

CELA 2007
The Council of Educators in Landscape Negotiating Landscape
Pen State, August, 14-19 2007

TIDE BETWEEN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE AT URBAN SQUARES
BY THE SEA

Ümit YILMAZ
Nuran ZEREN GÜLERSOY

Urban public places contain layers of personal and collective memories in their dynamic social, spatial, and political meanings. They are the reflections of cultures that generated, reformed, or transformed them.

This is a story of a series of unique historical public places in Istanbul, known as "iskele meydanlari": once the arrival points from the sea into small fishermen's villages then transformed into vibrant village squares overtime on the Bosphorus.

The squares became the "heart" of the local community and continued to provide a strong sense of arrival and sense of place with their geographical, cultural, and natural assets.

They remained as publicly owned and publicly governed viable public places in Istanbul's urban landscape, adapting to and surviving all transformation resulting from the changes in the society, technology, and their functions until recent years.

However, during the political, economic, and social changes in the last three decades, despite the similar characteristics in terms of their origins, geographical settings, community relations and physical morphology in all squares, some of them have lost their identity, declined or died while others flourished.

Nowadays, their cultural meanings and physical existence both have been threatened by the excessive appetite for the privatization of public assets in Istanbul.

CELA 2007
The Council of Educators in Landscape Negotiating Landscape
Pen State, August, 14-19 2007

These issues bring two questions:

1- What factors are essential for public places, and their unavailability would be detrimental along with the other factors which are valuable but not vital?

2- In our globalized world is there an answer to the question, why these places which have the highest real estate values should not privatize while local government save money from the maintenance and receive millions of dollars for these small properties?

When I had my sabbatical leave and received Fulbright scholarship and went to Istanbul Technical University, my alma-matter, Nuran and I outlined a research project based on these questions and conducted in the fall of 2006 with a group of students from planning and landscape architecture.

Public places have been extensively studied with their geographical, aesthetic, symbolic, social and political aspects as well as user's behaviour and perceptions.

Coinciding with increasing globalization accompanied by privatization, there are also several studies that focus on the governance, political functions and the ownership of the public places in the urban landscape.

According to the researchers who attempted to explain the actions and normative impulses behind the privatization of public space, one of the major impacts of the transformation from public to private is the establishment of private governance and/or consumption

These studies observe that the number of public spaces is in decline in urban settings due to:

- privatization,
- poor redesign and restoration,
- practices and processes that do not take into account, social diversity and equity. (Low, Taplin, and Scheld, 2005)

CELA 2007
The Council of Educators in Landscape Negotiating Landscape
Pen State, August, 14-19 2007

They indicate how public life has been challenged by the encroachment of privatization on public space and affected in terms of the democratic process and social equity.

The conceptualization of public space in the urban landscape remains in a penumbra of theory and terminology since the connotation of public and private varies in different cultures and constantly expand, contract and overlap as complex and fluid realms.

Beyond the normative conceptualizations of public and private space, some researchers advocate the dominance of lived experiences in the space, rather than the space itself as these concepts and users continually evolve and reflect new meanings of social and economic participation, the meaning of democracy, and public assertion of identity. (Crawford, 1995)

Similarly, the social history of urban space was also proposed to connect people to the urban landscape as it changes over time. These authors argue that social meaning in public places can be enhanced with public processes that recognize both the cultural and the political importance of place (Dolores, 1997).

THE CASE STUDY

The first group claimed that morphological studies are inadequate to explain the public and private places and approached from a contextual viewpoint. (Low, 2000)

The second group of researchers critiqued both approaches as a narrative of loss and proposed an alternative explanation of public spaces based on human experiences in the space.

In studying public places and providing a vision for the future, we propose a holistic approach, taking into account the geography and morphology in a contextual manner that also considers the human experiences in these places.

CELA 2007
The Council of Educators in Landscape Negotiating Landscape
Pen State, August, 14-19 2007

Therefore, our study explores the dynamics between public and private spaces, within the social, cultural, and economic contexts and examines the land-use transformations in the microcosm of the Iskele squares of Istanbul.

We preferred a holistic approach and took account.

The data for this international, collaborative research project was collected during the fall 2006-07 and spring 2007 semesters by a group of undergraduate landscape architecture and urban planning students at Istanbul Technical University with the participation of a professor from Clemson University.

Students worked on the mapping of current uses and conducted field surveys, photographic documentation, and user analyses. They were trained in observation, survey and documentation techniques at the beginning of the semester and conducted trial interviews before field study.

The observations were made during all days of the week and at different times of the day.

First, all ferry-landing squares were visited and researched in the urban and historical context. Each square was then analyzed in detail through observations, interviews, documentation, and mapping of uses and activity areas.

A variety of field methods were used to observe, record, and analyze activities and uses at the squares. Each square was assigned to students in groups of two. They used observation techniques and recorded events and activities that occurred at the square for a designated period on both weekdays and weekends.

Data collection included the uses, property ownership records, historic registration, demographics, access, and activities in the urban landscape.

CELA 2007
The Council of Educators in Landscape Negotiating Landscape
Pen State, August, 14-19 2007

More specifically, we examined each square within the following framework:

- Ownership and role of the public place,
- Fundamental roles of public space,
- Ownership and accessibility,
- The connection between democracy and space,
- Current examples of privatizing public space,
- Conflicts and challenges of the encroachment of privatization of space on public life,
- Human perception and use of space.

FINDINGS

Our findings confirm that pressures on public spaces are increasing due to several factors— as more private places are added to the urban fabric, existing public spaces are becoming more attractive for privatization due to their desired locations. In most cases, they are among the last remaining open spaces with privatization hanging above them like the sword of Damocles. One unique form of public places and the focus of our research, the iskele squares are also prone to privatization efforts as well as a result of changes in land use, transportation patterns, and the political realm.

However, there are several factors that have contributed to the maintained public ownership of iskele squares. As a democratic and free place, the iskele squares have no boundaries and are open to all users, regardless of their socio-economic backgrounds, gender, and age, even species. Diversity is another attribute of the squares, mothers with small children, senior citizens, students, professionals, people out of work, families, long term residents, newcomers, writers, poets, lovers, animals... can all be seen at the square side by side. As such, iskele squares enjoy a dedicated group of users, who live in local communities with strong attachments to these places as well as ephemeral but regular visitors who also have a connection.

The existing culture and history of the squares in addition to their sublime geographical locations create a strong sense of place for all users. The users not only learn from the place, but in return, add their unique contribution to

CELA 2007
The Council of Educators in Landscape Negotiating Landscape
Pen State, August, 14-19 2007

make it their own and as a result, feel "at home."

The variety of users and uses are critical in the actual and perceived safety of the iskele squares, another factor making the squares attractive for all users. Police or private security is non-existent since the presence of different segments of the society creates self-control while the surrounding residences provide 24-hour supervision even after businesses close.

The balance between the public and private is achieved by maintaining the squares under public ownership while allowing the daily encroachment of private uses to provide commercial services to visitors. We found this presents the optimum solution for the negotiations between the public and private. Public ownership ensures all democratic processes are allowed, while limited use by the private provides the variety of support services to users as an option, not as a condition to using the place.

The functionality of the passenger ferry is another factor present in squares. If the ferry square is on an active route, the square is perceived as the "front door" to the community as most locals stop and shop at the stores before going home. Where the ferry transportation services have stopped, the squares no longer exist as a daily part of local life, as car/bus transportation creates different life patterns.

CONCLUSION

In these remaining iskele squares, fundamental factors for sustaining a vibrant public place already exist-- safety, natural security without much interference from authorities, diversity of users, embedded cultural and social meanings... Disturbing any of these qualities, which are susceptible to most public and private administrations' desire to accomplish in public spaces to create economic benefit, would cost much more than the benefits. As long as the public owns its places, the private and public can both use the place harmoniously, but the reverse can be detrimental to the essential qualities that make these public places so unique. With private ownership, space becomes a commodity, with no sanctions to preserve the evidence of today or commitment to store social memories.

CELA 2007
The Council of Educators in Landscape Negotiating Landscape
Pen State, August, 14-19 2007

We concur with Low, who refers to place attachment as a psychological process similar to an infant's attachment to parental figures. If so, the death of these public places will leave behind many orphans.

Public ownership of public places will ensure that the power of these places will continue to reflect the past and current cultures maintain a stage for the public without a "skene" open to a sublime landscape, and provide a democratic platform for free speech, an accessible public place for everybody, including the locals, visitors, and tourists.

However, even if these crucial factors remain, there are new views on the future form of public space, democracy, and public interest in public places. These views foresee the public places as transient elements of the contemporary urban form and expect that the 21st century will change the possibilities of democracy as it will be accomplished electronically. If this vision of the future holds, "the new agora becomes the public network of singular sites, it is without any nostalgia we should say farewell to the old model of a monumental public space." We believe this is a rather bleak view of the future, and that by relaying these iskele squares as vibrant and healthy as our generation found and enjoyed them to the future generations.

There will be virtual places, and realities but the new agora will not be virtual space, as long basic human needs are not mutated (Maslow,1998).

Those of scholars who are ready to say farewell to the old model of public places should see the remaining iskele meydanlari. They might stop weaving hands and grab these agoras of our time.

The agora where Aristotle walked, but these are the agora of our time, where there significant cognitive learning.

CELA 2007
The Council of Educators in Landscape Negotiating Landscape
Pen State, August, 14-19 2007

References:

Crawford, Margaret; Low, Setha; Taplin, Dana; Scheld, Suzanne. (2005). Rethinking Urban Parks: Public Space and Cultural Diversity. USA: University of Texas Press.

Crawford, Margaret. (1995). Building the Workingman Paradise: The Design of American Company Towns, USA: Haymarket Series.

Hayden, Dolores. (1997) The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Kohn, Margaret. (2004). Brave Neighborhoods: The Privatization of Public Space. London: Routledge.

Low, Setha. (2000). On the Plaza, the Politics of Public Space and Culture. Texas Press.

Maslow, H. Abraham. (1998 third edition). Toward a Psychology of Being. NewYork: Wiley.