

## **From Privatized to Constructed Public Spaces: Observations from Turkish Cities<sup>1</sup>**

**Aysu Kes-Erkul, PhD**  
Hacettepe University  
Department of Sociology  
Beytepe Campus, 06800  
Çankaya, Ankara  
Turkey

### **Abstract**

*The examination of urban public space in terms of its definition, significance and use has always been an important issue for urban studies. In recent decades, with the changing role of urban space within economic relations through deindustrialization and the rise of service sector sparked the discussion about the tension between public and private realms in the urban context. Turkey, on the other hand, is going through a new phase of urban growth in that manner. With the growing share of construction sector within the economic system, the construction of big projects such as high-rise office buildings and residences, has been putting a substantial amount of pressure on the authentic public places of the cities. These newly constructed spaces claim to create new public spaces that have features similar to the privatized public spaces of the Western countries, such as US. Therefore, this paper aims to demonstrate that the constructed public spaces are increasingly becoming the locus of the discussion about the condition and the future of urban public spaces.*

**Keywords:** Urban public spaces, privatization of space, constructed public spaces, Turkey

### **1. Introduction**

Turkey has been going through a significant era in terms of the scale and scope of urbanization in metropolitan areas. The major cities such as Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir are seeing important changes in their landscapes with the construction of high-rise office buildings, hotels and luxury residences. In addition, many 'mega construction projects' including new highways are (re)shaping the spatial organization of these cities. The urban public spaces are also getting their share from this process. It has become more and more questionable to define any urban space as public, given the controversial features of newly built urban environment. Therefore, urban residents and scholars are witnessing the tension between newly constructed and existing (authentic) public spaces.

The discussions about the public spaces of today generate two main arguments. The first one suggests that today's 'urban public spaces' are not 'authentic' in terms of the characteristics of being 'public'. The other argument on the other hand, denies the existence of a crisis, on the grounds that the definition of 'public' has always been problematic. The tension between the inclusivity and exclusivity of public spaces lies beneath this standpoint (Graham and Aurigi, 1997: 20). This discussion obviously requires further inquiry in the context of this paper, which aims to look closer to the 'constructed' public spaces of our times.

### **2. Discussions on the Impossibility of Defining of Public Space**

Urban scholars agree on the fact that the definition of 'public space' has various aspects, each of them are problematic in themselves. Richard Sennett argues that the modern meaning of 'public' entails not only the social life outside the realm of family and friends, but also the realm of acquaintances and strangers which includes a wide diversity of people (2003: 17). When it comes to the 'publicness' of urban space, as Zukin (1995:266; cited by Atkinson, 2003:1831) indicates 'there is no single overriding vision of the city's public'.

---

<sup>1</sup> A previous version of this paper was presented at The 11<sup>th</sup> European Sociological Association Conference, August 28-31, 2013, Torino, Italy

However, it is widely accepted that the public spaces are integral parts of cities. For David Harvey, the nature of city as ‘the site where people of all sorts and classes mingle to produce a common if perpetually changing and transitory life’ is essential to understand the public character of urban spaces (2012:67). Gottdiener, on the other hand, defines public spaces of city centers as spaces that allow free interaction among a variety of people (2001:83). Accessibility is also considered as an essential feature of public spaces. A space’s publicness can be seen as the extent to which people have access without asking permission (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009:7). Putting these defining qualities together, public spaces can also be characterized by democracy in terms of celebrating cultural diversity, coming across strangers and being anonymous (Ward Thomson, 2002: 60). The relationship between democracy and public space has a historical aspect, too. Public space occupies an important ideological position in democratic societies, which can be traced back to Greek ‘agora’ (Mitchell, 1995:116). Urbanists still believe that inclusive urban public spaces remain an important political space. These public places are iconic and known places of public gathering, as well as peripheral places occupied by subaltern groups and minorities (Amin, 2008:6). On the other hand, public space definition is related to perception as well as physical practices. It carries a presumption that within these spaces we will, necessarily, encounter ‘others’ (Bottomley and Moore, 2007: 172). However other scholars claim on the contrary, such as Atkinson, who believes no space has ever held the status of providing people unrestricted access and right of way. He questions the notion of a public or citizenry with universal access rights to a geographical area and asks if everyone should have access or if this should be restricted for safety? (Atkinson, 2003:1831). Public spaces host an array of activities that overlap and thereby become sites of conflict (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009:8). These remarks show that the meaning of being public can vary in terms of what they bring into the urban social life and the everyday practices of urban residents.

Aside from the definitions of the public space from a theoretical point of view, today most urban scholars think about the distinction of public and private spaces, as a crucial binary opposition that can help distinguish between different urban spaces. However these two seems intertwined in contemporary metropolitan areas. Today, the sites of civic and political formation are plural and distributed. The sites of political formation now include the micro politics of work, school, community and neighborhoods, in which urban public space has arguable secondary importance. The dynamics of gathering in and passing through streets, parks, squares etc. are more likely to be interpreted in terms of their impact on consumer culture among other things (Amin, 2008:6). As Hannigan simply puts, issues of public and private space in terms of who uses it, who feels welcome to use and who does not even try to use it are relevant for urban spaces, including the entertainment sites (1998: 181). Similarly, Zukin discerns ‘Authentically’ public spaces, which broke down the traditional barriers that excluded women the poor and children (Zukin, 2009: 129), as opposed to the ‘public spaces’ of today, which seems more likely to create new barriers. For Mitchell, on the other hand, this discussion may be irrelevant, since the public spaces have always somewhat been places of exclusion from his perspective (1995:116). This line of discussion makes the privatization of urban space an embedded issue in the examination of public spaces today.

### ***3. Privatization of Urban Space – Public Spaces as Consumption Microcosmoses***

As discussed by many scholars of urban life such as Banerjee, the growing trend of ‘privatization’ of public spaces enhances the sense that the public realm is in decline (2001:12). In today’s metropolitan areas, the urban spaces of all sorts have become an asset for the investors and local governments, given the conditions of consumer culture. According to Michael Gunder and many other scholars, this is mainly due to the hegemonic position of neoliberalism in urban policy, which indicates that the urban space is significantly influenced by the logic of global neoliberalism (2010:299). In that context, the neoliberal city is conceptualized as an entrepreneurial one, which competes with others for investments, innovations and economic development through privatization and cost-benefit analysis (Leitner et. al. 2007: 4). Brenner and Theodore suggest that the cities around the world are the spaces where a variety of neoliberal initiatives have been articulated (2002:349). This conceptualization on the other hand, brings about the new critical role of consumption in the urban context, in terms of ‘consumption of space’ and ‘spaces of consumption’. In such a setting, nowadays, the urban lifestyle is so closely related to the consumption patterns of the urban residents that the cities are in competition to become nodes of consumer goods (Zukin, 1998: 825-826). Therefore, the appearances and/or the forms of urban public space are considered as strategic elements of attracting consumers to the city. This tendency to make cities look more pleasing to the eyes of the urban residents is reflected in the urban design in several ways. One form of creating attractive urban spaces is reshaping the existing places.

According to Zukin, the 'image crisis' of a derelict city leads to middle-class outrage about the quality of life and business people's anxiety about the investment climate. This outrage and anxiety are the cultural sources of the current era of privatization (Zukin, 2009:130). Making the city center an attractive place for middle classes is considered significantly related to the privatization of public space, which means control and management of the 'authentically' public places. The two factors in this process are increasing sense of fear and commodification of urban spaces as consumption zones (Graham and Aurigi, 1997: 21). The shopping malls and theme parks serve as desirable substitutes for the consumption and entertainment demands of the urban residents who believe that the sense of community is destructed by suburbanization and fear of urban crime (Gottdiener, 2001:123-126). However, for example the mall is a controlled space (Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998:291), therefore its capacity to revive the sense of community is questionable. According to Banerjee, these pseudo-public spaces are actually private spaces, which welcome the 'public' as long as they are customers or the workers of the businesses located on the premises (2001:12). The key idea behind this process is making the urban environment safe and clean enough for the affluent consumers who fled the urban centers and distanced themselves in suburbs and gated-communities. Atkinson argues citing Zukin (1995); democratization of public space was entangled with the question of fear for physical security (Atkinson, 2003:1831). These themed settings are created to provide an illusion of public space, from which the risks and uncertainties are carefully edited out (Banerjee, 2001:13). From the investor's point of view on the other hand, the property values in and around the public spaces rely on the safety and cleanness of the area, which is considered equivalent to no homeless people, no muggers, no graffiti (Zukin, 2009: 127-128). The shopping malls, as seemingly public but actually private spaces strengthen the boundaries between the consuming and non-consuming (such as the old and the poor) public by positioning the latter as 'the other' to the dominant order through surveillance and control of consumption (Crewe and Beaverstock, 1998:291). The new urban architecture reflects extraordinary attention to monitoring who enters and leaves, and keeping an eye on people while they are on the premises (Cybriwsky, 1999: 226). As an outcome of privatization of the urban space wealthy residents are increasingly retreating to urban centers, especially gentrified residential zones and luxury hotels. The homeless and the working poor are sequestered in decaying neighborhoods (Hannigan, 1998: 180). As suggested by Featherstone, this process can be considered as postmodernization in terms of restructuring the sociospatial relations through redevelopment of inner cities as sites of consumption (2007:105). When public spaces are redeveloped, some people are planned for as the target users, while others are planned against (Loukaitou-Sideris and Ehrenfeucht, 2009:3).

In many metropolitan areas around the world, the urban parks have become the locus of privatization in terms of making the city more clean and safe for the potential customers. Many parks are now managed by private firms instead of local governments. According to the critics of private management of the parks as a form of privatization of public spaces, such an arrangement serves to control the parks in a way that leads to the exclusion of certain social groups such as homeless, push-car vendors, street artists and the young. This process thereby reinforces the social inequality in the city and weakens the diversity of experiences and contacts that define urban life (Zukin, 2009: 128). Herbert Muschamp's (1995) 'Business Class City' aims to fuse suburban security with standardization with urban congestion and pizzazz (cited by Hannigan, 1998: 181). The centers of cities become more like the premier privately owned public space of our time, the suburban shopping malls that are clean, safe and predictable (Zukin, 2009: 128). For example, Red Cross blood donor clinics are allowed, whereas groups related to a political cause are not, as well as the political demonstrations (Hannigan, 1998: 182). In the privatized tracts of land in or adjacent to the central business core, the difference between private and public space become visible. As Crilley (1993:153) shows, corporate producers space foster the 'illusion of a homogenized public' by filtering out 'the social heterogeneity of the urban crowd, and substituting it with a flawless fabric of white middle-class work, play and consumption (cited by Mitchell, 1995:120). In her 2009 book 'Naked City' Sharon Zukin investigates the parks in New York City that are managed by Local Development Corporations and Business Improvement Districts, which act with private sector rationality (Zukin, 2009:128). In this discussion, which focuses on the Union Square of New York City, Zukin argues that it is still a public space, even though it is managed and controlled, considering that as the defeat of private by the public (Zukin, 2009: 128,157-158).

Second strategy to create consumption cosmoses for the urban middle classes is to build new places in the form of shopping and entertainment spaces. According to Mike Featherstone, the central feature of these centers is that these are privately owned (from the very beginning as opposed to being privatized in the process) and they are under surveillance in order to exclude the disturbing disorder (2007:102-103). The shopping malls of all sorts are the major forms of these constructed consumption centers.

According to Gottdiener, shopping malls have overarching features such as having a unified image in order to attract consumers and being private spaces aimed at realizing capital as part of their instrumental function (2001:83).

As understood from this review of the relevant literature, both sides of the discussion bring us to the issue of privatization and its impact on the urban public spaces. Given the fact that, 'privatization' transforms the urban places, be them public or not, through monitoring, management and various forms of social control, we can argue that the initial form of these places does not matter when it comes to considering them as public spaces in crisis. In other words, constructed or transformed, all urban and suburban places are under the same pressure of 'privatization'. It should also be noted that, the competition between authentic public spaces of city centers (the ones that are not privatized yet) and the privatized public spaces (either built from scratch or reshaped) remains as a prevailing tension in the urban context (Gottdiener, 2001:90). In case of developing countries such as Turkey, the newly constructed urban spaces seem to be the predominant issue at the moment, given the economic pressure on urban areas.

#### ***4. An Overview of Constructed Public Places in Turkey***

As an outcome of being a developing country and/or an 'emerging market', Turkey is going through a new phase of rapid urbanization. Even though this has been the case for decades, the dynamics of the process significantly changed over the last decade or so. Given the growth of the construction sector and wider availability of loans, as part of the government policies reinforcing housing sector through TOKI (Housing Development Administration of Turkey) and its public-private partnerships, Turkish cities started to grow in a huge rate. The housing market has become extremely competitive in the process, which also made advertising and marketing of vital importance for the construction companies. These relatively new dynamics regarding the rise of construction sector and the transformation of urban public spaces are usually associated with Istanbul as the biggest and fastest growing metropolitan area in Turkey, which is also presented as a global city by local and central governments. However, other major cities in Turkey, such as Ankara (the capital) and Izmir are going through the same transformation, as well.

In Turkish metropolitan cities, the most significant housing projects of the past decade have been increasingly in the form of 'big projects' in terms of their size and cost. These projects are substantial in number and they offer not only housing/office units but also several facilities, as well as 'security' to the potential residents. Consequently, the marketing strategy of these projects involves the promotion of a certain urban lifestyle, which claims to include both private and public realms. This offered lifestyle is defined as clean, safe, far from the city center enough to avoid the chaotic urban life, close enough to reach to the hearth of the city in minutes, in case you have to, since these projects include shopping malls, gyms and several leisure facilities. Thus the residents do not need to step outside the main gate to enjoy the life outside. The brochures, flyers and other promotional material of these projects include a 'social life' and 'common places' element, which aims to create a sense of community. Thereby, these projects emphasize the cultural symbols of urban consumption that are desirable for the urban middle and upper-middle classes by creating such spaces, including the buildings themselves (Zukin, 1998: 826). In other words, these projects resort to the 'public' spaces they create in order to promise a sense of community. In most cases these created public spaces are in the forms of shopping malls of various sizes, recreational areas and sporting facilities such as gyms.

In terms of the sense of community and public spaces promised, these projects have some major common features. First of all, they claim to provide a safe and clean environment in which the residents can enjoy being a part of the community. The security of these places is ensured with security cameras and guards. They are also managed and maintained by private firms, so that the 'public' areas are guaranteed to keep their exclusive and desirable status. Given the various definitions and essential features of the authentic public spaces, these features can be argued to be contradicting with the qualities of public space. The big housing projects claim to create such public spaces within their borders, so that the residents enjoy the feeling of a neighborhood life and being among the public without the unpredicted encounters and unwanted consequences such as mugging and panhandling. Even though, this image can be considered similar to the suburban lifestyles, in Turkish case, this process of creating a controlled lifestyle is different than North America and Europe, since most of these projects are located relatively close and connected to the urban centers. Many of them do not necessarily require car ownership (even though the public transportation system is not always adequate) or long commutes to the business centers.

So it can be argued that they are creating ‘private islands’ within the city limits. The residents can enjoy the controlled environment without going very far.

The perceptions of urban residents about the ‘publicness’ of the urban space also have an important part in the formation of these projects. The ways in which the urban middle classes think about different parts of the city elevates the demand for the lifestyle offered by such projects and thereby encourage the investment to the construction of privatized public spaces. There is significant data available about the place preferences and urban space use of urban residents’ in Turkey (Erişen, 2003; Ayata, 2005; Kes-Erkul, 2010). Especially residents of the housing projects on the edge of the city centers, which are now well connected to the center, seems to have clear opinions about the public spaces. For example, the authentic public spaces of Ankara, such as Kizilay Square and the surrounding shopping and business district is precisely avoided by the residents of housing complexes, due to its chaotic nature, the crowds, traffic and poor physical conditions such as shattered sidewalks etc. Therefore, the residents of the new communities turn to specific ‘islands’ that were constructed as public spaces, managed and controlled to shop or use while running errands or to spend leisure time (Kes-Erkul, 2010). The way they perceive these places and the reasons they have for choosing them over the ‘authentic’ public spaces are consistent with the discussion about the privatized public spaces. These places they use are safe, monitored, clean and convenient to meet their demands, as well as free from the unwanted urban crowds.

The change in the formation of urban public spaces is not limited to these big housing projects. The construction upsurge is also apparent in the business districts. In Turkish capital Ankara, high-rise office buildings are mushrooming, which is a process that leads to a shift in the zoning of the city. Kizilay Square and the surrounding area (which has expanded over time) has been the major business and government district for decades. However, over the course of last decade, many new government buildings were built on the western axis of the city center, around the highway connecting Ankara to cities on the west side of the country. These new government buildings are also in the form of high-rises. This development attracted the attention of developers and construction firms and kick-started the construction activities in that area (see Picture 1 and Picture 2). Many commercial office buildings, luxury residences, hotels and shopping malls are opening one after another. In terms of the construction of urban public spaces, these developments and projects follow a quite similar pattern. Most of them are big projects with regard to their size and the amount of investment. Plus, they are quite similar to the residential ‘islands’, which are described above. The major similarity between these projects is their claim to bring the public and private realms together. To achieve this, they build luxury apartment blocks next to office buildings and complete the projects with shopping malls, which include gyms, fine dining restaurants, casual cafes and movie theaters. That way, these projects extend the scale of control over public life to a new level to include work, leisure and housing in a way that blurs the fine line between private and public. Plus, a single firm manages all these facilities and services within the project to ensure desired consistency between both realms.

Another aspect of these constructed spaces is the way in which the open spaces are used within these projects. Increasingly, the shopping malls and other facilities are constructed with functional open spaces around the buildings. Some of these are in the form of landscaped parks with exotic plants and benches; some are designed as small plazas with marble pavements. In the beginning, these open spaces were just a part of the architecture of the projects. However in time, they turned into extensions of shopping malls and recreational facilities. Increasingly, the previously mentioned claim of providing a desirable public space to the residents and customers of the projects has evolved into a new form through the ‘public events’ organized by the managements of these newly constructed projects. The open spaces of these projects that are framed as public spaces are now being used as activity venues for concerts, shows, activities for children, movie screenings and even for celebrations of national holidays (see Picture 3). Even though all these activities, some of which are free of charge, obviously aim to attract more customers to these consumption cosmoeses; they thereby enhance the pseudo-publicness of these private spaces. However, it can be argued that the use of these constructed ‘all-in-one’ places for housing, leisure and public events actually corresponds to withdrawal from the actual urban public in the sense of mingling with others.

### **5. Concluding Remarks**

As mentioned earlier, the transformation of urban public spaces in Turkey is a common issue for many big cities. Ankara, as the capital of Turkey, is also experiencing the process in many ways.

The overwhelming upsurge of construction projects is reshaping the urban space to an extent that it transforms even the spatial organization of governmental bodies. The observations that were conveyed and discussed above reveal that the urban public life has been influenced by that process significantly. As the new big projects construct so-called/ pseudo public spaces of their own, urban residents, especially the middle classes, gradually abandon the authentic public spaces. In case of Ankara, it is apparent that such a process contributes to the decline of authentic public spaces of the city such as Kizilay Square and urban parks near downtown. Such a construction of private public spaces contributes to and deepens the already prevailing urban segregation throughout the city.



**Picture 1: Developments on the Western axis of Ankara**



**Picture 2: Formation of new Business District in Western Ankara**



**Picture 3: A public space constructed by a shopping mall in Western Ankara**

**References**

- Amin, A. (2008). Collective Culture and Urban Public Space. *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy, Action*, 12:1, 5-24.
- Ayata, S. (2005). Yeni Orta Sınıf ve Uydu Kent Yaşamı. In D. Kandiyoti & A. Saktanber (Eds) *Kültür Fragmanları: Türkiye’de Gündelik Hayat* (pp.37-56). İstanbul: Metis Yayınları.
- Benarjee, T. (2001). The Future of Public Space: Beyond Invented Streets and Reinvented Places. *Journal of American Planning Association*, 67:1, 9- 24.
- Bottomley, A & Moore, N. (2007). From Walls to Membranes: Fortress polis and the Governance of Urban Public Space in 21<sup>st</sup> Century Britain. *Law Critique*, 18, 171-206.
- Brenner, N. & Theodore, N. (2002). Cities and Geographies of ‘Actually Existing Neoliberalism’. *Antipode*, 34:3, 349- 379.
- Crewe, L. & Beaverstock, J. (1998). Fashioning the City: Cultures of Consumption in Contemporary Urban Spaces. *Geoforum*, 29:3, 287-308.
- Cybrivaky, R. (1999). Changing Patterns of Urban Public Space: Observations and Assessments from the Tokyo and New York Metropolitan Areas. *Cities*, 16:4, 223-231.
- Erişen, O. (2003). Suburbanization in Türkiye within the Process of Integration to Global Development and a New Life-Style Settlement. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, METU, Ankara.
- Featherstone, M. (2007). *Consumers Culture and Postmodernism* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications.
- Gottdiener, M. (2001). *The Theming of America: American Dreams, Media Fantasies and Themed Environments* (2nd ed.). Boulder Colorado: Westview Press.
- Graham, S. & Aurigi, A. (1997). Virtual Cities, Social Polarization and the Crisis in Urban Public Space. *Journal of Urban Technology*, 4:1, 19-52.
- Gunder, M. (2010). Planning as the Ideology of (neoliberal) Space. *Planning Theory*, 9:4, 298-314.
- Hannigan, J. (1998). *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis*. (2005 E-Library ed.). London: Routledge.
- Harvey, D. (2012). *Rebel Cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. London: Verso.
- Kes-Erkul, A. (2010). Ankara’da Kent içi Hareketlilikte Konut ve Yer Tercihinin Aktör-Yapı Dinamikleri. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Hacettepe University, Ankara
- Leitner, H., Sheppard, E.S., Sziarto, K., & Maringanti, A. (2007) Contesting Urban Futures: Decentering Neoliberalism. In H. Leitner, J. Peck, & E. S. Sheppard (eds). *Contesting Neoliberalism: Urban Frontiers* (pp.1-25). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Loukaitaou-Sideris, A. & Ehrenfeucht, R. (2009). *Sidewalks: Conflict and Negotiation over Public Space*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Mitchell, D. (1995). The End of Public Space? People’s Park, Definitions of the Public and Democracy. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 8:1, 108-133.
- Sennett, R. (2003) (1974) *The Fall of Public Man*. London: Penguin Books.
- Ward Thomson, C. (2002). Urban Open Spaces in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 60, 59-72.
- Uzun, C. N. (2006). Kentsel Dönüşümde Yeni Bir Kavram: Seçkinleştirme. In A. Eraydın (ed.), *Değişen Mekan: Mekansal Süreçlere İlişkin Tartışma ve Araştırmalara Toplu Bakış: 1923-2003* (pp.340-360). Ankara: Dost Kitapevi.
- Zukin, S. (1998). Urban Lifestyles: Diversity and Standardization in Spaces of Consumption. *Urban Studies*, 35:5-6, 825-839.
- Zukin, S. (2009). *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*. New York: Oxford University Press.