The Embedded Digital Realm in Urban Space

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Abstract

This research reinterprets urban design theories. Its main aim is to reconsider social structure, which is comprised of individuals and their mobile communication tools. It is inevitable that our mobile society constituted in urban space necessitates a reconsideration of urban identity defined through the cognition and identification of the components of the city. Over the ten years, we've witnessed a perception of urban space and location in which awareness is quite different when individuals use smart phones in wayfinding process or when defining familiar-unfamiliar places.

First part includes a short account of the questionnaire research results. This enables us to interpret the effect of mobile communication devices on individuals' meeting places in urban space. In the second part, the frame of the subject is extended with an example of a sensational mass movement to depict the power of social media. This section based on the Gezi Park demonstrations in Istanbul in 2013, examines the role of social media to identify urban space and redefined identities of urban space. The constant information flow related to particular locations during the Gezi Park demonstrations has created imperishable memories for these places in Istanbul. This research is criticizing the acknowledged images of urban space beyond architectural determinism and asks how the perception of place identities has changed in light of new modes of communication.

Keywords:

Urban identity, urban public space, mobile phones, mobile communication, social media, vested identities

1. Introduction

The objective of this research is to interpret acknowledged urban design theory in light of social structure in urban space which is comprised of individuals and their mobile communication tools. The existence of 'mobile society' in urban space necessitates the reconsideration of the urban identity issue described through cognition and identification of physical and spatial components of urban settings. Hence in the era of wireless connection, physical space and virtual space should be considered together in urban space to define place identities. Shared pictures and texts on social media posted from specific locations are consolidating the identities or enriching the meanings of these places.

In *The Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere* (1962), Jürgen Habermas emphasizes the role of communication in public opinion. However, the means of communication of recent times were unthinkable when Richard Sennett (1974), Jürgen Habermas (1962) or Kevin Lynch (1961) was writing about urban social life and cognitive mapping. This

research reviews urban design theory from the perspective of today's mobile communication practices by looking at the impact of social media as one of the most effective channels of perpetual connection with little to no cost and the world to bear witness.

The outcome and earnings of mobile communication possibilities in urban space is conceptualized by 2 examples. One of them is based on a survey conducted in Ankara, Turkey, during 2009 and 2010. It covers the analysis of the responses of several hundred participants to a questionnaire which attempted to identify behavioral changes before and after the advent of the mobile phone. The second subject is based on the recent findings of summer 2013 Gezi Park protests in Istanbul. We all have witnessed the impact of mobile communication possibilities in urban space via social media during mass social movements particularly in the Middle East during the 'Arab Spring'. Gezi Park protests that began in Istanbul and spread throughout the country was one of the examples of mass society movements but it is quite unique because 85 percent of social media posts were sent from within Turkey, whereas in the other examples the majority was sent from abroad [3]. Although the protestors against police violence seem to be lost but Gezi Park protests have resulted with the success of social media. Accordingly, the Gezi Park mass movement itself and how the movement patterns and meeting places constantly defined and redefined through instant shares on social media are the noteworthy issues that shed light on this research.

2. The survey on Meeting Places

This survey is conducted in 2009 and 2010 includes the responses of 630 participants to a questionnaire that attempts to ascertain behavioral changes before and after mobile phone usage. The fundamental question is "How have the meeting places of Ankara are changed in meanings in the mobile phone era". The first section of the survey looks for changes in the cognitive mappings of the citizens of Ankara due to the onset of mobile phone use. The criteria for this survey were; 1) The respondents should have been familiar with the city; 2) The respondents should have experienced the city before and after the advent of mobile phone usage.

According to the answers, the meeting points on the city map were scattered in urban space and they are placed more on streets rather than pointing out nodes as landmarks. An additional extended questionnaire was carried out with denizens of different ages, backgrounds and educational levels aiming to achieve an objective interpretation; including 630 participants in total. The inventory of meeting places in Ankara according to different age groups showed a considerable change. One of the most critical issues of this research was that the specific interior spaces or service points (metro stations, bus stops) were defined as the meeting places by denizens. This shows that the meeting places became the simultaneously scheduled activities, rather than situated /organized activities. The paths (streets or boulevards) in the city center were preferred as meeting places more often according to the questionnaire results (fig.1 and fig.2). After the advent of the mobile phone, meeting places were scattered on these paths. Therefore, it can be interpreted that the meeting places were also perceived in linear form besides point wise. Unlike urban theories which tell us these components of urban structure are ascendant elements for a city to be legible, secondary research (Barlas, A., Şentürk, M., 2012) reveals that these points of references are lose efficiency during cognition mapping processes in the era of mobile information and communication technologies.

Fig. 1 - Meeting Places before mobile phone
Private archive, Meltem Şentürk Asıldeveci.

Fig. 2 - Meeting Places after mobile phone
Private archive, Meltem Şentürk Asıldeveci.

In order to bring further comment on urban design theories, it is helpful to review what the theory says so far. By the 1960s, the production of flexible environments was increasingly seen in terms of amalgamating the multifunction design principles of modernism with the new media of computers. During the early 1970s a group succeeded in isolating a large number of so-called "patterns" which specify some of the spatial relations necessary to wholeness in the city. The patterns which are defined ranged from the largest urban scale to the smallest scale of building construction (Alexander, Neis, Anninou, King, 1987). Then, Amos Rapoport in "Human Aspects of Urban Form" brought the close relationship between built form and culture to the attention of architects and planners. Urban form is clearly seen as resulting from the interplay of a number of factors such as location, transportation networks, land value and topography (Rapoport, 1977). Mobile technologies breathe a new life into the multi-layered structure and restoration of urban space. As Scott Mc Quire declares, the contemporary city is a media-architecture complex resulting from the proliferation of spatialized media platforms and the production of hybrid spatial ensembles. While this process has been underway at least since the development of technological images in the context of urban "modernization" in the mid-19th century, its full implications are only coming to the fore with the extension of digital networks (McQuire, 2008). The predominant theory of urban identity is largely fed by visually based explanations, supported by interpersonal and inter-communal relations. In this sense, new communication practices and virtual environments of social media embedded into urban structure bring a new approach to the subject of urban design theories as well as the meaning of urban identity.

3. Vested Identities of Urban Public Places

Public places are consolidated by the affordances of smart phones, and question acknowledged urban design theories. The value of the flow of instant information is crucial. It is like spatial knowledge in urban space because the person standing in an urban sphere is connected to everybody and everywhere with his smart phone in addition to the real social composition. Such that, in the previous years we have observed a determinative role of social media in demonstrations in Egypt and Tunisia; we experienced it in Istanbul at the Gezi Park protests too. The Gezi Park protests arose from disputed urban development plans, which had little public input to remove Taksim Gezi Park, the last significant green space in the center of Istanbul, and replace it with a shopping mall. The protest and its effect on social media increased exponentially with the police intervention.

29th of May 2013, was the first day of the police intervention in Gezi Park and thus the beginning of the protests in Istanbul. According to the New York University Social Media and Political Participation (SMaPP) Department, 7,328,937 Tweeter messages were sent on that day and 18,835,909 protest-related messages were sent on June 1. Hashtag direngeziparki is used more or less four million times during Gezi Park protests. Turkish Twitter users increased from 1.8 million to ten million people [1]. These statistics show that people rely on social media in order to be informed about what is going on in urban space. During the Protests, participants used social media to define safe and unsafe places and they transformed the meanings of locations. Via Twittter and Facebook messages, the protestors declared a mosque as an infirmary, a hotel lobby as a shelter, a café as an emergency battery charging spot and made these places to be used in that way. In 2017, the number of smart phone users in Turkey is estimated to reach 40.5 million compared to just 16 million in 2013. Along comes the importance of the collaboration of ICTs and urban design practices in order to breathe new life into the debate of successful cities.
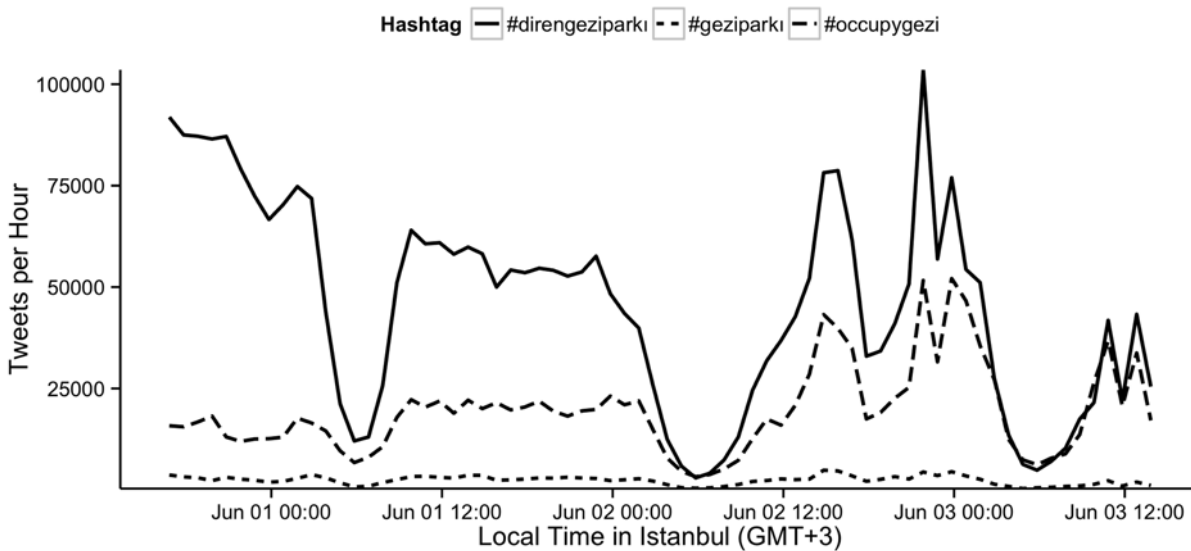

Fig. 3 - The density of hashtags in the Twitter messages during Gezi Park Demonstrations, https://www.technopat.net/2013/06/04/gezi-parki-ve-sosyal-medya-etkisi/ (04.06.2016).

Spontaneous and reflexively growing crowd of Gezi Park movement raise many questions in the fields of urban design, urban sociology, and architecture. The architect Murat Çetin (2013) says that Gezi Park is a real architecture and urban design laboratory for all of us. As suitable to the atmosphere of the post-modern era virtually started on social media, digital space turns into a concrete, physical, archaic and primitive image and converted to one basic land struggle at the 21st century at the heart of Istanbul. Çetin,M (2013) explains that the self-organized urban space and the urban space network is formed during Gezi Park protests (camping tents, common service tents, soup kitchen, infirmaries, free chairs, etc.) [2]. Susan Buck-Morss called Gezi Park protests and similar kinds of mass movements as "global crowd". She argues that the diplomacy of global crowd has created its own street art, political performances, common cultures, tweets and etc. According to the research of New York University's Social Media and Political Participation Department (SMaPP), the Gezi Park protests should not be compared to the other movements such as Occupy Wall Street and Arab Spring, it is unique because 85 percent of the posts were sent from Turkey whereas the majority was sent from foreign countries in other examples and because social media was used as a driving force as argued above [3].

Fig. 4 - Social Media, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/09/turkey-social-media-smartphones-occupy-gezi-protests_n_3411542.html (18.01.2017).

3. Conclusion

My aim is to illuminate both everyday practices in urban spheres and the reliability of current urban design theories. In this way, a new theoretical explanation of urban public place and urban social life is described by the role of mobile communication technologies in everyday life. Constant information flow related to particular locations during the Gezi Park demonstrations has created imperishable memories for these places in the city of Istanbul. The power of social media has ensured these memories of particular places in Istanbul are known worldwide.

What happens during the Gezi Park protests are extreme but the protests were crucial example to prove possibilities of establishing common platforms of sharing place memories, building collective memory, artistic and intellectual productivity, consequently increasing the diversity of place identities. Among the redefined places in Gezi Park and around it, I mention two of them: *yeryüzü sofraları* (translation: dinner table of the earth surface) and *park forumları* (translation: forum of the parks). These are the examples of created places of Gezi Park demonstrations. Yeryüzü sofraları are the tables are set up on the Istiklal Street along with an approach embracing everybody and open to everyone. The food was served and shared by the protestors. The reputation of them spread very fast with the hashtag #YeryüzüSofraları on Twitter and started to settle in different cities right after Istiklal Street.

Yeryüzü Sofraları was another unique creation like other places that brought Gezi Park Protests to the city. Following Gezi Park Demonstrations Ramadan started. These tables are established on the Istiklal Street along with an approach embracing everybody and open to everyone. The reputation of the *Yeryüzü Sofraları* spread very fast with the hashtag #YeryüzüSofraları on Twitter and started to settle in different cities right after Istiklal Street.

Fig. 5 – Yeryüzü sofraları at Istiklal Street, Istanbul, https://onedio.com/haber/ramazan-a-bes-kala-yeryuzu-sofralarinin-tum-bilinmeyenleri-527040 (18.01.2017).

Another creative example of collective memory is the Park forumları. After the Gezi Park camp was cleared by riot police on June 15, protesters began to meet in other parks all around Turkey and organized public forums to discuss ways forward for the protests. *Park Forumları* were a free platform of speech. These unique formations of urban space were one of the most important bi-products of Gezi Park protests which are created in the synergy of protestors.

Learning from the collaboration, communication and organizational skills in the Gezi Park protests, we can argue that the mobile communication practices in urban space over a very long period of time can leave permanent marks on the city. The presence of real encounters in physical space is essential but urban connoisseurs should not underestimate the effect of mobile communication possibilities on random meetings and location awareness. We must think about urban public place through technical, habitual, fluxional notions with all aspects in order to conceptualize urban design theories and place identities.

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