

Power of Public in Remaking the Space: Reflections from Istanbul's Gezi

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Abstract

The paper attempts to question the power of public in remaking the urban space through the reflections from Istanbul's Gezi Park. Since the 1940s after its construction, Gezi Park and Taksim Square has appeared to be the symbol of republican and secular state, the symbol of the new society, the symbol of worker class, the symbol of tolerance and self-expression, the symbol of cultural production and consumption through an unending tension between the global and the local. Occupy Gezi Movement in May 2013, though, has made Gezi Park not only a symbol for state-driven authoritarian initiatives in the urban landscapes of Turkey, but also a role-model for inclusive urbanity based on community empowerment. Regarding this unique case study, the paper presents the use of power in the reproduction of space and the implications of the discovery of the power of space by highlighting the need for a transition from the old role of public space as a set format of the state towards rethinking the public space as the representation space of right to the city and empowerment in resolving the conflicts between different power relations engaged in the reproduction of urban space.

Keywords: Public space, power, community empowerment, Istanbul, Gezi Park

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Introduction

The public space is the legitimate platform to present power - the ability to make a difference in the world; thus the paper attempts to question the power of public in remaking the urban space through the reflections from Istanbul's Gezi Park. Gezi Park is located within the boundaries of Taksim, Beyoglu, which is the cultural and economic heart of Istanbul throughout history. Since the 19th century, the region has been struggling with a continuous restructuring process under the shadow politics. After the 1940s, Gezi Park and Taksim Square has appeared to be the symbol of republican and secular state, the symbol of the new society, the symbol of worker class, the symbol of tolerance and self-expression, the symbol of cultural production and consumption through an unending tension between the global and the local. Radical changes have been observed in the region since the 2000s including commercialisation via shopping malls, gentrification in the near surrounding, and pedestrianisation of Taksim Square and reconstruction decision for the Topcu Military Barrack replacing park. These interventions have recalled a significant ideological intervention to transform this unique public space in accordance with the politics of the state. Occupy Gezi Movement in May 2013, though, has made Gezi Park not only a symbol for state-driven authoritarian initiatives in the urban landscapes of Turkey, but also a role-model for inclusive urbanity based on community empowerment. Regarding this unique case study, the results of the paper hopes to present the use of power in the reproduction of space and the implications of the discovery of the power of space by highlighting the need for a transition from the old role of public space as a set format of the state towards rethinking the public space as the representation space of right to the city in resolving the conflicts between different power relations engaged in the reproduction of urban space.

The power of space

Starting with the power of space, as we know from the readings of Lefebvre (1991), Foucault (1980), Castells (1996) or Harvey (2013) that any political debate covers the considerations on controlling the urban space and everyday life attached to it throughout history, since man's "powerful" occupation of nature. According to Foucault (1980: 149), "a whole history remains to be written of spaces, which would at the same time be the history of powers from the great strategies of geo-politics to the little tactics of the habitat, institutional architecture from the classroom to the design of hospitals, passing via economic and political installations.". As such, the success of capitalism depended on the production and consumption of space in an ever-ending circle; regarding the facilitation of the city and its urban space as a tool of accumulating capital rather than product. Lefebvre (1991) associates capitalist growth with space and underlines that the success of capitalism lies in its discovery of the power of space. According to him, we are incapable of understanding to what cost capitalism has been successful in managing growth; however we are sure of its instruments. These instruments are to settle in space and to produce space. While the city is being restructured as a commodity, we are living in an era shaped by the "urbanisation of politics", whereas the urban space is being reproduced to make markets work, together with our social and economic lives.

The answer to the question why capitalism needs urban space is simple: “Market should continuously absorb the surplus stemming from continuous production ignoring the decrease in values” (Harvey, 2013). The surplus is under the need of reinvestment and absorption to produce more profit, thus urbanisation is by far the hungriest absorber. This is not a new phenomenon; but the examples from Baron Haussmann’s 19th century restructuring of Paris or Robert Moses’ arrogant urban transformations of New York in the 1940s up to now show that this will never be old. Thus the success lies in the discovery of the power of space as the “privileged instrument” (Lefebvre, 1991): by creating a transformation in space. Globalisation finds its locality with the urban space and we become familiar with the fact that this is not an architectural or engineering phenomenon, but a financial one (Harvey, 2013).

Whatever the ideology is, we are sure now that our cities and our lives are being captured inside the “walls”, in the creation of space of “asymmetrical power”, as in Lefebvre’s words. Some cities or some neighbourhoods are more likely to be chosen for their capital accumulation compared to the others, as “the capital dooms the undesired spaces to stagnation and alienation” (Keyder, 1996:104). These are new customized spaces based on elite consumption and large-scale projects drafted for encouraging investments through the fostering of, first, spatial fragmentation, then social fragmentation. Recipe is simple: Vast infrastructure projects (highways, dams), mega-projects (bridges, ports), real-estate projects (shopping malls, gated residences, dormitory cities), theme parks, golf courses, etc. In this case, those consuming and using the global city become the generators of the global city, while the rest is excluded from this formation. This is well-explored in Harvey (2013) that the imbalanced spatial development as an inevitable end of the mobilization of the space as a power of production.

The power in space: the public space

Following the “power of space”, then comes “the use of power in the reproduction of space”. The argument is apparent: To facilitate the power of space, power is needed to be represented in space through the withering of “public realm” and increasing “executive control”.

Throughout the world’s cities, the public space is playing an ever more important role in the production of urban identity, in building democracy, cultural identity and in reviving city’s image, economy and liveability. It has become cores of contradicting demand (Turkoglu et al. 2014): On the one hand, they have come under the influence of commercialisation of the cities, while on the other; they have increasingly been adopted by civil society as a space of self-definition and cultural action. The old role of public space as a set format of the state and the government’s self-representation is obsolete and new approaches for a co-production of public space are needed to turn contested public space into an element of inclusive urbanity (Turkoglu et al. 2014).

Regarded as “any publicly owned streets, pathways, right of ways, parks, publicly accessible open spaces and any public and civic building and facilities” through orthodoxy definitions, we know today that public space is more than a physical component such as a park, a square or a street. Public space is a social space that is open, accessible and inviting to all, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, age or socio-economic level. It is a space of unrestricted access and right of way; it is a meeting

space where strangers meet (Sennett, 2008); it is a cultural space where people socialise in such a way that it contributes to citizenship and strengthening civil society (Zukin, 1995); it is a political space which is open to all and freely chosen action (Lynch, 1992). It is a designed space that influences people in their everyday and political life. It is an urban democracy arena - a political forum as we have been increasingly witnessing from Occupy Street in Zucotti Park, Stuttgart 21 in Stuttgart, 1989 events in Beijing's Tiananmen Square, Arab Spring in Tahrir Square or 1st May in Taksim Square or Occupy Gezi in Gezi Park. As in the writings of Habermas (1989) publicness is described through the "sphere" influencing political action independent from state authority and capital hegemony. According to Fraser (1993), it is a theatre in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk, while it is conceptually distinct either from the state or the official economy. Being beyond a physical space, public space appears to be "performance space" in ideal; but as it is always under the shadow of politics, is not related to "public", but rather related to "state". Thus, although it should be independent from state authority or capital hegemony, today, our cities are increasingly experiencing the withering of the public realm including the loss of the quality of public space and the loss of "the public" as an important element of urbanity under the strong influence of authoritarian state interventions and market pressure.

While neglect and deterioration are among the factors for this withering; the transformation into pseudo-public spaces is also effective in conjunction with privatisation and an extension of market principles to the provision of public space. Privatisation, commodification, commercialisation and even militarisation of public space through "executive control" are indicators of its declining quality as a factor of urban culture and the freedom of communication (see Crawford, 1992; Boyer, 1993; Davis, 1992). There is a shift of design, management and control of public space from public to private sector. The public realm is recognized as a commodity to be bought and sold, thus they are increasingly competing with 'pseudo-public' spaces for users (e.g. shopping malls), which mimic aspects of publicity while remaining under private control. As appears in one of the advertisements of a shopping mall in Istanbul: "the only shopping mall in which you can rest under a tree". The ultimate goal is to produce profit rather than to improve the quality of urban space and life under the name of "consumption space".

Within these circumstances, "planning provides the basis for neoliberalism to take control; neoliberalism in return leaves planning free from its responsibilities – thus planning and planners become the agents of neoliberal ideology" (Lovering, 2009). The result is a state in real-estate sector in a way of sharing of the urban rant, changes in the relationship between urban development and demands and investments of capital. In addition, while the public space is utilized as the primary space of "domestication by cappuccino" (Zukin, 1995), the creation of the symbolic space means controlling masses (Harvey, 2013). "The city of illusion" (Boyer, 1993) then becomes the spectacle when the moment the commodity manages to fully invade social life and the visible world has become the world of commodity; in a way of transforming the public space into a space of control over undesirables through the use of guards, surveillance cameras, walls as part of a strategy for confronting the socio-spatial fragmentation of cities through sanitised spaces freed from undesirable groups and activities in order to secure the exclusivity and to protect the property values.

It is not only about city-building anymore. It is about the creation of representation spaces of power - from the spontaneous spaces of lived experiences to the specifically designed spaces of privileged groups. Creating the symbolic space means controlling the masses (Harvey, 2013). The keywords here are “gated public spaces” and “militarisation”, which provide sanitised landscapes freed from undesirable groups and activities in order to secure the exclusivity and to protect the property values. This is the ultimate control over “undesirables” through the rules of using space. The required is the redefinition of “public” in public space: Is it state? Is it people? Is it about ownership or about performance?

The rest of the paper responds to this question through the case of Istanbul. Istanbul calls for rethinking the public space as a bridge between the past, present and future while emphasising the current economic-political processes and socio-spatial challenges.

Use of power in the spaces of global Istanbul

The State is the coldest of all cold monsters. Coldly it lies, too; and this lie creeps from its mouth: “I, the State, am the people.” (Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra)

When Ataturk [*the founder of Turkish Republic*] invited Herman Jansen to prepare a plan for the new capital Ankara in the 1930s, Jansen said: “We can prepare a plan, but do you have the power to realize a plan?”. This sentence, while summarizing Turkish attitude against doing plans and implementing them, it also reflected the attitude of following 80 years. In the 1960s, the slogan was “we want rice, not plans”, but coming to the 2000s through the government of Justice and Development Party (AKP), the political arena showed a total transformation, that the “plan” became the primary factor together with urban space in competing for the first municipality elections, then government elections as a change of emphasis: “Urbanization of politics” vs. “Politisisation of urbanisation” in the century of cities. The president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, in his prime ministry speech of 26 April 2011, stated that “Istanbul is the summary of Turkey. Kanal Istanbul [*a mega-project for the creation of a second Bosphorus*] is a public service to our citizens. A dream project for 2023 [*10th anniversary of Turkish Republic*]. Using mega-project proposals for governmental election campaigns since 2002 has provided evidence that urban space became the arena of political power – going beyond being an instrument of economic competition in the global economy. The question is: Does this help to resolve the problems of cities?

Global Istanbul project is based on the reproduction of urban space through the creation of pathways of capital accumulation, and thus the continuous surplus production cycle. While there was an increasing emphasis on real-estate projects and rising archistars as the “new symbols of prestige”, logic of real estate and land speculation entered into planning system in order to position cities globally in order to attract new investment through competitive city approaches. The transfer of land to global commercial interests resulted in the privatisation, commodification and commercialization of public space. The remaining public spaces have been put into the agenda of redevelopment to construct “anything” but not public spaces such as shopping malls, residences, gated neighbourhoods, private schools or hospitals. In a

city of 1% green area per person, I remember a quota from a state official: “Too many green, too little mosque”, after another mosque project eliminating another public space. How much green is too much?

The use of power in the space of global Istanbul has different facets including the segmentation of the city into isolated clusters of construction through real-estate projects (shopping malls, gated communities, residences, cruise ports, etc.) and rising archistars as the new symbols of prestige, resulting in spatial segregation; the formation of “powerless” lower and middle income groups through forced evictions and gentrification ending up in class-based segregation in addition to spatial segregation; getting rid of so-called devalued spaces in inner-cities for capital valuation; and the production of mega infrastructures to facilitate flow of capital and “desired” humans (like highways, airport). As Adanali (2011) states, this is a treatment of space as abstract/empty plate, while ignoring rational planning processes. This is the transformation of public’s space into private, poor man’s land into wealthier, cultural and ecological corridors into corridors of capital flow fuelled by extreme disparities, inequalities. Among the instruments for use of power in the space of global Istanbul is through excessive power to state agencies, authoritarian institutions and forces. Taksim, the main focus of this paper, is one of the final primary targets of this transformation pressure.

Empowerment: #occupy gezi

“City is man’s most successful attempt to remake the world he lives in more after his heart’s desire. But, if the city is the world which man created, it is the world in which he is henceforth condemned to live. Thus, indirectly, and without any clear sense of the nature of his task, in making the city man has remade himself.” (Park, 1967: 3)

Considering the problematic discussed above, the next question is how to regain power back to the public? In a time when human rights is at the centre controversially together with property rights and for-profit interventions, Taksim can be termed as the symbol of Turkey’s quest for public space in a city of constant change with competition between destruction and construction. Taksim, which is within the boundaries of Beyoglu Urban Conservation site since 1993, is not solely the cultural and economic heart of Istanbul, but it has also been the symbolic arena for republican state and democracy as an ideological representation of the new state, the Turkish Republic after the collapse of Ottoman Empire. It is a Public Square as the symbol of Republic, as the symbol of new society, as the symbol of public, the middle class, the workers class, as the symbol of self-expression and tolerance.

Beyoglu has been the cultural and economic heart of Istanbul since the 19th century through its “European / Levantine” population, architecture, and everyday life facilities including hotels, theatres, cafes. It was within those circumstances that the proposal to create a public square as the symbol of new republic was appeared in Henri Prost Plan in Lutfi Kirdar Period of 1939. The plan proposed the demolition of Taksim Artillery Barracks (1780/1806) to build the Inonu Esplanade “Gezi Park” and new Republican Square around Monument of Independence (1928) (for an overview of history of square, see Yildirim, 2012). Besides its power in symbolizing Republican era and Independence War, Taksim Square and Gezi Park had also

become the symbol of new society, a new secular and European society through geometric architecture, sculptures, trees, pools, and of course women next to men as a response to 19th century characteristics of Beyoglu - but this time redefined through the “Turkish” identity. The next reidentification occurred in 1955 (September 6-7) after the ethnic tensions between Turkish and Greek populations, resulting in abandonment, displacement, in-flow of the poor. The socio-spatial decay had continued until the 1980s. Then it became the symbol of public, the middle class, and the workers class. It was the symbol of democracy - the power of public especially after the 1st May Massacre of 1977. These made this unique public space an expression space for political movements. Through its intangible heritage, it became the space of “tolerance”. It was for that reason the public space was closed for public protests until today. In the 1980s, the use of power has changed pace through the increasing privatisation – Istiklal became the ideal public space for cultural production and consumption as accompanying this role since the 19th century. The pedestrianisation of Istiklal Street in 1988 was a major attempt to give strength to that role. Regarding being an area of tolerance, an expression space for political actions, today, over two million people walk up and down Istiklal Street, which is about two kilometres long, every day. This massive human flow is accompanied by a massive capital flow and its transformative effects.



Figure 1: Topcu Military Barrack (upper left), Gezi Park “Inonu Esplanade” in the 1940s (upper right), Gezi Park in 2010 (bottom left); Taksim Pedestrianisation Project and Model of Topcu Military Barrack (bottom right)

However, radical changes have been observed in the region since the 2000s - everything that gives identity to the space -including the announcement of the construction of a mosque, the commercialisation via shopping malls replacing historic cinemas, theatres, independent bookstores or cafes (such as Demirören, historic Cercle D'Orient building hosting Emek Cinema, İnci Patisserie), the gentrification in

the near surrounding (Cihangir, Tophane), the amalgamation of real-estate projects (such as Tarlabasi, French Street or Talimhane), the ban for street musicians, the ban for table use on the streets, and lastly the pedestrianisation of Taksim Square and the reconstruction decision for the Topcu Military Barrack (Uzumkesici, 2011), which in total have recalled a significant ideological intervention to transform this unique landscape in accordance with the politics of the increasingly authoritarian central government of AKP. This brief chronology shows the unending tension between the local and the global. Whatever the reason or ideology is, Gezi is under continuous attack of power. It was this last attempt, which opened up the way to Occupy Gezi Movement [Gezi Resistance] of May 2013.

Here is a timeline to describe the path to Occupy Gezi Movement of May 2013:

- 2011, Announcement of the Project of Pedestrianisation of Taksim Square and Reconstruction of Topcu Military Barrack as a cultural centre after the approval of Municipal Council.
- 2011, Registration of UN-EXISTING Topcu Military Barrack that was built in 1780, and demolished in 1940 in accordance to Henri Prost's plan to create a vast green space integrated with Ottoman Dolmabahce Palace.
- 2012, Trees were marked for demolishment while the green space per person in Istanbul was 1 m².
- 2012, Announcement of "shopping mall" project in Topcu Military Barrack [to be owned by Vice Prime Minister's son [*speculative news*] – pedestrianisation project by Kalyon firm (such as 3rd airport or metrobus among others)]
- January 2013, Refusal of reconstruction by the Regional Board of Protection of Cultural Assets [which was represented by academicians]
- April 2013, Refusal of the refusal decision by the Supreme Board of Protection of Cultural Assets [which was represented by state-elected bureaucrats]
- 2013 May 27, Start of cutting down of trees at 22pm – the WAITING starts.
- 2013 May 28, Attack by police at 5am, Fire on tents – 100 protestors
- 2013 May 29, 1000 – Start of attack by tear gas bombs
- 2013 May 30, 10.000 – "Gezi Festival"
- 2013 May 31, Greater Court had a decision to stop the construction of barrack.
- 2013 May 31, Attack at 5am – Continuing since then: Turkey is on the MOVE for their RIGHT TO THE CITY
- June 2013, Recep Tayyip Erdogan (former Prime Minister, new President): "We should hang these *chapullers* on those trees" [see "Wikipedia" for meaning: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chapulling>]
- June 5, 2013: TAKSIM PLATFORM CALLS FOR: Conservation of Gezi Park as it is. Stop the projects. Stop the legalisation of gas bombs other similar chemical weapons against citizens. Permit public meetings in all public spaces of Turkey. Removal of pressure against citizens who resist for the protection of environments against HES, 3rd bridge, women rights, lgbt rights, forced evictions, limitations on living styles, etc.
- June 6, 2013: The court has halted the project on pedestrianisation and reconstruction of barrack. But the pedestrianisation completed with vast concrete ground.

Occupy Gezi is a social movement which started as one of the peaceful (environmentalist) protests of Turkish political history, but ended as one of the brutals

through the attempt of government in blocking the pathways of communication to its “public” by restricting access to this unique “public” space and by using extensive police and political violence. It was that violent/brutal power -brought into existence by thousands of teargas and water canons- that raised awareness and took unprecedented magnitude among all over Turkey. According to the survey by Konda, Gezi was even the first movement to be participated for 44,4% of the protestors (see, http://www.konda.com.tr/tr/raporlar/KONDA_GeziRaporu2014.pdf). Among the reasons of participation, concerns on human rights came first. This has different dimensions stemming from the authoritarian and provocative approach of the state towards an anti-government movement based on democracy, right to protest and right to city through the motto of “Everywhere Taksim! Everywhere Resistance!”. As Butler (2011, cited in Kaban, 2014) states: “When bodies gather as they do to express their indignation and to enact their plural existence in public space, they are also making broader demands. They are demanding to be recognized and to be valued; they are exercising a right to appear and to exercise freedom; they are calling for a liveable life.”

Occupy Gezi movement called for power in space by the people, “the public”, rather than by the state. As a response to the increasing executive control through armed / militarised police force, restrictions on social media or physical access to public space, brutal attacks, the people created most innovative tools to combat for their right to the city all related to the space, the public space. These included strong sense of humour, social media appearance, artistic events to represent public space as a performance space (through graffiti, music, dance) and also design events (such as community libraries, tent cities, illustrations on trees). The movement has been empowered by regular community meetings based on the discussions on the urbanization challenges, remaking the public spaces of Istanbul and methodologies on further empowerment of the public in decision-making processes, first starting in the park, but after the closure of the park to the public, in various districts of Istanbul. Universities and civil society organisations organised events to discuss the challenges in a more academic context. I have to say that these were not as powerful as the events that were conducted by the Gezi groups themselves. Thus, even the university programmes have been revised just to create a more responsive project schedules to community through strategic and tactical solutions. The representation of empowerment has since been enacted through small but effective events such as the colouring of stairs, the squatting of abandoned buildings and alike. The impacts have been reflected in a great number of publications since May 2013 (Gokay and Xypolia, 2013; Kuymulu, 2013; Turhan, 2013; Kaban, 2014).

Gezi has become a symbol of passage from the symbol of state towards the symbol of empowerment and the space of people, “the public” as in Habermas’ public sphere as mentioned above. There are actually two Gezi(s): Gezi as the tool to initiate executive control and power and Gezi as the tool to regain control and empowerment. Occupy Gezi movement called for power in space by the people rather than by the state as a medium of democracy, diversity, collective power, solidarity and rights.



Figure 2: Occupation of Gezi



Figure 3: Counter-movement by the state



Figure 4: New public space freed from public (By the author)

Concluding remarks

“We do not have such a suggestion to close Gezi to public. But of course there is a necessity of bringing order. It is not right to say each person have the right to enter cafes or restaurants by wandering around undauntedly: Can everyone enter to everywhere?” (Halil Onur, Architect of Proposed Military Barrack, - ironically- Head of Heritage Management Directorate)

Up to now I have tried to explore the different power bases in public space: highlighting the change of emphasis from a public space as an asset to be capitalised towards the empowerment in space whereas public space is the people’s space rather than state’s; to take us back to the real power of space by reading truly the power.

Herein we have talked about two tools: one, the tool to realize capital formation namely “executive control”, second, the tool to empower people in owning the space, namely “urban movements”.

We are now sure that the public space is the legitimate platform to present power - the ability to make a difference in the world, and it is always under the “shadow of politics” (Zukin, 1995) as a continuous cultural problematic. In addition, there is the problem of the withering of “the public” as an important element of urbanity through privatisation, commodification, commercialisation and militarisation. Thus, the main problem is about the meaning of public. This unique case of Gezi highlights the role of public space as the representational spaces of power, an urban democracy arena. In a country of undeveloped publicity and social movements, this case caused the awakening of a nation for the quest for “right to the city”, surrounded by the very basic question: Who are the owners of cities? How to empower community in working for their city?

Gezi has not only become a symbol for state-driven authoritarian transformation initiatives in the urban landscapes of Istanbul, but also a role-model for future community movements and perhaps a civic activism, a solidarity model for inclusive urbanity based on community empowerment in Turkey after the Occupy Gezi Movement in May 2013. That is the reimagination of a space beyond a physical space, a material product or a commodity, but rather a performance space being centered on the very basic idea of possessing the right to change and rediscovering the city as we desire. This is a call for rethinking the public space as a bridge between the past, present and future, while emphasising the current economic-political processes and socio-spatial challenges, through interrelating relations between institutions and space in social context. Because, -regarding Park (1967)’s statement- what kind of city we want to live in cannot be divorced from what kind of human we want to be. This requires a transition from the old role of public space as a set format of the state towards rethinking the public space as the representation and solidarity space of right to the city in resolving the conflicts between different power relations engaged in the reproduction of urban space.

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