

What is happening in Turkey? Taksim Transformation Project and Its Unexpected Consequences

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Taksim: A Brief Introduction



Taksim Square is the heart of Istanbul. Being an overly-populated and highly-expanded city, İstanbul has no other equivalent urban space that is this much embraced by the people. Its symbolic importance not only comes from its size or design, but from the lived experiences of people connected to the space. This site was a former water distribution area in Ottoman Empire (1731-1839). After the foundation of republic, Henri Prost intervened to the site which resulted in the demolition of the military barracks (Topçu Kışlası) in 1939. An urban park of was built in the place of this former barracks. This park is called as Gezi Park and it covered 38.000 m² area.

Military Barracks Before 1940s



Gezi Park Today





The following years need a summary, since there were a series of acts that directly or indirectly affected the functions and spatial layout of Taksim. Some of these decisions were favorable such as the construction of Atatürk Cultural Center, placement of sculptures that played an undeniable role in the identity of Taksim. However, there were large-scale urban interventions conducted to solve the urbanization problems of a rapidly growing city of Istanbul which were shaping the future role of Taksim today. The most significant examples are the transportation arrangements such as the construction of large boulevards that made Taksim a transit-node in 1980s. However, being aware the historical and cultural importance of the site and its components, İstanbul Supreme Board of Monuments, declared that Taksim Square, Historical Water Depot, Atatürk Cultural Center and Gezi Park should be conserved as a whole in 1999.



Above all, I have to emphasize that, Taksim square carries powerful symbolic images in people's memories. The most significant reason is that, the square is the main place for the Labor Day gatherings. Besides the celebrations, bitter experiences have made this site a symbol of labor power and class struggle in years. Moreover, it is an urban space that very much gained its identity after the republican period, hence we can conclude that this square has shaped the city's political stance and this public open space has been shaped by ideological motives. It has become the symbolic space of class struggle and renewal.

Taksim Transformation Project:

Gezi Park is the place where the resistance against the authoritarian and pressuring acts of government began. Urban spaces, especially the ones that carry symbolic significance, are always subjected to the wills of governments aiming to reflect their own political understandings. I believe, this was a crucial motive that triggered transformation projects in Taksim. However, we have to keep in mind that the neo-liberal acts of government played a crucial role in the process as well. Because, Taksim is intended to be transformed into a by-pass transport zone and its environs are already becoming favorable consumption centers of Istanbul.

The Taksim transformation project was raised as one of the “crazy” projects of Prime Minister Erdogan. He gave the initial clues of the project as a campaign pledge before the general elections in 2011. Among these “crazy” projects, there were ideas as “channel İstanbul”, “two new cities in İstanbul” etc. In my opinion, these promises were aiming two birds with one stone. Meaning that, Erdogan was not only using the city as his playground to show off the power of his government, but also he was giving the clues of future investments in construction sector to reinforce the national economy.

The “Taksim’s Crazy Transformation Project” was introduced to the public as the pedestrianization of the square in the beginning. According to this project, the excess traffic will be oriented to the underground passing and the surface will be left to pedestrians. The demolished Military Barracks will be built in the place of Gezi Park. The City Council of İstanbul approved the necessary plan changes in September 2011. In February 2012, İstanbul Preservation Board also approved the changes and hence the project has been legitimized.

The Proposed Design for Taksim Transformation



The project was being called as the “Prime Minister’s Taksim”, even the Mayor of İstanbul stated that “*Prime Minister wants it, the project will be completed*”. There are no clear information related to the final use of the barracks. The function changes spontaneously according to the changing agendas. It is sometimes a mall, an opera house an ice rink etc. There were no participatory steps before the declaration of the project. No one asked to the people who live Taksim, if they are on favor of these

changes. There were challenging explanations related to the project some of the professionals found it “*chavette, uncouth and a money-waster*”, while some others claimed that it is what Taksim and İstanbul need.

The project is highly disputable in terms of city planning and what it offers to urban life and space. Before explaining the effective actors in the transformation process, I would like to discuss these points in three main titles. First title is related to the circulation patterns. The so-called “pedestrianization” arrangement will possibly create a dead “empty” space isolated from the public use. Because, people in İstanbul are generally transport oriented, that is they need to access the public transit easily and in-between they prefer to enjoy urban activities. However, this arrangement kills the role of Taksim Square as a nodal point and people could only access it through underground stairs that are reaching the square after a 70 meters climb. Some professionals may approve the idea, but in İstanbul context, this project directly means “un-pedestrianization” of the site. The second title is related with the commodification of space. Taksim Project offers new opportunities for capitalist acts, such as construction of a mall instead of a park(which is almost the last standing public green area in the middle of a housing mass), marketing the space to the foreign investors, the possible excess profit from the construction works. The last and most fragile concern is linked to the loss of meaning in space. The rooted history of Taksim square and the lived experiences of people are clearly ignored. The identity of the square is tried to be erased. Government intends to create a “new identity” according to its own political understanding. The most dramatic example is the isolation of the labor meetings from Taksim square (in fact this 1st of May was prohibited by the governor with an excuse of construction works on the site). Government, clearly did not want people to come together to raise their voice and defend the labor rights or any opponent idea.

Moreover, Prime Minister Erdogan often states that they build “a new square for one million people” to gather. He decided where people gather by bereaving their very own public square. This project is called as “Yenikapı Square Project”, a sea-filling project that is located in the Yenikapı Archeological Park which acquires 8000 years old ruins...

Yenikapı Square Project



Actors, Planning Steps and Legal Process:

There were strong voices against the Taksim transformation project from the very beginning after the city council's decision. Taksim Solidarity Platform has been founded in 26th December 2011 for which Chamber of City Planners put all their effort from the very beginning till today. This platform consists of a significant amount of people who care their city center, the representatives of neighborhood unions, chambers etc. The platform functioned very effectively after its foundation. Besides the community meetings, press releases, petitions, informative document distributions, the members of this platform started to overnight in Gezi Park to keep watch and attract attention of people and media to the crucial treat of demolition in the spring of 2012.

Preservation board disapproved the reconstruction project of Military barracks in the place of Gezi Park in January 2013. Their defense was stating that there are no existing traces to legitimize the reconstruction project on the site. Erdogan strongly opposed to this decision and he said that "*We will reject the rejection*" in the beginning of February 2013. Following this, the Supreme Board of monuments approved the barracks project at the end of February, and this was the final legal decision. Taksim Platform carried the decision of the supreme board to the administrative court. The expertise report prepared by chamber of city planners, architects and landscape architects and the process still continues.

Chamber of city planners opposed to this decision from the very beginning. Especially, İstanbul Branch of the chamber put a great effort to inform public about the real aims and possible negative outcomes of the project. Taksim Platform tried to raise awareness by arranging meetings in Gezipark, giving press releases and using creative media works. Meanwhile, Erdogan stated that the barracks will be a shopping mall, although the mayor stated the opposite a few months ago...

However, in 28 May 2013, 70 year-old trees were intended to be demolished. There were people resisting in the park, trying to protect the last bit of the green space in the center of İstanbul. They were peacefully defending a right to the city and even a right to the living. There are no open spaces left in the case of an emergency as an earthquake. İstanbul is filled with buildings; there are no spaces to breath. People are rushing from one enclosed area to the other. There are no interaction spaces for different classes to meet. The resistance started against all of these, for the right to the city. The name of "woman in red" is Ceyda Sungur, who is a city planner graduated one year before me from the same university, was there in the park to defend a public space, a park, a green area, a tree, to defend the good for the common. Turkey and the whole world have met with the face of pressure through the power of this moment.



“The Lady in Red” ,Ceyda Sungur, City Planner

Moreover, in 31th of May, riot police attacked people that are keeping watch in the park against a demolition. Police burned the tents at the dawn, they used heavy amount of pepper spray. There were little children in the tents, people were sleeping, and the reaction was strong. Turkey has already had its patience filled because of all the interventions to “private space” and life in general. The restrictions, de-regulations were in every section of human life, in education, health, economy, gender issues, problems in judicial system etc. Hence, people went out streets in the middle of the night, there were voices rising against the government in the misty morning of 1st of June.

Since then, every day is the day for resistance in Turkey. All I can say that, the process has evolved to the right of living from right to the city. Riot police attacks unboundedly. The words are not enough to explain the amount of tear gas they use, not to mention plastic bullets, the water cannons filled with additive chemicals besides water and the harsh attitude on the people that are arrested.

In the night of 13th of June, prime minister called for representatives for Taksim platform, artists groups, unions etc. The head of the İstanbul branch of Chamber of City Planners conducted a press release and explained that prime minister will wait for the final decision of the court, which is actually should not even be discussed in the first place. Moreover, he insisted on the referendum choice after the decision of the court. Clearly, he now thinks that it is better to ask people for their opinion on their city(!). However, this is not a good intention of accepting the public will. It is the arrogant saying of the government which thinks that they will collect enough proponents to get the necessary amount of numbers of votes to legitimize the demolition. Government seeks for other ways out to ignore the scientific and societal dynamics and even the legal measures.

Every day the agenda changes in Turkey. The resistance spread all over the country. Lawyers, doctors are being arrested besides the regular people who sometimes just happen to carry a gas mask (which is really compulsory since we cannot walk sometimes because of the heavy gas in the regular streets). For nearly two months now, people occupy urban parks, doing nothing but raising awareness, standing against the pressuring acts of government and inspiring people all over the country.

Gezi Parkı Protests before Police Intervention



In 15.06.2013 a sudden attack of riot police to Gezi Park occurred. There were children resting after their day of painting in the park, and the representatives were discussing their next step. They stated that, they intended to collect tents and leave only one as a symbolic resistance remark. Yet, police attacked with several water cannons and heavy amount of gas one more time despite prime minister's promise of not touching to the park to the representatives. The riot police cleared the park, they destroyed the tents. There were numerous wounded people and lost children who sheltered in a 5 star hotel. Moreover, this hotel was being used as an infirmary for the wounded people and police threw gas bombs inside.



Police Attack to Gezi Park 15.06.2013



People Coming together after the Attack

There were many incidents since then. However, the most significant development is the closure of the park to the public access. There were riot police sitting around the park. There is an ongoing “decision process” of the “decision makers” whether to open the park to the “public” or not. Hence, one day you can see that the park is closed and one day it is “open”. And in a day like that, two of the professional employees of İstanbul Branch of Chamber of City Planners were taken into the custody and transferred to the court. They were released at the end, but this may give you the slightest clue about what the people, especially the most active professionals are facing while defending the public interest. In the specific case of Chamber of city planners, there are crucial responses from the government officials. The first of which was the “temporary” tasking of Tayfun Kahraman, the head of İstanbul Branch of the chamber. He was assigned to another city for one month and was made to move from İstanbul. Following this, Gürkan Akgün, who was a board member of the İstanbul branch, was fired from his job.



Till today, there are six casualties and thousands of injured people. The number of the ones who have taken into custody is again thousands. There are nearly 130 arrested people as well. But people still continue to resist. It is sure that the type of resistance has changed. Today, people gather in their urban parks and arrange public forums, maybe practicing the real type of democracy for the first time of our life. The problems are being told, the solutions are being sought by the public itself. There are ongoing protests all around Turkey as well. I cannot guess what I would write if I finished this tomorrow. I just want to say that a strong motive for these protests is the uneven development in cities. It was an ongoing process of marketing our natural resources for electric and nuclear plants, the crazy projects to foster the rental gain from the urban land and similar authoritarian acts of government that are directly related to right to the city and living-which are closely interlinked.