

STORY OF TAKSİM SQUARE'S TRANSFORMATION: "FROM DEATH'S STILLNESS TO LIFE'S HUBBUB"

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ABSTRACT

The study will comprise Taksim Square's transformation from the 16th century to the present day. Maps and plans of the periods will provide bases of comparison for the land use patterns. This rural area on the outskirts of the Pera region of the Ottoman capital initially served as the graveyard for the plague victims of the 16th century and was referred to as "Grand Champs des Morts". This area with its superb position overlooking the entrance to the Bosphorus, became public promenade grounds where people strolled along the paths separating graves of Moslems and of different Christian sects. This use soon covered the entire area so as to obscure its original function. The "Maksem" - the water distribution system for the area, built within the first half of the 18th century and giving its name to the region, stood as the sole edifice of the area for many years. Construction of the Dolmabahçe Palace and the army barracks also conferred an official identity to the region. However, the barracks' location shows that this district was considered to be on the city's outskirts even during the 19th century. First years of the Turkish Republic witnessed the city square's development with its monument which marked the beginning of the actual and important construction activities. Soon, Taksim became the new city centre with its ever continuing dynamism. Today, Taksim is a focal point of entertainment, art and cultural activities.

INTRODUCTION

Taksim Square, is indeed the heart of present day's İstanbul, as the main centre of all activities and of the city's transportation system. With the monument of Atatürk as the symbol of the modern Turkish Republic, Taksim Square is hosting meetings, celebrations, concerts, attracting a considerable section of İstanbul's population. One of the city's main avenues- to-day's "İstiklal caddesi" (avenue of Independence), the former "Grand Rue de Péra" or "Cadde-i Kebir" along which residences of the elite Levantines of the Ottoman era were concentrated- joins the Square at one end.

The aim of this study is to summarize the transformation of the Taksim Square, today's center of İstanbul and to point out the breaking points in that change, thus opening a discussion about the causal factors per era. Within this context, the subject is being treated under two headings, namely "the era of graveyards" and "the era of the square".

THE ERA OF GRAVEYARDS

Péra was an ancient rural settlement where, eventually, graveyards started to appear on the eastern and northern stretches (slopes of to-day's Tepebaşı and Kasımpaşa and present day's Taksim-Ayaspaşa-Gümüşsuyu areas) (Laqueur, 1993). The "Petit Champs des Morts" (Small Cemetery) on the east and the "Grand Champs des Morts" (Great Cemetery) on the north are represented as green densities in the general appearance of the region (Akın, 1998). These can be seen in the maps (Figure 1), gravures and photographs of the era.

The subject of this study is the "Grand Champs des Morts", that is the Great Cemetery where today's Taksim Square is situated. While the graveyard served as burial grounds for the plague victims of the 16th century, it was open to general use during the 17th century (Laqueur, 1993). There were Armenian Gregorian, Armenian Catholic, Latin Catholic, Protestant, Greek Orthodox cemeteries and also a Moslem cemetery on the slopes of Ayaspaşa. In time, these grounds became a very popular promenade and picnic area of the Pera region (Gülersoy, 1986) . The main reason for this new function was the superb position of the plane of to-day's

Taksim Square, with a panorama including the Üsküdar landscape on the Asian shore, the Leander's Tower and the entrance to the Bosphorus. Graveyards in the East, unlike the Western tradition, are integral parts of daily lives. This peculiar approach, coupled with the arboreal green graveyards' beautiful view and their proximity to the narrow streets of Pera, facilitated the area's transformation into a public strolling place. Baron de Bussiére, secretary to the French ambassador of the period, depicts this setting as an area where even the highest trees cannot obscure the view of the Bosphorus on the left and the Princes' Islands and the Topkapı Palace on the right, presenting a beautiful expanse of scenery (Gülersoy, 1986). In the 18th century, signs of change in the area's function started to appear with the noticeable example of a coffee-house serving the strollers (Gülersoy, 1986). Thus, the passive green land started to transform into an active green area.



Figure 1 Alb_000043_22, Beyoğlu Atatürk Library

The first construction in the region was the "Maksem" which was the reservoir for storing and distributing the city's water, supplied from the northern forests. In fact, the name of the square, "Taksim", meaning "to divide", was derived from this portioning of water for distribution. Built by decree of Sultan Mahmut I, in 1732-33, this building can still be seen at the junction of "İstiklal caddesi" and the "Taksim Square". Maksem was the most prominent building in the region until the middle of the 19th century, when the Ottoman government ordered removal of the Catholic and Protestant graves in the Grand Cemetery and commanded construction of "Taksim Topçu Kışlası" (Taksim Artillery Barracks) (Figure 2), "Taşkıışla" (Stone Barracks) and the Military Hospital on the area (Laqueur, 1993).



Figure 2 Alb_000007_012, Beyoğlu Atatürk Library

In the region's plan of 1882, it can be seen that there was no single large graveyard, but a Moslem cemetery (Büyük Mezaristan) (Laqueur, 1993) was situated on the slopes of Gümüşsuyu and an Armenian cemetery (Surp Hagop) (Miroğlu, 2009) was to be found between the Taksim Topçu Kışlası and the military school.

During this period, the idea of parks for public recreation developed in the Ottoman capital. In 1864, during the road works of Taksim-Pangaltı, the Christian cemeteries were moved from Taksim to Şişli and the area thus evacuated provided the grounds for a city park (Çelik, 1986) to be called the "Taksim Park". It took five years to finish the park which was the first example of its sort in İstanbul and the most popular strolling area for the Pera population (Çelik, 1986). According to observations of Edmondo De Amicis, "the Taksim Park was full of people and carriages on Sunday afternoons and the colourful world of Pera overflowed the beer gardens, cafes and amusement centres" (Çelik, 1986).

The Surp Hagop Armenian cemetery is represented with its original boundaries in the 1922 city plan (Figure 3), while the Muslim graveyard was reduced to two bands alongside the İnönü caddesi (Laqueur, 1993). Graves in the Ayaspaşa Moslem cemetery were completely removed in 1925. In the beginning of 1938, the İstanbul municipality first evacuated the Surp Hagop cemetery and the area was later allocated to apartment houses and parks (Miroğlu, 2009). The demolition of the graveyard was completed in 1939 and the unpossessed remnants of tombstones were used in the steps of the park and in the restoration of the Eminönü square (Miroğlu, 2009).



Figure 3 Map of 1922

THE ERA OF THE SQUARE

During the middle of the 19th century, after partial removal of the graveyards, military buildings were erected, and the biggest of them was the Taksim Topçu Kışlası. In front of this building, a vast plain provided grounds for soldiers' drills and maneuvers of artillery carriages. The district that developed over this area in later years derived its name "Talimhane" (drill field) from this history. The fact that large scale military establishments were built in this region points to Taksim's still being considered beyond the city's limits. In 1920s, the barracks, being no longer functional, were completely evacuated and the courtyard was transformed into the first urban stadium of İstanbul, hosting football matches. During the same epoch, the plain of Talimhane was divided into parcels with grid plans (Figure 4) over which apartment buildings started to rise.



Figure 4 Map of 1925

Taksim attained its city square status upon the erection of the Taksim monument which became the symbol of a new era, of the young Republic. During the Ottoman period, there existed no monuments in the present day's sense of the word except for some civil edifices of religious, administrative or social functions. Ceremonies taking place around a monument were peculiar to western societies. There was no such Ottoman tradition (Gülersoy, 1986). This need arose around the first half of the 19th century, with the advent of the Ottoman westernization movement that started with the declaration of *Tanzimat* in 1839, and culture importation from the west. During this period, the Ottoman government attempted to create the image of a "westernized city" by planning great avenues, boulevards and squares, reorganizing the urban texture according to the rules of geometry (Bilsel, 2007). This trend gained momentum during the first years of the modern Republic and found a visual expression in the setting of the monument, when Taksim plain, near the newly developing western Pera was chosen instead of the former center of İstanbul on the historical peninsula. The governors of the young Turkish Republic aimed to create a new İstanbul that turned away from the neglected, partially demolished Ottoman capital, worn out by the first World War, foreign occupation, frequent fires and economic problems which had become apparent at the turn of the 20th century. In place of the old city center symbolizing the Ottoman identity, a Square and a monument representing the Republic were planned at Taksim, neighbouring Pera that hosted the "western" population of İstanbul, closely resembling contemporary European cities, with its architecture and everyday life. Designed by the Italian sculptor Canonica the monument was inaugurated on August 8, 1928 with celebrations.

At the time of İsmet İnönü, the second president of the Republic, in 1940, the mayor of İstanbul, Dr. Lütfi Kırdar, with advisory help from the famous urban planner, Henri Proust, started developmental activities of wide scope. Within this context, the Taksim Square was re-organized with a modern style. "Topçu Kışlası" was demolished and the area of 26,000 square meters thus obtained was transformed into to-day's Taksim Park, otherwise known as "İnönü Promenade" (Figure 5). The mayor, in those days, asserted to have been under the impression of the Parisian parks, "Jardin des Tuileries" and "Jardin du Luxembourg" and that "İnönü Promenade" was indeed a public strolling place (Gülersoy, 1986).



Figure 5 Map of 1943

Taksim Square, with its expanding borders, became the venue for social events, protesting crowds and demonstrations as well as for official ceremonies and parades. Two blatant examples are the Wagons-Lits event of 1933 and the May 1 tragedy of 1977.

The fast rising buildings around the Square and its focal function of connecting the old and the new settlements of the city together with the construction of the opera building, contributed to the place's new character of a cultural centre. The opera building's construction took a long time: The works started in 1946 and completed in 1969. The building had to undergo serious reparation after the fire of 1970 and re-opened as "Atatürk Cultural Centre" in 1972 (Figure 6).



Figure 6 Atatürk Cultural Centre

Taksim is within the district of Pera which once was a rich, colourful place with western tastes. The greater part of the city's Greek minority lived there. However, the September 6-7 events of 1955 and the strained Turkish-Greek relations over the Cyprus dispute in the 1960s drove many of the Greeks to leave Istanbul. Some of the residents of the region had also to leave for economical difficulties hindering the upkeep of their houses. The rich shops, restaurants, cafes, theatres closed up and the splendour was no more. Then, a new group of people started to inhabit these partly abandoned houses. These were the "new citizens" the job-seeking rural people who had moved to Istanbul. The decrepit, abandoned houses provided cheap housing. These "new citizens" brought with them their ways of living, their habits, their memories all of which amalgamated with the remnant urban manners to result in a new sub-culture. A reflection of this cultural diffusion was in the streets of Beyoğlu (the former Pera) where alcohol, drugs and prostitution rendered the area "insecure and dangerous" especially after sunset.

There was a new development in the 1980s. These emigrated families living in Beyoğlu, feeling more like settled "citizens" and having acquired means to provide better living conditions for themselves, started to favour the recently expanding common housing projects and move to the new apartment blocks, gradually abandoning the historical Pera.

In 1990s, the social transformations together with Istanbul's becoming the centre of the service sector and nostalgia for the old Beyoğlu, started to appeal to artists,

students and many old natives of the city. İstiklal caddesi (Figure 7) and its surroundings were being re-discovered and new restaurants, cafes, cinema houses appeared. Gradually, the district has been transformed primarily into an area for tourists. İstiklal caddesi which is the main axis, became exclusively pedestrian, contributing to the area's becoming the centre of attraction of the city. Taksim Square is situated at one end of this axis and is one of the main focal points in the European side of İstanbul.



Figure 7 İstiklal Street, Beyoğlu

Nevertheless, various investigations have arrived at the conclusion that this square is accepted to be "the" centre of the city (Dülger Türkoğlu, 2002). The new spots of entertainment and arts as well as the cultural and congress centres of the area are attracting large crowds. Taksim Square of the 2000s and neighbouring streets, namely Sıraselviler caddesi and Talimhane have indeed become the region of hotels. With the recent project of "the Congress Valley", Taksim, together with Harbiye and Maçka, is undergoing a new process of reconstruction.

CONCLUSION

Study of the transformation of Taksim Square as the center of İstanbul through centuries shows a strong change of its identity, from a vast graveyard to public promenade, to military grounds, to Taksim Gardens and within the process of the construction of a new nation, turning to the westernized city center. The previously lifeless area has been transformed into a lively center of culture, art, entertainment and celebrations thus depicting a transformation from "death's stillness" to "life's hubbub".

The Taksim Square, as İstanbul's center has undergone an enormous transformation engendered by its rich heritage, cultural diversity and cosmopolitan population. However, being exposed to global influences its transformation is an ever continuing process, whereby prediction of the future forces the boundaries of the imagination.

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