

Interrelation between inclusivity of public spaces and social cohesion: Metamorphosis of a historical park in Ankara, Turkey

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Abstract: Public spaces with different degrees of inclusiveness and exclusiveness are critical in both attaining and sustaining social cohesion between diverse groups, thus achieving coherent community life from neighborhood to city scale. This paper aims to examine the notion of social cohesion through the lens of the inclusivity of public spaces. Providing a model for the qualitative assessment of the inclusivity/exclusivity of public spaces, this research assesses the largest historic park in Ankara, *Gençlik Park*. It studies the metamorphosis of this park from its heyday to 2018 regarding the four dimensions of access in relation with design, management, control and use processes, as well as the contextual aspect of the inclusivity-exclusivity continuum of public-private spaces. It argues that the inclusive nature of public spaces evolves over time along with the local and global contexts within which the public space is set and bounded. Revealing multiple, site-specific and interrelated driving forces behind the inclusivity of the public space, it shows how the original design of the park has been modified, and how this affected the inclusivity of the park, and the social cohesion in the city.

Keywords: public space; social cohesion; inclusivity; Ankara

Introduction

Public spaces are inevitable components of cities. Bringing together different groups of people regardless of their class, ethnic origin, gender and age, and performing as the arenas of social interaction, they help the formation of the richest quality of a multi-class, multi-cultural and heterogeneous society. They carry out educational, informative and communicative roles to strengthen public life. People coming from different segments of the society interact and learn about each other in public spaces. Therefore, public spaces with different degrees of inclusiveness play a critical role in both attaining and sustaining social cohesion between diverse groups to achieve a coherent community life at neighborhood, district and city levels. This paper aims to discuss the interplay between social cohesion and inclusivity of public spaces, first by providing a model of inclusivity for the qualitative assessment of public spaces, and second by using this model to assess the inclusivity of the largest historic urban park in Ankara, namely *Gençlik Park (GP)*. As a city-scale park, GP was built in the 1930s along with the nation-building ideology of newly-founded Turkish Republic to create a modern, secular and Westernized society and to build a social cohesion and unity among different segments of the population. This paper examines the metamorphosis of GP, its changing inclusivity over the last 90 years, and thereby its impacts on contributing the social cohesion in the city. It relies on qualitative and quantitative

evidence (archival documents, direct observations, a survey of 180 questionnaires and in-depth interviews with the sixteen old park users), involving a mixture of primary and secondary data.

The inclusivity model of public spaces

Public spaces, by nature, are inclusive and pluralist (Tiesdell and Oc, 1998; Williams and Green, 2001). The *inclusive public space* can be defined as possessing four mutually supportive qualities of *access*: Physical access, social access, access to activities, and access to information, discussions and intercommunications (Akkar, 2005). *Physical access* is the access to the physical environment (Tiesdell and Oc, 1998). Public spaces are inclusive, as long as they allow everybody to be physically present with the availability of entrances and universal design principles which its accessibility and connectivity to paths of circulation and a variety of public and private transport modes (Akkar Ercan and Memlük, 2015).

Social access involves the presence of hints and signals, in the form of people, design and management elements, suggesting who is and is not welcome in the space (Carr et al., 1992). *Visual access* or *visibility* of public spaces, symbols used or represented within these spaces and feeling of safety and comfort affect social accessibility of public environments (Carr et al., 1992; Rishbeth, 2001). Likewise, the emotional bonds between individuals or groups and environments generate symbolic meanings and cultural importance of the places, with which public spaces help form personal or collective histories and memories, leading to the creation of place attachment (Rishbeth, 2001), and a sense of continuity for a group or a society (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1988). Binding the individual members of the group or society together, these feelings enhance social unity and cohesion (Lynch, 1992; Moughtin, 1999). Similarly, the design, activity and management of public spaces need to reflect the needs, values and aspirations of all social groups from different ethnic, social and income levels to ensure the provision of inclusive public spaces (Rishbeth, 2001).

Public spaces are also inclusive, as long as they accommodate a variety of activities accessible by the publics. As the societies become highly multiplied, diversified and differentiated and the distance between social groups widens, the need for multi-functional public spaces arises. The more variety of facility the public spaces comprise, the more inclusive they are (Akkar, 2005).

Access to information, discussions and intercommunications means the availability and accessibility of the information about the design, development, management and use processes on public spaces. Inclusive public spaces are places where the information, discussions and intercommunications regarding these processes are truly open to all (Akkar, 2005). This requires the presence of inclusive and participatory public spheres, guaranteed by the public authorities (Akkar and Memlük, 2015). By facilitating renegotiations between the publics and public authorities, such arenas enable the meanings and functions of public spaces to change in conformity with citizens' needs and interests (Akkar, 2005), and reinvigorate society through collective action (Madanipour, 2010). Language should not be a barrier to access development and use processes of public spaces (Rishbeth, 2001).

This *inclusivity model* can be understood at the physical and procedural levels. The first three access dimensions of this model are *physical*, as they primarily denote the accessibility of physical space, whilst the fourth access dimension denotes a *procedural accessibility*; i.e. the access to the design, development, management, control and use processes of urban space (Akkar Ercan and Memlük, 2015). These two levels of access should overlap to achieve *inclusive public spaces* (Akkar Ercan and Memlük, 2015). Public spaces ideally should be inclusive to protect cultural diversity, create the spatial experience of democracy, reduce the potential social conflicts of the society, promote an urbanism of tolerance and social cohesion, reintegrate a socio-spatially fragmented city, expand citizenship, empower community, and get people involved in the governance and maintenance of their cities and public spaces (Madanipour 1999; Shonfield 1998). To achieve these higher values and objectives, the

inclusion of all segments of the public in the physical and procedural public spaces is crucial (Akkar Ercan and Memlük, 2015).

Four access dimensions of this model offer valuable empirical tools to define an *ideally inclusive public space* and to assess the inclusivity capacity of a public space. Since the relationship between inclusive public space and exclusive private space is a *continuum* rather than a dichotomy, it is possible to define public and private spaces with different degrees of inclusivity/exclusivity (Akkar, 2005). Therefore, regarding four aspects of access for a specific time-period, the extent of 'inclusivity' of a public space depends on the degree to which the public space physically and socially is open to all, and the activities occurring in, and information, discussions and intercommunications about the design, development, management and use processes are accessible to everybody (Akkar Ercan and Memlük, 2015; 2019).

As the change in public spaces is inevitable, their inclusivity levels or qualities evolve in time in relation with the local and global contexts (Akkar Ercan and Memlük, 2015). This premise underlines contextual aspect of the *inclusivity-exclusivity continuum* of public-private spaces. The characteristic contexts of places and how they vary from one city to the next determine the inclusivity qualities of public spaces. The *spatial or locational context*, including the location of the public spaces in a neighborhood, district or city, their distinguished features such as their morphology, natural invariants and the characteristics of their surroundings and urban fabric, identifies their inclusivity or exclusivity (Akkar Ercan and Memlük, 2015). The changes in these features in time also impact on the inclusive/exclusive nature of public spaces. The *political economic context* –i.e., the political institutions, the political environment and the economic system of a society- influences the physical form of a city, or urban space, in addition to the governance processes of its design, development, management, control and use (Akkar Ercan and Memlük, 2015). Likewise, the changes in society, the economy and the prevailing politics in a city/society can impact on the inclusivity or exclusivity levels of the public spaces. Last, the inclusivity/exclusivity level of public spaces is (trans)formed within a *historical context*; it can be shown and communicated through the history that has shaped them, requiring continuous interpretative mediation. Urban design process is a process which begins long before contemporary development proposals are dreamt up, and these in turn build upon a very long history that continues to inform processes of change through to today (Madanipour, 1997). Thus, we have to look at the inclusivity/exclusivity of public spaces as a *historical continuum*, which begins with a look to the past (Akkar Ercan and Memlük, 2015). How far a space is inclusive or exclusive is shaped by an accumulated history of experience and practice, although the change in the level of inclusivity or exclusivity depends on local and global contexts. Despite globalization, this change sometimes can be very place-dependent (Akkar Ercan and Memlük, 2015). For these reasons, looking at the inclusivity qualities of public spaces through a historical context is critical, as will be shown in the example of GP.

Evolving inclusivity of GP from its heydays to today

GP is a 27.5-hectare park located at the south-west of the historic city center of Ankara, namely Ulus. The Park is surrounded by important landmarks of the city, such as the Central Station to the southwest, large sports complexes and Atatürk Culture Centre to the northwest, Opera House and Symphony Hall to the south, public and government buildings and a bus station to the east, the Central Bank and the Radisson Hotel and the famous *Vakıf* apartment building with two historic theatre halls to the north. The history of GP goes back to the mid-1920s (Uludağ, 1998; Akansel, 2007). The transformation of this swamp into an urban park and its tale of inclusivity can be examined under four major historic periods: 1925-1950 representing the park's early years, 1950-1980 characterized by its heydays, 1980-2005 covering its declining period and the period after 2005 corresponding to its regeneration (Memlük, 2012).

This paper, suggesting an inclusivity model for the assessment of public spaces, has depicted how the inclusivity of GP has changed over the last 90 years within the spatial, political-economic and historical contexts of Ankara. Studying four subsequent periods regarding four *access* dimensions in relation with the design, management, control and use processes, it found that GP's inclusivity has changed in every historic period according to the spatial, political-economic and historic contexts (Akkar and Ercan, 2015). Between 1925 and 1950, along with the nation-building ideology of the newly-founded Republic, GP was designed and built as an inclusive and democratic park to build a social unity and cohesion among different segments of the population (Kasaba, 1997; Bozdoğan and Kasaba, 1997; Akansel, 2007; Demir, 2006; Özdemir, 2009; Cantek Şenol, 2012). From the 1950s to the 1980s when Ankara became a dual city with the rural migration and the emergence of squatter poverty neighborhoods along with the liberalization policies and the transition to multi-party democracy, GP became more inclusive and democratic for the upper and middle classes, but less inclusive for the new urbanites; i.e. rural migrants, squatters dwellers (Bozdoğan and Kasaba, 1997; Akkar Ercan and Memlük, 2015; 2019). Between the 1980s and 2005, along with the degeneration of Ulus, the rapid urban sprawl of Ankara, and the rising dominance of Islamic wing party in the local politics, which pursued the disinvestment policies on the Park to erode its historic and cultural values, thereby its early republican identity, GP became less inclusive for the upper and middle-income groups, but more inclusive for the low-income classes, squatter dwellers and the marginal groups (Akkar Ercan and Memlük, 2015; 2019). Since 2005, GP has become more inclusive and democratic for low and middle-income conservative groups, but less inclusive and democratic for its previous users –mostly coming from secular, middle and upper-income classes, and particularly *new middle* class (Akkar Ercan and Memlük, 2015; 2019).

Throughout these years, the lack of public involvement in any renewal or regeneration schemes/stages of the park have undermined the GP's *inclusive* and *pluralist* qualities. The absence of the GP's procedural accessibility in any historic period has always resulted in the dominance of some segments of the urban population with their hegemonic cultural symbols and values. Every time GP was renewed, its authentic, cultural and historic values and the collective memories about the Park have been compromised and eroded to an extent. This ultimately resulted in the (re)configuration of a public space which has served for the benefit and enjoyment of some groups, while deliberately disregarding and excluding the needs and values of others. Consequently, although the city should be a network of historic and new public spaces, it has turned into another sort of network, where public space ghettos or fortified public spaces of the rich and the poor, the conservative and secular sections of the society, with distinct patterns of consumption, have been built through the past and current municipal policies. This has continuously entailed the spatial segregation and polarization, impinging adversely the ideal inclusive qualities of the public spaces of Ankara. However, especially public spaces in cities should be used to spatially harmonize all the social, economic and cultural differences in a society, and to generate new social solidarities among inhabitants related to their common and individual future.

The lack of procedural accessibility of GP in any historic period has caused not only the neglect of the historic and cultural values and images of the park, but also the loss of both the sense of place attachment and the collective memory among the (older) citizens. This has ultimately resulted in the erosion of a sense of continuity, social unity and cohesion, and strengthened social exclusion and stratification. However, the symbolic meanings and cultural importance of public spaces generated by the emotional bonds between these places and their users contribute to the creation of the sense of continuity for a group or a society; and these feelings ultimately bind the individual members of the group or society together, and enhance social unity and cohesion (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1988; Lynch, 1992; Moughtin, 1999). Histories and elements constituting the identity of public spaces therefore should be well-preserved to foster social inclusion, social coherence and unity.

Conclusion

The analysis of the GP's changing inclusivity over the last 90 years leads to several conclusions. First, the inclusivity/exclusivity of public spaces is not only the problematic of contemporary public spaces. Instead, it has always been a conflicting issue if the inclusivity of public spaces is examined in a historical perspective. Although genuinely inclusive public spaces might be very rare in reality, it is possible to find various types of public spaces with different extent of inclusivity and exclusivity. As in the case of GP, the *inclusive* nature of a public space might change and evolve depending on the *time* dimension, depending on the local and global contexts within which the public space is set and bounded (Akkar Ercan and Memlük, 2019).

Second, the approach that conceives the inclusivity-exclusivity continuum of public-private spaces within a historical context reveals *evolutionary* aspect of this continuum (Akkar and Memlük, 2015; 2019). As in the case of GP, the inclusivity/exclusivity of public spaces acquires a continuously evolving process. This continuum is not static and unchangeable, but instead varies circumstances and attitudes change. Additionally, it is not uniform and undifferentiated, but rather has several components and forms. Hence, the inclusivity of public spaces is a *dynamic* concept, which is continuously (*re*)shaped in time within particular local and global contexts, including historical and cultural trends, diverse modes of governance, regulation, political priorities and the political and market forces. It evolves continually, but at the same time, established components of inclusivity –four dimensions of access- are confirmed again and again over time. For this reason, inclusivity of public spaces has a *plural* character that appears through a *time* perspective (Akkar and Memlük, 2015; 2019).

Third, the production of inclusive and democratic public spaces is the outcome of political process. As shown in the case of GP, the political group which gains power in local (or national) politics affects the inclusivity level of public spaces. Thus, the inclusivity/exclusivity levels of public spaces are arguably determined by the political forces and power relations. Public spaces are political arenas (Akkar Ercan, 2007), actively fought over by groups with seemingly irreconcilable ideological visions (Carmona, 2010). The inclusivity/exclusivity nature of public spaces is (*re*)shaped through on-going processes between the interests and values of opposing political, social and economic actors. Creating inclusive and democratic public spaces therefore requires the recognition of a democratic model where decision-making processes of public spaces would effectively enable the publics not only to project their own preferences, values and inspiration, but also to listen to and be appreciative of those of others. Such inclusive decision-making processes will engage a broad range of publics in the process of shaping the public space, and help them to understand and recognize a diversity of interests and perspective among the publics (Paddison and Sharp, 2007). An inclusive decision-making process requires to:

- find new mechanisms of communication and collaboration that will allow the inclusion of the multiple publics,
- have a political authority, which is willing to ensure the continuous presence of democratic and egalitarian procedural accessibility by giving all segments of the public the opportunity to raise their voices and opinions about the public spaces (Akkar and Memlük, 2015; 2019).

With an inclusive decision-making process in which deliberations are used as the mechanisms to endure a consensual rather than authoritarian style of interaction, it is more likely to generate and maintain inclusive public spaces that will ultimately help achieve social cohesion and reduce socio-spatial fragmentation and polarization in contemporary cities (Akkar and Memlük, 2015; 2019).

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