Heritage, memory and social justice: reclaiming space and identity

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The date of 27 May 2013 marked one of the largest environmental demonstrations in recent history, as protestors sought to save Istanbul’s Gezi Park from being replaced with a shopping mall and a reconstruction of an Ottoman barracks. The riots and clashes began in Gezi Park and spread to other Turkish cities. Millions of people gathered in the city centres’ squares and main parks, not only to protest at the proposed demolition of Gezi Park but also to reclaim their own spaces. In the following days and weeks Gezi Park and the main squares and parks of other cities were occupied by the people who had reclaimed them. The protests showed resistance against top-down government decisions and the transformation of cultural space for profit-making – and against the attempt to challenge the identity construction of those who used these spaces through an authoritarian approach. Such resilience demonstrated that cultural or public spaces have a significant role as heritage for a public who have the right to attach values, ascribe meanings and develop memories within them.

Many papers from anthropological and sociological perspectives have been published since the Gezi Park protests (Arat 2013; Moudouros 2014; Cayli 2016 and many others). However, it is still important to explore discourses of why it is significant to look at cultural space as heritage. Such an approach is critical for understanding the aims both of the government, in insisting on demolishing these spaces, and of the public, in showing resistance to that attempt even if it cost many lives.

This chapter examines the importance of public space as a place where heritage is developed, exploring its links with memory and identity and the destructive nature of economic development. It then considers...
the impact of attempted destruction of cultural space on the public and their resistance to hegemonic power by taking into account the concepts of social theorists Henri Lefebvre (on ‘space and social production’) and David Harvey (on ‘the right to the city’ and ‘social justice and spatial system’). Through its focus on Gezi Park, this chapter will demonstrate the importance of public space for heritage-making, and therefore in identity construction and memory development, seen against attempts to use such spaces for profit by erasing heritage and memories and re-constructing identities.

Public space, heritage, social production and power

If we are to understand space, we must consider its symbolic meaning and its complex impact upon behavior as it is mediated by the cognitive process.

(Harvey 2009, 36)

Public spaces have great significance for individuals and groups. With their meanings, representations and symbols, they are the key tool for establishing heritage, constructing identity and developing memories. Public spaces, particularly in urban cities, also serve as the voice of the people: many groups carry out activities such as protests, festivals, etc., in these places, which have great significance for social life. These squares or public spaces also represent historic events with monuments. For instance, the Republic Monument in Istanbul’s Taksim Square commemorates the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, following the Turkish War of Independence. These spaces and monuments are all symbolically significant in representing and commemorating certain events in the past.

In the last few decades public spaces have been transformed into commercial places and used as profit-making tools for wielding economic and political power. Gentrification, urban development and, especially, ‘mega projects’ have targeted public spaces at the heart of a community’s sense of belonging, as well as of the identity of individuals and groups. These developments, which have a huge impact on public spaces and the environment, have strong links with the ambition of economic development (Harvey 2007). The aim of promoting economic development without considering its benefit, both economically and socially, and public opinion has affected people’s lives widely, changing their way of life and their perceptions (see Harvey 2007). This kind of transformation is particularly critical in countries such as Turkey, where democracy has been
effectively suspended for over five years under an authoritarian regime. Public spaces and natural resources are increasingly being abused for economic development, for the benefit of elites seeking economic power. In this process forests are cut down for construction projects, rivers are used for dams and, of course, city squares and public spaces are turned into profit-making places.

These places are extremely significant for the daily lives of the public, as it is where they produce their values. Because of the importance of these spaces for heritage-making and memory development, the public are motivated to reclaim their own space. This results in strong resistance, as in the case of Gezi Park. In other words, top-down decisions made without consulting the public, which neglect the rights and benefits of individuals and groups, result in urban crisis; as the philosopher Henri Lefebvre has pointed out, they transform, reconstruct and erase spaces, heritage and memory (Lefebvre 1991). Certainly cities and spaces have many different functions; they therefore contain highly complex meanings and symbols strongly connected to the social, political and economic lives of individuals and groups. According to Lefebvre, space has several dimensions strongly connected to social production:

... a product that is consumed as a commodity and as a productive resource in the social reproduction of labor power; a political instrument that facilitates forms of social control; ... reproduction of property relations through legal and planning regimes which order space hierarchically; a set of ideological and symbolic superstructures; ... a means of human reappropriation through the development of counter spaces forged through artistic expression and social resistance.

(Lefebvre 1991; quoted in Butler 2009, 320)

Space therefore takes an important place in power sharing as well. While space is a social production which has been laboured over by ordinary people, it is also significant for elites seeking to gain the power to control politics and economies. The case study of this paper, Gezi Park, was right in the middle of this battle of power sharing. While government aimed to make more profit, and to shift the symbol and meaning of the space, the public sought to reclaim their space. Because Gezi Park is located in Taksim Square, a site that commemorates the Turkish War of Independence following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the establishment of a secular state, it has great significance for the public identity construction of Turkish secularists (Fig.5.1). With its monuments and the Atatürk Cultural Centre, it was deliberately constructed as a potent symbol of modern Turkey.
For decades Taksim Square has been symbolically significant for left-wing labour unions and groups. It represents their struggles for rights, being formerly the site of union rallies and demonstrations (Baykan and Hatuka 2010). Gezi Park, set in the centre of Taksim Square, also represents an Armenian minority group who had a graveyard located there until the 1930s; although this was later moved, it is still significant as a place that affirms identity and offers a sense of belonging to Armenians (see Watenpaugh 2013). Lastly, as Gezi Park is one of the few green areas in the city centre, it plays a significant role in local people’s daily lives.

Although Taksim Square and Gezi Park thus have significant importance for many different stakeholders, these aspects have been neglected by an authoritarian approach that aims to profit from cultural spaces. David Harvey has suggested how the notion of cultural rights has been turned to the benefit of ‘economic elites’ (Harvey 2007). This kind of authoritarian and destructive approach against the demand of people whose space was under threat encountered strong resistance. Harvey emphasises in his concept of ‘the right to the city’ that public spaces can be changed and transformed (Harvey 2003). However, the question is whether this change should be creative or destructive, and who it is that has the right to bring it about.
Authoritarianism, destruction and (re)construction

It is widely believed within heritage and political studies that heritage is a key tool for constructing identities, developing memories and ascribing values (see Smith 2006; Macdonald 2013; Graham and Howard 2016; Apaydin 2018). However, heritage is itself a process (Smith 2006) – not developed in a short period of time, but rather a long process of social production (Lefebvre 1991). It is constructed within groups for collective social memory (Hall 2005, 25) over generations of social interaction. This construction, particularly in the case of constructing national identity, is often imposed by political elites who establish an ‘authorised heritage discourse’ (Smith 2006), or in other words, ‘official heritage’ (Harrison 2013). The use of authorised heritage discourse can be seen widely in undemocratic nation-states, particularly those founded on certain aspects of identity such as ethnicity, religion and ideology (Kohl and Fawcett 1995; Meskell 1998).

The dramatic political transformation of Turkey over the last decade can clearly be seen in the change and use of authorised heritage discourse as well, following an attempt to shift to more Islamic and Ottoman values and identity (see Zencirci 2014). The state was established on secular values, in direct contrast to the religious values of the Ottoman Empire that officially collapsed with the foundation of secular Turkey in 1923. The key focus for Turkish heritage discourse by the state has always been secularism as well as Turkish ethnicity. In 1980, following a military coup in Turkey, Islamic values were added to this heritage discourse, but it by and large kept its ethnic and secular orientation (Zencirci 2014).

Since 2002, however, the Justice and Development Party (AKP) has been in power. The party was founded with an Islamic orientation, and it has focused on changing the values and means of society’s construction of identity, investing it with a more Islamic character (see Zencirci 2014). This can be seen in every part of the society and state institutions, particularly in the education system; this now includes more religious classes as economic and political power has shifted during the 17 years that the AKP has been in power. However, as Hall (2005) points out, this kind of transformation is a slow process and takes time; it is not straightforward to change the identity of individuals and society. People often resist change. Recent elections in Turkey (2018) demonstrate that the public remains strictly divided, one half supporting the AKP and the other half, whose identity and values are founded on secularism, showing resistance to this attempt at transformation.
Since the AKP assumed governmental power in 2002, its rule has been transformed into ‘competitive authoritarianism’, particularly within the last five years. The term ‘competitive authoritarianism’ distinguishes this type of power from the classic authoritarian regimes common before the Cold War. In a competitive authoritarian system elections are still held and some democratic norms remain, but power – including state institutions, the judiciary and the media – is controlled by the ruling group. This results in a restriction of human rights and freedom of expression alongside ‘electoral manipulation, abuse of state resources, harassment and violence’ (Levitsky and Way 2010, 3).

In this kind of political atmosphere, the demands of the public are often neglected. Particularly in Turkey, authoritarian and oppressive policies can be seen occurring under the umbrella of economic development by abusing natural and public resources, including repurposing public spaces for economic development. Taksim Square and Gezi Park were not the first cases in which public spaces were targeted for transformation through economic development. In many parts of Turkey large developments have become more common, particularly in the last decade. For instance, dam construction in many parts of Turkey (but particularly in southeastern and eastern Turkey) has been erasing the landscapes and cultural, social and economic spaces of the minority groups: their identities were attached to these places, and their memories developed there. Even though campaigns and public demonstrations were held against those developments, the people’s voice has been completely ignored (Ronayne 2006).

Since AKP came to power it has increasingly used public spaces and natural resources to make more profit and grow the country’s economy (see Buğra and Savaskan 2014). These include mega construction and development projects in every part of Turkey. This kind of economic and political approach is closer to abuse of public spaces and heritage than to the often-stated goal of developing economic resources for public benefit. Abusing public spaces, natural resources and landscapes by using them for profit making has effectively decentralised public and individual power.

The aim of exercising this particular form of power – in order to decentralise the rights and power (by which I mean people’s values and memories) of individuals and groups – is to take social control and consolidate power over public rights. This was clearly seen in the Gezi Park case. Here the combination of a push for economic development and an authoritarian-style approach can be explained in two ways. The first follows the argument that public space represents forms of
abstract knowledge, produced and controlled by government institutions (Lefebvre 1991). Because Taksim Square and Gezi Park symbolically represent the knowledge and values of secular Turkey, alongside those of leftist groups and Armenians, the Turkish elite currently in power aim to erase such representation and knowledge; their intention is to shift it to a representation of their own, diametrically opposed ideology. In doing so, they wish to demolish the Park and reconstruct an Ottoman barracks to be a symbol used for identity construction of the ‘new’ Turkey (‘Yeni Turkiye’).

The second avenue of explanation for the actions at Gezi Park is that the AKP depends on neoliberal policies for profit, particularly for ‘constructions’ and ‘developments’. Abuse of the space of Gezi Park for increasing profit is not something new; it is in fact one of the main aspects of the capitalist system in place. This is because space also contributes to production (Lefebvre 1991; see Butler 2009 for more details), and space needs to be fixed physically to make more profit out of it (Harvey 2009). The plan of developing a shopping mall was indeed not only contributing to Lefebvre’s argument concerning the connections of capitalism and space, but also to his analogy about the space:

Social spaces are a recognition that the political dimensions of space extend beyond its management and use as a political tool by the state. Space is itself a site of political conflict in which the class struggle has increasingly been transformed into forms of conflict which are spatial as well as political and economic,

(Quoted in Butler 2009, 321)

As the Taksim Square-Gezi Park case demonstrates, space can be used in reconstructing identities and erasing memories. The planned shopping mall in Gezi Park was not a traditional shopping mall, but was going to include a cultural centre and a mosque, as well as an Ottoman barracks, to serve as symbols of the new Turkey. In this way, the identity of individuals and communities would be radically changed.

Although the plans to transform and demolish Gezi Park and replace it with a shopping mall are currently on hold because of the public reaction and community resistance, underlying issues surrounding the space’s use remain. The continuing goal of employing this space for capitalist enterprise and transforming Turkish identities can be seen in the example of the Ataturk Culture Centre (AKM), located in Taksim Square. In the 1960s, as one of the first modern buildings in Istanbul and a symbol of the Republic of Turkey, the Centre was listed as built
heritage, secured by the protection and preservation law. In later years the future of AKM became the subject of recurring debate: should it be replaced or restored?

In 2008 the Centre was closed prior to demolition. However, because of a strong public reaction, community resistance to the building’s destruction and associated legal requirements, any proposed demolition by the current government would clearly take years. Since 2008 the public, academics and professionals have heavily debated and opposed the plan to demolish the Centre. As with the attempt to develop Gezi Park, there was no public consultation. Finally in 2018, in a very top-down decision, the AKM was demolished, along with its memories, symbols and the knowledge it represented. It was rebuilt to develop and construct a new identity, and to give a new focus to memory development and heritage making. Although destruction is also a natural process in constructing new heritage, memories and values, the question for the AKM and the Gezi Park must be ‘how ethical was the decision-making process?’

Archaeologist and UNESCO chair on Heritage Futures Cornelius Holtorf argues that destruction and transformation of heritage can lead to new opportunities and possibilities of developing new heritage and memories for future generations (Holtorf 2015, 2018). Furthermore, he suggests that cultural heritage should be adaptable in order to be sustainable; it should be conceived as being as natural as ‘mountains, clouds, or waves in the ocean’ as they continually change (Holtorf 2018). It is indeed true that heritage is a process, of which construction, destruction and re-construction are part, and that it should be adaptable in order to be sustainable, as he suggests (Holtorf 2015), changing over time. Material culture of the past cannot be protected forever; loss is inevitable, and the focus should be on producing new heritage (Harrison 2013).

However, what has been neglected in the arguments of Holtorf and other scholars who argue along similar lines (Holtorf 2018; DeSilvey 2017; Ingold 2010) is the ethical side of this approach. Here my questions are: who decides what is to be erased, reused and transformed? Who decides what is to be demolished in order to build new heritage? To what extent can transformation and destruction be creative? Should heritage still be transformed, even if it is destructive for people?

This brings us to Harvey’s points on ‘whose rights and whose city?’ What is the outcome of destruction of public space, or its transformation? In this case we ask: what is the outcome of destruction and transformation of built heritage? Is it creative or destructive? Harvey argues for the cases of urban spaces, declaring that ‘they are usually both: the
city historical site of creative destruction’ (Harvey 2007). This is not different in the context of heritage, as can be seen from many heritage sites. Surely the city and city heritage or public space is more complex; they have many different claimants or stakeholders and are always contested (Mitchell 2003, 4).

Although material culture should be considered as progressive cultural production, open to transformation, I argue that this process should be managed at the grass-roots level and decided from the bottom up. The case of Gezi Park clearly demonstrates that top-down decisions to transform public space using a neoliberal and authoritarian approach are destructive rather than creative. However, space and heritage can be transformed – and new meanings and memories can be developed in a positive way – through the actions of ordinary people who have the right to claim the space and heritage, as the Gezi Park protest and occupation also demonstrated. Here protests and occupation have shown a path towards ethical transformation of space and heritage, attaching new meanings and memories to the public space and heritage of Taksim Square and Gezi Park for future generations. Furthermore, what the Gezi Park protests and occupation also demonstrate is that if attempts at change, transformation and reconstruction are imposed on the public destructively and from the top down, neglecting people’s demands leads to their reclamation of space through resistance to protect values, meanings, memories and identities.

**Discourses of resilience in the reclaiming of public space**

In many parts of the world implementation of neoliberal policies have made cities places of social and economic conflict (Hammami and Uzer 2018). Istanbul as a whole is an example of the process of urban growth and gentrification, the impact of which can be seen in the consequences of displacement and inequality. These urban public spaces have been built on social experiences. They are therefore closely associated with the lived experiences (Lefebvre 1991) of the individuals and groups who develop memories there and attach values and meanings to them. Development and gentrification thus heavily impact on identity formation. As Lefebvre points out:

> These form part of the social imaginary of ‘inhabitants and users’ of space through which complex symbols are linked to non-hegemonic forms of creative practice and social resistance.  

*Lefebvre 1991*
Although Taksim Square and Gezi Park have different claimants and stakeholders, as they have different meanings and representations for different people, the diverse participants in the demonstrations prove that public space has great significance for people, even if from different backgrounds. The demonstrations and occupation were politically diverse, with both left and right wing, secular and conservative, majority and minority ethnic groups attending. In addition, the protests were also demographically diverse, with participation of different age and gender groups (Baydar 2014).

Such diversity of protest participants emphasises the significance of urban public spaces for people – something not only linked to political meanings and heritage. The diverse structure of the protests showed that rights over urban public spaces should be equally divided between the state and the people for social justice to flourish (Harvey 2009). Having pointed out that the main reason for resisting through demonstrations and occupation was to protest at top-down decisions and an authoritarian approach, the question still remains: ‘what were the embedded discourses of resistance from a public space and heritage perspective?’

In his concept of a ‘right to the city’, Harvey emphasises that people cannot easily leave their desires, social relationships, values, nature and lifestyles (Harvey 2009, 315). In this framing, the right to the city is not about access; it rather affirms its people’s right to change themselves for the better by changing their environment and public space. I argue that these five aspects – social relationships, values, nature, lifestyle and rights – were the embedded reasons for the participation of so many people in resistance at Gezi Park; they are both crucial for protecting public space for heritage-making and also represent basic human rights, highly correlated and interlinked.

Social relationships established between individuals and groups within one or more communities – communities here defined as being divided across certain boundaries (for example, economic, political and ethnic) from each other (Cohen 1985) – create social values. Social values are obviously complex, subjective and difficult to define as they differ across communities. However, they are mostly related to identity, attachment and a sense of belonging (Jones 2017; Byrne et al. 2003).

In heritage studies, heritage has been widely discussed as a social process, implying a process of social production by individuals and groups through social interactions with one another. Within this process, public space is without doubt the most important location for heritage-making. This particularly applies to common or public space where people socialise and interact.
Interaction and socialising provides ground for social production, such as the creation of memory and identity that shapes everyday life. From their construction, the public spaces of Taksim Square, Gezi Park and the Ataturk Cultural Centre have been significant places for social interaction, establishing social relationships and, most importantly, constructing memories of personal significance for members of the public. As the diversity of communities involved in resistance to changing these spaces proves, these locations have a large role to play in reconciliation and peace-building between groups and communities from different backgrounds. While heritage can be a divisive element within society, the various demographics, ethnicities and economic standing of participants in the resistance to the demolition of Gezi Park showed that these places are valued and have meanings for many groups from different backgrounds.

The impact on the physical environment must also be considered. It is often acknowledged that the environment has a large impact on identity construction and plays a role in developing memories (see Clayton and Opotow 2003). This acknowledgement mostly focuses on the landscape and natural environment. However, Gezi Park, as the only green space in Taksim Square, has long been considered part of the area’s natural environment by the public.

A further consideration is that Taksim Square and its surrounding area is one of the busiest parts of Istanbul for social life; people attend bars, pubs and night clubs here and it is popular with tourists. The development of a shopping mall in a reconstructed Ottoman barracks would not only have destroyed public space, but was also going to destroy people’s ability to enjoy this kind of lifestyle. Article 8 of the Human Rights Act clearly explains that ‘everybody has the right to live their private life without government interference’. This is unquestionably one of the basic human rights. According to a poll conducted during the demonstrations by Bilgi University, over 91 per cent of the protestors attending demonstrations included in their reasons for participating the breach of their democratic rights by the government’s authoritarian approach.

As a whole, social relationships and value, nature and lifestyle are the main foundation for identity, memory and a sense of belonging. They serve as tools for community survival. These aspects are also features of the basic human rights for every individual, group and community, giving them the right to protect and preserve them if necessary. Therefore heritage and space are closely interlinked with human rights (see Silverman and Ruggles 2007), and can be a positive force to overcome injustice created by powerful elites.
Conclusion: right to change and transform

In his substantial book *Social Justice and the City*, David Harvey demonstrates the strong relationship between human rights, social justice and the city and heritage. He emphasises that rights in the city are not only about the freedom of individuals to access resources but also, and most importantly, about their having the right to change the city by themselves. He goes on to say that this process, the transformation of resources, is not about the individuals; it is part of an exercise of collective power to reshape resources (Harvey 2009, 315). Gezi Park has become one of the great examples of resistance against authoritarian approaches and top-down decisions that aim to transform and destroy public space and heritage. However, while the importance of heritage has been discussed widely from the perspective of identity, memory and a sense of belonging, the question of ‘who has the right to change and transform heritage?’ and its corollary, ‘what is the ethical way of achieving this?’, have not received sufficient attention.

Using, constructing and reconstructing cultural resources is such a complicated area that it is a nearly paradoxical concept. Harvey suggests that the right of exercising cultural resources should be led by the public, as it is a source of collective power. What I argue here is that, one way or another, the vital issues of how to consume cultural resources, and of how to change and transform cultural heritage and public space, must be led by the public concerned. The people should have priority in developing, changing and transforming cultural heritage. Giving the right to change and transform heritage to people can in fact make heritage more sustainable for future generations – rather than erring too much on the preservationist side, which can prohibit growth.

In the case of Gezi Park heritage, transformation and change have actually never ceased since it was established. New meanings were added and new memories developed, with the area providing a resource for different identity constructions for over a century. Change and transformation is surely inevitable for heritage, as Holtorf has suggested (Holtorf 2018). Gezi Park and other heritage sites and public spaces will continue to change; they will gain new meanings and new memories as people ascribe them. However, in heritage studies, we need to focus on the ethical sides of the transformation and change process of heritage rather than its conclusion, and to discuss how this process can be made more ethical, bottom-up and essentially more democratic.
Notes


References


