



# Oeuvre vs. Abstract Space: Appropriation of Gezi Park in Istanbul

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## ABSTRACT

*The Gezi Park incidents of summer 2013 in Istanbul have marked a turning point in the political life and democracy in Turkey. The peaceful environmentalist protestations in central Gezi Park have turned into a countrywide upheaval against the neo-liberal and conservative policies of the government, pouring millions of people into streets in different cities. It was a time that Turkey witnessed the formation of a new type of public sphere that encompasses a variety of counter publics, and its spatial incarnation –the Gezi Commune-, reclaimed, created, shaped and inhabited by the free will of people. This was the instant creation of oeuvre through appropriation of the urban space, and a spatial manifestation of reclaiming the right to the city. This article is a reflection on possibility of creation of oeuvre in contemporary society, and a new way of architectural thinking and practice that can pave the way for it.*

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## 1. Introduction

There is a strong relationship between city spaces, the way they are produced and social relations taking place in those spaces. Spaces are adapted by people through their diverse economic, political, social and cultural activities. All personal or common lived spaces make place for these dwelling practices of people (Sadri & Zeybekoğlu Sadri, 2012). The way that spaces are formed determines how we access to those spaces, how we use them and how we exist in them. Under the domination of state, capital, and institutional knowledge, spaces are

produced as commodities (Sadri & Zeybekoğlu Sadri, 2012). Accordingly they reflect the order of a ruling power, and they start to cause exclusions of certain groups of people and their diverse dwelling practices, which do not fit into the norms defined by the ruling power.

Henri Lefebvre distinguishes between space as "oeuvre" and space as "product". Space as

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oeuvre occurs as a result of collective creation, praxis. The French word oeuvre refers to lifetime "works" created by an artist. Since space as oeuvre is an outcome of collective creation of different generations during a long period of time, it is the accumulation of all works done by inhabitants of a city during its city's history. Thus, space as oeuvre embodies peace and co-existence. However space as product is produced by forces of production such as nature, labour, division of labour, and instruments of labour. Nature is commodified, labour is exploited, division of labour is organized and instruments of labour such as knowledge and technology are estranged and controlled by power. Furthermore designed and produced spaces have been invaded and organized by the state, capital and institutional knowledge, particularly architecture and planning. While space as oeuvre is formed in accordance with the needs of different generations, through a collective of lives over a lot of people during a long period of time; space as product is designed and constructed within the domination of ruling power and as an outcome of collaboration between the state, capital and institutional knowledge (Lefebvre, 1991).

Lefebvre defines designed and produced spaces as abstract things and commodities. He associates the abstract space with social hierarchical order, social norms and social factions. Abstract space creates social hierarchical order through limiting the access to and use of space. Abstract space also dictates social norms through homogenizing the potential uses of space by limiting those uses to particular functions inside defined architectural forms and accordingly restricting the everyday life of people. And finally, abstract space renders social factions as the systematic method for controlling daily life and its practices through fragmenting the collective and cooperative practices of people (Lefebvre, 1968; Purcell, 2003; Lefebvre, 1991; Gottdiener, 1993).

Against hierarchical order, social norms and social fragmentation, intrinsic to the abstract

space, Lefebvre celebrates the idea of «right to the city» to protect diverse dwelling practices of people and promote oppressed groups. The right to the city is the right of inhabitants of the city to dwelling, existing and co-existing within the space during the process of formation and use of space. Consequently Lefebvre divides the right to the city into two interdependent rights: the right to oeuvre and the right to appropriation. While the former is more related to the praxis of creation of space, the latter is more concentrated on free life and co-existence in space (Lefebvre, 1968).

During Gezi protestations, Taksim Square and Gezi Park in Istanbul were appropriated by Istanbulites, and the park was transformed into a communal space through a collective praxis of protestors. With several dwelling practices that it housed, such as protection from police attacks, political discussions, artistic production, health services, eating and cleaning, the commune was the instant creation of oeuvre, which was made according to its inhabitants' visions and desires. It was representing the free will of people co-existing inside the commune, against social hierarchical order, social norms and social factions dictated by abstract space of ruling power and capital. This article aims at unfolding the spatial history of Gezi Resistance as a right to the city movement, through evaluation of spaces of resistance that emerged and disappeared throughout the days of protestations and reflecting on a new way of thinking with practice that can pave the way for a new architecture of resistance.

## 2. Production of abstract space in Istanbul

Starting from the mid-1970s, world cities have been changing under the impacts of neo-liberal economic developments, which have been manifested in new spatial organization of production, developments in communication and transportation technologies, and the declining control of nation states over economic activities (Van Kempen & Marcuse, 1997; Sassen, 1998; Giddens, 1999). World cities started to

restructure themselves and compete with each other in order to attract a highly mobilized capital which started to travel around the world in the form of high technology industries, new employment forms, new administrative institutions, international events and tourism. Within this competitive environment, creating a marketable city image became a priority for city administrations. Urban transformation projects which aim at creating new and marketable images for cities started to be implemented at different scales and with different contexts (Harvey, 1989; Goodwin, 1993; Paddison, 1993; Evans, 2003).

Istanbul is also under the effects of this marketing based production of urban space. The commencement of implementation of neoliberal economy policies in Turkey dates back to the year 1980, concurrent with the military coup d'état of 12 September (Öktem, 2011). From this year on, Turkey's economy started to grow on consumption, depending on production of consumer goods rather than industrial and agricultural production (Şönmez, 1996). Istanbul was the centre of this economic growth and its imagination as a world city paralleled to its position in the global competition of cities (Keyder & Öncü, 1994; Robins & Aksoy, 1995; Keyder, 2000). This imagination transformed the urban space into a commodity, replacing the use value of urban land with its exchange value.

Within the last 15 years, to be able to foster urban development and economic growth at the level of other global cities, urban regeneration has been used like a magic wand by the central government and city administrators in big Turkish cities (Zeybekoğlu Sadri, 2017). Although urban regeneration is described as ideas and activities to improve the economic, physical, social and environmental conditions of an area (Roberts, 2003), its application in Istanbul is not following this multi-layered approach. The focal point of the projects in Istanbul are mostly physical with economic priorities and are applied with several motivations such as earthquake prevention,

renewal of historical neighbourhoods and creation of tourism attraction, re-functioning of former industrial or historical buildings, rehabilitation of *gecekond* (squatter) districts, and last but not least economic development through huge-scale prestige projects. Within the last 10 years or so, the scale and content of urban interventions have also evolved into enormous scale infrastructure, transportation, and new urban development projects such as 3<sup>rd</sup> Bridge over Bosphorus, 3<sup>rd</sup> Airport, and Kanal İstanbul.

Preparation of the urban infrastructure for a potential earthquake, development of the economic conditions of people, preservation of the historical-cultural assets of the city, and improvement of poor living conditions and declined physical environments are crucial for a more safe, liveable and resilient city. However, the urban regeneration experience of Istanbul shows that, in most cases, the above mentioned motivations are only used as guise for transforming the urban land into commodity for investors and city management, and even earthquake has become a marketing tool during this process. Through enforcement of new planning laws and regulations, or amendments to existing regulations, the legal framework of urban regeneration is also manipulated (Günay, 2013).

Usually, what is being applied as regeneration is construction of high rise, high density gated communities, with residential, commercial and hospitality functions for higher income groups (Yalçın, Çalışkan, Çılgın, & Dündar, 2014). These projects are implemented with the decision of central or local governments and investors, without maintaining the participation of local people who are going to be affected by the projects. In most cases, the implementation of regeneration projects includes destruction of an existing poor neighbourhood and eviction of the inhabitants of that neighbourhood, followed by other problems such as unemployment, exclusion from social services and health and education facilities and loss of social networks

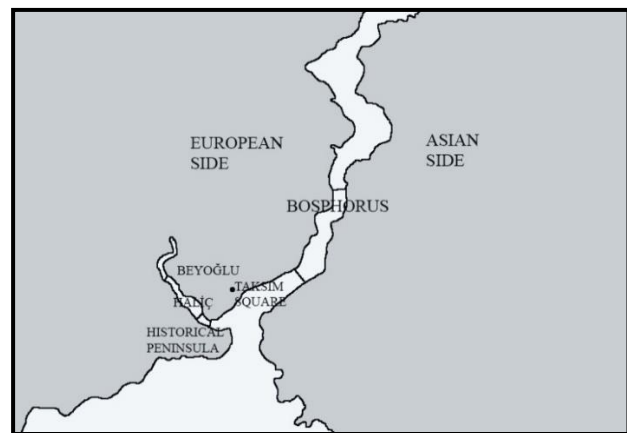
established in the neighbourhood (İslam & Enlil, 2010)

As a result of such market oriented transformation of the city, the abstract space is produced through hierarchical division of the urban space, enforcement of social norms and social factions. The nature is destroyed and environment is polluted in an irreversible way. Public spaces are privatized and closed off to the use of the public. The urban space is fragmented into pieces through gated communities, and any encounters with differences are avoided for security reasons. Consumerism is celebrated and shopping has become the new urban recreation. Urban poor is marginalized and displaced. History and memory of the city is demolished while being re-written. The decisions regarding the urban space are given by central government, city administration and contractor firms without any public consent. The projects are implemented with an ignorance of scientific research and humanitarian values, with laws and regulations manipulated in order to eliminate any legal barriers in front of the projects.

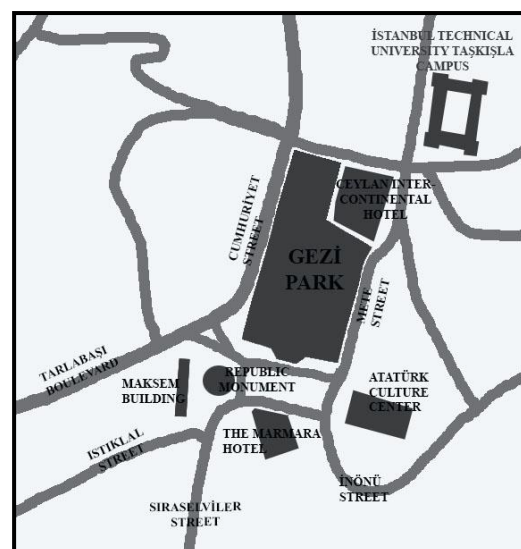
### 3. Taksim Square and Gezi Park

Taksim Square and the adjacent Gezi Park in the center of Istanbul constitute a major public space not only in Istanbulites' lives but also for the whole of Turkey. The square and the park are located in Beyoğlu district of Istanbul on the European side of the city (Figure 1). Beyoğlu can be considered as one of the most central locations of the city, with a high number of cultural activities, and ease of access through over and underground systems connecting at the square. The square lies on a hilltop which overlooks the Bosphorus on the east and Haliç on the southwest, at the intersection of İstiklal, Sıraselviler, Cumhuriyet, İnönü and Mete Streets and Tarlabası Boulevard (Figure 2). The most significant structure giving the square its characteristic is Taksim Republic Monument completed and opened in 1928 (Figure 3). Other major urban elements surrounding the square

are Maksem Building on the west, Atatürk Culture Center (AKM) on the east (Figure 4), the Marmara Hotel on the southeast and Gezi Park on the northwest which lies between Cumhuriyet and Mete Streets (Figure 5). The square takes its name from the Maksem building, a big water reservoir, built in 18th century as a part of a bigger water distribution network that served to Beyoğlu and its surroundings (Akin, 2011). As the water distribution center, Taksim (an Arabic word meaning distribution) took its name from this new function of distribution (Kuban, 2010).



**Figure 1.** Location of Taksim Square in Istanbul, map reproduced by the authors from Istanbul Greater Municipality's City Map (Istanbul Greater Municipality, n.d.).



**Figure 2.** Taksim Square and Gezi Park, map reproduced by the authors from Istanbul Greater Municipality's City Map (Istanbul Greater Municipality, n.d.).



**Figure 3.** Taksim Republic Monument (authors' archive, May 2013).



**Figure 4.** Atatürk Cultural Centre (authors' archive, May 2013).



**Figure 5.** A view from inside the park, with the Marmara Hotel on the background (authors' archive, October 2013).

#### 4. Appropriation of Gezi Park

In June 2011, the Prime Minister of the period announced the Taksim Square Pedestrianization Project (Demirkan, 2011). The project which

envisioned the pedestrianization of the square by directing the traffic flow of streets surrounding Taksim Square towards an underground, through huge tunnels, removing bus stops from the square, and re-constructing the Artillery Barracks building over the location of Gezi Park (Figure 6) was approved by the Istanbul Greater Municipality Council in September 2011, and 1/5000 and 1/1000 scale Preservation Master Plans of Beyoğlu including this the project were amended (Council Decisions, 2011). Additionally, the non-existent Artillery Barracks was announced as a registered building by the decision of Istanbul 2<sup>nd</sup> Directorate of Cultural Heritage Conservation District Board on 09.02.2011 (Taksim Dayanışması Güncesi, 2015).



**Figure 6.** A scene from the video of Istanbul Greater Municipality's directing Taksim traffic underground and redesigning the square project (Yapı Haberleri, 2012)

The project aroused several objections among civil society organizations due to its top-down application process (Bayhan, 2012; Özkarkal, 2012). It was seen as a neo-liberal urban intervention project imposed by the government, combining all the above mentioned aspects of urban transformation in Istanbul. From destruction of nature, to loss of public space, from commodification of space to manipulation of laws and regulations, this project was a representation of what has been going on in Istanbul, and in other big cities in Turkey for years (Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** A view from Taksim square during the pedestrianization project works. Gezi Park remains in its place (Taksim Meydanı Çevre Düzenleme İnşaatı, 2015).

Demolition of the park, which commenced on the night of 27 May 2013, was challenged by protestations of a group of activists including architects, planners and artists. Although the demolition of the park was the moment that the protests began, this environmental protest shortly evolved into huge scale unrest against the government. Discontent caused by the ruling party's political pressures and interventions in daily life over the last 10 years was cried out during the protestations. The crowds were marching with slogans as "government resign", "shoulder to shoulder against fascism", "everywhere Taksim everywhere resistance" (Her Yer Taksim Her Yer Direniş, 2013).

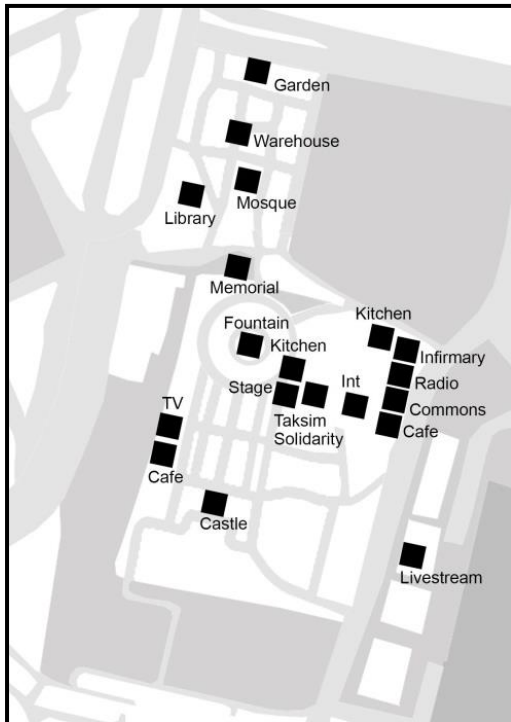
As the police interventions, paralleled with the statements of the Turkish Prime Minister of the time regarding the government's determination with the construction of the mall and humiliating and marginalizing the protestors continued (Taksim'e cami de yapacağız..., 2013), the resistance grew, both in number of people attending and in geographical distribution. People from different political ideologies and groups, civil society organizations, football support groups, special interest groups and individuals who were not attached to any political ideology or group came together in Gezi Park, supporting each other (Postvirtual, 2013, Bulut, 2013). People who were not on the

streets were supporting from their homes through home-scale protestations like banging pans and pots at their windows (Post Modern Protesto Gezi Parkı Olayları, 2013), or leaving food, water and medicine outside of their doors and windows for protestors.

During this period, the mainstream media was ignorant to what was happening in Gezi Park. While many of the local TV channels were keeping their silence regarding the protests, international media organizations were broadcasting the protests live. The most reliable communication and news media turned out to be the social media and citizenship media (Zileli, 2013). Social media was effective in organizing and orienting protestors instantly, and calling out warnings related to upcoming police attacks too.

The biggest weapon of the resistance was the critical humour that was produced and shared by millions of people on the streets and through social media. The pressure and humiliation coming from the prime minister was subverted into a satirical acceptance, and was used as a weapon of critique against repression, and police violence. Caricatures, graffiti, different forms of art works, and creative ways of demonstrations were used as a way of resisting, which lifted the spirit of the protests, and created a strong solidarity among protestors and supporters (Avcı, 2013).

As demonstrations continued and the number of protestors increased, police was expelled from Taksim square. Gezi Park was appropriated by protestors and a sort of commune was established in the park, with tents, temporary kitchen, library, pharmacy, garden and other amenities for people to live in (Figure 8). The Gezi Commune, with free and voluntarily provided services, autonomous decision making system, coexistence of different people and groups and freedom of expression, was the spatial expression of the resistance and evolution of oeuvre against the forces of abstract space produced by political power, capital and security forces.



**Figure 8.** Facilities inside Gezi Commune, map reproduced by the authors from Istanbul Greater Municipality's City Map (Istanbul Greater Municipality, n.d.) and sketches in Historical Atlas of Gezi Park (2013).

## 5. Gezi Resistance as a Right to the City Movement

The Gezi Resistance was a large scale uprising for the right to the city in its two aspects: right to oeuvre -a claim for democratic participation in the making of the city- and right to appropriation -a demand for peaceful co-existence in the city. First, it was a claim for right to oeuvre which was realized in the self-autonomous character of Gezi Commune, a voluntary, participatory, temporary habitat, where all inhabitants had a voice and contribution in the creation and re-creation of the spaces of the commune. As a temporary settlement, this communal space provided diverse dwelling practices for people from sheltering to social gathering, from health services to education, from worshipping to artistic production, and all the services and maintenance was provided voluntarily on a regular basis as a part of communal living. Although there was no city administration and no ruling class to ensure order and security, solidarity

among people created harmony and safety inside the commune area. This was the realization of oeuvre through collective praxis of inhabitants of the city.

The Resistance was also a demand for right to appropriation, for peaceful co-existence in the city without exclusion and discrimination. The Gezi Commune provided an arena of visibility and co-existence for various groups and individuals representing different (sometimes opposing) political views, cultural/ethnic/religious identities, and social interest organizations. Those differences did not become a matter of discrimination and inequality, but led to mutual respect and solidarity among different groups. Rather than being a unifying and homogenizing public sphere, Gezi Commune became an arena of dialogue, mutual understanding and trust and a public space where all differences could peacefully co-exist, without exclusion and discrimination. In addition to gathering different groups and identities together, Gezi Resistance provided "a spatial and bio-political ground of existence for those groups and identities that lost their visibility in the public sphere" (Türkkan, 2013). The Gezi commune, described as a temporary autonomous zone with reference to Hakim Bey (Altay, 2013), was physically short lived, but its impacts endured much longer. With the police attacks on the 11<sup>th</sup> of June 2013, the commune was ceased. After the massive protestations ended, the resistance has continued in different spatial forms and scales at different locations: painting the city staircases with different colours; gatherings in neighbourhood park forums (Özlüer, 2013); occupation of an abandoned house as a neighbourhood solidarity home, and formation of umbrella organizations bringing together several urban and ecological resistance groups.

Throughout the protestations, two important questions were raised: first, what kind of a city we want to live in? second how we can make it? and the Gezi Commune was one answer to both questions. The commune was a claim for a city

of democracy, peace and co-existence and illustrated "what kind of social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we desire" (Harvey, 2008). It was claimed, instantly created, maintained, and re-created again by collective efforts of protestors and the technical knowledge of production of abstract space was replaced with the common sense of collective praxis of place making. At this point, architectural thinking and practice, and the roles of architects need to be re-considered. As Çetin frames it clearly, "architecture as a professional field of practice, which serves macro-scale cities planned in a monopolistic manner, can transform into a field of knowledge which provides spatial devices of a micro-scale, organic city" (Çetin, 2013; 8). This transformation is possible through a re-definition of architects as well. Rather than master builders who design abstract spaces for capitalist reproduction, architects also need to transform into social agents contributing to place making through sharing their expertise on construction and building.

## 6. Conclusion

As much as Taksim Square and Gezi Park were abstract spaces with the ways they were imagined, designed, organized and produced by power and capital, they also gained an identity of oeuvre in the sense that they were owned, used, lived and appropriated by people through various dwelling practices ranging from daily life activities to massive protestations taking place in them like a Gezi Resistance. Gezi incidents created a new language of resistance, solidarity and mutual trust among people, and it opened the discussion for possibility of new ways of making politics, and architecture as well. As much as Gezi Resistance was an uprising against conservative, discriminatory and oppressive policies of the government, it was also an opposition against the new spatial order dictated by the neo-liberal production of space through architecture. The Gezi Resistance was also a discontent with this architecture which is

under the service of power and capital, dictating social hierarchy, norms and fragmentation and transforming the history, nature and culture of the city into commodity. Therefore, The Gezi Commune was created as the spatial reflection of the common will of the protestors, who desire peace and co-existence. The creation of Gezi Commune could not be possible with the architecture of power, which is based on consumption, discrimination and fragmentation. The Commune was a challenge against architecture as an abstract entity, defined by sharp disciplinary boundaries as a profession and under the hegemony of architects. The making of the Commune as an oeuvre was only possible through collective praxis of all people participating in the resistance, and its construction was based on a collective field of knowledge on place making which was created, shared and then re-created again by protestors. Rather than an architectural product, the Commune was the physical manifestation of the soul of resistance. Therefore, it was a resistance against the production of abstract space which is the embodiment of hegemony, hierarchy, norms and orders, and was a call for right to the city.

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