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Editores:

Ana Mejón

David Conte Imbert

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ÍNDICE

COMITÉ CIENTÍFICO Y DE ORGANIZACIÓN	11
PREÁMBULO	12

Espacio urbano

LA GESTIÓN DEL PATRIMONIO URBANO. EL CENTRO HISTÓRICO DE SANTA CRUZ DE TENERIFE: ARQUITECTURA Y LENGUAJE	18
SEVERO ACOSTA RODRÍGUEZ FÁTIMA ACOSTA HERNÁNDEZ ÁNGELES TUDELA NOGUERA (UNIVERSIDAD DE LA LAGUNA)	
OLVIDO Y MEMORIA EN LA ÉPOCA DE MERCANTILIZACIÓN DE LA CIUDAD	29
ALBA BARO VAQUERO (UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA DE MADRID)	
WOMEN AND URBAN MOBILITY: THE IMPORTANCE OF RECOGNIZING GENDER DIFFERENCES IN URBAN PLANNING	37
LUA BITTENCOURT (UNIVERSIDADE DE LISBOA)	
RE-SIGNIFICAR EL ESPACIO URBANO: ANÁLISIS SEMIÓTICO EN TRES TIEMPOS DEL ÁREA DE LA EXPOSICIÓN IBEROAMERICANA DE 1929 EN SEVILLA.....	44
MANUEL A. BROULLÓN-LOZANO (UNIVERSIDAD DE SEVILLA)	
ISTANBUL: BRIDGE BETWEEN WEST AND EAST	55
SINEJAN BUCHINA (THE CITY COLLEGE OF NEW YORK)	
MAPA Y TIEMPO DE LOS ESPACIOS ESCÉNICOS DE MADRID	66
FELISA DE BLAS GÓMEZ (REAL ESCUELA SUPERIOR DE ARTE DRAMÁTICO DE MADRID –RESAD- Y UNIVERSIDAD POLITÉCNICA DE MADRID) ALMUDENA LÓPEZ VILLALBA (REAL ESCUELA SUPERIOR DE ARTE DRAMÁTICO DE MADRID –RESAD-) CARLOS VILLARREAL COLUNGA (UNIVERSIDAD POLITÉCNICA DE MADRID)	
LA BAHÍA DE PASAIA COMO PAISAJE CULTURAL URBANO	77
ENRIQUE DE ROSA GIOLITO (UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE EDUCACIÓN A DISTANCIA –UNED-)	
LA TRANSFORMACIÓN DE SEÚL A TRAVÉS DE LAS INDUSTRIAS CULTURALES SURCOREANAS: EL CASO DE LA OLA HALLYU	91
SONIA DUEÑAS MOHEDAS (UNIVERSIDAD CARLOS III DE MADRID)	

MELILLA: DE FORTALEZA A CIUDAD	101
FERNANDO SARUEL HERNÁNDEZ (UNIVERSIDAD DE MÁLAGA)	
LA GESTIÓN DE LA CONFLICTIVIDAD URBANA. LA CIENCIA DE POLICÍA Y LOS ORÍGENES DEL URBANISMO	113
PEDRO FRAILE (UNIVERSIDAD DE LLEIDA)	
LA ARQUITECTURA EN LA CIUDAD	123
EDUARDO MIGUEL GONZÁLEZ FRAILE (UNIVERSIDAD DE VALLADOLID) SANTIAGO BELLIDO BLANCO (UNIVERSIDAD EUROPEA MIGUEL DE CERVANTES) DAVID VILLANUEVA VALENTÍN-GAMAZO (UNIVERSIDAD EUROPEA MIGUEL DE CERVANTES)	
ARQUITECTURA VERTICAL. SIMBOLISMO Y CONGESTIÓN EN LA CIUDAD CONTEMPORÁNEA	135
AGUSTÍN GOR GÓMEZ (UNIVERSIDAD DE GRANADA)	
THE TRANSFORMATION OF ISTANBUL AND CULTURAL EFFECTS	150
JANET BARIŞ (NISANTASI UNIVERSITY)	
RE-IMAGINING THE URBAN EXPERIENCE IN THE GLOBAL ERA.....	160
ANNA LAZZARINI (UNIVERSITY OF BERGAMO)	
EL EQUILIBRIO ENTRE PASADO, PRESENTE Y FUTURO EN UNA CIUDAD CHINA: CHENGDU Y EL EJEMPLO DE SINO-OCEAN TAIKOO LI	169
LIAO SHUQI (UNIVERSIDAD DE CARLOS III DE MADRID)	
1939/ 1959 MADRID EN EL CINE, CÓMO UNA COMEDIA SENTIMENTAL SOLAPA PROPAGANDA.....	178
MARGUERITE AZCONA (SORBONNE UNIVERSITÉ)	
EL GÉNERO MUSICAL COMO DISCURSO PARA LA REPRESENTACIÓN Y LA PROMOCIÓN DE LA CIUDAD. EL CASO DE <i>SUNSHINE ON LEITH</i>	183
VICTORIA LÓPEZ ÁLAMO (UNIVERSIDAD DE MURCIA) SALVADOR MARTÍNEZ PUCHE (UNIVERSIDAD DE MURCIA) ANTONIO MARTÍNEZ PUCHE (UNIVERSIDAD DE ALICANTE)	
LA FLÂNEUSE IMPOSIBLE: EL ACTO DE CALLEJAR DESDE UNA LECTURA FEMINISTA	194
VICTORIA MATEOS DE MANUEL (INSTITUTO DE FILOSOFÍA, CCHS-CSIC)	

VALPARAÍSO Y LOS DESAFÍOS DE UNA CIUDAD CONSTRUIDA SOBRE UNA GEOGRAFÍA ABRUPTA. EL CAMINO CINTURA COMO LA OPERACIÓN URBANA QUE ARTICULÓ LA EXPANSIÓN DE LA CIUDAD SOBRE LOS CERROS	203
MELISA MIRANDA (EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY)	
LA RECONSTRUCCIÓN DE LA IMAGEN DE BERLÍN TRAS LA REUNIFICACIÓN ALEMANA	211
MARÍA DOLORES MONTORO RODRÍGUEZ. (UNIVERSIDAD POLITÉCNICA DE MADRID)	
LA RELACIÓN ENTRE PAISAJE Y URBANISMO EN LA CIUDAD MODERNA: EL EJEMPLO DE SANTANDER	224
MARÍA JESÚS POZAS POZAS (UNIVERSIDAD DE DEUSTO – BILBAO)	
LUGARES PARA LA PROMOCIÓN DE LA SALUD Y DE LA HIGIENE EN EL MADRID DE LOS AÑOS 30 EN LA REVISTA <i>CULTURA INTEGRAL Y FEMENINA</i> (1933-1936)	238
IVANA ROTA (UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI BERGAMO)	
IMAGINARIOS TURÍSTICOS Y RENOVACIÓN URBANA: EL CASO DEL BARRIO DE SANTA CRUZ EN LA SEVILLA DEL SIGLO XX	248
PAULA SAAVEDRA TRIGUEROS JACOBO GARCÍA ÁLVAREZ (UNIVERSIDAD CARLOS III DE MADRID)	
PROCESOS, PERMANENCIAS Y TRANSFORMACIONES EN LOS PAISAJES URBANOS BONAERENSES. EXPLORACIÓN HISTÓRICO-VISUAL EN LAS CIUDADES DE MAR DEL PLATA, TANDIL Y NECOCHEA-QUEQUÉN, ARGENTINA	257
LORENA MARINA SÁNCHEZ GISELA PAOLA KACZAN (UNIVERSIDAD NACIONAL DE MAR DEL PLATA)	
LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DEL PAISAJE CULTURAL DE LA RÍA DEL NERVIÓN, EL LEGADO HISTÓRICO DE LOS FERROCARRILES MINEROS	267
ANA SCHMIDT SERRANO (UNIVERSIDAD DE EDUCACIÓN A DISTANCIA –UNED-)	
EN LA VÍSPERA DEL ESPLENDOR: EL WASHINGTON CITY DE MARGARET BAYARD	277
MONTSERRAT HUGUET (UNIVERSIDAD CARLOS III DE MADRID)	
DE “LA BANLIEUE” AL “GRAND PARIS”, LA BÚSQUEDA DE UNA NUEVA IMAGEN PARA LA EXTENSIÓN DE PARÍS	288
PILAR AUMENTE RIVAS (UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID)	
LOS GRAFITIS EN MURCIA. DE LA ILEGALIDAD A LA OFICIALIDAD. ESTADO DE LA CUESTIÓN	310
VICTORIA SANTIAGO GODOS (UNIVERSIDAD DE MURCIA)	

Experiencia ciudadana

PROYECTO 00000000X. LA CIUDAD COMO SOPORTE PARA UN ARTE CRÍTICO 322

MARÍA ANDRÉS SANZ
(UNIVERSIDAD DEL PAÍS VASCO)

WOMEN AND PUBLIC SPACE: THE URBAN FEMALE IN LISBON 332

BRUNA BORELLI
(UNIVERSITY OF LISBON)

RELACIONES CIUDADANAS, GUBERNAMENTALIDAD LIBERAL Y UTOPIA COOPERATIVISTA. EL PROYECTO DE ELÍAS ZEROLO EN SANTA CRUZ DE TENERIFE (1868-1870) 343

JESÚS DE FELIPE
(UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA DE MADRID)
JOSUÉ J. GONZÁLEZ
(UNIVERSIDAD DE LA LAGUNA)

ESPACIOS HORTÍCOLAS CIUDADANOS, REDES E INFRAESTRUCTURAS AMBIENTALES COMO FACTORES DE RESILIENCIA URBANA..... 352

SONIA DELGADO BERROCAL
(UNIVERSIDAD POLITÉCNICA DE MADRID)

DISCOURSE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF 'OTHERNESS' IN PUBLIC URBAN 'SPACES OF FEAR' – AN INTERSECTIONAL FEMINIST APPROACH 362

SONJA GAEDICKE
(RWTH AACHEN UNIVERSITY)

ANÁLISIS DEL CASO DEL DISTRITO CULTURAL LEICESTER'S CULTURAL QUARTER 371

JENNIFER GARCÍA CARRIZO
(UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID)

SMART CITY COMO NUEVA ESTRATEGIA DE MARCA CIUDAD. UNA APROXIMACIÓN DEL SMART CITY BRANDING EN EL CASO ESPAÑOL..... 383

NOELIA GARCÍA-ESTÉVEZ
(UNIVERSIDAD DE SEVILLA)

VOLUNTARIADO SOCIAL, GESTIÓN DE LA COMUNICACIÓN Y RESPONSABILIDAD SOCIAL HOSPITALARIA EN ESPAÑA 395

M^{ra} TERESA GARCÍA NIETO
FRANCISCO CABEZUELO
(UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID)

TRIESTE, ANTES Y DESPUÉS DE LA REVOLUCIÓN PSIQUIÁTRICA 408

ANA MARTÍNEZ PÉREZ-CANALES
(UNIVERSIDAD CARLOS III DE MADRID)

UNA EXPERIENCIA URBANÍSTICA DESDE: LA PARTICIPACIÓN, LA FORMACIÓN Y LA SORORIDAD EN LA CIUDAD DE MANACOR (ISLAS BALEARES) 417

ANTONIA MATAMALAS PROHENS
(INVESTIGADORA INDEPENDIENTE)

LA TIPOGRAFÍA EN LA CIUDAD, VEHÍCULO EMOCIONAL Y VASO COMUNICANTE ENTRE DOS TIEMPOS HISTÓRICOS DISTINTOS. UN ESTUDIO DE CASO: LA IDENTIDAD VISUAL CORPORATIVA DEL ESTADIO METROPOLITANO 423

JUAN PEDRO MOLINA CAÑABATE
(UNIVERSIDAD CARLOS III DE MADRID)

MUJERES Y PARADOJAS DE LA CIUDADANÍA CONTEMPORÁNEA 431

LAURA BRANCIFORTE
(UNIVERSIDAD CARLOS III DE MADRID)

¿UN CIUDADANO, UN FLÂNEUR O UN VISITANTE? LA CIUDAD COMO MUSEO DE LO COTIDIANO 440

CANDELA RAJAL ALONSO
(UNIVERSIDAD DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA)
ESTELLA FREIRE PÉREZ
(UNIVERSIDAD DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA)

LONDRES – VIENA. LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE LA IDENTIDAD MEDIANTE UN PASEO CON VIRGINIA WOOLF E INGBORG BACHMANN 454

VERÓNICA RIPOLL LEÓN (UNIVERSIDAD
CARLOS III DE MADRID)

ATLAS ARTEDUCATIVO: LA CIUDAD DESPLEGADA 462

CRISTINA TRIGO MARTÍNEZ
(UNIVERSIDAD DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA)

Representaciones

REPRESENTACIONES DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA EN LA LITERATURA INFANTIL GALLEGA DEL SIGLO XXI. UN CAMINO DE LECTURAS TEXTUALES Y VISUALES 478

EULALIA AGRELO COSTAS
(UNIVERSIDADE DE VIGO)
OLALLA CORTIZAS VARELA
(UNIVERSIDADE DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA)

“I’M JUST TRYING TO MAKE MY CITY A BETTER PLACE” SOCIAL ISSUES, SUPERPOWERS, AND NEW YORK CITY IN NETFLIX’S 2015-2017 MARVEL SERIES FRANCHISE 486

OCTÁVIO A. R. SCHUENCK AMORELLI R. P.
PEDRO AFONSO BRANCO RAMOS PINTO
(UNIVERSIDADE DE BRASÍLIA)

VIRTUAL REALITY AND READING CITIES: GPS-BASED APPLICATIONS AS A NEW FORM OF LITERARY TOURISM 495

ANA STEFANOVSKA
(UNIVERSITÀ DI PADOVA)

VISIONES URBANAS EN LA OBRA ARTÍSTICA DE CHEMA ALVARGONZÁLEZ 503

MARÍA DOLORES ARROYO FERNÁNDEZ
(UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID)

LA CASA DEL HABITANTE QUE SE NEGÓ A PARTICIPAR Y LA MASQUE. UNA PROPUESTA DEL ARQUITECTO JOHN HEJDUK PARA LA CIUDAD	515
CARLOS BARBERÁ PASTOR (UNIVERSIDAD DE ALICANTE)	
PLÁSTICA Y TECNOLOGÍA COMO OBSERVATORIOS DE LA CIUDAD	526
ALBA CORTÉS-GARCÍA (UNIVERSIDAD DE SEVILLA)	
RE-PRESENTAR LA CIUDAD. URBAN RE-IDENTIFICATION GRID. APROXIMACIONES AL ESPACIO COMO ACONTECIMIENTO	535
FELIPE CORVALÁN TAPIA (UNIVERSIDAD DE CHILE)	
LA CIUDAD ES UN MONTE.....	546
ARTURO ENCINAS CANTALAPIEDRA (UNIVERSIDAD FRANCISCO DE VITORIA)	
LA CIUDAD REHABITADA.....	565
FELIPE SAMARÁN SALÓ (UNIVERSIDAD FRANCISCO DE VITORIA)	
DE SUR A NORTE, DE NORTE A SUR: ORÁN Y MONTPELLIER EN LA OBRA DE MALIKA MOKEDDEM....	577
M. CARME FIGUEROLA (UNIVERSITAT DE LLEIDA)	
LAS <i>UTTERANCES</i> URBANAS A TRAVÉS DE LA FOTOGRAFÍA	585
MAR GARCÍA RANEDO UNIVERSIDAD DE SEVILLA	
LA CIUDAD EN LOS FILMS TARDOFRANQUISTAS DE PACO MARTÍNEZ SORIA (1965-1975)	597
OLGA GARCÍA-DEFEZ (UNIVERSITAT DE VALÈNCIA)	
LA PINTURA CONTEMPORÁNEA Y LA INTERPRETACIÓN PSICOGEOGRÁFICA DE LA CIUDAD COMO TRADUCCIÓN ESTÉTICA DE UNA ORGANIZACIÓN COMPLEJA.....	606
RICARDO GONZÁLEZ GARCÍA (UNIVERSIDAD DE CANTABRIA)	
EN <i>CONSTRUCCIÓN</i> DE JOSÉ LUIS GUERÍN: LUGARES DE MEMORIA Y MEMORIA DE LOS LUGARES....	617
SABRINA GRILLO (UNIVERSIDAD DE ARTOIS)	
A RE-VIEWING POSSIBILITY: NEW ENCOUNTERS WITH/IN ISTANBUL IN THE CINEMA OF TURKEY	624
DR. ÖZLEM GÜÇLÜ (MIMAR SINAN FINE ARTS UNIVERSITY)	
EL ESPACIO URBANO DE TOLEDO EN LA NOVELA ACTUAL: <i>MAZAPÁN AMARGO</i> (2011) Y <i>LA ÚLTIMA SOMBRA DEL GRECO</i> (2013), LA SERIE NEGRA DE JOAQUÍN GARCÍA GARIJO Y SANTIAGO SASTRE ARIZA	631
JESÚS GUZMÁN MORA (INVESTIGADOR INDEPENDIENTE)	

LA CIUDAD EN EL CINE NEGRO ESPAÑOL. ESPAÑA, CARNE DE <i>THRILLER</i> DESDE LOS AÑOS OCHENTA	639
EZEQUIEL HERRERA GIL (UNIVERSIDAD DE LA LAGUNA)	
HONG KONG ANTE LA MIRADA DE EILEEN CHANG: LA CIUDAD QUE PERDIÓ LA IDENTIDAD	647
LINLIN JIANG (UNIVERSIDAD COMPLUTENSE DE MADRID)	
EL ESCUCHARIO URBANO	654
ALMA DELIA JUÁREZ SEDANO (UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA METROPOLITANA) MIGUEL ÁNGEL GONZÁLEZ LOZA (UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA METROPOLITANA) ELIZABETH LOZADA AMADOR (UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA DEL ESTADO DE HIDALGO)	
WRITING CHICANO LOS ANGELES: GEOCRITICISM OF LOS ANGELES IN <i>THE MIRACULOUS DAY OF AMALIA GÓMEZ</i> BY JOHN RECHY	663
ALVARO LUNA (UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA)	
PARÍS/CARAX	671
JOSÉ LUQUE CABALLERO (UNIVERSIDAD CARLOS III DE MADRID)	
CONTRAFORMAS DE CIUDAD	679
CRISTINA MORALES FERNANDEZ (EINA, CENTRE UNIVERSITARI DE DISSENY I ART)	
LA IDENTIDAD BARRIAL EN EL DOCUMENTAL “FLORES DE LUNA”. UN ANÁLISIS DESDE LA MEMORIA HISTÓRICA, EL SENTIDO DE PERTENENCIA Y LA GEOMETRÍA DEL PODER	689
DANIEL DAVID MUÑOZ MORCILLO YAMILA DÍAZ MORENO (UNIVERSIDAD CARLOS III DE MADRID)	
THE CITY OF THE ANTHROPOCENE: SOME PROBLEMS WITH THE NOMENCLATURE AND A LITERARY EXAMPLE	699
KATARZYNA NOWAK MCNEICE (UNIVERSIDAD CARLOS III DE MADRID)	
URBAN MODERN IMAGINARY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN POST-WAR GREECE: PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE ILLUSTRATED JOURNAL <i>EIKONES</i> (1955-1967)	707
EVI PAPADOPOULOU (ARISTOTLE UNIVERSITY OF THESSALONIKI)	
THE ENEMY WITHIN: THE CITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SERIAL KILLER IDENTITIES IN AMERICAN POLICE PROCEDURAL FICTION	720
MONA RAEISIAN (PHILIPPS-UNIVERSITÄT MARBURG)	

CIUDADES IMAGINADAS: MADRID, BARCELONA Y SEVILLA EN LAS REVISTAS EXTRANJERAS DE GEOGRAFÍA POPULAR (1970-2015)	728
MARÍA RAMÓN GABRIEL (UNIVERSIDAD CARLOS III DE MADRID)	
LA CIUDAD TRANSFORMADA, REPRESENTACIÓN Y DISCURSO	736
JACOBO SUCARI (UNIVERSITAT DE BARCELONA)	
LA BARCELONA DE PETRA DELICADO	746
MARIADONATA ANGELA TIRONE (UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA)	
LEYENDO ENTRE RUINAS: LA HABANA, LA DECADENCIA DEL ENCANTO O EL ENCANTO DE LA DECADENCIA.....	755
SILVINA TRICA-FLORES (STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK)	
IDENTIDAD URBANA E IMAGINARIOS FÍLMICOS	764
AURORA VILLALOBOS GÓMEZ (REAL ACADEMIA DE NOBLES ARTES DE ANTEQUERA)	
LA CIUDAD VASCA A TRAVÉS DEL HUMOR GRÁFICO DE LA SERIE “ZAKILIXUT” (1977): DE LA TIERRA MADRE A LA CIUDAD MODERNA	774
AITOR CASTAÑEDA (UNIVERSIDAD DEL PAÍS VASCO)	
GAUDÍ, ARQUITECTO GENIAL EN LA CIUDAD DE LOS PRODIGIOS, DE EDUARDO MENDOZA.....	784
FRANCISCO LEÓN RIVERO (BENEDICTINE COLLEGE)	
LOS SONIDOS URBANOS. LA CIUDAD DESDE LA PERSPECTIVA DE LA MÚSICA CLÁSICA	793
ANA BENAVIDES (UNIVERSIDAD CARLOS III DE MADRID)	

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La ciudad: Imágenes e imaginarios

ESPACIO URBANO

The transformation of Istanbul and cultural effects

Janet Barış
(Nisantasi University)

Abstract

Istanbul, which had gone through many changes in the past, has been in a more severe transformation in the recent years. Correspondingly, the Beyoğlu neighborhood, the arts and culture and lifestyle center of the city, started to change. The change in Beyoğlu and the people changing their habits to use this region affected the cultural life and movie theaters of Beyoğlu. The main factor behind the movie theaters losing their attendance is the transformation of people's habits due to the change in Beyoğlu. Therefore, saving these theaters from going out of business has become a movement to save urban life spaces. This paper explores the relationship between social movements, gentrification of Istanbul-Beyoğlu, and movie theatres in cities, with a focus on the transformation of urban culture in regards to people's engagement with the spaces of movie theatres. The urban renewal areas will be examined and the change, transformations and it's social-cultural reflections will be put forward.

Resumen

Estambul, que sufrió muchos cambios en el pasado, ha sufrido una transformación aún más severa en los últimos años. En consecuencia, el barrio de Beyoğlu, centro de arte y cultura y estilo de vida de la ciudad, ha emprendido su propia renovación. El cambio en Beyoğlu y en las costumbres de su población ha tenido efectos claros en la vida cultural y, en concreto, en la actividad de las salas de cine. El principal factor detrás de la pérdida de espectadores sufrida por estas últimas es la transformación de los hábitos de la gente debido al cambio en Beyoğlu. Por lo tanto, evitar que esas salas cesen su actividad ha derivado en un movimiento social para salvar espacios de vida urbana. Este documento explora la relación entre los movimientos sociales, la gentrificación de Estambul-Beyoğlu y los cines en las ciudades, y pone el foco en la transformación de la cultura urbana provocada por el compromiso de las personas con los espacios de los cines. En él, asimismo, se examinan las áreas de renovación urbana y las consecuencias socioculturales que el proceso conlleva.

Keywords: Istanbul, Beyoğlu, Gentrification, Movement, Theater

Palabras clave: Estambul, Beyoğlu, Gentrificación, Movimiento, Teatro

Introduction

The Beyoğlu district where a big part of “Distant” takes place is the heart of Istanbul. After the fall of the Ottoman Empire that hosted various cultures through centuries, it has kept its place transformation. As of the early 2000's, Beyoğlu witnessed even further changes. Political conservatism severely affected this district, and its socioeconomic and demographic structures have changed completely. The gentrification of Istanbul has been in progress since the 1980's, in the central and historic districts of the city. Beyoğlu, which used to be an important touristic and entertainment center until twenty years ago, has lost its appeal, mostly due to the conservative-Islamist government in power for the last fourteen years.

İstiklal Street, that is located in Istanbul's historic district of Beyoğlu, has been experiencing changes in its nature for more than 100 years. The shopping patterns have changed with the new age giant shopping malls on the avenue and most of the art and

culture foundations on the street have been closed. In line these developments cultural life has started to change in Beyoğlu and most of movie theaters get closed. This kind of cultural developments caused by some protests. From 2010 onwards, an audience community in Istanbul attempted to claim their right to save historical movie theater called Emek. The Emek Movie Theater movement began April 2010 and lasted until January 2015. Street culture was significant for this community's engagement with the Emek movement, and the Gezi uprising was part of this culture. Another example is experience of Beyoğlu Movie Theater. The movie theater which has been experiencing financial problems for a long time, announced in 2017 that it will close in June. After this point, a small movement started to prevent the movie theater from closing. As a result of this movement a "loyal card" system was created for people to buy.

When a community claims its right to its own spaces, this consolidates their feeling of togetherness and their understanding of the power of their agency.. According to Harvey's and Lefebvre's works, "the right to the city" refers not only to rights to urban services, such as housing, work, and education, but also to the right to participate in making "the urban," the right to inhabit and transform urban space and thus to become a creator of the city as oeuvre.

This paper explores the relationship between transformation of Beyoğlu with urban regeneration policies and movie theaters in Istanbul. The argument is based on the study of cinema-going practices of an audience community in Istanbul. In this context, the transformation and the change of Beyoğlu make an example of gentrification which is occurred at the global scale.

Istanbul and gentrification

In Istanbul, the transition to a neo-liberal urban regime started after the 1980 coup d'état. By the early 1980s, the construction industry had become the second most economically important sector after textiles and clothing. Investment in tourist attractions, big urban projects such as offices, hotels and shopping malls, cultural and convention centres and luxury housing estates reached unprecedented levels. (Türkün, 2011: 64)

Along with an expanding export economy, the financial sector started to grow and the first glimmers of the city orienting itself to the global arena became visible. Under the new regime presided over by Prime Minister Turgut Özal (1983-1989), municipalities were given more autonomy and their budgets increased. İstanbul was allowed to chart its own course in terms of infrastructure and productive investment. (Keyder, 2010: 178) Under the mayorship of Bedrettin Dalan (1984-1989) turning İstanbul into a 'world city' became the main goal of the newly empowered metropolitan municipality. At that time, Dalan was seeking to 'transform İstanbul from a tired city, whose glory resided in past history, into a metropolis full of promise for the twenty-first century.' (Keyder and Öncü 1993: 29).

Istanbul was the most attractive city in Turkey for investors seeking short returns and high profit margins. (Türkün, 2011: 64) Last two decades, shopping malls and festivals have increasingly become larger and more influential features of urban landscape and culture in cities. Representing 'the dreamworlds of capitalism' (Pusca, 2009: 371)

The current government, Justice and Development Party (AKP), inherited the achievements of the crisis doctors when they won the elections in 2002. Their neo-liberal convictions were served well by the shock-doctrine approach that had brought in the required changes for full global opening. (Keyder, 2010: 179) In the AKP period, through its neo-liberal policies, not only the urban centers but also other districts have been

demographically reshaped in line with the government's capitalist and conservative tendencies. This type of urban policies has been on the rise especially after the year 2000. On the global scale, this was the period in which big urban projects started to replace comprehensive planning. Investing on urban land was seen as less risky than the available opportunities in industrial production, where globalization, new technology and the increasing availability of cheap labor was driving costs and revenues down. (Türkün, 2011: 64)

Uprisings are not only political but also cultural gatherings where people participate in shared spaces whilst creating a common political culture. Accordingly, as a space incorporating the culture of shopping and cinema, the main avenue for film consumption has become the multiplex. While Turkey's first shopping mall, Galleria, was opened in Istanbul in 1988 (Gökarıksel, 2012: 7) wider exhibition of films in multiplexes dates back to the mid-1990s.

Turkey's shift into neoliberalism dates back to 1980s, it has integrated into capitalism following the military coup of 1980. Corporate globalization has stream-rolled the landscape of Istanbul with the post-coup d'état policies. 'Urban change, the transformation of urban space and the increasing deployment of the construction sector as tools of hegemony have been common desires of the Turkish conservative right wing and political Islam' (Moudouros, 2014: 186).

In this framework, 'Istanbul has become the privileged arena of operation for the AKP government' (Aksoy, 2012: 97–98). Erdoğan, the first avowedly Islamist mayor of Istanbul in 1994, explained his approach as follows: 'Istanbul is a global city, which is accepted not only by the world but also the prophet Mohamed. Istanbul should have an Islamic identity' (Öktem, 2011: 36). In so far as the ruling AKP government has helped to open Istanbul to market-driven global forces, the city's transformation has been a state-led project. (Aksoy, 2012: 107) This project implies the increasing penetration of mosques, the boom of the neo-Ottoman style and decreasing numbers of alternative spaces for any other religious, ethnic, and sub-cultural groups, apart from the majority Sunni Turks.

Beyoğlu gentrification and movie theaters

Beyoğlu has been basically a symbol for Istanbul's occidental facade. Bearing in mind the Turkish modernization in the Republican era, Beyoğlu represents an occidental image of the Turkish society along with the stores, shops and restaurants run by non-Muslim minorities.

Nevertheless, after this period, policies that aim to transform the Republican, Western space image of Beyoğlu were implemented. Although, despite incidents like the September 6-7 1955 pogrom aimed at replacing non-Muslim minorities, Beyoğlu kept its Western image until the 2000's. In the AKP period, Beyoğlu found itself in a new wave of transformation. While this transformation primarily seems to affect physical space, it has also disabled the lifestyle, arts and culture center of the city. Different factors such as the neo-liberal policies, transformed neighborhoods, social media have changed the leisure habits of the youth, as well as the way they spend time in some districts of the city.

One of the most radical effects of urban regeneration programs is seen in the Beyoğlu district, where global chains, studio flats and shopping malls have replaced independent shops and historical sites while its previous communities such as transgender, Kurdish and Roma communities have slowly left the area. This

transformation also gentrified the Beyoğlu district and the rent and service prices skyrocketed.

Beyoğlu was a center for production, consumption and reproduction of culture, which brought about restaurants with reasonable prices but when the times changed, these places started charging 2–3 times the normal prices. In this transformation, the AKP and the municipality trying to market Beyoğlu to the newcomer wealthy tourists has also been a factor. After 2011, plans and policies such as replacing the Gezi Park with a modernized, commercial version of the old Artillery Barracks, building new shopping malls, closing Beyoğlu to all public demonstration including the Labor Day rallies, are related to this strategy.

One of the most important factors in Beyoğlu's transformation is that foreign capital gradually took over important spot on the İstiklal Street especially after 2000. The real estate investments of big local and foreign capital play an important role in shaping the transformation of İstiklal Street.

Sales and purchases conducted by investors expanding volume every day as properties are hurriedly handed out. In tandem with the thrilling pace of real estate investments made by local and foreign capital, institutionalized art centers sponsored by major Banks (Garanti, Akbank, Yapı Kredi) and corporations (Sabancı, Koç, Borusan), as well as prestigious stores owned by big brands (Lacoste, Nike, Converse, Mango) are opening on the street. İstiklal Street comes to fore as an attractive investment site for shopping malls for the first time in its history. (Adanalı, 2011: 5)

Apart from neo-liberal policies, financial strategies and the desire to appeal to wealthy tourists, Islamism is an obvious factor in Beyoğlu's transformation. I identify political Islam as one of the reasons for Beyoğlu's "touristification" and spatial cleansing. The recent rise of political Islam has led to limits on the consumption and selling of alcoholic beverages, the transformation of urban spaces into commercial undertakings, the bans on drinking and eating outside in Beyoğlu, the police's enforced removal of people sitting in front of the restaurants. Among recent investments perhaps two neighboring buildings have caused the most controversy: the street's first shopping mall, Demirören İstiklal, and the historic Cercle D'Orient building which has the new Emek Movie Theater under its roof had reconstructed and opened in 2017.

The rising number of tourists from Arab countries visiting Beyoğlu is also an important factor that has contributed to the gentrification and spatial transformation of the district. The increase in wealthy Arab tourist visiting the district for shopping purposes rather than arts and culture, has been an important factor in Beyoğlu's transformation. Bookstores being replaced by shopping areas, indoor shopping malls being opened on the İstiklal Street which is already like an open-air mall, are examples of this transformation.

İstiklal street, that is located in Istanbul's historic district of Beyoğlu, has been experiencing changes in its nature for more than 100 years. the shopping patterns have changed with the new age giant shopping malls on the avenue, the locals have stopped hanging around, most of the art and culture foundations on the street have been closed. İstiklal Street lost its "intellectual center of the city" status, as many would agree. The distinctive businesses on the street have the risk of losing their buildings because of the changes in "the disaster act" or "the code of obligations." Apart from losing reputation, the businesses have also been heavily affected by the distressed environment set by multiple bombings, several of them have closed down their branches or relocated.

All these developments also affected people who view Beyoğlu as a cultural center and frequent the district for cultural purposes. "The destruction of a neighbourhood creates a rupture in the social contract that binds its residents to the state" (Lelandais, 2014: 1802)

This gentrification is a process made possible with arts and culture institutions and these institutions have made the neighborhood rich and classy. A place that does not have arts and culture institutions and which has become a place of bombs and terror, is hard to glorify again. Nobody understands that there is no culture on the street and the usual sight of Istiklal on photos and videos has become a picture on postcards.

Movie theatres and the case of Emek Theatre

Movie theaters, in neighborhoods and the city center, have the ability to transform its audience, as well as the city. The movie theaters in Beyoğlu, through the time, have also served this purpose, through movie theaters, cinema becomes part of the space and fulfills the need for arts in urban centers.

Cinemas also have a way of constructing a memory of the city, full of recollections. When they are closed or move to other locations for various reasons it is like a person losing their memory and damages a city's cultural-artistic texture. It pushes the city and its people to an insensitive, ineffective, unresponsive lack of love, which equates to having no memories. Cities are forced not only to stay contemporary, but also to protect and maintain their resources and the places that will continue to construct their identities and shed light on their future.

The movie theater remains a rather curious institution, an unlikely brick and mortar outpost for a cultural form heralded as defiantly mobile, malleable, reproducible, and accessible. Plainly, the basic idea of a theater long predates cinema, pulling forward the significance of dedicated or specially demarcated spaces for traditions and practices of live drama, performed music, and public oration as well as circus barkers, burlesque artists, magicians, and middle brow occultists. (Wasson, 2016: 2)

Film critic Kutlukhan Kutlu underlines that movie theaters are an indissociable part of films. According to Kutlu, the spaces in film are reshaped through the movie theaters that we view them in, and the movie theaters play a role in the impact made by the movie on the viewer, creating a personal culture. This is one of reasons why movie theaters being shut down and moved into shopping malls is problematic. We can no longer remember where we watched a particular movie. With the movie theaters being replaced by shopping mall cinemas, watching a movie becomes a non-cultural event. Cinema, which is more and more considered to be a commercial product, being excluded from the space thus creates a cultural void. (Kutlu, 2013)

Film can be used to create a space in which citizens can encounter issues. Once produced, organizers and other supportive groups and individuals can use a film to create a space within which citizens can encounter, discuss, and decide to act on the issues raised in the film. (Whiteman, 2004: 55)

Beyoğlu, in the 1990's and the 2000's, was a popular spot especially in this regard. It hosted the most preferred locations of the city with its movie theaters, cafes and restaurants. As the people visiting the district transformed, the audience also transformed. Since the newcomers were mostly shopping-oriented, movie theaters became targets for gentrification. One of the most important reasons for movie theaters in Istanbul to shut down was the growing number of shopping malls which included cinema halls. This transformation accelerated in Beyoğlu, since movie theaters represented valuable spots for gentrification.

While global chains such as Mango or Starbucks have mushroomed on Istiklal Street since the 2000s, the emergence of its first shopping mall, Demirören, dates back to 2011. This is followed by the opening of the Grand Pera shopping mall next to Demirören, in place of the Cercle d'Orient complex that hosted the Emek Movie Theater for more

than a century. The movie theatres which were parts of the local arcades have also disappeared, apart from a few notable exceptions, such as the Atlas and Beyoğlu Pera,

Locations of arts and culture were among the firsts to be affected by Beyoğlu's gentrification. The most prominent example of this situation was the Emek Theater shut down in 2009. The movie theater which opened in 1924 as the Melek Theater, was later renamed to Emek in 1957. The theater was renovated in 1993, and technically modernized in 2000. After it was shut down, it was included in a shopping mall project called the Grand Pera and demolished in 20 May 2013.

Emek Movie Theatre is one of the oldest of Beyoğlu's cinemas along with the Elhamra and Alkazar. All three were opened in the early years of the Republic (1924). In their day they were among the most modern cinemas, not only in Istanbul, but also in Europe. Not only were the screened films exclusive, but also the audience. Emek had an important place in the collective memory as it had been the principal theater of the Istanbul Film Festival for decades.

A movie theater that might well be considered to be a cultural heritage to have been destroyed by a private company drew a rebuff among those who tried to save Beyoğlu. It would be shameful in those days to even think about transforming these places into business centers or similar places just for the sake of some potential revenue. Even in the most difficult days when the cinema world was in crisis it didn't compromise the films it screened.

A number of demonstrations took place aiming to stop the closure of the movie theater. These events also became the forefront of the defense for Beyoğlu and the city. From 2010 onwards, an audience community in Istanbul attempted to claim their right to the Emek Theater in their protests against its demolition. The Emek movement began during the İstanbul Film Festival in April 2010 and lasted until January 2015. (Özdüzen, 2017: 9)

The demonstrators tried to protect their living spaces and movie theaters. The Emek Theater had a two-way function as a living space and a movie theater. Before the uprising, the Emek Theatre became a symbol for the loss of not only the independent movie theaters but also other cultural venues, a symbol which represented a defense against homogeneity through "shopping-mallisation", and from a broader perspective.

Throughout their social movement, my informants repurposed the spaces that were previously used for cinema-going and felt a sense of belonging. The resocialization through demonstrations, film screenings and public concerts meant claiming right to their own space and lives. The use of the streets for cinema-going implied a merge of the cinema spaces such as movie theaters with the public spaces on the streets. Also, the intertwining of protest sites with festival spaces expanded the understanding of festival activism, which was previously contained within the boundaries of film festivals' own spaces. (Özdüzen, 2017: 12)

In order to claim their right to the city, this audience community used many different creative methods such as changing the look of the city. The activists, occupation of streets, squares and movie theaters intertwined with the protest's offline media outlets/film exhibition avenues. The creative protests such as making songs, organising screenings and performing in concerts became the locus of the Gezi protests following the Emek movement. The 'creativity' of these protests was partly interrupted by the severe police violence which began on the 7 April 2013. Increasing levels of violence and repression did not silence this community's willingness to use their democratic rights to claim their right to their spaces and their futures. (Özdüzen, 2017: 14)

The Emek movement was also a movement for protecting a living space and protests were shaped accordingly. Harvey's conception of the right to the city, the right

to the living spaces, those who live in the streets of the city being decisive in the fate of the city were fulfilled in the Emek rallies.

According to Harvey, the right to the city is the right to access to urban resources, transform them and define our own future. City is an answer to how and where people want to live and communicate with which people in which locations. Therefore, city is a transformable collective space that people adapt themselves to and expects that it adapts to them.

The question of what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from the question of what kind of people we want to be, what kinds of social relations we seek, what relations to nature we cherish, what style of daily life we desire, what kinds of technologies we deem appropriate, what aesthetic values we hold. The right to the city is, therefore, far more than a right of individual access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city more after our heart's desire. It is, moreover, a collective rather than an individual right since changing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization. (Harvey, 2008: 28)

For Bourdieu, “the literary or artistic field is at all times the site of a struggle between the two principles of hierarchization: the heteronomous principle, favorable to those who dominate the field economically and politically (e.g. “bourgeois art”) and the autonomous principle (e.g. “art for art’s sake”) which those of its advocates who are least endowed with specific capital tend to identify with degree of independence from the economy, seeing temporal failure as a sign of election and success as a sign of compromise.” (Bourdieu, 1983: 321)

Recent protests organized against proposed urban development plans for Gezi Park in Taksim Square in Istanbul during May and June 2013 showed the importance of symbolic spaces (neighborhoods, squares, parks, and so on) in the emergence of resistance, as the inhabitants of the city would not allow top-down public decisions about their living spaces, which are considered to be part of their identity and represent landmarks in their everyday life. (Lelandais, 2014: 1804) It not only triggered further social movements but also increased the desire to create ‘our own communities’ for the future against the imposition of ‘their’ culture.

The case of Beyoğlu Movie Theater

After the Emek Theater was shut down and moved to its artificial location inside the Grand Pera mall, another movie theater in Beyoğlu found itself on the brink of being shut down. The Beyoğlu Theater was one of the two movie theaters (along with the Atlas Theater) in Beyoğlu that was still connected to the street. The theater, which has been operating under dire conditions for a long time, announced that it would shut down in June 2017.

Middle-class intellectuals and university youth switching to other neighborhoods, the terrorist attacks, restrictions on alcohol, the culture of the Middle Eastern tourists dominating the district already transformed Beyoğlu. This transformation affected the gate receipts of movie theaters, including the Beyoğlu Theater.

The Beyoğlu Theater, which has been operating since 1989, announced its decision to cease its operations in June 2017. They said:

We have long tried to survive in a place of monopolized distribution and screening chains. We still can't afford the fixed expenditure today. We've looked for sponsors but couldn't

find any, continuing with our efforts since 1989, it has become impossible to survive in this setting. we hope that alternative ways for survival will be found in a place of monopolized industry.

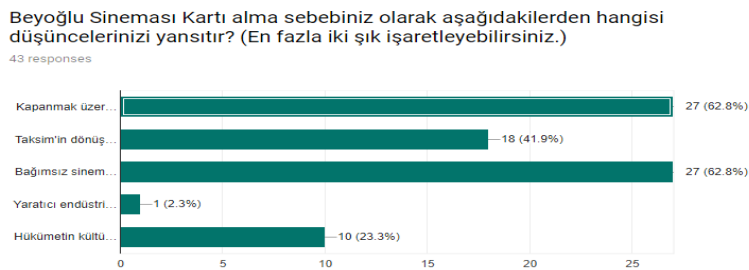
At this point, a small movement emerged in order to save the theater. After a debate on the social media for a strategy, a subscription system based on “loyalty cards” was introduced. A network of volunteers led by cinema critics Cem Altınsaray and Utku Ögetürk was formed, and negotiations with the theater managers started. As a result, Beyoğlu Theater cards were introduced, comprised of three tiers of 100 TL, 500 TL and 1000 TL. With the income provided by the card sales, a part of theater’s debt was covered.

The movement to protect the Beyoğlu Theater evolved in a different manner than that of the Emek Theater. The state of emergency in Turkey and the street demonstrations being restricted, urged for a different political action. The crowds that tried to save the Emek Theater were no longer in the streets, largely related to the disillusionment after the Gezi Park protests and the state of emergency declared after the failed coup attempt in 2016. Therefore, “desk-based actions” replaced mass protests, and purchasing cards helped protect a space. However, the Emek Theater and the Beyoğlu Theater movements both qualify as attempts to protect a cultural living space. Even in a period when political action was diminished, motivation for saving a movie theater as a cultural space was present. That motivation manifested itself through card purchases or actors and actresses encouraging people to purchase cards.

While those who purchased the cards were mostly movie goers, a considerable amount of people were who were uncomfortable with Beyoğlu’s transformation and trying to save it even though they no longer frequent the district.

The Beyoğlu Theater, in this regard, is important since it represents a hope for Beyoğlu, as well as being a cultural center. Journalist Kültigin Akbulut made a survey with card buyers about their motives to purchase. “My first question was about whether they had ever supported such a campaign before. The 60% of the people said that they supported such a campaign for the first time. (Akbulut, 2017) The Beyoğlu Theater campaign created a group of people who supported a crowdfunding effort for the first time. Therefore, we may say that this campaign is an important first step in creating awareness.

“In the second question, I asked the interviewees to state their purposes of supporting the campaign by selecting at most two of five choices. Two choices ranked first with 62% of votes; ‘Save the theater from shutting down’ and ‘Supporting the independent cinema’ (Akbulut, 2017)



As a result of this survey, it appears that many supporters participated in the campaign to protect the movie theater and their living spaces. Therefore, it is predictable that people tend to fight against Beyoğlu’s transformation and the movie theaters being shut down.

The Beyoğlu Theater was saved for the moment, through cards and other donations. As it was not taken over by a major company, it is currently away from extinction. It is renovated and continues operation.

Conclusions

The political and socioeconomical transformation in Turkey in the last 15 years have affected the arts and culture, as well as the urban spaces where cultural activities take place. Beyoğlu, gradually losing its appeal, has become the most prominent indicator of this transformation.

Beyoğlu, with the changing touristic strategies and the neoliberal policies, was opened to profit-based gentrification, and the arts and culture places were discarded in line with these policies. As a result of this process, movie theaters started to go out of business due to viewers not preferring this neighborhood, and also the finance capital trying to replace these theaters for profit.

With the closing of movie theaters, a new urban movement has mushroomed. The intellectuals who felt that their urban life spaces were threatened were the pioneers of this movement. While this movement manifested itself physically during the attempts to save the Emek theater, in the Beyoğlu theater case, social media and subscription schemes have played a role.

The actions pursued in the streets or on the social media empowered those who want to have a word on the fate of the city. Especially in the Emek movement, even though the movie theater could not be saved in the end, a process in which people felt themselves part of a movement emerged. Therefore, Harvey's and Lefebvre's theoretical arguments were turned into practice. The use of occupation as an alternative method transforms private or state property into independent public property where people can engage in their own decision-making processes.

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