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STREETS AS PUBLIC SPACES: THE CASE OF YELDEGIRMENI NEIGHBORHOOD AND EVENT ORGANIZED BY “STREET BELONGS TO US” ORGANIZATION

Keywords: public space, evolution of public space, street events, Yeldeğirmeni neighbourhood.

ULICE JAKO PRZESTRZENIE PUBLICZNE: PRZYKŁAD OBSZARU YELDEGIRMENI ORAZ WYDARZENIA ZORGANIZOWANEGO PRZEZ ORGANIZACJĘ „ULICA NALEŻY DO NAS”

Słowa kluczowe: przestrzeni publiczne, ewolucja przestrzeni publicznej, wydarzenia uliczne, obszar Yeldeğirmeni.

Introduction

This paper aims to discuss the evolution of public spaces and their effect, by focusing on the streets in Yeldeğirmeni Neighbourhood, Kadikoy District in Istanbul. In order to do this, the paper explains the process of improvement in public spaces in the context of the Yeldeğirmeni Urban Renewal Project. In this process, not only the physical, but also the social dimension is crucial. The paper makes a comparison of public spaces between 2011 and 2014, and using the example of the ‘Street Belongs to Us’ organisation’s event, argues the importance of the social effects on the improvement of streets as public spaces.

1. Urban Public Spaces

Publicness is a concept, which refers to the whole that is related and open to everybody. This leads us to say that public spaces are places for all and open to the general public and their activities. The main qualities of public spaces are publicness, openness and accessibility for all, which allows connection, interaction, togetherness and sharing amongst human beings. Public life is shaped by public space in which cultural, political and social interaction occurs, and where people with different perspectives come together and communicate. We all get involved in public life with our first steps out of our homes onto the streets. As it is open to everyone, public space provides a platform for socializing and constructing our social and daily lives.

Public sphere is also an area in which individuals come together, share ideas and have free discussions. This concept is related with other concepts such as state, power, culture, civil society and media. Habermas defines the public sphere as a "society engaged in critical public debate" (Özbek, M., 2004).
Public sphere and public space have interactive relations, which shape each other. Public space is shaped on this basis and provides a physical space for this social concept.

Public spaces are vitally important for people, in providing a quality of life. In Turkey, the inadequacy in numbers of public spaces is a serious problem that needs to be solved. In Istanbul, current urban planning policies, profit-oriented urban projects, ignorance of public participation and public welfare has negative effects on public spaces. In addition to this, government’s attitude is beyond protecting and developing public spaces. Local government of Istanbul creates projects like turning Gezi Park into a shopping mall, Validebag Grove into parking area, constructing building in Kuzuncuk community garden. On the other hand, iconic historical public spaces of the city like the Emek Movie Theatre is demolished, Ataturk Cultural Center is vacant and not functioning. In Istanbul where even sidewalks are occupied by automobiles, public spaces are dwindling and no longer people-centered. At this point, it is very important to reclaim public spaces and create new ones.

Considering the need to create public spaces and that the means by which this is achieved in Istanbul, it makes sense to consider successful changes in urban public spaces. Thus, the Yeldeğirmeni Urban Renewal Project is worth examining to show the changes that occur in a neighborhood developed with the purpose of creating public spaces.

2. Yeldeğirmeni Neighbourhood and Its Streets as Public Spaces

2.1. Yeldeğirmeni Neighbourhood

Yeldeğirmeni Neighbourhood, also known as Rasimpasa Neighborhood, is a settlement in the Kadıköy district of Istanbul. It is located in the centre of the district near by the sea. The neighbourhood is surrounded by important transportation centres such as the Haydarpasa Train Station, ferry ports, in addition to bus transfer stations, and the Marmaray and Kartal subways. These connections show that the neighbourhood is accessible via public transportation modes within walking distance.
Yeldegirmeni is an old neighbourhood of Kadıköy, with a history dating back more than two hundred years. As mentioned in “Yeldegirmeni Experience: a New Approach to Urban Renewal” it was named after four windmills that were built in the area at the end of the 18th century (Çekilli Foundation, 2014.) Yeldegirmeni neighbourhood’s streets were planned in a grid system, which was one of the first examples of such rational planning in Istanbul. The resident profile of the neighbourhood was multi-cultural, including Turks and Greeks and multiple religions including Muslims, Jews and Christians. At the end of the 19th century the neighbourhood was also known for its apartment buildings as one of the first examples in Istanbul.
The first signs of changes with respect to the built fabric were seen in the beginning of the 20th century with the construction of the Haydarpasa Train Station. Engineers of the train station started to build apartments for the workers of train station construction in the late 19th century. With the effect of the newly built apartments and the following fire of 1922, the structures started to change from wooden houses to concrete buildings after 1950s. It is also the time when profile of the population also started to change and Greeks, Jews had moved from this neighbourhood. Although the neighbourhood was registered in 1981 as an Urban Site for conservation, the effect was just the opposite. Ongoing neglect, exacerbated by immigrants from Anatolia moving into the city, led to a gradual collapse of the neighbourhood.

Today Yeldeğirmeni has a population of 16,000, and is constantly under pressure of large scale urban projects such as the Marmaray and Kartal subways and the Haydarpasa Train Station Renewal Project. However, at the same time these projects again brought attention to the neighbourhood and formed a basis for an urban redevelopment/regeneration project. At this point, Çekühl Foundation, a non-governmental organization for the Protection and Promotion of the Environment and Cultural Heritage, had started the “Yeldeğirmeni Urban Renewal Project” with a new approach. This neighbourhood-oriented urban renewal project had a holistic, sustainable, self-managed renewal vision. It aimed to revitalise the urban fabric with its own social and physical dynamics. The main objective was to create public spaces and to activate civil initiatives.
2.2. Public Spaces in Yeldegirmeni Neighbourhood in 2011

Figure 3. Existing Public Spaces in Yeldegirmeni Neighbourhood in 2011

Source: Erturan, A., 2011

The image above illustrates existing public spaces in the neighbourhood in 2011. As can be seen, Yeldegirmeni had insufficient green spaces, play grounds for children, parking areas, culture centres and pedestrian friendly streets, which shows that the major problem in the neighbourhood was the lack of public spaces. Although they were narrow, hilly, occupied by cars and incapable of providing safe pedestrian traffic, streets were the only public spaces of the neighborhood beside the community centre. Within this, there were two intersections which functioned like a small square and focus points for the residents, which had potential as a possible public space. However, despite the lack of public spaces, it was possible to observe public behaviour such as neighbours chatting on the sidewalks, children playing in the streets and pedestrians walking on the streets and sidewalks. In addition, residents were aware of these problems and demanded additional public spaces, social centres, cultural events, sport areas, safe sidewalks and bicycle ways.
2.3. The 'Street Belongs to Us Once in a Month'

As a basic urban unit, streets are our first steps from our houses to the public life. They connect other public spaces to each other and provide a platform for social interaction. Streets are places in which we defend our rights and the key origin for bottom-up actions. Based on these ideas, "Street Belongs to Us Organisation" was founded in 2010 as a non-profit organization, which focused on human-centered cities and streets for a livable future in Turkey. This organisation involves in different projects, campaigns, interviews, events and workshops to make citizens aware of the transportation problems and alternatives, different usages of public spaces in terms of people-centered and livable cities. The 'Street Belongs to Us' Organisation is working in collaboration with other organisations such as municipalities, local residents, NGOs, sponsors, and local initiatives to achieve efficient participatory urban processes.

The first project of the NGO was an event series named "Street Belongs to Us Once in a Month" (hereafter shortened to 'The Street Belongs to Us'). These events had started as the pilot projects of the 7th Carfree Conference in 2007. Events were organized to show people how to reclaim streets as public spaces for a livable neighbourhood and city. The main purpose was to reclaim streets as places and to show the alternative usages of the street in order to revitalize street culture by closing the street to vehicular traffic for one day. In this context, the main aims of the project was to achieve livable streets for livable cities, and encourage the participation of the local people in the solution process, emphasizing accessibility for all, discovering and experiencing alternative modes of public space, creating people-centred public spaces, and spaces specifically for people and not only for cars.

The 'Street Belongs to Us Once' activities set out principles of good practice for a social action based event in public spaces with the participation of citizens. These events raised the awareness of street culture, public space and livable streets. They were organised in 12 different streets in Istanbul in collaboration with different municipalities and NGOs. As a physical outcome, three of these streets were permanently changed into pedestrian-friendly streets by the municipalities. In April 2012, one these events was held in Yeldeğirmeni Neighbourhood in collaboration with Kadıköy Municipality, Yeldeğirmeni Community Centre, local NGOs and sponsors. This event contributed to the process of public spaces improvement by demonstrating the idea for one day and integrating people. By making people aware of alternative solutions, the events let them demand their rights to public spaces. The images below illustrate the difference before and after the event.
2.4. Public Spaces in the Yeldeğirmeni neighbourhood in 2014

In 2014, it was possible to observe changes in the neighbourhood as a result of the Yeldeğirmeni Urban Renewal Project run by the Çekül Foundation and the Kadıköy Municipality. The project outputs were social revitalisation, creation of public spaces and vital corridors, and renovated buildings for public amenities. Another significant factor of the change was Gezi Park Protests and its aftereffects. Gezi Park protests started with a demonstration against demolition of trees in the Gezi Park and turned into a social movement all around Turkey in 2013. Following this process, creating new ways of resisting such as forums and collectives started to occur in the neighbourhood scale all around Istanbul. In parallel with these developments, a new social initiative emerged in the Yeldeğirmeni neighbourhood, called as ‘Yeldeğirmeni Solidarity’. In addition to this, ‘Don Quijot Social Centre’ was established in this neighbourhood as the first ‘squatted building’ of Turkey. These improvements contributed to the social revitalization of the neighbourhood.

Beside the social revitalization improvements, physical improvements have materialized by the Municipality of Kadıköy and Çekül Foundation. In order to create vital corridors and public spaces, streets were redesigned in a pedestrian-friendly manner, infrastructure was renovated, façades were improved, and historical buildings such as churches and mansions were restored, and reused as culture centres. In addition, small squares and public spaces such as a sculpture garden were created. The first park in the neighbourhood was created with the participation of the residents and neighbourhood organisations. TAK Design Studio of Kadıköy was established in collaboration with the municipality to provide a platform for designers, students, NGOs and local people who had a vision for Kadıköy. On the other hand, one of the most important and visible changes was the murals painted by different national and international artists, creating art-oriented benchmarks as the identity of the neighbourhood.
These improvements made the neighbourhood more attractive; this could well have been the impetus which led the neighbourhood through a gentrification process which is evident in a rise in real estate prices and an increase in the number of art galleries and studios. In addition, the popularity is seen in the existence of paid walking tours, which reveals the change in the neighbourhood is appreciated and has created a tourist market.

In December 2014, interviews with residents of Yeldeğirmeni showed that they were aware of the improvements in the public spaces and were content with pedestrian-friendly and clean streets, new cultural centres and the first park. Although they were happy with these improvements, they mentioned that once the neighbourhood became more attractive, it caused a rise in the value of property and started a change in the profile of residents. Further, disconnection between neighbourhood and the squatted building was mentioned as another problem.

Figure 5. Existing public spaces in Yeldeğirmeni in 2016

Source: This image has been produced by the author in the context of this study.
Conclusions

Considering the change between the years 2011 and 2016, the Yeldeğirmeni neighbourhood in Istanbul now has more public spaces and civic organizations have emerged as strong actors. Residents of the neighbourhood mentioned in 2011 that they do not have any public spaces beside streets. Compared to 2011, new public spaces were developed and the neighbourhood became a more organised settlement as it was aimed in the Yeldeğirmeni Urban Renewal Project. This statistic is compared with today, in which they talk with satisfaction about the increase of urban public space. Nowadays, the neighborhood has green areas, cultural centres and small open public spaces. Streets have been improved both physically and socially and became more safe, comfortable and vivid. Revitalizing streets as public spaces and supporting this process with social events had positive effect on the development of the public spaces. However, this public space development in the neighbourhood at the same time, appears to have driven gentrification, raising its profile and attracting new art studios and cafés. Most importantly the rise in the real estate values reinforces the view that the neighbourhood is facing the threat of gentrification. Unless the local government regulates the real estate market, it is expected to see changes in profile of the neighborhood due to the increases in value of property. This can lead to a change where the neighbourhood culture of Yeldeğirmeni is negatively affected and residents are displaced. In order to avoid these negative affects, neighbourhood organisations should work hand by hand and sustain this social capacity for the future. This social capacity of the neighborhood is the key to take the success of improved public spaces and neighborhood culture to the future.

Bibliography


**Streszczenie**

Artykuł podejmuje dyskusję na temat ewolucji przestrzeni publicznych i ich działania, poprzez skupienie się na przestrzeni ulic w obszarze Yeldeğirmeni w dzielnicy Kadıköy w Stambule. W tym celu w artykuł opisano proces poprawy przestrzeni publicznych w kontekście Projektu Odnowy Urbanistycznej Yeldeğirmeni, w którym ważny jest nie tylko wymiar fizyczny, ale również społeczny odnowy. W artykułie porównano przestrzenie w roku 2011 oraz 2014 i na przykładzie wydarzenia zorganizowanego przez „Ulica należy do nas” zwrócono uwagę na wagę wpływu działań społecznych na podniesienie jakości ulic jako przestrzeni publicznych.

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