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Encountering the Urban Crisis

The Gezi Event and the Politics of Urban Design

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This article addresses an experimental urban design studio conducted in Bilkent University in Ankara, which problematized the protests that initially started in Gezi Park in Istanbul and shook Turkey in the summer of 2013. As will be argued in detail below, we claim that the Gezi event represents an urban crisis. The particular event was the rapid escalation of a small protest against the destruction of a public space into a nationwide anti-government insurrection. But it also represented a larger urban crisis: the increasing influence of neoliberalism on the city, as the protests were the outcome of a period marked by zealous commodification of urban space. In both instances, such urban conflicts have to be addressed by urban designers, since they produce the renewal projects that gentrify urban spaces and, at the same time, seek possible alternatives for a better urban environment.

Despite local peculiarities, the Gezi protests were a part of the global tide of resistance against neoliberalism. In brief terms, neoliberalism represents the contemporary phase of the capitalist mode of production, making particular use of urban space through processes of

commodification and gentrification for the sake of capital accumulation. In this regard, the protests revealed the distinctive features of the neoliberal agenda, prioritizing growth and competition over democracy and social justice within the urban environment. The call

for urban dwellers to have a say in the decisions regarding their urban commons should not be understood as a simple demand for participation. Rather, it reflects the desire for creating “one’s own life” in the city, which Henri Lefebvre has famously formulated as the “right to the city.”¹

Remembering the Situationists’ definition of the Watts riots as a “critique of urbanism,” it becomes possible to understand that the street protest demanding a democratic reorganization of urban life is in fact a powerful critique of urban design.² Therefore, as urban design instructors, we felt obligated to address the issues raised by the Gezi protests in the design studio. As design educators, there was an ethical responsibility to address the Gezi event as a particular form of urban crisis; another reason was the role of students as major actors during the Gezi protests. They were the fierce critics of an updated (neoliberal) version of capitalist urbanism that the rioters in Watts had “critiqued” half a century ago.³

The protests in Istanbul began with the entry of bulldozers into Gezi Park on the night of May 27, 2013. The park had been built in the early 1940s adjacent to Taksim Square, which is the central hub of Istanbul and also a historically symbolic locus for Turkey. Despite the fact that it was protected as

a registered heritage site, the government had announced plans to replace Gezi Park with a shopping mall that was designed as a replica of a nineteenth-century army barracks that existed on the site. Although the initial protests were able to stop the construction, it resumed in the following days. In response, a small group of environmentalists camped in the park were brutally evacuated on the morning of May 30. Over the next two days, the country witnessed the growth of protests in and around Taksim Square, and the demonstrations spread to various quarters of Istanbul as well as Ankara (Figure 1). On June 1, the major squares of Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmir were occupied by thousands. Gezi Park was home to a communal encampment until it was violently evacuated on June 15.⁴

“Events,” according to Lefebvre, “believe forecasts; to the extent that events are historic, they upset calculations.”⁵ He was writing in the wake of another crisis, that of Paris 1968, which he defined as an “explosion.” The Gezi protests were also an unexpected explosion that took everyone by surprise. And while Gezi usually defined a place,



Figure 1. Signboard with graffiti referring to Taksim Square in downtown Ankara during the protests. (Photograph courtesy of the Chamber of Architects Ankara Branch. Reproduced with permission.)

for us it developed as an event. While it was truly a historic event, in Lefebvre’s words, “reactivating the movement of both thought and practice,” it was also a longer process extending beyond the two-week period of continuous protests and violent clashes with the police. This period of unrest comprised both the demonstrations of late May and early June of 2013 and the park assemblies that continued throughout the subsequent months. Therefore, we have defined the whole process as the “Gezi event,” since the park assemblies, which were labeled *forums* by the participants, were instruments that placed urban issues back on the national agenda.

The design studio was conducted by three instructors and thirty students within the urban context of Ankara. It was based on the key concept of “encounter,” another term borrowed from the inspirational work of Lefebvre.⁶ It is crucial to note that the student body was by no means a homogeneous entity; it also had to “encounter” its fellow students, who had diverse opinions regarding the protests. Therefore the design studio aimed to prompt multiple encounters that would inform the analysis and design of urban space. The main objective of this experimental studio was to make use of the “Gezi spirit” that—similar to other historic moments when people take to the streets en masse—transformed those who participated in it.⁷ According to Alain Badiou, the Gezi event was a new political space that assembled different social groups and brought about the possibility of a new political subject.⁸ Based on a similar idea, we sought the transformation of the students as agents of urban design: changed not through didactic tutelage, but a contingent process comprising planned and chance encounters.

The following article will discuss how the studio affected the students in their relation to urban design and describe the method we used to evaluate the studio work

in light of students’ responses to a survey conducted after a five-month interval. The survey was intended to allow the students time to reflect on their experience and its influence on their way of thinking regarding urban design.

The Urban Crisis

The growing literature on the neoliberal city and its social and environmental problems points to a historically specific condition of urban crisis. The effects of neoliberalism on urban life, particularly issues such as the destruction of public space, gentrification, the emergence of gated communities, and increases in inequality have been closely scrutinized since the 1990s.⁹ Moreover, especially during the past decade, modes of resistance and the current forms of urban social movements have attracted the attention of scholars of urban studies.¹⁰ Alternative strategies to counter the neoliberalization of the city have led to the emergence of globally connected and mutually inspired forms of urban protest.¹¹ Among these were the occupy-style (Occupy Wall Street) mobilizations, at times targeting global centers of hegemony and at times raising local issues.¹² Those focusing specifically on urban issues often referred to the Lefebvrian “right to the city,” albeit sometimes blunting the radical edge of the concept.¹³

The nationwide protests that shook Turkey during the summer of 2013, with certain historical specificities, were part of this global scene. The decade-long economic expansion under the Islamist Justice and Development Party (JDP) primarily depended on urban investments such as the gentrification of old squatter areas, the revitalization of city centers, growing numbers of shopping malls, and the construction of new roads promoting the increase of vehicular traffic.¹⁴ All of these projects—regardless of their scale—were proposed and rapidly implemented without any deliberation, a trademark method defined

as “authoritarian populism of the entrepreneurial state.”¹⁵

The disintegration of urban life via such regeneration projects went hand in hand with the imposition of Islamic codes in the cultural domain, such as the reorganization of primary school curricula along Islamic teachings, attempts to ban abortion, and the introduction of strict limitations on the consumption of alcohol. Therefore, when the small environmentalist protest against the destruction of a particular urban common such as Gezi Park spread, it quickly turned into a beacon for mass demonstrations in the major public spaces in the majority of Turkish cities.¹⁶ In a few days, millions took to the streets to demonstrate against the JDP government. An urban issue became the central theme of a mass movement converging distinct political actors and their diverse agendas.

Defining public space as the “space of appearance,” Hannah Arendt famously pointed out the importance of being visible as a sign of social existence and interaction.¹⁷ This idea of public space coalesces with Lefebvre’s concept of encounter to emphasize the social character of existence in public space. The basis for the juxtaposition of encounters in public space is its simultaneous housing of mundane practices and divergent activities in varying temporary cycles.¹⁸ Being an important urban hub, Taksim Square operates in this fashion: it is both the scene of an intense metropolitan rhythm and also the stage of historic events that marked the country’s politics.¹⁹ This dual character of public space defines the relation between politics and the city. Discussing Lefebvre’s concept of “right to the city,” Andy Merrifield argued that the concept is too vast and too narrow at the same time: “It’s too vast because the scale of the city is out of reach for most people living at street level; it’s too narrow because when people do protest, ... their existential desires frequently reach out beyond the scale of the

city itself and revolve around a common and collective humanity, a pure democratic yearning.”²⁰ This was precisely the case when Gezi Park, together with the adjacent Taksim Square, was occupied by the protestors for two weeks until it was brutally evacuated by the police. Meanwhile, demonstrations of various scales continued in other districts of Istanbul as well as other cities across the country. According to the figures given by the Ministry of Interior, there were 5,532 demonstrations in eighty of eighty-one provinces within these two weeks, and protestors numbered 3.6 million.²¹

The protests gradually faded during the weeks that followed the evacuation of the park. However, the momentum was not lost; it was channeled to local forums as sites to discuss how to keep up the protests and turn them into a lasting political mechanism. Numerous neighborhood forums were organized, especially in Istanbul and Ankara, and they were also interconnected through social media. The sites for the forums were generally smaller parks that were convenient to use on the warm summer nights. While the forums turned these sites into public spaces of political participation, they also turned the participants into political agents claiming their right to participate in decision-making processes shaping their neighborhoods and cities.

Agency in Urban Design

If we look at the demographics of the initial protests, the major actors were, not unlike the examples of the recent tide of mobilizations across the globe, young activists skillfully making use of social media to organize.²² These were mostly young, white-collar professionals with college degrees and university students destined to occupy similar positions, a social stratum defined by some scholars as the “new middle classes.”²³ Although the demographics of the protests rapidly became heterogeneous, the influence of the

young activists was felt throughout the events with their dynamism, skillful use of technology, and the sense of humor that produced a particular language of protest with slogans and graffiti.²⁴

The Gezi event claimed the city by (and for) urban dwellers, and it was a material illustration of the right to the city.²⁵ Needless to say, such claims target the ongoing urban renewal processes, which in turn bring into question the practice of urban design, since the former occurs through the operational use of the latter.²⁶ Thus, the Gezi event demanded the democratization of urban renewal, which requires a radically different approach to urban design, one that opens up a new space that allows for encounters among a multitude of agents. This politicizes urban design and urban dwellers, who transform into political subjects with “the right to claim rights.”²⁷

Engin İşin, a professor of politics and leading scholar of citizenship studies, differentiates between active citizenship and activist citizenship, defining the former as participation in public affairs using the existing legal channels and the latter as pursuing acts that transform “modes of being political” and opening up new channels of participation through claims of rights.²⁸ In this regard, the Gezi event clearly represents an act of activist citizenship in the absence of conditions for active citizenship. The demand for the democratization of urban renewal processes in the face of authoritarian implementation of urban design proposals defines urban dwellers as activist citizens.

Here, what is crucial for our discussion is the spatial character of activism; the street protests and the forums *produce* space. Activists make use of, reshape, and attribute new meanings to existing spaces. Moreover, with organizations such as protest camps and forums, they create a utopian social order, albeit for a very short time.²⁹ Therefore,

activist citizenship also involves the physical redesigning of urban space, which provides invaluable input to the experience of the students of urban design.

By the end of summer 2013, when the violent clashes with the police had already ended and the forums were continuing, the studio instructors decided to tackle the Gezi event in the urban design studio. Since the idea was to investigate the role of multiple issues of contestation rather than the specific case of Gezi Park in the making of the event, it was appropriate to use the city of Ankara as a site and analyze the protests that occurred in the city. The studio was intended to define a framework that would avoid an overt political position to be imposed on the students, yet one that would be in tune with the spirit of the protests, allowing the students to develop and express their own interpretation of the event as well as its connection to the practice of urban design. The students' profile fit with the activist youth; most of them were literally on the ground taking part in the protests. Therefore, they were urban political agents as both activist citizens and urban designers, even though some of them were not aware of this at that moment.

Defining the Studio Problem

The studio objectives were defined along three main tracks: creating awareness regarding the urban crisis that gave way to the protests, analyzing the spatial character of the protests and the forums in the city of Ankara, and combining these two tracks toward concrete urban design proposals in tune with the curricular course objectives. According to the department's curriculum for the fall semester, the studio themes are defined as "site design" for second-year students, "urban districts" for third-year students, and "open space network" for fourth-year students.

The studio problem was intended to develop links between the studio and the Gezi event, first by turning the studio into a forum of expression and deliberation on urban issues, and second as a means to translate actual issues and their related spaces of contestation in Ankara into design problems for the students to tackle. In this way, the interaction between these two realms would allow the students to grasp the complexity of urban politics through their own experience. Our intention was to allow the students to confront the urban crisis of the neoliberal city through the case of Gezi, where the massive social explosion in

fact unified distinct but particular issues.³⁰

The studio process was organized in three stages (Figure 2). In the initial stage, students were invited to engage in dialogue to discuss the Gezi event and its relation to the urban realm. The second stage mapped the spaces of encounter through the fieldwork conducted in the designated districts. The students researched the recent history of the protests in early summer and produced chronological accounts informed with socioeconomic data. In the final stage, they were given design problems in accordance with their grade level.

"ENCOUNTER" Studio Process						
Stages	Tools	Method	Description	Site	Type of encounter	Outcome
Stage I: Dialogue	Concepts	ENCOUNTER	dig into the multitude of meanings and connotations embodied within the particular concept under scrutiny and map them within a two-dimensional structure	-	Mental-Textual-visual	MIND-MAP
		Reading Lectures	Excerpts from the work of Guy Debord "Utopian Space and Situationists" and "Urban Social Movements".	-	Mental-Critical	DISCUSSION
		PUBLIC SPACE	Observation - bodily experience - <i>dérive</i> choose a particular public space, observe the space in different times of day and detect encounters.	A particular public space in Ankara	Mental-visual-emotional-experiential-bodily	FREE EXPRESSIONS: film, sound, drawings, maps and collages.
Stage II: Mapping	District Forum	Mapping	analyses of the general characteristics of the districts, the urban development processes, the political disposition of the district, street protests, ongoing forums; qualitative and quantitative data collection on spatial practices	Neighborhood Forums in Ankara	Physical-emotional-bodily-experiential-random	PSYCHOGEOGRAPHIC MAP
Stage III: Design	Place of encounter - Urban Park	Scenario/Design	Second Year: (individual projects) design an urban park as a place of encounter	an empty lot across Kugulu park in Kavaklıdere-Ankara	professional	URBAN DESIGN PROJECT 1/200
	Neighborhood-Public space	Scenario/Design	Third Year: (individual projects) redesign the open spaces of the district center with proposals informed by the uses of spaces (re)produced through collective action.	the district they had analyzed in the second stage and the neighborhood Forum	professional	URBAN DESIGN PROJECT 1/500
	City Center - Public Space-Agent	Network	Fourth Year I: (dis)uncover network of places of encounter across Ankara: superpose different networks (city councils, neighborhood forums, etc)		professional	Network Map of ANKARA
	City Center - Network Place of encounter	City Center Network Place of encounter	Fourth Year II - develop individual proposals for the city center with relation to the networks; redesign it as a place of encounter.	Kızılay district stretching between Sıhhiye and Kugulu	professional	URBAN DESIGN PROJECT 1/1000

Figure 2. "Encounter" studio process. (Drawing by authors.)

The Studio Process

Stage 1: Dialogue

The first stage of the studio process began with the discussion of the studio topic and was aimed at laying a discursive foundation for the upcoming stages of “mapping” and “design.” In a sense, this was the most difficult stage, for it required careful definition of the framework within which to work: namely, the relationship with politics. The memory of the hot days of June was still present; some of the students had actively participated in violent clashes with the police (for the first time in their lives) and were still filled with the youthful energy of protest. The excitement of rebellion was still in the air. Yet a smaller number of the students were supporters of the ruling JDP and were sure that the Gezi protests were merely a violent rampage aiming to oppress religious citizens. The announcement that the studio would focus on the Gezi event inevitably resulted in a heated debate at the first session. Ironically, the protestor-students soon realized that they were also a dissimilar body; the discussions led to sharp disagreements even among the supporters of the protests. As one student later put it: “The studio work was actually like the Gezi events. It was a process in which prejudices and radical ideas were put forward and discussed; and finally it was possible to work together despite differences.”³¹

The initial phase began with a primal scene of encounter: the students confronted fellow students with diverse positions and had to come to terms with their points of view. This gradual move was possible through the reluctant acceptance to frame the debates within the context of urban politics. As the Gezi event transformed the destruction of an urban common into a multitude of topics of protest in various locales across country, we attempted to repeat the process and began the studio with a dialogue as “deliberation” on Gezi, which gradually turned into an excursus on urban politics. The big political notions

such as “freedom” and “resistance” gave way to questioning the link between these notions and urban space. Instead of debating the reasons behind the protest (critique of various government policies), the discussions turned to the nature of public space and its generative role in social movements. This, on the part of the students, was the recognition of the urban—which proved to be no less political.

The dialogue stage comprised a series of conceptual exercises. The first of these applied the method of mind mapping to the concept of encounter. The logic of the mind map rests on developing new concepts that branch out from the initial one. This allowed students to dig into the multitude of meanings and connotations embodied within the particular concept under scrutiny.³² Finding concepts stemming from “encounter” and later deriving new ones from those, the students arrived at two-dimensional structures radiating from the central concept. As the students began to consider the distinct meanings and connotations of encounter, we invited them to read and discuss excerpts from the work of the Situationists.³³ The basic premise of the Situationists rested on the observation that consumer capitalism dulled urban life and controlled its spaces, followed by the reasoning that this process could be inverted toward liberation through playful interventions. We found their work relevant to the experience of the Gezi event, since the protests often embodied artistic creativity and involved spatial interventions to resist consumer culture.³⁴ The excerpts were carefully selected and reassembled (in tune with the spirit of the Situationist *œuvre*) in order to serve as a thought-provoking introduction to a discussion on the capitalist city. They were meant to unsettle the students’ preconceptions regarding urban planning and design. After discussions of Situationist keywords, the students attended two lectures designed to

provide scholarly input regarding the neoliberal city and the urban crisis. One of the lectures focused on the work of the Situationists and the social context of their work, and the other studied contemporary urban social movements to situate the Gezi event within a global framework.

The final component of the dialogue stage took the students outside the studio space. They were required to experience public space and observe the experiences it accommodated (or discouraged). With the concept of encounter in mind, the students were asked to choose a particular public space and spend a few hours over the course of a weekend to observe encounters. Observing the space at different times of day, students realized that public space not only accommodated sudden events but was also the site of mundane activities repeated in cycles with certain rhythms.³⁵ It was also inspired by the Situationist notion of *dérive*, which Guy Debord has defined as “a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances [which] involve[s] playful-constructive behavior and awareness of psychogeographical effects.”³⁶ The intention was to use this experience as an inventive strategy not only to observe but also to live through unforeseen and unpredictable encounters, and lead the students to a new awareness of public space.

By the end of the first stage, the connection between encounter and public space was well established. The students were now informed about the irreducibility of public space to a functional program and its potential to restrain or encourage the actions of urban dwellers. The role of Gezi Park as a physical space of protest made it possible to link it with both the urban crisis (as the object of an authoritarian renewal process) and the spatial character of protest (as the locus bringing together various issues of contestation). According to one student, “Although it is sad that an event that is so much related to our profession came to the foreground in such a

[violent] way, it raised awareness and resulted in the rise of new ideas and proposals. It paved the way for the people to claim their public spaces.” Whether they were for or against the Gezi protests, the students were now aware of the social cost of neoliberal renewal projects via discussions on dislocation, gentrification, and commons.

Stage 2: Mapping

The second stage aimed at scrutinizing the spaces of encounter in Ankara. This comprised comprehensive analyses of the Gezi event, including both the street protests of June and the forums of the following months. Through a preliminary assessment, the instructors divided the city into districts, superimposing the network of areas that witnessed political action as part of the Gezi event with the existing divisions along administrative units and socioeconomic differences. Studying the forums and their activities, we discovered that some districts did not contain any relevant activity. Therefore, a particular analytical criterion was the existence of at least one neighborhood forum in each of the districts. As a result, eight districts were defined and assigned to students (Figure 3). This initial mapping of protest sites showed a concentration of disaffection with the JDP. Interestingly, this map did not coincide with the voting patterns and the location of traditional supporters of political parties. An important finding that would later inform the design problems was that there were local urban issues that superseded party affiliations.

The second stage of the studio was conducted as group work, requiring the collaboration of second-, third-, and fourth-year students. Each group began its analyses with the general characteristics of the districts such as the socioeconomic structure and cultural identity, the urban development processes, and the current contested urban issues. Particular attention was given to the ongoing forums; their

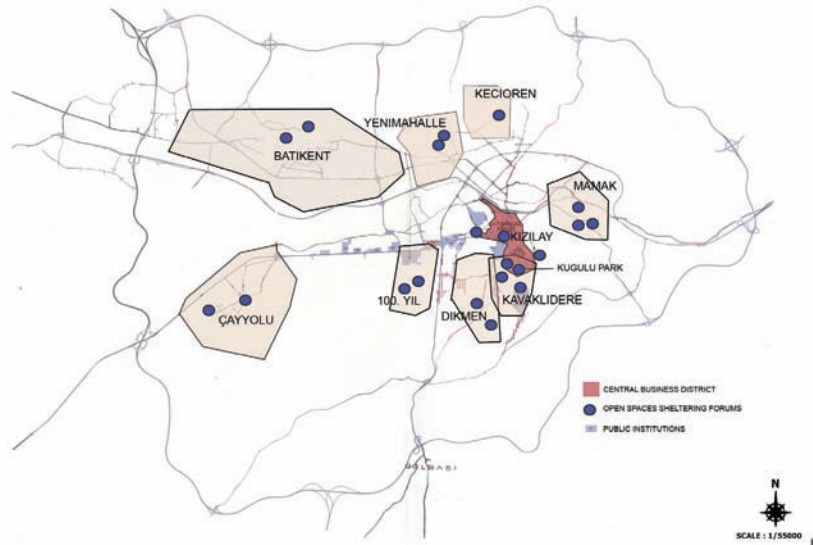


Figure 3. Map of districts showing the locations of forums and the city center in Ankara. (Drawing by authors.)

structure, qualitative and quantitative data about their composition and activities, the public spaces used during the forum activities, and the spatial practices that reshaped the use of the public spaces were thoroughly investigated (Figure 4).

The students were required to attend local forums as well as a general assembly in Kuğulu Park, bringing together participants from all over Ankara. A striking “encounter” at the Kuğulu assembly was illustrative for both the students’

experience and the social dynamics of the protests. One of the students wearing a headscarf—a visible signifier of Islamic identity that has been a cause of the exclusion of young women—received hostile remarks from some of the participants. The authoritarian character of the Turkish modernization project had resulted in the definition of the public sphere as a site for the

Figure 4. Cable car implemented in spite of local opposition in Yenimahalle. The system was not part of the existing development and transportation plans; therefore, its supports were randomly located in the streets, destroying daily life in the neighborhood. (Photograph by authors.)



implementation of secularism and the silencing of religious signs and symbols.³⁷ Nevertheless, during the protests, Gezi Park witnessed cohabitation and solidarity among various groups, including anticapitalist Muslims. There were many protestors wearing headscarves, and there was no harassment directed toward them. This encounter showed that Kuğulu Park was, unlike Gezi Park, not a space that accommodated cultural differences. Located in Kavaklıdere, with its particular population, Kuğulu was not able to turn into an inclusive center.³⁸ It was used as the central locale for the general assembly since the city's main public square—Kızılay Square—was under strict police control due to its proximity to the government buildings. The student described her experience as follows: “Think about it; you are pursuing a studio assignment which aims at designing ‘public spaces’ in an area which is identified by everyone as ‘public space,’ and yet you are treated as [if] you don’t belong to that ‘public.’” It was not only the forum participants who were surprised to encounter the students with headscarves in Kuğulu

Park. When one of these female students approached the police and questioned their violent methods, the police were not sure how to respond and tried to explain their position (a response they would normally withhold from protestors).

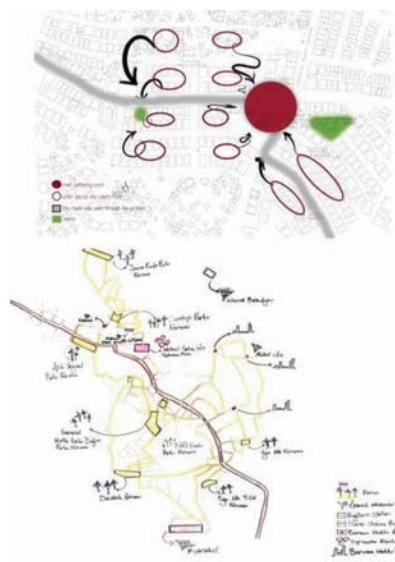
The students’ participation in the local forums, besides serving as an opportunity to make observations in the field, was an experience of encounters: with different social positions, different cultural identities, and different political agencies. They witnessed that encounters trigger exchange of ideas and questioning of prejudices. As one of the survey responses argued, “[encounters] create consciousness and alter points of view. For instance, during the June resistance, people realized that encounters in the Southeast [the Kurdish cities] are different than those in Ankara [i.e., experiencing oppression] and began to question the conditions there.”

Moreover, the local forums allowed the students to realize the multiplicity of urban political issues and their multiscale character. In all of the forums, the participants discussed local problems together with larger political issues. Some of these local issues were a cable car proposal in Keçiören, the destruction of a local park in Yenimahalle, the construction of a mosque-cemevi

complex in Mamak (which the Alevis viewed as an attempt at religious assimilation), and the road construction in 100. Yıl neighborhood.³⁹ All of these local issues were tied to the crisis that marked the urban condition in Ankara, as revealed by the Gezi event. The common point in these local issues was that they were urban design projects proposed by the municipality without any deliberation, denying the right of urban dwellers to have a say in decisions about their environment (Figure 5).

The analyses produced during this stage were presented as psychogeographic maps—another Situationist tool—allowing the students to express their own experience in creative ways.⁴⁰ These psychogeographic maps contained spatial analyses on the activities and the types of encounters within the public spaces such as parks, squares, and even street corners, which turned into significant locales during the Gezi event (Figure 6). These analyses helped the students see how space affected the actions in it. They discovered cases such as the appropriation of a particular street corner as a café, the arranging of an open space as a resting area for injured protestors, and the use of barricade tape to reorganize traffic in accordance

Figure 5. Spatial analyses of political action during the Gezi protests in different districts of Ankara (Drawing by Gülse Eraydın, Ceren Gülen, Betül Çakan.)



ONE TREE DIES ONE NATION WAKES UP #occupymamak



Figure 6. Final product of stage 2 showing the types, slogans, spatial patterns, and locations of protest in Mamak district juxtaposed with the urban regeneration process experienced in the area in recent years (Drawing by Selin Nalbant, Tuğba Altın, Hümeysra Betül Mallı, Doğu Berkan Çitlak.)

with the rhythms of protest. The findings of these analyses were later used for the definition of particular design problems as well as students' proposals to remedy these problems. The students incorporated drawings, photos, novel excerpts, poems, slogans, metaphors, and souvenirs in their visual presentations (Figure 7).

While the first stage was a conceptual investigation into encounter, the second stage led the students to physical encounters that were more effective in influencing their position in relation to urban politics as well as urban design. This experience, on the one hand, invited the students to pursue their site analyses in an unconventional way, with the use of a conceptual tool. According to one of the students, "the concept of encounter made me think of another concept; that of 'contact.' Through my field analyses I observed how urban space allows and restrains such contacts. I had never evaluated urban space in this way before." Another one acknowledged: "I understood the significance of space for encounters. I observed how space affects encounters and is affected by them in return."

The students' experience in the forum activities was a hands-on case in participatory design juxtaposing activism and architecture. Through their encounters, students observed



Figure 7. Collages showing the spatial practices that emerged in Kuşulu Park during the Gezi protests and their transformative effect on the adjacent Tunali Hilmi Street (Drawing by Özgü Apaydın, Lütfiye Özden, Elif Ceren Engin, Zeynep Pelin Özcan.)

how urban space was transformed (sometimes temporarily and sometimes permanently) through political action. They also overcame their preconceptions about the false hierarchies embedded within urban design, which separate the designer and the user, prioritizing the former over the latter. One student remarked: "The studio experience reminded me that we are designing for people." Here, two points are significant in this seemingly simple statement. The student posits that what the studio did was not to teach but to remind them of the humanist

dimension of their profession. That is, the students already knew in theory that they are (supposed to be) designing for the people, yet the encounters they had during the semester led to a practical awareness. Second, the Turkish phrase used by the student (*insanlar*) is not a generic phrase referring to "the people" but to people as "human beings." This was an indication of the shift in their view regarding the agents of urban design; they began to see the users as the producers of space.

Stage 3: Design

The final episode in the studio was the design stage, which was formulated as individual projects defined with respect to the grade requirements of each year. Accordingly, the second-year

students were given an empty lot across Kuğulu Park and asked to design it as a place of encounters in the form of an urban park. They were responsible for the physical links to the surrounding neighborhood as well as Kuğulu Park and were expected to develop their program addressing the semester's debates around the concept of encounter.

The third-year students were required to continue working in the district they had analyzed in the second stage. Their design problem was defined as refocusing the district on the place of encounter; they were expected to redesign the open spaces of the district center with proposals informed by the uses of existing spaces and the new ones produced through collective action. The spaces of encounter as uncovered through the analyses of the second stage were to become the focus of the district and act as a center containing regular urban functions (such as transportation networks and public services).

The design problem for the fourth-year students was formulated with reference to the findings of the second stage. The observations of the second stage illustrated the failure of Kuğulu Park to serve as the central public space in Ankara. The lack of such a center was a result of state control in Kızılay, the actual city center with social, cultural, economic, and civic functions. They were expected to develop individual proposals for the city center and redesign it as a place of encounter (see Figure 2). In tune with their grade objectives, they were required to reorganize Kızılay as the focal point of an open-space network.

The proximity of their site to Kuğulu Park forced the second-year students to engage with this particular space and its political character during the Gezi event. As a result, the reference to Kuğulu (or lack thereof) was almost a manifestation of the student's position regarding the Gezi event. One student was impressed by how a retaining wall in Kuğulu Park turned into a palimpsest of graffiti. She researched the

politics of graffiti and cases where it is considered legal. Her conclusion was that graffiti was an instrument for the freedom of expression and should be accommodated in a democratic society. Observing the frequent destruction of graffiti by the police, she proposed to extend the wall in Kuğulu Park into the site she designed, labeling it as "legal graffiti wall." The wall extending out of Kuğulu Park was now legitimized as a visible (and viable) urban element. While this project reflected the excitement of Gezi, another approach affirming the protests focused on the memory of the event through those who were killed during the protests. One student proposed an underground tunnel linking Kuğulu to the designed site, which gradually ascended to meet a monumental oak. The image of a single tree was frequently used in posters and banners during the Gezi event, since the origin of the protests was the environmentalist cause to defend the trees in the park. Here, the tree was not used merely as an image but rather as a spatial element within the landscape. Moreover, the phenomenological approach to topography further increased its symbolism. In contrast to these examples, a student who opposed the protests declined to refer to Gezi as a positive event. Yet her proposal was to create a "marketplace" of cultural exchange, which was particularly consistent with the neighborhood sheltering embassies and their multicultural staff.

The third-year students came up with more complex schemes informed by their earlier analyses. One student forwarded a contextual proposal for Keçiören. Keçiören has been a stronghold of the JDP, and there is only a small minority of (mostly Alevi) neighborhoods with a history of violent oppression that participated in the Gezi event. The student had already uncovered the history of the area in the second stage and superimposed the sites attached to this history of oppression and resistance

with the contemporary sites of encounter. One such example is a cafe frequented by leftists where she discovered the political graffiti displayed spatial patterns in the district: some walls have been used for decades. Another reflection she brought was the multifunctional use of the public spaces in the district. Because the neighborhood was accustomed to political demonstrations, parks and street intersections were at times transformed accordingly, including the temporary reorganization of traffic flow. During the design stage, she utilized her observations in the area regarding the architectural know-how of the activists. She proposed certain locations to be temporarily adapted to demonstrations, rallies, and activities such as concerts. Linking graffiti walls with longer histories via a trail, she created spaces of memory along this trail and arrived at the redesigned site of the historic café mentioned above.

One student working in Mamak, a large district mostly composed of traditional squatter neighborhoods, focused on the struggle of the locals against the regeneration of their neighborhoods. She began with an analysis of the recently transformed squatter areas, uncovering the destruction of the social spaces through the regeneration process, comparing aerial views of the same area from different years. Her findings revealed that the irregular patterns of squatter housing actually created open spaces, which were appropriated in accordance with the past practices of the squatters in the countryside. In contrast, contemporary patterns created by development plans created leftover spaces suitable for neither agricultural use nor leisure activities. Then she proposed "guerilla gardening" as a method of resistance to be pursued by collective action. Urban agriculture was defined as a shared domain to withstand the atomization of life in modern apartments. This was both a contemporary strategy of urbanism

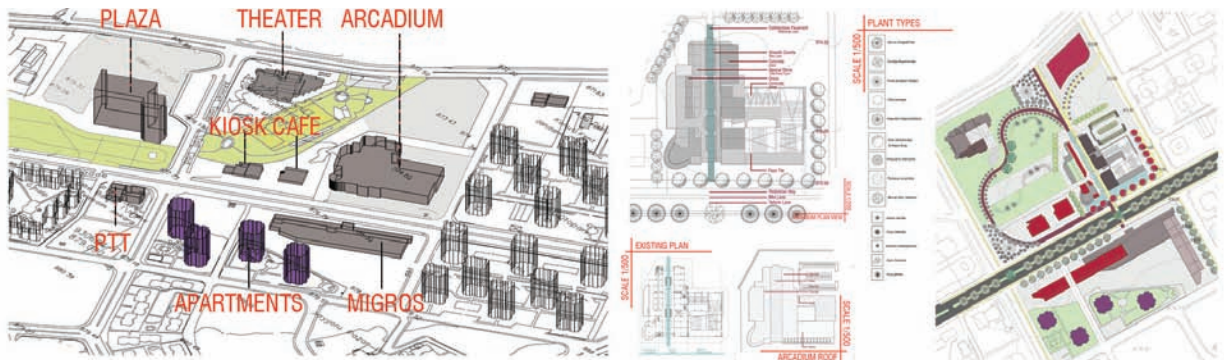


Figure 8. Third-year design proposal for Çayyolu: opening up the shopping mall to incorporate it into the landscape of the open public space. (Drawing by Hande Demirezen.)

and a lesson derived from the traditional squatter neighborhoods with their irregular green spaces.

While these two projects had overt political connotations, a more subtle approach was pursued in Çayyolu. Çayyolu is a suburban upper-middle-class area, which is also identified with a strong opposition to the JDP. The student working here departed from the dysfunctional condition of the two existing forums in Çayyolu. Her earlier analyses revealed that the prioritization of vehicular traffic in the initial planning of the district made the existing open spaces inaccessible. Therefore, the forums in the district chose to assemble in indoor spaces. She proposed to redesign a busy spot around a shopping mall and a theater (Figure 8), giving priority to pedestrians and reorganizing traffic. The most striking aspect of the project was its inversion of the proposal for Gezi Park in Istanbul. The municipality had proposed to destroy Gezi Park to create a replica of an Ottoman military barracks with a large courtyard in the form of a shopping mall, a building making the urban common its courtyard. The student's proposal for Çayyolu inverted this scheme and proposed opening up the closed architecture of the shopping mall, destroying the controlled character of its interior by opening it to pedestrian paths and bicycle lanes running through. The open spaces

around the mall were also skillfully designed to assimilate the building as a component of the landscape.

As for the fourth-year projects, the design strategies ranged between rather modest attempts to improve the social character of the city center and retaking it from the state by occupying the government buildings in Kızılay. The students were defined as a major actor in most of the projects, which reflected the identification of the students with the users of the space. This was not surprising since they were pushed out of Kızılay with water cannons and tear gas during the days of protest. One of the projects proposed urban furniture at a spot frequently used for political demonstrations (Figure 9). This type of minor architecture, which was in tune with the Situationist idea of appropriating urban space by the users, was also intended to obstruct police intervention in the area.⁴¹ In another proposal, it was the government quarter itself that was reused as a university campus open to public use; the government buildings were taken over by the students (Figure 10).

Proposing scenarios for Kızılay inevitably revisited the earlier discussions on public space and its relation to the state, which had always been problematic throughout the history of modern Turkey.⁴² The student who proposed to reuse the government quarter as a university campus narrated the anecdote of an encounter in the area. She was stopped by a police officer who found her actions suspicious

(taking notes, drawing sketches, and taking photographs of the Prime Minister's office), and she engaged in a discussion with the officer on what defined public space. Against the student's claim that these spaces belonged to all, the police officer compared taking pictures of the Prime Minister's office to the invasion of the privacy of a father's chamber. This very encounter was probably more influential on the student's design proposal than all the theoretical discussions on public space.

Assessment: Urban Design and Politics of the Encounter

The studio, based on the Gezi event and conducted at Bilkent University, dealt with the politics of encounter on two levels. First, the Gezi event itself illustrated the politics of encounter in public space. Gezi Park turned into a physical and symbolic space bringing together different issues and identities, which provided a significant case for urban designers interested in the social production of space. In this regard, the politics of encounter was a major point of the Gezi event. Second, the protests were an accumulation of reactions to the authoritarian commodification of urban space, which we defined as a case of the global urban crisis of neoliberalism. For us, this was an issue to be addressed in urban design education, and here, encounter was our means to tackle the urban crisis in the studio. Departing from the idea that the Gezi event represented the eruption of multiple urban issues through the singular struggle to

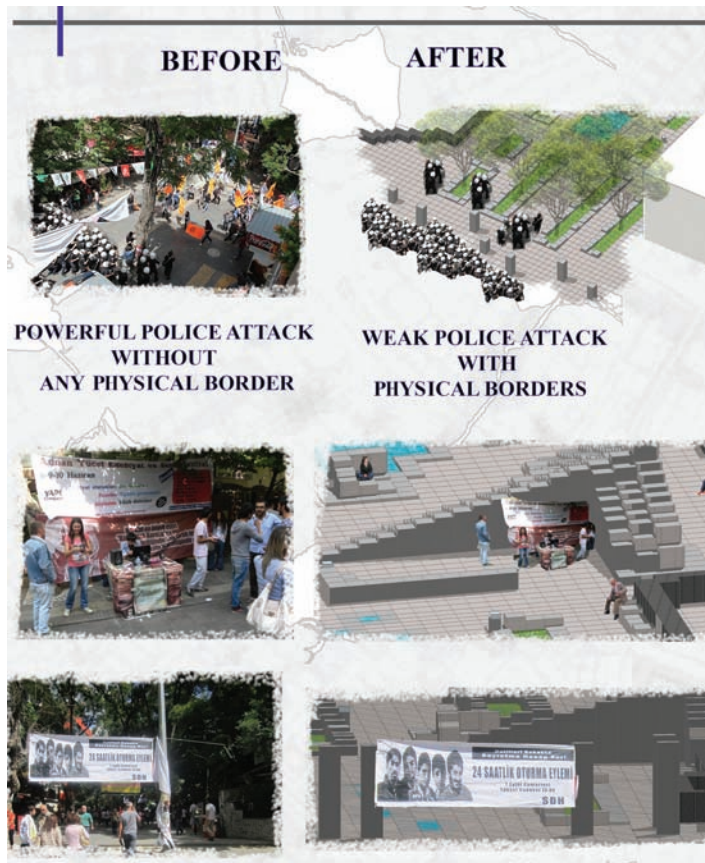


Figure 9. Above: Fourth-year proposal: "minor" architecture in Yüksel Pedestrian Zone easing protest and restricting police movement (Drawing by Gülse Eraydın.)

Figure 10. Below: Fourth-year proposal: appropriation of government buildings in Kızılay (Photograph/drawing by Sena Çam.)

defend public space, we followed a methodology to reverse engineer the protests in each local context. While our regular studio method was to define the problems to which the students would produce solutions through design, in this experimental case we let the students discover the problems to be solved through

their analyses, beginning with the local forms of the Gezi event in the districts of Ankara. That is, we designed the semester's work as a contingent path for the students to learn from their experience of encounters. This contingency, we believe, was in tune with the spirit of the Gezi event, for it did not

impose a particular approach to the problem at hand. Rather, it allowed the students to invent their solutions to the issues they discovered along this path. In this way, the studio work simultaneously addressed slum clearance and gentrification (in Dikmen), architectural manifestations of religious conflict (the mosque-cemevi complex in Mamak), negative impacts of road construction on adjacent neighborhoods (in 100. Yıl), integration of transportation hubs with social environment (in Yenimahalle), incorporation of political history into urban life (in Keçiören), and the role of the shopping mall as public space and its mutual relation with car-based transportation (in Çayyolu). All these problems were discovered by the students as local bases for protest to which they responded with original design proposals. Almost all of the proposals connected these themes with the practices of protest as legitimate activities within their newly designed public spaces.

The student responses to the survey we conducted five months after the studio work reveal a number of themes that the students found significant. One was the sociopolitical character of urban design. Some students defined this as an issue of multidisciplinary: "After the studio, I decided that urban design is not independent from politics, media, sociology and psychology." Others derived political lessons: "I began to think that [urban design] is not easy and in fact it is about shaping social movements. This consciousness developed since the first day of the studio and I hope that I never forget these ideas throughout my professional life."

Another issue emphasized by the students was the significance of public space. Interestingly, the survey responses related to this issue reflected a sense of tolerance for differences; it was a lesson in political culture taken from space: "Whatever its political meaning may be, the Gezi events have—and should—lead us to consider the

concept of public space. Differences can exist side by side; what we call 'public space' is precisely this heterogeneity." One student argued that encounters in public space should be stimulated through spatial means since "alienation and fear should dissolve in these spaces."

Finally, the students expressed their views linking the studio to the Gezi event: "I believe that the Gezi events have transformed the ways in which we perceive the street and the studio experience allowed me to realize these transformations." Despite initial skepticism regarding the suitability of the Gezi event as a studio topic, the final comments were positive. One student responded: "I found it meaningful that the studio problem was related to a social phenomenon, because I believe that we designers should have certain sensitivities and I think the studio can and should establish this sense." Another one similarly found the topic not only relevant but "timely," which "required us designers to take responsibility."

The semester-long process was exciting and curious for the studio instructors. While we benefited from the comprehensive analyses in studying the spatial forms of the Gezi event in Ankara, it was also instructive to be in contact with the students through such a challenging topic. Both the students and the instructors came into the studio with their own ideas and views, only to submit these to the test of encounters. Encounters do not occur in a vacuum; they occur through the meanings we ascribe to people and places we encounter. But these ascriptions are also subject to transformation through the encounter, that is, the transformation of ourselves.

Coda

A few words should be said about the aftereffects of the Gezi event. The violent repression of the protests rapidly extended to the institutionalization of state oppression with new legislation toward reinforcing a

police state. The use of social media was restricted; the laws related to the operations of the police and the intelligence units were revised for their utilization by the government; and finally the judiciary bureaucracy was reorganized to put it under government control. While the JDP maintained its power and Prime Minister Erdoğan rose to the presidency, the Turkish government is now internationally viewed as an oppressive one. Although the dynamics of the current political situation in Turkey are complex, there is a consensus that the Gezi event marked a historical threshold.

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