forms of relaxation, leisure activities characterized by passivity, are ways that people release themselves from the pull of instrumental social purposes, both formally and in terms of content."⁹ Yet, there are no architectural design components which can invite and receive the body; no opportunities for bodies to slow down, repose, or linger. The new plaza ceases to be a space in its own right; becoming rather a transitory area which connects two or more spaces of interiority. Here, there is only one kind of agency and it is of the government. These non-spaces act as if they are spaces only under certain conditions when the bodies of public become the audience for political campaigns, passively being preached to. However, this participation cannot go beyond being a mere image of agency in the absence of potentiality.

The plaza is reduced to a container for the crowds; a container "without life and human experience."¹⁰ The narrow understanding of public space without public life can only induce conflict, segmentation and disturb the balance of the social body. At best, particularly in combination with government or religious buildings in the background, they are the perfect setting for AKP's political propaganda. A setting in which "totalitarian propaganda can outrageously insult common sense" underneath the mask of democracy; a setting where "the most rigid, fantastically fictitious consistency of an ideology" can be uttered to the masses; a setting "where common sense has lost its validity."¹¹ Constructed as manifestations of power, the new plazas are nothing more than fragments of a fascistic utopia.

There is also the question about the bodies which are even more aggressively excluded as a result of the repressive design strategies applied. The notions of modernity and gender are intimately linked in Turkey. Women had to fight their way into the public space starting in the late Ottoman period. Sumptuary laws which outlined the rules for consumption of luxury goods and display of clothing in public

spaces targeted the whole population. However, undeniably there were more stringent regulations on the female body and its representation in the public space. Nineteenth-century period travelogues on Ottoman Turkey are filled with stories related to the severity of sumptuary laws and the high price particularly women had to pay for their defiance.¹² As "an expression of invisibility" the veil allowed women to pass through public spaces without interrupting this male domain.¹³ However, in this uniform, the veiled Ottoman women were never real participants in the urban life but remained trespassers in a space which they could never claim as their own. The women could exist in the public space only under certain conditions protected and governed strictly by men and perhaps to some degree older women.

1923 marked the year when a secular and modern Republic of Turkey was founded. Its first president Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, championed women's rights by adopting a civil code based on gender equality in 1926 and granting women the right to vote in 1930. Atatürk also introduced a number of reforms in the education system, in dress; abolishing the *yashmac* (veil), and in marriage; prohibiting polygyny.¹⁴ The reforms of the new Republic opened up the public spaces for women allowing them to truly participate in public life. This was only the beginning of a lasting struggle between the competing claims of modernity and tradition, secularism and religion. The nation building efforts necessitated erasing the memories of an empire ruled by Sultans and the construction of a new modern national identity. A "modern memory" was being fashioned to bind the nation together by means of a "massive effort to reject the past and construct a radically new future."¹⁵ The national memory demanded a common history; "shared by people who have never seen or heard of one another, yet ... bound together as much by forgetting as by remembering."¹⁶ The new capital of the Republic was moved to Ankara, the heart of Anatolia -leaving behind the last imperial capital Istanbul in the distant past. As part of nation building, in 1925, Atatürk started a campaign to plant trees in Ankara currently named Atatürk Orman Çiftliği (Atatürk Forest Farm -AOÇ) to kick off his environmental and agriculture reform.

Atatürk remained the president of Turkey until his death in 1938. The transition into a democratic state was disrupted by two military coups in 1960 and 1980. The military rose as the stronghold of secularism and constitution as an undesired byproduct of rapid process of democratization. The anxiety caused by the ghost of an empire resulted in a curious relationship between the nation and



Figure 2: Gezi Park, Taksim Proposal

its past. Ironically, the female body; arguably the most significant site for the national project continued to be at the center of heated arguments about modernity and democracy. Following the military coup of 1980, in 1981, *türban* (Muslim headscarf) was banned for university students and public officials. Turgut Özal, the prime minister and later the president of Turkey in 1980s introduced free market economy and liberal policies.¹⁷ One of his “most controversial move was the attempt to lift the ban on *türban* for female higher education students, “although this effectively stymied by a decision of the Constitutional Court in 1989.”¹⁸ The headscarf became a polarizing debate for politics in Turkey. “For a long time, the distinction between the private and public sphere was subject to furious discussion because of controversy over the nature of secularism.”¹⁹ Starting in the 1990s, the rise of Islamist movements, the enlargement of the religious field and the rise of neoliberalism were the most significant processes in political and social history of Turkey.²⁰ These developments led to the victory of AKP in the general elections of 2002. Since then, AKP remained in the parliament winning the absolute majority seats with the exception of 2015 general elections. The continued political success of AKP is striking considering poverty, corruption, terrorism, an unprecedented increase of violence on women and attacks on personal freedoms prevalent in the country today.

A “representational logic”²¹ and its lack of negotiation can be observed both in the post-1980s Turkey and its reconfiguration as “Yeni Türkiye” (New Turkey) under the leadership of AKP. Arendt’s said masses which “are obsessed by a desire to escape from reality”²² were determined to find their own self-fabricated reality. AKP presented a utopia; the reincarnation of a great empire to the lower and middle classes who felt a lack of appropriate representation by the secular elite; a vision which was summarized in the term *Yeni Türkiye* (New Turkey). The “wretched masses” helped to put fascism and “extreme political reaction into power.”²³ AKP’s dominant narrative is one of division; attacking diversity in all fronts imaginable including religious, ethnic, sectarian, sexual, and class. Conservative ideology based on religion is imposed upon the whole society but particularly women. One of the founding members of AKP and the current president of Turkey, Tayyip Erdoğan’s rhetoric suggested that women and men are not equal, that women should dress modestly to ensure their

own safety, and that women should have at least three kids in addition to other condescending comments encouraging segregation of women from the rest of the society. Democracy’s probable flaws as Žižek once stated “the possibility of corruption, of the rule of dull mediocrity”²⁴ was now very well represented by the AKP government. In addition to divisive political tactics, Erdoğan and many close to him were accused of alleged corruption and bribe schemes a number of times. “The Qatari and Saudi support for Erdoğan and the AKP has been also the subject of speculation regarding the huge mysterious inflow of unidentified foreign currency to Turkey during the years of AKP rule. The sum has reached an unprecedented \$36 billion in total, with the monthly inflows increasing especially during election time.”²⁵

AKP’s neo-Ottoman and autocratic tendencies are embodied in a number of architectural projects. Erdoğan built himself a thousand plus room presidential palace inside AOÇ cutting down a considerable number of trees on 22.5 acres of area. Erdoğan moved to his new \$350M presidential palace in 2014. The palace designed by architect Şefik Birkiye (Vizzion Architects) is a vulgar imitation of traditional Seljuk and Ottoman architectures. The construction of the palace manifested two different yet related agendas: The destruction of Atatürk’s legacy which was closely associated with modernity and secularism and the production of a new narrative for *Yeni Türkiye*. The palace is the ultimate embodiment of a future which is based on the Ottoman past in architectural form; a future where one leader and his ideology is held above everything. It is a monument, a memorial for Turkey’s autocratic imperial past. “A principle of futurity” is implied by the “repetition of the past.”²⁶

The making of the palace is violent in many fronts. First, the space is hijacked from public and was privatized in terms of its use. While the forest was accessible to public, the grounds of the palace is aggressively protected and appropriated for the exclusive use of Erdoğan and his family. In addition to lacking architectural interest, it is an environmental tragedy (considering the destruction of valuable forest area, square footage for 1000+ rooms, amount of materials needed for its construction, amount of energy needed for its construction and use, etc.) Paradoxically, Vizzion Architects website declares its “environmental philosophy” and discusses the level of care given to issues of sustainability, integration into the environment and preservation of natural resources.²⁷ The claims of design concerns listed on Vizzion Architects’ website such as “minimizing the demand for operational energy, optimizing the use of renewable energy, and having recourse to low energy use techniques” have no bearing on the design of Erdoğan’s AKsaray (White Palace).

The effort to resurrect the Ottoman past via architecture was also visible in the Gezi Park proposal. In his *De Oratore* (55BC) Cicero argued that the first step of the general principles of the mnemonic “was to imprint on the memory a series of loci or places.”²⁸ The notion of public space as a mnemonic device would be put to test first by the destruction of the existing public space and later by its replacement. Kansteiner argued that “we are always part of several mnemonic communities, and that collective remembering can be explored on very different scales: it takes place in very private settings as well as in



Figure 3: The destruction of AOÇ and the construction of “White Palace” (Ak Saray) for Erdoğan.

the public sphere.”²⁹ And in this case, the proposal aimed to reshape the public space to recreate a different kind of mnemonic community. The two ideas successfully utilized by AKP to sustain their power: commercialization and religion would be realized here. The ultimate patriarchal expression of state power found its body in the loss of spatiality and the proposed reconstruction of Ottoman barrack buildings as a shopping mall and a mosque. Architecture and the urban space surrounding it was utilized as a tool for Islamist propaganda. The quotation of this historic building was meant to form an “indirect memory” in the urban environment transforming the building into a symbol, a “representation of the original object;” all the while erasing the existing “direct memory.”³⁰ The old Ottoman barracks, Taksim Kışlası was the setting in which the religious conservative groups revolted against the political changes brought forward by the restoration of the constitution in 1909.

As once Ruskin suggested: “We may live without ... [architecture], and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her.”³¹ In AKP’s proposal, the past is no longer inaccessible; it is very much a part of present as the past becomes architecturally and visually accessible. Gezi Park proposal was intended to settle the irreconcilable relationship of tensions between Islam and secularism, faith and reason, tradition and modernity once and for all. Architecture was deployed for the transformation of secular national identity into an ideology of *ummah* (religious community). AKP’s destruction and building program produced and maintained a new Islamic bourgeoisie as their advocates financially profited from the transformation of the urban built environment.

While the degree and form of assault on public spaces vary in these projects, its totalitarian soul endures. The mode of production for commodities and the production of these city plazas are parallel in that both lack identity; the standardization of space and the standardization of social bodies -at the same time the rapid and endless reproduction of objects are readily perceivable. Though memories and identities are in no way fixed and they naturally change over time, the unyielding government authorship results in the loss of “the core meaning of any individual or group identity, namely, a sense of sameness over time and space, [which] is sustained by remembering;

and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity.”³² The communities which benefited from previously existing public spaces dissolve in the lack of prospects to gather and share. As experiential opportunities in these non-spaces diminish and even extinguish, so does memory. “Urbanism without a certain degree of cosmopolitanism is just a mass of completely unconnected, alienated strangers. It is in public open spaces that people are best able and most likely to engage with social diversity gathered together in cities.”³³ Successful urban public spaces demand diversity of activities, authorship and memories. This will ensure the whole community’s engagement with the use, protection and maintenance of public spaces in addition to offering a sense of pride for the community members. Public spaces are not mere architectural artefacts fixed in time and space. Relational conception of space goes beyond the positivist view in that beyond being a physical entity, space is understood “as constantly generated by people,” growing over time and as an “outcome of the specific mutual relations between people and places, and their contexts.”³⁴

Under the rule of AKP, an architecture of homogeneity is introduced, one which glorified Turkey’s Ottoman past. AKP’s aesthetic position neither negotiates; nor mediates because both would require acceptance of multiplicity. The new design schemes of the city plazas, the presidential palace, Gezi Park proposal all undermine public’s agency while they amplify government authorship. Urban space and its experience are deactivated perhaps so severely never to be recovered. The unwarranted monumentality employed in these projects debilitate their surroundings. The design of the new plaza favors artificiality, regulation and elimination of play. The commodification of public spaces as shopping malls immediately transforms their accessibility making them usable only by certain members of the society. Thus, in these spaces “the complex tensions which arise between different needs, different meanings and different users”³⁵ become much limited. And yet, it is precisely these tensions which generate stimulating urban experiences for the city dwellers. The compartmentalization of urban life through systematic destruction of accessible, free public spaces can only bring about further exclusivity of social classes. “When public life and public spaces are missing from a community, residents can become isolated from each other, less likely to offer mutual help and support.”³⁶

Although the previous conditions of the city plazas may not have been ideal, they allowed for potentiality. The urban public space which speaks a playful language of spontaneity and unpredictability -to a certain degree- will offer exciting experiences to a wide range of people with various backgrounds, age groups and even bodily abilities. “Designing the public realm requires calibrating and serving the diverse needs of multiple individuals.”³⁷ The public space with diverse authorship and relational conception of space will be more-democratic and eventually be more successful. In addition, there are also the environmental and health concerns related to AKP’s public space strategies. The developed world now has come to realize the significance of urban green space on the overall wellbeing of nearby communities. Exposure to nature “has been scientifically



Figure 4: Niğde, a Central Anatolian town and the transformation of its square.

proven to improve mental, physical, and social health.”³⁸ A number of initiatives in Europe and North America suggest going beyond conservation of existing green public spaces by creation of new sites, introducing nature at early age, and taking the park “from a burgeoning idea to a best practice in preventative health.”³⁹ One such initiative, The National ParkRx “is a community of practice for agencies involved in park prescriptions programs at local, state and national levels.”⁴⁰ ParkRx programs are designed to “encourage overall behavior change, improve individual and community health, and foster the growth of new stewards and advocates for public lands.”⁴¹ Green urban space has the capacity to foster biodiversity and community diversity. Conservation and even creation of more urban green spaces is necessary to offset some of the possible negative outcomes of city living. For the new generation, “nature is more abstraction than reality” and “increasingly, nature is something to watch, to consume, to wear –to ignore.”⁴² This broken bond shapes every aspect of our lives from our unhealthy food culture to our social relationships. It leaves us with a sense of incompleteness; an unpleasant feeling of dissatisfaction urging us to consume, destruct and own more. It shakes our very being at its core.

Furthermore, the existence of green public spaces is observed to increase property values in any given neighborhood⁴³ in addition to reduction of crime, and stress and enhancement of business.⁴⁴ Since early 2000s there is a trend to convert brownfields, vacant parcels, and unused structures into green spaces for the use of communities; Liberty Lands (Philadelphia), Woodbine Park and Toronto Port Lands (Toronto), High Line Park (New York), Midtown Greenway (Minneapolis), Cooley Landing Park (East Palo Alto, CA), India Basin Shoreline Park (San Francisco) to name a few. These projects are meaningful as they offer much needed green space for communities and transform blighted neighborhoods. However, they are also poetic in that they symbolize the victory of nature over industry, community over business interests. One would expect Turkey, a country with claims for aspiring to be a developed nation to follow the footsteps of European and North American countries. And yet, the Turkish government continues to retailize public spaces and eliminate any remaining diminutive nature in its cities. While retail is an important part of urban life, it is not in the interest of city dwellers to have their existing urban public spaces to be territorialized “by way of consumption and retail.”⁴⁵ It is disheartening -to say the least- that

the policies regarding city planning and urban development followed by AKP has been modeled after nineteenth-century standards -if that –where commodity is favored and well-being of the environment and the community is overlooked. Adrian Parr argues how political imagination can be utilized for repressive tactics and that imagination itself may not always be emancipatory. Yet she also reminds us that imagination is also an integral component of political change for the production of an alternative to what currently exists.⁴⁶ I would like to end this paper with neither romanticized notions of an unreachable utopia nor nostalgia but with hopes that the future public spaces in Turkey and elsewhere can be appropriately reshaped with the inclusion of communities who will be most affected.

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