What is happening at Gezi Park?
‘Privatization of public space as a control mechanism’

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Abstract
This paper aims at analysing unrest from a spatial point of view by
pointing that the Artillery Barracks project is a means of establishing control
over public via privatization of public space, namely Gezi Park. It is assumed that
the stubborn insistence on the project could no more be explained by just
economic gains but rather by the will to impose a controlling mechanism over
the society by turning a public space into a private one where the representation
of public is limited. In order to understand the representation of and within
public spaces, Lefebvre’s, well-known conceptual triad is being referred to.

Key words
Public sphere, public space, privatization, claiming the public space, space of
representation, Taksim Square, Gezi Park

Introduction
For the past three weeks, there has been an on-going unrest focusing on
and organized around Taksim Gezi Park, İstanbul. The dynamics of protests,
which was initially a civil reaction to preserve probably the last green area at the
centre of a metropolis and then a massive reaction against government, has been
largely discussed along with the analysis of the composition and organization
methods of groups of protestors. At the core of protests lay not only the project
to turn the public park into a shopping mall – or even a city museum as stated
later- in the replica form of old Artillery Barracks, which was demolished in 1939
as providing space for current Gezi Park, but also the decision making methods
of the government and the prime minister, who ignored any collaboration request for developing a project concerning Taksim, the most prominent public square of Istanbul, and probably of Turkey. In fact, this character of Taksim, being maybe the most symbolic and thus significant public space of Turkey was remembered through these considerably long lasting and yielding demonstrations.

**Public and Private Spaces in the Cities**

Cities, as products of social and political organizations, encompass both public and private spaces in various forms. The distinction between the public and the private basically relies on the spatial behaviour of individuals. Madanipour (1999: 880) puts this distinction as follows:

> Some places are protected and set apart from the rest by a complex system of signification: by spatial means such as signs, boundaries, fences, walls, and gates; or by temporal means such as predetermined working hours. This complex system of codes, expressed through physical objects and social arrangements, signifies private places, where strangers cannot enter without permission or negotiation. Public places, on the other hand, are expected to be accessible to everyone, where strangers and citizens alike can enter with fewer restrictions.

> Depending on this basic spatial behaviour, a number of features that differentiates public spaces from private spaces in the cities could be listed.

**1.1 The Major Qualities of Public & Public Space**

Though most definitions of public may have spatial references, such as public sphere, public realm, or public space itself, and even though socio-spatial character of “public” should not be forgotten, it does not mean that every aspect related to public is limited to physical space. Looking at these definitions it is possible to investigate public through three interrelated discourses: i) the theoretical and ideological discourse, ii) discourses through the legal means and
law, iii) discourses through lived experience in everyday life of the city especially in the physical space.

i) The theoretical and ideological discourse: political & sociability

By public, within the political social distinction there has been reference first to the state, second, to the political community which is often defined as nation, and third to the domain of open discourse in which various understanding of collective identities and interests may be brought to the fore.

The political theory takes public as politics and initiates its concepts for “public” in Aristotle’s definition of political community (polis) whereas “private”(oikos) comprises both the family and economic life. Public as political may also refer either to the state authority or to a world of discussion, debate, deliberating collective decision-making and action.

Public space for sociability is a space for heterogeneous coexistence. It is a space for symbolic display of the complex blending of practical motives with interaction of ritual and personal ties, of physical proximity coexisting with social distance. In the social space, according to Hunter (2012), ideally the ties of intimacy characterize the “private realm”, “the parochial realm” is characterized by a sense of commonality among acquaintances and neighbours, and in contrast, the “public realm” is defined as non-private sectors of urban areas where individuals in co-presence tend to personally unknown or only categorically known to one another.

ii) Discourses through the legal means and law

According to Hunter (2012), public order is often the point where individuals from different social orders meet, where social worlds collide. In such difficulties, the construction of publicity and privacy through legal ruling is important. The state plays an important role in giving the last decision about the boundaries between the public and private spaces, thus deciding about the type
of activity, deviant behaviour and social order. There are values and standards for assessing appropriate and deviant behaviour in public spaces. In sharp contrast with private and parochial orders, the state claims to legitimate monopoly of the use of coercion, force and violence structures the public order in public space.

iii) Discourses through lived experience

According to Fraser (1990), in practice, we do not have “the” public sphere but public spheres based on contestation created through competing interests, and sometimes reasoned debates. There are demands for keeping “orderly” and “rational” public discourse in the public space. Order and rationality in public spaces (defined by gender, class, race, ethnicity, and age) are preserved by excluding some “unruly” people. There are also demands for access to and for new rights in and through those spaces. Those excluded groups from the public spaces (women, workers, political dissidents, and all those deemed by the dominant society as unruly) have had to struggle their way into the public to be heard.

Madanipour (1999: 881) describes urban public spaces in particular as “multipurpose spaces distinguishable from, and mediating between, the demarcated territories of households”. Private spaces are not only demarcated territories, but also protected by state regulated rules of private property use. Yet, the users of both private and public are the same “public”, belonging to the same social reality. From the spaces in which we take shelter to those, which we cut across and travel through, are parts of our everyday social reality. Public space includes very recognizable geographies of daily movement, which may be local, regional, or global. Thus, it is not the user, but the access and control of access that defines whether space is public or private. That must be why “most definitions of public space emphasize the necessity of access, which can include access to the place as well as to the activities within it” (Madanipour, 1999: 881; Pitkin, 1981)
1.2 Major Qualities of Private & Private Space

According to Jeff Weintraub (1997), "private" can be contrasted with "public" with the following characteristics. In the first characteristics, visibility, defines what is hidden or withdrawn versus what is open, revealed, or accessible. He states “collectivity” as the second characteristics that is “What is individual, or pertains only to an individual, versus what is collective, or affects the interests of a collectivity of individuals”. This individual/collective distinction can, by extension, take the form of a distinction between part and whole. The two may also blur into each other in specific cases, and can also be combined in various ways, but the difference in principle is clear enough. When an individual is described as pursuing his or her private interest rather than the public interest or a group is described as pursuing a "special interest" rather than the public interest-the implication is not necessarily that they are doing it in secret. The criterion involved is the second one: the private is the particular.

Looking through more historical perspective, Madanipour (1999: 884) stresses out that the central functional role of public spaces have long been fading out since the activities which once necessitated face-to-face communication in public spaces, such as political debates, exchange of goods and services, and participation in rituals and ceremonies, can now take place in different locations through a variety of means:

Public spaces of the city have become residual spaces, used for parking cars, or at best associated with particular, limited functions, such as tourism or retail. Many public or semi-public places, from the ancient church to the public libraries and museums of the modern period, have come under pressure from these changes. The modern city has therefore gone through a spatial and temporal dispersion of its functions and a despatialization of some of its activities, which have created multiple non-converging networks working against the cohesive nodal role of the urban public space.

However, new so-called public places, like restaurants, museums, libraries, theatres, and shopping malls, cannot play the role of an urban public space for two reasons: first, each of them only serve for a single purpose most of
the time, and second, they employ a series of restrictions for access, the most significant of which is that they operate according to a working-hour schedule. These characteristics prevent them replacing urban public spaces. At best, such places could be defined as semi-public spaces, while still they fit into the definition of private spaces better.

1.3 Privatization of Public Spaces

This historical perspective tells us more about the current conditions of public and private spaces in the cities. As Madanipour (1999: 884) puts forward, “the open public spaces of the city, which are most accessible and have the most functional overlap and ambiguity, have come under pressure from the specialization and functional disintegration of the modern city.”

Why urban public spaces are under the pressure of privatization? Who applies such pressure, on whom, and how? The answers may easily be found within the political and economical organization of capitalist societies and particularly in relations between state and the capital. From private investors’ point of view, what required is more land to be invested on and developed as urban spaces. And for public authorities, it is also advantageous to let private sector manage development, because not just developing the urban areas, but also maintaining them is a burden for most of the public authorities, which have long been undermined. Even though they still hold the position as the subject of privatization, their role is hardly more than providing a safe environment to be invested by private sector, which demands safety for the return of their investment. Thus, “from shopping malls to gated neighbourhoods and protected walkways, new urban spaces are increasingly developed and managed by private agencies in the interest of particular sections of the population.” (Madanipour, 1999: 888)

It is important how and why safety of privatized areas, demanded by the private investors, is provided. Is it only a demand by investors to guarantee the safe return of investment, or is it also seen by public authorities as a mean to
establish a control over “the public”? My argument here is that, even though there is a great pressure on public spaces from private sector, public authorities also endeavour privatization in order to convey its responsibility of providing security to new property owners, who could apply strict restrictions in a way that no public authority on no public space could do.

It is also critical how almost at all processes of privatization “the interest of particular sections of the population” is favoured. When the object of privatization is a significant public space of a city, it is not just favouring the interests of a group over that of the others, but also reduction of that particular public space to the status of commodity (Mitchell, 1995). And it is this commodification that strips off the emotional and cultural value of public space, which is developed only through people's use over time (Madanipour, 1999: 888).

What is meant by emotional and cultural values, which is easily ignored during privatization processes, may well be summarized into the representations of public. Thus, privatization of urban public spaces also means limiting the representations of public as a heterogeneous group, who could unquestionably had the access to the public space, be present there, yet restricted from the new form of space, which is private.

**Lefebvre’s Conceptual Triad**

In order to understand the representation of and within public spaces, Lefebvre’s, well-known conceptual triad could be referred to. In his seminal work, The Production of Space (1991), he articulates his triad between spatial practice, representation of space, and representational space.

In his triad, Lefebvre states that “the spatial practice of a society secretes that society’s space; it propounds and presupposes it, in a dialectical interaction; it produces it slowly and surely as it masters and appropriates it” (1991: 38). For him, deciphering the space of a society reveals its spatial
practice. With its everyday ordinariness, including routes and networks, patterns and interactions connecting people and places, spatial practices structure the lived reality (Merrifield, 2006: 110). It is thus continuity and some degree of a cohesion that spatial practice ensures (Lefebvre, 1991: 33).

Within his conception, Lefebvre defines **representations of space** as a conceptual space, where scientists, planners, urbanists identify what is lived and what is perceived with what is conceived (1991: 38). It is the abstractions, such as arcane signs and jargon, as well as objectified plans and paradigms utilized by these assorted professionals, technocrats, and institutions to represent space as it is in the head rather than in the body. Thus conceived space is the dominant space in any society and as Merrifield (2006: 109) adjoins Lefebvre's (1991) phrases;

Because this is the space of capital, state, and bourgeoisie, representations of space play a substantial role and specific influence in the production of space, finding “objective expression” in monuments and towers, in factories and office blocks, in the “bureaucratic and political authoritarianism immanent to a repressive space.

The third of Lefebvre’s triad is **representational space**, which is the space as it is directly lived through its associated images and symbols, in other words, the space of everyday experience. In Lefebvre’s own words, “this is the dominated –and hence passively experienced- space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects” (1991: 39) Unlike representations of space, representational spaces, such as a café, a park, or a street, is more felt than it is conceived.

What must not be forgotten when employing Lefebvre's triad is that, neither the distinction nor the interrelation among them is a clear-cut one. As Merrifield puts it, “Lefebvre is vague about how spatial practices mediate between the conceived and the lived (...) One thing he's sure of, though, is that there are three elements here, not two. It's not a simple binary between lived and conceived, but a triple determination” (2006: 110). This vagueness may as
well be related to the non-stable features of, or non-linear relations among the conceived, perceived, and lived.

**Gezi Park / Taksim Square: The major qualities of this site**

Taksim area is a vibrant section of the city and a symbol of modern Istanbul. From my experience of living, studying and working in Taksim, I would like to emphasize its endlessly fascinating and unexpected surrounding, where one could encounter the wealthiest and poorest of the city, old cosmopolitan Istanbulites as well as immigrants. As Hunter (2012) mentioned, sociability (mentioned above), could easily be found in Taksim Square, as it fulfils the requirement of becoming a public space by providing a heterogenous co-existence of individuals. This also provides a realm for visibility, as in Weintraub’s characterization of public space, where it becomes a space for representation as in Mitchell’s definition.

Taksim Square has also been important both as a political symbol, especially for the Turkish left and labour movement and as a site of public political practice, too. As mentioned in the political theory concepts of public space, it is always political, insofar as it involves a particular imaginary of the public, people, and their authority. In the seventies, the square was home to enthusiastic celebrations of Labor Day, led by leftist trade unions and N.G.O.s. Unfortunately, in 1977, forty-two people were killed in an outburst of provoked violence and the chaos that followed. In the following years, the government banned Labor Day celebrations in the square. It took almost 30 years to claim this public space and become visible again.

Gezi Park (or Park No 2) in Taksim that is adjacent to Taksim Square is one of the public symbols of modern Istanbul and the secular Turkish Republic as a civic landmark. For the creation of the park, Topçu (Artillery) Barracks, a disused military building in the same location, was removed in 1939. Tracing back to the history of Ottoman era, the barracks is a symbol of an incident called March 31 (According to Julian Calendar the date is 31 March 1325, in Gregorian
Calendar it is 13 April 1909). After the announcement of the second constitutional monarchy in 1909, the military base in these barracks was the origin of the uprising against the Ottoman Emperor with the demand of governing with the rules of sharia.

Gezi Park as a symbol of the Modern Istanbul was designed and implemented according to Henri Prost's Plan for Istanbul in 1940. One would say this has totally erased the traces of this reactionary and unprogressive movement. The Park has been in the daily practices of society for over 70 years. The inherent properties of a public space are found in Taksim Square as well as in Gezi Park by being accessible to and for essential rights for representation of individuals without defining who, when, what type of action he/she takes. During the night it provides a shelter for the homeless, and in the day time it houses a range of activities for people of different gender, age, race, ethnicity. It is on the daily movement paths, where one can at least take shortcuts from one side to the other. In combined spatial perception with park, Taksim houses all kinds of groups and individuals ranging widely from labor class to football fans, from disregarded minorities, to popular artists whose only intention is to be visible and represented in public space.

The recent protests in Taksim and Gezi Park right now are inherently linked to the freedom of expressing oneself, and the use of the Park as a representational space to be heard by the authority. It is also a near instinctive reaction: when society wants their opinions to be heard by others, they turn to open, shared spaces such as streets, plazas or parks. When those in power are not interested in what they have to say, public space is no longer a priority to them as in the case of Gezi Park's case and these spaces become a battleground for supporters of the state and those who feel that their rights are being violated.

The plan to convert Gezi Park into a replica of Topçu (Artillery) Barracks will for sure limit the inherent properties of a public space. Will it be possible to extend that sense of inclusiveness, and generate spaces that are open to different publics, instead of the narrow and polarized claims that have sought to mold a singular kind of place and people in the past? The barracks, apart from any
proposed function, is not a part of public and collective urban memory anymore. And the creation, without even considering the cultural and historic heritage values of the park, disregards the needs as well as the views of the urban population who are the owners and wielders of collective urban memory. It is also important to inquire about the boundaries (material, economic, cultural, and religious) of the urban population, about the terms upon which people come to be included within it, and about the capacity of these particular spaces to accommodate multiple publics.

**Gezi Park / Taksim Square: The Process and Representations**

Every ruling class has sought to put its stamp on Istanbul. Over the past decade, Istanbul has seen a massive construction boom. This swiftly changing physical landscape of Istanbul symbolizes the competing themes that undergird modern Turkey. The emphasis is on the booming economy and a self-confidence expressed by the religiously conservative ruling elite that belies the post-empire gloom. Because of the symbolic value of Taksim Square and Gezi Park, the area provides many opportunities for an authority using the power not for the public good. This could well be described by the "edifice complex" of the power holders. From an architectural point of view, it is no accident that both the great plans to remake Taksim, as well as the way protestors' speeches and actions often invoke history and architectural memory to buttress their arguments in the present. Indeed, an interest in architectural history and the historical resonance of place is at the heart of the ambitious urban renewal plans as well the protests. In this specific case, the interest in reviving Ottoman architecture fits with the sensibilities of what some call the neo-Ottoman Muslim elite.

In order to clarify the insistence of this intervention in a public park, I would like to provide the time-line of the events.

**21.05.2009** Approval of 1/5000 Beyoglu Conservation Plan with the integration of a new underground traffic junction in order to transform Taksim Square into pedestrian zone.
(Emphasis on the preparations of a major urban renewal project on Taksim while isolating the square from the daily experience for a good amount of time, note that the entrance of the underground junction will limit the pedestrian flow up to the square.)

**12.06.2011** The AK Party has been announced to be the leading party as a result of the elections. One of the projects announced was the recreation of Topçu (Artillery) Barracks.

**16.09.2011** Istanbul Greater Municipality Assembly decided on the recreation of the Topçu (Artillery) Barracks in accordance with the existing urban context.

**17.01.2012** Approval of the amendment of conservation plans at 1/1000 and 1/5000 to allow the Pedestrianization Project of Taksim and Recreation of the Topçu (Artillery) Barracks.

**03.02.2012** Application for Gezi Park’s Registration as a cultural heritage to the "2 Numaralı Kültür ve Tabiat Varlıklarını Koruma Kurulu" by scholars from the departments of Architecture, City and Regional Planning, and Conservation of Mimar Sinan University, Yıldız Technical University, İTÜ, Galatasaray University, ODTÜ and Gazi University, as well as some NGO’s.

**27.06.2012** the first protest of “Taksim Solidarity” (Taksim Dayanışması) on the day of the auction fort he contractor of the Pedestrianization Project of Taksim and Recreation of the Topçu (Artillery) Barracks


**05.02.2013** In one of his speeches’, the prime minister mentioned, “they will reject the decision made by the “2 Numaralı Kültür ve Tabiat Varlıklarını Koruma Kurulu”
27.02.2013 “Kültür Varlıkları Koruma Yüksek Kurulu” rejected the decision made by the “2 Numaralı Kültür ve Tabiat Varlıklarını Koruma Kurulu”

(Note that there is only limited number of specialist in “Kültür Varlıkları Koruma Yüksek Kurulu” and it is mostly consist of bureaucrats known with their close tie to those holding the power)

27.04.2013 “Taksim Gezi Parkı Koruma Ve Güzelleştirme Derneği” applied to “İstanbul İdare Mahkemesi” for the withdrawal of the decision made by the “Kültür Varlıkları Koruma Yüksek Kurulu” as the decision is not parallel to public interest.

13.05.2013 The final report conducted by three specialists has been presented to “İstanbul İdare Mahkemesi”

27.05.2013 The uprooting of the trees in Gezi Park has started without any notification or valid document. The civil resistance started at Gezi Park.

28.05.2013 “Taksim Gezi Parkı Koruma Ve Güzelleştirme Derneği” declared this unofficial destruction to “2 Numaralı Kültür ve Tabiat Varlıklarını Koruma Kurulu”

29.05.2013 The prime minister announced in his speech “No matter what you do, we made our decision”

(Emphasis on the shift of decision making actor and the self-esteem to manipulate the decision-making process)

31.05.2013 The meeting between Kadir Topbaş, the Mayor of Istanbul greater municipality and “Taksim Dayanışması”

Motion for stay “İstanbul 6. İdare Mahkemesi” by “Taksim Gezi Parkı Koruma Ve Güzelleştirme Derneği”
“İstanbul 6. İdare Mahkemesi” approved the stay of order.

Late at night after a harsh police intervention, the Park has been taken under control of the police forces.

The protests to demand a public park back, turned into a nationwide protest against the increasingly authoritarian government. All across the country, thousands stood up not only for Gezi Park but also for the right to shape the place that they live in.

02.06.2013 The prime minister rejected accusations of dictatorial behaviour while flatly discounting the protesters’ legitimacy. “We would not yield to a few looters coming to that square and provoking our people, our nation, based on their misinformation,”

(That is a speech where he managed to feel provocative and exclude the people who are not in the same side with him.)

He also denounced on Sunday as “the worst menace to society.” making it clear to the world that the voices of hundreds of citizens would continue to be ignored by their government.

While he said no shopping mall would be built in Taksim, he vowed to build another mosque in the square.

(Another proof of using the power not for public interest but for own legitimacy.)

Doğan Kuban, Istanbul’s foremost urban historian and the writer of numerous books and worked with the United Nations on preservation issues in Turkey. He complained that he has never been consulted by the current government, criticized the government for ignoring the country’s pre-Islamic history by not protecting certain archaeological sites and structures, an issue he cast as highlighting Turkey’s turn away from Western culture. According to him and many others, “The only things being preserved are mosques,” Preservation is a very refined part of the culture. It’s very much a part of European civilization.
By exercising the power not for the public interest and undertaking large-scale development projects without seeking recommendations from the public. This is a sign of losing their democratic reflexes and is returning to authoritarianism.

According to Jane Jacobs (1992), the success of a city is the health of its public spaces, but what defines a healthy public space and who should get to decide the fate of spaces such as Istanbul’s Gezi Park is the main theme. Does the government have the right to execute what it believes to be the best choice for the city’s future, or is it the right of the people to take control of their city and to actively participate in the development of an urban landscape that suits their needs? And on the other hand, if “Taksim is ours,” as many have come to say, it is necessary to continue asking whom that “we” is, how it comes to be constituted, and how inclusive it is, and can or cannot become. Of course that is if the park stay as a park. As Lefebvre (1991:373) has argued, difference threatens social order and hence must be absorbed by hegemonic powers: Differences arise on the margins of the homogenized realm, either in the form of resistances or in the form of externalities. The established power of the state and capital are threatened by the exercise of public rights within public spaces.

According to Sennett (1992) ideally, the anarchy of the market meets the anarchy of politics in public space to create an interactive, democratic public. By privatizing a public space there will be a designed-and-contrived diversity created with marketable landscapes, as opposed to uncontrolled social interaction, which creates places that, may threaten exchange value. The “disneyfication” of space consequently implies increasing alienation of people from the possibilities of unmediated social interaction and increasing control by powerful economic and social actors over the production and use of space. Imposing limits and controls on spatial interaction has been one of the principal aims of urban and corporate planners during this century.
Conclusion

Public spaces of a city have always had political significance, symbolizing the power of the state, as exemplified in the parades or the statues of the elite, or where the state is challenged by its opponents, as in demonstrations and revolutions. Control of public space is therefore essential in the power balance in a particular society. (Madanipour, 1999: 880)

The Turkish government, who intervened in the privatization of Gezi Park in Istanbul in order to build a replica of old Artillery Barracks, has actually attempted to symbolize its power over the whole country in two ways: first, by building that bizarre structure on probably the most symbolic and thus significant public space of Turkey, and second, by building it on Gezi Park, which was a representational space for all groups and individuals of Istanbul. However, as mentioned in the quotation above, public spaces are significant not only for states to symbolize power, but also for its opponents. If one reason for opponents to resist was standing against the power to be symbolized, the other must have been rejecting the control over themselves and over their space, which was going to be established by privatizing the public space.

If we are to rephrase the process by Lefebvre’s triad, we may say that the people, who directly lived through the park's and the square's images and symbols, once had the park as the space of everyday experience. Gezi Park was and has been a representational space for them. Yet, when the privatization project for Gezi Park was announced, in other words when the representations of that particular space were drastically changed, they realized that, neither their representational space, nor the spatial practice there would remain. The state attempted to limit their representations on public space by privatizing that public space to provide a control over the public.
References:


