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Platform**

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The Studio

**A field guide
to the future
of architecture**

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The background of the entire page is a blue-toned, halftone-style photograph of a city street. In the foreground, there are several wooden benches or low walls. In the middle ground, a streetcar or tram is visible, moving along the street. The buildings in the background are multi-story structures with windows. The overall aesthetic is that of a vintage or historical photograph, rendered in a monochromatic blue color with a dot-matrix or halftone texture.

Architecture of Commons

**How citizen-led action
in Turkey reclaimed
the notion of common(s)**

By Merve Bedir



“Despite all their differences, the citizens of Istanbul were united in claiming what they commonly understood to be theirs: the tree, the park and more.”

The demonstrations against Turkish government action to demolish Gezi Park in Istanbul in 2013 prompted the self-organisation of its citizens and a new grassroots understanding of the notion of the “public”. Urbanist, writer and curator Merve Bedir, took part in the protests. Here she analyses what happened back then and how the seeds of a new type of urbanism were sown.



It all started as a demonstration to save a tree in Gezi Park in 2013. By then, for over a year, the government had been threatening to raze the urban park and reconstruct an artillery barracks there as part of a “pedestrianisation project” of the neighbouring Taksim Square. No information was forthcoming about what the intended use of the barracks would be and what this would mean for the city. Some of the alternative uses that then Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan mooted had been: a shopping mall, a mosque, an ice-skating rink, a city museum, an opera house and housing. The ambiguity surrounding the future of the park kept people guessing for a long time, until the day an excavator entered the park and ripped up a tree from its roots.

Merve Bedir

Merve Bedir is an architect and researcher. She is a partner at Land+Civilization Compositions, an office based in Randstad and Istanbul that works and collaborates on issues related to built form and is a PhD candidate at Delft University of Technology, Faculty of Architecture. She was a curator for the Netherlands Architecture Institute in 2012, where she worked on two main projects on reuse of buildings and urban transformation in Turkey.

Previous page: Istanbul protests, 11 June 2013.
© Simon Becker

This page: Istanbul protests barricade. © Merve Bedir

The ensuing protests on the streets continued uninterrupted for 20 days; with crowds gathering in Gezi Park, Taksim Square and the surrounding areas. Despite all their differences, the citizens of Istanbul were united in claiming what they commonly understood to be theirs: the tree, the park and more. This event marked a threshold moment in which the people remembered the notion of “common(s)” – one that they have been re-discovering and exploring ever since, through all the possible spatial and political meanings of the word.



Rules of Gezi Park protests.
© Merve Bedir

When the police retreated from Taksim Square after the initial demonstrations, people occupied the adjoining Gezi Park with tents, workshops, a library, an infirmary, a warehouse, a kitchen, a café, a TV and radio station, and many other things. Free film screenings, book readings, and yoga classes became daily activities there. Groups with a range of different ideologies joined together to reinforce the south-east barricades that separated Gezi Park from Taksim Square. Another small adjacent public park, closed by the municipality some time earlier, was incorporated into Gezi Park and made into an organic garden. The people who came into the park after that first clash collected and cleared the garbage off the streets and a solar cooker was brought in by Greenpeace. This is how the city of resistance arose in the park, in Istanbul.

The park became a cohabitated space where communication was almost intuitive and gathering was effortless. The initial aim was to protect the park from the police by continuous occupation, but late in the evening of the first day, one inhabitant was already talking about the kind of vegetables he wanted to plant in the organic garden next summer. The free speech corner saw new battle tactics formulated, but in addition it functioned as an open-air individual therapy centre. Almost a week after its settlement, the police entered the park again, and cleared away the commune and all its elements.

After the Gezi Park protests, people started organising forums in parks in their own neighbourhoods. This included more than 15 parks spread across the city and there was even a map of how to get to each of them. Everybody who was concerned about their city was welcome to come – whether local residents or passers-by.

The city of resistance

The forums

A SÖYLER DEĞİLDİR

SARAYLARA SAVAŞ
KULÜBELER

SDP

MEYDAN
AĞAÇ
SULU

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HİÇBİR ŞEY SONU
SON SÖZÜ DOĞA





Previous page: Camping in Gezi. © Giordano Ambrosi

Above: Working group with children. © Giordano Ambrosi

The forums were held for people to discuss further collective action. As spaces for exercising direct democracy, the parks in the city became forums, agoras and common(s). The results of the various discussions were shared around the city and a daily report on each forum disseminated via a newsletter and blogs. These forums made people remember their public parks again, and their relationships to one another.

Local inhabitants started maintaining the parks in their neighbourhood, using and programming them in ways that had never been experienced before. The movement, encouraged worldwide reactions and participation – from Brazil to Greece and beyond.



Gezi photo exhibition.
© Giordano Ambrosi

The issues discussed during the forums varied from urban transformation to earthquake threats, the environment, Istanbul's candidacy for the Olympics, social housing, collective budgeting of projects and cooperatives, collective urban space, the government's privatisation

policies, approaching local and general elections, social exclusion, other protests in Brazil, Egypt and Bulgaria, police violence, neighbourhood committees, gerontocracy – and more. The forums were often accompanied by workshops, lectures, film screenings, picnics and Ramadan dinners.

What might have come out of the protests and forums, had they continued, is not clear. This reactive movement had no leadership, the autonomy of the Gezi Park occupation was more intuitive and self-organised. For some it is already old history, for others it is a nostalgic moment, whilst for a few it became a starting point for other struggles – other common(s) issues.

Without doubt, the understanding of common(s) is as a new kind of (urban) space that is outside the dichotomy of public and private; a space that is created by collective action, by people; not trying to be permanent but looking for the transforming capacity of the temporary. Learning from the dynamism of the temporary is certainly inspiring for designers and other creative disciplines.

How can designers position themselves so they facilitate the creation of new common(s), outside the established hierarchies, at certain places and times? The response to this question is not a formula, recipe or model that can be repeated in other contexts. During the occupation of Gezi Park, the specific urban space, regardless of its physical boundaries, was re-produced, including and beyond its initial aims of design, revealing another capacity within which the roles of design and designer are redefined, where they can explore new existences.

*“Friendship”
as common(s)*

The park created a new kind of friendship amongst the people who gathered there as well. Partially it was “xenia” (guest-friendship) defined as the hospitality shown to a stranger or an unknown foreigner, an outsider to the community – or indeed by them as a host – that of showing the necessary mutual respect, generosity, and courtesy. This definition is far from a legal one, in that it is neither created nor instrumentalised by law.

Gustavo Esteva¹ explains this as a friendship through which we can create the kind of social fabric to offer us security, protection and a good life alongside our neighbours and friends. He asks, “where do new concepts of the self begin to emerge, that make us realise that we are not alone in our struggles, as well as desires?” The most important thing is creating new common(s), by the people, particularly in the cities. We know we all have a thousand virtual friends, but we only have a small number of real friends. Ivan Illich talked about his polyphilia, the need to be with friends. He elevated friendship as the main category for the reorganisation of our society, for reconstructing it in a different way, as the starting point of hope.

Friendship as common(s) is a working methodology bringing people together towards collective imaginaries that also acknowledge the individual within them. This working methodology could be an inspiration for designers to position themselves, as well.

When Turkey declared an open door policy for Syrian refugees in 2011, nobody could have guessed that the war in Syria would continue for so long and the number of Turkey’s new “guests” would rise to three million. Today, the debate about Syrian refugees ranges from integration

¹ dougald.nu/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/DM4_Gustavo_OffPrint.pdf

*Kitchen and garden as
common(s)*



Gezi garden. © Merve Bedir

to xenophobia. How much the refugees “benefit” from free public services (such as health and education) is a major question for many. Undocumented refugee labour and its abuse is another debate, amidst claims that Syrians take many jobs because they work for lower wages compared to Turks. Meanwhile very few people focus on the actual issues of the undocumented economy in general.

Refugees need support, but the understanding of “support” has to shift from humanitarian aid to acceptance, living together, sustainability and empowerment. This mass migration from Syria came at a point when people were discussing their common(s), new friendships and new urban spaces, where they were able to define their own struggles through the struggles of refugees.

A transnational women’s solidarity platform was established in the city of Gaziantep in Turkey, around the concepts of a kitchen and garden run by a collective of women from Gaziantep, endorsed and facilitated by artists and architects, and logistically supported by cultural NGOs.

“Refugees need support, but the understanding of “support” has to shift from humanitarian aid to acceptance, living together, sustainability and empowerment.”

This initiative aimed to shift the discussion on migration and refugees at many levels:

- The kitchen and garden helping transform refugees' roles and the perception of them in society from the role of guest to that of the host.
- Food/kitchen/cuisine become a cultural space of diversity, sharing, experimenting and representation. A cultural space that is for facilitating a participatory society, where thoughts are not only spoken, but can be realised.
- A self-sufficient space was developed, where initial support transforms into a sustainable network of socio-economic capital. Capital that is not defined by finance, but by voluntary labour devoted to a common imagination.

Roland Barthes² addressed the philosophical problem of the coexistence of individuals through the lens of the everyday: food, things, places. Achieving the utopia of a collective, “idiorrhhythmic” subject requires us to overcome arbitrary division as much as to open up spaces of shared interests. How can common(s) relationships be translated into cultural methods to build a convivial society? Can the sense of emplacement give new meaning to our engagement with the global issues of the world?

In the case of Gezi Park, the kitchen and garden became places for everyone, yet they belonged to no-one and everyone, helping create a new vocabulary for the contested notion of public. Through the kitchen and garden, design and designer facilitate and get involved in a horizontal process of ecological and social “transition” that takes root in simple gestures of everyday life: growing food, preserving seeds, bartering knowledge and building

How to live together?

² Roland Barthes, 1977
lectures: *How to live together*.

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tools of resilience to prepare for the multiple crises that lie on the horizon of our complex, yet fragile systems of organisation. ■