

Suppressing urban creativity: displacement of the art spaces out of the mainstream cultural scene of Istanbul

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Abstract: Istanbul's contemporary cultural scene has been struggling with the displacements of long-established cultural assets due to the applications of top-down urban redevelopment and renewal projects. In particular, the stigmatization of the city's long-established cultural spaces as a non-profit places and the de-functionalization of their buildings through long-term closures and neglect have appeared as a political strategy of urban policy makers to legitimize the replacements of public spaces by profit making private spaces. In this paper, as focusing on one recent case of the displacement of the Emek Movie Theatre that has symbolically important place for Turkey's local cinema scene through the application of urban renewal project, I investigate the reasons that the survival and resistance tactics of the bottom-up agencies failed to evolve planning processes into a communicative and collaborative structure. It is aimed to evaluate the drawbacks of the non-communicative and non-collaborative governance structure arising in the urban policy scene of Istanbul in the generation of urban creativity. The study will underline the importance of non-mainstream cultural scene in the development of Istanbul's creative and innovative capacity along with contributing to enhance the status of bottom-up urban players in the public spaces of cities. Thus, it draws an attention towards sustaining urban environments with the vision of innovative and positive nature of bottom-up urban practices, and contributes the debates on how the urban processes in Istanbul are democratized by the participation of bottom-up urban actors in formal planning and urban development processes.

Keywords: bottom-up urban actors; urban regeneration; top-down urban planning; urban governance

Introduction

Cultural heritage and assets are more implicated in the policy structures of cities in parallel with more prominent emphasis on innovation, knowledge and economic competition within policy issues. They play instrumental role in positioning cities as a cutting edge creative city that competes with other global cities (Trosby, 2001; Florida, 2002; Chhabra *et. all.*, 2005; D'Auria, 2008;). Contemporary modes of urban governance, on the other side, increasingly rely on the agencies other than formal governmental structures (Carley, 2000; Schmitter, 2002; Haus and Heinelt, 2005, Bennett, 2009); however, cities continue to confront with the challenges of maintaining a satisfactory urban governance model that can aid to improve the quality of complex urban projects as well as complex decision-making process. These urban projects include big and distributed infrastructural projects, new routes for new transportation centers, highly contested environmental projects as well as the



projects that require major changes in cultural heritage and assets of cities with the concept of creating new commercial areas. The bottom-up agencies add new dimensions in these urban redevelopment processes as the actors of urban change with the capacities of creating new places and enhancing community relationships. That subject has been already discussed in various cases (Vivant, 2010; Colomb, 2012; Bain and Landau, 2017). The exemplified cases in these studies show that bottom-up agencies act as a catalyst for creating adoptive and responsive pathways to changing and challenging urban conditions. The case study of events in Berlin organized by the interdisciplinary cultural centre Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik demonstrates that the intermediary role of artists in urban development have challenged the exclusion wrought by the overriding forces of global capital through co-opting artistic creativity to increase citizen involvement, transparency and legitimacy in urban development processes (Bain and Landau, 2017). In this regard, urban governance that can able to involve bottom-up actors, who provide real support to integrate creative insights to this kind of complex urban projects would foster scenarios of community engagement and collaboration, and thus, add adaptive and co-evolutionary flexibility to urban environments.

The urban renewal and regeneration projects in Istanbul that were subject to civil response shows that the city still faces malfunctions in the governance of multiple stakeholders from civil society in the social and cultural dimension of urban development. The national government structure in Turkey still has a significant influence on metropolitan development through policy making although transition to global economy has led to reduction in government's proactive role in the economy and society (Uzun, 2007). The urban renewal and urban redevelopment projects increasingly rely on spatial and cultural heritages of the city while the operationalization public-private partnerships in these projects has been gaining importance. These projects, however, illustrate that these partnerships cannot operated through forms of governance. Indeed, the types of collaborations with the actors from civil society have been visibly neglected.

This paper aims to discuss the disablement of governance mechanisms in the decision-making processes during the Renewal of Serklydoryan urban plot and re-build of Emek Movie Theater in the proposed new shopping mall in Beyoğlu, Istanbul which was subject to policy intervention of public-private partnership. Through the examination of non-communicative and non-collaborative attitude of the local and central planning bodies towards the long-standing bottom-up response towards the top-down processing of that project, the paper considers the only strategy of local and central governmental bodies to allocate all historical and cultural heritage in the urban core to private commercial developments as a suppressing factor on enhancing creativity at local level even though Istanbul's frequent reference to creative city and growth exemplars.

Istanbul's Creative City Approach and Self-Generated Cultural Dynamics

The changing and challenging conditions of 21st century stimulate new developments in Turkey's cultural and creative scene. The use of the 'creative economy discourse' in Turkey was first taken up national level by the Turkey's government in the beginning of 2000s. Turkey joined the eEurope+ Initiative for developing strategies and an action plan to become an information society in 2001. The policy-oriented cooperation projects that aimed at strengthening infrastructure for knowledge based urban development were proposed as concrete objectives of Turkish cities. Virtually increasing number of cities in Turkey uses the concept of creative city (or one of its variants) in their politics,

policy, advocacy and practice. The e-Turkey initiative was established as a part of this attempt. Economic growth in Turkey between 2002 and 2011 also contributed to this initiative.

In this vein of Turkey's liberalization and creative economy interest nationwide, arts and culture started to be not considered marginal to economic life and not dependent on public subsidy. Promoting culture and investing in cultural industries appears in the policy agendas of the city to compete in the contemporary knowledge-based economy. Government bodies were moving towards enhancing the socio-economic impact of cultural life while enhancing creative industries. Turkey's cultural scene has also witnessed an increase and diversification in the number and type of cultural actors starting from the late 1990s. Along with the established state-owned cultural associations and institutions, the private and semi-private initiatives also accelerated in different forms of cultural spaces (Ertürk, 2010:9; Bakbasa, 2010:14). This stimulated collaborations with private and governmental institutions for taking shared actions in cultural scene.

Istanbul, as globalizing city, has adopted to use creative industries as strategic tool for urban management for last two decades (Öztürk and Çıracı, 2015). Istanbul Greater Municipality made first cultural and creative industry classification in two groups of activities in 2005: culture based activities and business services. This can be considered an attempt to understand the city with the contribution of the economic activity stemming from creativity and culture to the city's economy. This classification includes the commercial forms of culture and creative activity (culturally industrialized entertainment activities, like theatre, music and film) and also the service businesses like advertising selling creative skills to other businesses, manufacturing businesses that feed into cultural products and the retail of creative goods). This tendency was also motivated by the fact that Istanbul has been selected to be the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) in 2010. A series of arts events and cultural festivals have been taking place during this special year, and an important symposium, Creative Cities and Industries in the 21st Century, was scheduled for November 2010. The government allocated large amounts of funding to create new cultural offerings and to host year long cultural events. This upspring in the city's cultural scene stimulated the formations of new cultural actor-initiated interventions, notably the emergence of bottom-up art organizations. The bottom-up groups had chances to build new organizational arrangements to establish their own autonomy and to allow ways of interaction with the public in the city. Consequently, new models of cultural actors found their place in the city's cultural scene. Their emergence in the city's cultural scene, in turn, increased the local capacity to mitigate and adopt new realities and challenges for local cultural scenes.

Despite this course, however, the enabling conditions for the development of self-initiated mechanisms started changing after 2010. Public investments and the organizational excellence in building the infrastructure for cultural and creative industries in Istanbul dramatically drew back. The government could not reap the expected political benefits of holding the title of the ECoC. The government was even negatively publicized due to the lack of preparedness in the face of some social challenges.

The country's significant shift towards more liberal and out-ward looking economic policy also dominantly operated through the subsequent urban transformations of that decade, culminating, especially in large cities, in the development of shopping malls as alternative retail spaces to traditional markets and stores on a shopping street (Erkip and Özuduru, 2015). The related legislation on 'The Protection of The Deteriorated Historic and Cultural Heritage through Renewal and Re-use'

(act 5366 released at 2005) has been put the historical and cultural heritage of Istanbul to controversial position (Enlil *et. all*, 2011). Istanbul's urban landscape has been rapidly marked by private- public partnership driven urban renewal projects taking place especially in its historic sites. Based on this law, eleven urban areas within historical and architectural value have been subjected to the urban renewal projects; and six of them, Tophane, Tarlabası, Persembepazarı, Cezair Street, Galata Tower and Beyoğlu Municipality and their surroundings and the Serklydoryan urban block, are located in Beyoğlu (Çoşkun, 2016: 56). As regards to the issue of revival of unused and decaying cultural heritage in Beyoğlu, the projects worked on similar urban models re-program and rebuild the existing built fabric with the new concept of retailing, which occasionally embodied itself as big shopping malls integrated into new offices, residences, entertainment and cultural centers.

For many critics (İslam and Enlil, 2006), the intricate machinery of this law and its legislations did not trigger positive effects on urban protection and reinforcement of social dignity and equality since the independent small retails and existing neighborhood or building dwellers were left vulnerable and insecure and usually unorganized and there was a lack of integrated urban policy for developing strategies to make the dwellers and retailers resilient. Hence, it is frequently declared that the local authorities have exposed mere control on the use of the deprived areas of Istanbul through arbitrary expropriation. In this way, these properties either private or public would have been endowed to the new users. Through employing urban renewal and re-use projects, the property ownerships were easily exchanged; and this paved the way for putting the private interest over the public good in these places.

It is clear that there is a significant challenge caused by the emerging multi-voice economic and cultural scene in the city on the future of urban commons and the central and local planning bodies' creative city initiatives and plans and their underlying rationales about regeneration of cultural heritages. Currently, the empowered agents in the cultural and urban scene, including municipality, private sector and central government nor took important steps for institutionalized dialogue on constitution and implementation of urban and cultural policy areas or generating vision of civil life adapted to the city's changing economic life. The lack of institutional mechanisms also prevented developing a collaborative decision making processes for proposing solutions for enhancing creativity in the city.

The case of renewal of Serklydoryan urban plot and re-build of Emek Theater in new shopping mall

The phenomenon of renewal of Serklydoryan urban plot and re-build of Emek Theater in new shopping mall was long-before on the agenda of urban policy makers; and its sell for commercial development has been vocalized in media since 1994. In 2005, the *Emekli Sandığı* (Retirement Fund-ES) announced to sell the Serkldoryan urban block (Yapı Dergisi, 2005). The implementation of new project, however, was delayed until 2010. Along with the renewal of Cerle D'Orient building under the Law on Protection of Cultural and Natural Property, the re-build of shopping mall on the remaining part of urban plot, where the Emek Movie Theater was located, have anticipated from its beginning by civil society. The civil response not only came from the professional bodies that approached susceptible to the contractual practices between public and private subjects and design practices but also individuals and social groups frequenting the theater, in particular, cinemagoers and cinema-workers including artists, producers, and audiences. This civil opposition depends on two

major concern: (1) the transfer of public property to private ownership to re-build and to manage it as a private property by operationalization of built-transfer-operate model would produce range of physical and social displacement processes (2) the relocation of theater on top the newly-build shopping mall would undermines the authenticity of the theater building and cause the loss of information of collective value. These impacts prompted civil society to form movements to engage and speak up about the increasing impacts of harsh urban regeneration projects they were facing. The civil society groups were organized under some initiatives; *Emek Bizim Istanbul Bizim (Emek is ours Istanbul is ours)* and *İstanbul Kültür Sanat Varyetesi* were leading the processes. Despite these events; the iconic cinema building was demolished in 2013. Later on, Kamer Construction Company completed the urban renewal of Serkldoryan urban plot in 2016 through re-constructing a new shopping complex covering all the land of this urban plot. In this complex, the Serkldoryan building was only kept through restoration, the back part of the building including the Emek Movie Theater demolished and rebuild as a part of shopping complex. The Emek Movie Theater is now on the top floor of this new shopping complex, Grand Pera.

The case that the strong social response against the project could not have evolved into an influential civil society-based organization in city planning points out different dimensions of crisis between municipal bodies, city leaders and civil society: (1) de-personalization of local and central governmental bodies to the right of society on the future of cultural heritages sites (2) obstacles preventing the civil initiatives to evolve from social movement to soft-infrastructure at city level. Although the influence of civil society groups would play significant role in devising new policies in regeneration of cultural heritage sites, the personal engagement of the citizens and the commitment of national and local governments to cooperate with civil society groups seem to be still rather marginal in the process of Turkey's urban planning practices.

The enduring role of Serkldoryan urban plot and Emek Movie Theater in Beyoğlu's urban everyday routine

The Emek Movie Theater on *Yesilcam* Street (formerly *Devaux*) was located on the Serkldoryan (Cercle D'Orient) urban plot in Pera, which has been actively part of urban social life since the second half of 19th century. The Pera neighborhood, northern extension of Galata neighborhood was mainly Levantine neighborhood with the establishments of churches, schools, institutions and new associations. In 1884, the construction of Cercle d'Orient (Serkldoryan) building in the heart of Pera made this urban plot unique destination of bourgeois urban life. The building was one of new social associations for Ottoman-elites and non-Muslim Levanters came together to socialize (Baruh, 2016). In 1896, the Ottoman Bank took the building from its owner Abraham (Karakahya) Pasha since he did not pay the borrowed the money back. The bank owned this building until 1919. During this period, the whole urban plot accommodating the Serkldoryan building with its backyard become to used as a recreational and cultural center as the dead-end street next to the Serkldoryan building decided to widen and open towards back of the urban plot. The Staking Place was built at the back of the building in 1909. It was actively used for not only for skating but also other performative activities such as talks, circuses, sports and cinematographic performances, and the skating palace was then converted into a theater in 1918. Lately, the use of electricity in Istanbul has initiated the opening of movie theaters in the same urban plot.

After the decline of Ottoman Empire and the first years of the establishment of Turkey Republic, this

urban plot continued to be a recreational spot in the cultural life of the city; and it began to transform into a movie theater zone. The establishment of Melek Movie Theater (Emek) in the Staking Palace building was dated back to 1924. Two other cinemas (Ipek/formerly Opera and Sumer/formerly Artistik) located in this urban plot in 1930s. These two movie theaters with their renewed names served as movie theaters until 1955. The major changes in the cultural and social landscape of Beyoğlu were happened due to the decline of non-Muslim communities living in Istanbul. The wealth tax of 1942 has changed the general profile of property ownerships in the district and caused economic disempowerment of non-Muslim communities. As a result, The Serkldoryan urban plot with its all-cultural and commercial facilities has brought by the municipality (Aktar, 1996). The transition of the urban plot from private to public, however, did not prevent the cultural and commercial importance of the plot. There were still active three cinemas, eight commercial stores at the entrance floor of Serkldoryan building and the social club.

It is widely stated that the economic decline and leaving of non-Muslim population and the settlement of Anatolian immigrants in the empty places caused the decline in both urban environment and cosmopolitan cultural life of Beyoğlu. However, the rise of local cinema industry from 1930s till 1980s held some synergy in Beyoğlu despite the city's declining cosmopolitan profile. According to Kula (2015), it was still privilege to go the Melek Movie Theater and eat some cake in the Inci Patisserie in 1950s even though Beyoğlu has experienced decline in his cultural life. This urban plot was sold to the Emekli Sandığı (Retirement Fund-ES), the main social insurance institution for public servants of Turkey in 1957, and the institution has renewed all the three-movie theaters in the urban plot. They have continued to serve as movie theaters as Emek, Ipek and Kucuk Emek Movie Theaters. The Ipek Movie Theater has then taken over by the Istanbul Municipality Theater, and served as a comedy theater hall until 1975. Similarly, the Kucuk Emek Movie Theater was used for Municipality Concerts.

The Serkldoryan urban plot and its surrounding became a heart of the self-emerged movie theater urban zone in Beyoğlu. This zone was accommodating 11 out of 30 movie theaters in the city from 1920s to 1950s. Some of them were closed; some were re-named and new ones added on the list during this period. It has, indeed, enlarged towards proximate locations with increasing numbers of movie theaters (Özlü, 2016). Besides movie theaters, the related facilities and all the networks were established around this area, and this urban area, namely Yesilcam has actively functioned as a heart of movie industry of Turkey. There was also increasing number of local movie production companies in Yesilcam, and approximately 300 movies have been locally produced and distributed other cities in a year in 1950s.

Besides being a movie theater, the Emek Movie Theater has gained specific symbolic value with events, public gatherings and screened movies it housed. It housed leftwing concerts and screening alternative movies for years. The art pursuers formed bottom-up civil society groups have had a key role in shaping these events. The theater's progressive causes have provided the backdrop for small, courageous revolts: the first big public 1 May celebrations after the military coup of 1980 took place there in 1987. The Emek, it has turned out, was more of a meeting place strengthening sense of community in cinema scene than a movie theater. At this point, the theatre created a loyal 'public' coming regularly to this place, following the events and meeting people who think like themselves. This place was not a given public space; however, it might be considered as place with public role through bundle of network relations produced through collective actions (Firat and Bakçay, 2012).

Globalization period led the cinema sector in Istanbul to re-structure itself with the inclusion of international companies and the rise of television and advertisement sector after 1995. This reflected on the spatial organization of the cinema sector. The clusters of production companies have begun to spread through the centre of metropolitan area. The central role of Beyoğlu in the film industry has been decentralized as a result of the location preferences of production companies in Şişli and Beşiktaş neighborhoods (Dursun, 2009). The social and cultural life, however, tended to not spread out as much in these recently developed creative precincts. There was still a strong tendency for locating art festivals or cultural events in city centers with strong historical and cultural links; and the Beyoğlu urban area was still a prominent figure in terms of engaging cultural and art activities. Until 2010, the Istanbul International Film Festival used the long-lasting movie theatres in Beyoğlu, most of which were demolished today, like Emek, Yeni Rüya, Atlas, Beyoğlu and Yeni Melek movie theatres (Say, 2016:28). Although the audiences of these events could be defined as a very small proportion of Istanbulites, defined as middle or upper-middle class, these theaters have been stages for stories not seen either publicly funded and commercial private cinemas. The Emek Movie Theater has housed the opening and closing ceremonies of the festival for almost 30 years until it closed its doors to the moviegoers in 2009 due to the decision of renewal.

The bottom-up response to the renewal of Serklydoryan urban plot and the re-build of Emek Movie Theater in the new shopping mall

Since 1994, the speculations on the sell and rebuild of the Serklydoryan urban plot as a new commercial site encountered persistent opposition not only from professional chambers, non-governmental organizations, but also from the civil society. In particular, the civil society groups include both individuals and community groups frequenting the Emek Movie Theater and its surrounding urban environment in their daily urban practices and the ones demanding their right to decide over the fate of the city whose cultural and historical heritage. Here, an attempt is made to critically re-visit the existing debates on community groups' cultural heritage right activism in urban renewal and redevelopment process.

In 2010, the one-day use of the theater for the opening ceremony of Istanbul Film Festival staged political action and social protests against the demolition of the Emek Movie Theatre taken by the Istanbul Film Festival audience. Following the abandoned three years of building between 2010 and 2013, there was an ongoing legal battle against the implementation of the project. Several platforms including architects, planners, art critics, academicians, and art historians have founded to raise awareness and garner support against the project. Moving the theater without comprising the quality and value of its original set-up on the top of the newly built shopping mall is the mantra for this project to legitimize the renewal plan in the public sphere. The apparent lack of transparency in the planning process, however, could not satisfy the civil society groups' and the professional chambers' concerns.

The Emek Bizim Istanbul Bizim Initiative was one of the leading figures in forming creative protests against the project. In 2011, they led the event that has occupied the Demiroren Shopping Mall, which was constructed in a similar way opposite the Emek Movie Theater. In their slogans and banners, their right to the other neo-liberalized spaces, especially those replaced non-mainstream cultural spaces were highlighted (Özdüzen, 2017). In March 2013, the initiative occupied the theater while the contracting company was de-constructing the existing theater structure to rebuild shopping mall. This

initial unauthorized event organized by the initiative demonstrated that there was still time to save the theater from demolition. This event has followed by creative protests with the involvement of various community groups, including cinemagoers, cinema workers, artists and local residents. Public gathering and speeches by prominent figures has made. In April 2013, their protest was faced with extremely tight response with water canons and teargas from the police. This direct state intervention results in the evolution of political activism against the project transformed many of citizens into critical and activist cosmopolitan individuals. More people also fuelled the creation of a collective identity and a network of solidarity and resistance. The following wave of resistance and protests launched the Occupy Gezi Park Upspring in May 2013.

Conclusive Remarks

The case of the renewal of Serklydoryan urban block and re-build of Emek Theater in new shopping mall becomes a great example of the civil society's attempt to participate in urban planning, particularly in the controversy urban regeneration areas. Other relevant cases from Istanbul also support the idea that there is significant civil concern towards the strategy of local and central planning bodies that allocates all historical and cultural heritage in the urban core, including theaters, residences, public and private properties designated for other uses, to private commercial developments without engaging any negotiation with civil groups. This case also presents that the role of civil society groups encompassed the shared-values and lifestyles of citizens through gatherings, meetings and protests. Even though these groups have received support among citizens, the governmental bodies did not choose to recognize the voice of community and engage their attempts in urban regeneration process. This process, however, progressed in a destructive manner through undertaking reactive strategy.

It is important to highlight that this missed opportunity to create a base for a participatory planning approach prevents accommodating civil society aspirations for future of the Emek Movie Theater. Over the past decade, diversity of bottom-up practices are increasingly, on the whole, actualized in many cities around the world by different initiators, such as community groups, political activists, artists, entrepreneurs, individual volunteers and so on. The ones that aim to maintain their own positions to the challenge of urban problems can provide new forms of urban space uses, improving their urban living conditions and creating new urban commons. The presented case in the paper, however, prevents the capacity of bottom-up agents to adopt and to influence urban processes and local planning bodies; and the suppress of their creative capacity created barriers for the emergence and survival experimental urban space uses and solutions punctuating the city's landscape. The challenge of proposing adoptable urban model in Beyoğlu that can adjust the disturbances related to the emerging city marketing discourse requires battling the structural disadvantage of globalized retailed system in the city. The bottom-up tactics producing new images and narratives can come up with new opportunities for traditional small businesses to be up their game in the sector. If the civil response to urban regeneration is translated into a system of variety of urban actors interacting within network of governance, this system can generate truly differentiated and special solutions for urban developments.

This not only about finding good solutions for urban redevelopment but also dealing with the complex issues in an ongoing networked, fragmented and empowered world. In case of the Emek Movie Theater, the present reality was dynamic and volatile, due to the two insights derived from the

involvement of changing views. The urban transformative practices of civil initiatives interlinked with the some parts of local citizens, but there was tension arising with municipal authorities and the private contractor. Urban creativity in much broader terms –not just about creative solutions for urban environment, but also about how these multiple views engage and interconnect. It is related to the self-directed organization building processes that are created by participants. Under this condition, different priorities and capacities can be negotiated among different stakeholder and modes of co-existence in space be conditioned. Hence, utilizing bottom-up responses in urban planning processes that enable direct participation of civil society into urban planning should be understood as a framework for flexible and open structure for developing ideas.

In terms of extending limits of democracy in society, creating dialogue and interaction among various actors, even the ones with opponent perspectives, is essential. Besides that, the ways of challenging neo-liberal urban development logics –processes often oriented towards privatization and financialisation of urban space_ highly depend on the capabilities of civil society to self-organize and demonstrate alternative survival strategies and tactics. The ways that bottom-up groups foster new engagements with urban space and places, are therefore, essential power of expression of creativity at local scale while framing creativity in public imagination, at the same time, is essential driver of urban neo-liberal policy tool. Together, these two approaches offer diverging perspectives on, and expectations of, urban creativity. Hence, urban creativity is interpreted differently local administrators and civil groups. The former frames it as possibilities of making alternatives for virtues of economy while the latter generally uses it as socio-spatial practice of embedding themselves into locality. In this presented context in Istanbul, creativity seems to be interpreted as big urban redevelopment projects by the formal planning bodies, but social virtues of creativity were neglected. A dichotomy between the central and municipal planning bodies' strategy of suppressing opponent views and the ineffective efforts of bottom-up groups to creating dialogue with formal planning bodies prevents intermediary role of bottom-up response to emerge not just as the inscriptions of various visions of the theater associating individuals and social groups frequenting the theater, but rather develop relationship building processes between diverse groups and urban actors for maintaining mode of co-existence within the place.

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