

Invented Spaces of Activism: Gezi Park and Performative Practices of Citizenship

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In this chapter we take as a point of observation the 2013 Occupy movement in Istanbul's Taksim Gezi Park to discuss practices of citizenship in the contemporary neoliberal city. Through study of this urban contestation, we find that beyond the invited spaces of participation, invented spaces of activism play a critical role in asserting citizens' rights to the city and counter-development of exclusionary urban projects. Our special focus is with the symbolic and performative aspects of strategies that activists use to resist aggressively market-based urban development projects. We highlight these innovative forms of action as effective insurgent practices of citizenship with specific urban development outcomes.

Introduction

A relatively small public protest in the form of an Occupy movement against the replacement of Gezi Park with a shopping mall in the central district of Istanbul triggered wide-ranging public demonstrations in Turkey in summer 2013. The main goal of the Gezi movement was to preserve the park and halt the government's plan to replace public green space with profit-generating private space. Although the immediate goal was to defend the park and to protect it from demolition, the movement transformed into weeks-long mass demonstrations against the government's undemocratic practices at local and national levels.¹ The protests spread all over the country, and Gezi protestors faced violence and brutality from police, who arrested and detained a total of 4,900 people nationwide.² For the first time in modern Turkey's history, groups that had previously been hostile or at least viewed each other with suspicion stood next to each other against the authoritarian governance, committed to restructure their city. In this process, Gezi Park functioned as the physical and the political space of activism where citizens collectively defended the public against the private interests of government-sponsored capital. In the end, the Occupy movement and protests in the park achieved the immediate goal: the Taksim Square project, including the proposed transformation of the Gezi Park area, was halted.³

The outburst of urban inhabitants over a redevelopment project in downtown Istanbul (Taksim Square and Gezi Park) that was able to halt fast-moving real estate capital in its track has already inspired numerous academic publications on the contemporary political and social struggles over the urban space (Atay 2013; Kuyumlu 2013; Taştan 2013; Göle 2013; Dağtas 2013; Tuğal 2013). Here, our focus is on the innovative strategies that citizens employ in this movement responding to the anti-democratic planning processes that govern and develop the city and to claim their right to the city and its public spaces. Along with other critical scholars of urban citizenship, we interpret citizenship as tangible practices that involve claiming and redefining substantive rights of citizens to the city—to produce, inhabit, and appropriate space they inhabit (Merrifield 2014; Harvey 2012; Mayer 2009; Miraftab 2009; Irazabal 2008; Holston and Appadurai 1999; Purcell 2003). This formulation of citizenship from below and through

citizens' practices departs radically from the conventional understanding of citizenship as an intangible collection of rights, duties, and liabilities defined under a legal framework of membership in the nation state (e.g., Marshall 1950). The Gezi movement needs to be understood as citizens' practices of urban citizenship launched in response to neoliberal aggression and the assault on the public sphere and public spaces—that is, a response to a form of economic, political, and spatial violence that the legal procedures and market-driven planning principles are implicated in. To combat the onslaught of neoliberal capitalism on people's lives and livelihoods, we argue that government- and market-sanctioned channels for citizen participation are not sufficient. As seen in Gezi case, these are invited spaces of participation created and/or sanctioned by authorities, often to contain the public interest and energy. To be heard and taken into account as citizens, people in Istanbul instead moved beyond invited spaces to invent new spaces and forms of action. Spanning invited and invented spaces of participation and forms of activism, these insurgent practices of citizenship help citizens to tangibly claim and access their substantive right to the city and its public spaces (see Miraftab and Wills 2005; Miraftab 2006). Insurgent practices of citizenship are “counter-hegemonic in that they destabilize the normalized order of things; they transgress time and place by locating historical memory and transnational consciousness at the heart of their practices. They are imaginative in promoting . . . a different world as being . . . both possible and necessary” (Miraftab 2009: 46).

In this case study we highlight the symbolic and performative aspects of insurgent citizenship practices, as creative spatial practices that help to destabilize what is considered common sense in urban development and expand the realms of possibility and imagination for (re)development of urban spaces. We define performativity after Judith Butler, as elaborated by Gillian Rose and Nicky Gregson in the following terms: “Performance is subsumed within and must always be connected to performativity”; performativity consists of “practices which produce and subvert discourse and knowledge, and which at the same time enable and discipline subjects and their performances.” (Gregson and Rose 2000: 433). Our intervention here is to use Butler's representations of performance and performativity as the starting point for thinking about the critical potential of those tools in the struggle over urban space and urban development/redevelopment/un-development. These performative and innovative acts of citizenship register the discontent to a broader public by symbolic disruption and transgressions in and of public space. Pointing to three examples of invented spatial practices in Gezi movement, we highlight the performativity of these forms of action as effective insurgent practices of citizenship with a clear (although not guaranteed) urban development outcome—be it through proposition of alternative urban development scenarios or simply the defense of existing urban spaces against the onslaught of aggressive neoliberal development projects.

The remainder of this chapter is organized into three sections. In the first section we introduce the broader urban dynamics within which the Gezi movement was shaped to contest redevelopment of Taksim Square. We discuss the forces and ideas that urged rebranding Istanbul as a global city and its urban transformation through a series of redevelopment projects. This section then focuses on the Taksim Square redevelopment project, specifically the processes and forces that motivate its development and citizens' resistance to it. In section two we turn to urban contestations against this redevelopment, and how people's opposition against the redevelopment plans moved from invited spaces of participation and citizens' input through consultation to forms of participation and input that people invented through collective and individual acts to protect their public space against private developers and real estate capital. For that we introduce

the broader Occupy movement in the park during the first two weeks of the Gezi Uprising, referred to as *Taksim Gezi Commune*. In the third section we pay special attention to the performative/symbolic practices of insurgency mobilized to protect this public space. We elaborate on three specific examples: *The Resisting Piano*, *Standing Man*, and *Table on Earth*. These actions will be discussed as performative acts of citizenship that politicize the public space by disrupting the symbolic order of the city. We conclude the chapter by highlighting how these innovative forms of action redefine and refine citizens' claims to their city and its public space and public sphere.

1. Broader Context of the Gezi Movement

Istanbul: Emerging Global City

The background of the Gezi Uprising comprises the ongoing neoliberal urbanization policies and practices employed in the city. Istanbul has been going through the shock of rapid integration to transnational finance networks and markets since the early 1980s (Keyder 2005). This integration has been motivated mainly by the goal of attracting global financial capital. In this era of neoliberal globalization, the ability to accommodate global financial capital within the physical space of an urban environment is seen as the key to success in attaining global competitiveness among other cities (Sassen 2001). Joint efforts are made by the transnational corporations, policy networks, and international development organizations (i.e., World Bank, European Investment Bank, etc.) co-sponsored by real estate capital and facilitated by the government of Turkey. Marketing Istanbul as an emerging global city (see Genis 2007a; 2007 b) can be interpreted as a part of a broader trend in which mega-cities “of the global South become the marketable commodity, under the guidance of global development” (Goldman 2014, 60).

Enhancing the integration of Istanbul into the global economic system has been a national goal since the early 1980s, when the Turkish economy shifted from a “nationalist” focus to a “liberal” outlook following the right-wing military coup in 1980. As a part of this process, Istanbul immediately became the physical space to absorb the large-scale investment in built environment based on its historical and geopolitical convenience as an intercontinental cultural, social, and economic hub. This enthusiastic effort of rebranding Istanbul by both the state and private sector is linked with the national and local urbanization agenda shaped by the fundamentals of neoliberal urbanism (Brenner and Theodore 2002). Success in the world and national hierarchies as a global city entails capacity for innovation and marketing of the urban space through the narrative of urban entrepreneurship (Jessop 1998).

Current local and national economic development policy is focused on the popular view of increasing Istanbul's global competitiveness. Investment is largely clustered around infrastructure developments in the form of megaprojects, which fuel the national economy through increased construction. The major megaprojects of Istanbul are the Marmaray Tunnel Project, \$3.7 billion (ongoing); the Third Bosphorus Bridge, \$2.08 billion (ongoing); Canal Istanbul, \$5.5 billion (planning stage); and the Third International Airport, \$13.5 billion (planning stage) (Megaprojects of Istanbul 2014).

Many of the dedicated efforts to *market* Istanbul as a global city are also closely related with the growing retail sector. New segments of the population (e.g., bankers, young professionals) acquire globalized consumption habits and lifestyles at increasing numbers of upscale shopping malls (Keyder 2005). According to recent retail sector reports, there are 105

active shopping malls with 3.7 million square miles of gross leasable area (GLA) and over 30 centers under construction, adding 1.3 million square miles GLA in Istanbul. Shopping center development in Turkey is the most active market in Europe (CBRE 2013; Jones Lang LaSalle 2014), and Istanbul is one of the most active shopping center development markets globally after booming Chinese cities (Moss 2012; Mayer 2009).

The dynamics involved in the Gezi insurgency are closely related with the transformation of Istanbul from a megacity of the global South to a global financial center, driven by efforts of the neoliberal-Islamist national government led by the Justice and Development Party (AKP) (Karaman 2013a). The political agenda set by the national government is facilitated by a coalition with the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and national and multinational private development companies. The insatiable *demand* for new spaces of consumption created by these entities explains the objectives shaping the Taksim Square redevelopment project.

Taksim Square Redevelopment Project: History, Plans, and Actors

Taksim Square and its neighborhood constitute the main leisure and touristic district in Istanbul. Taksim has been the public transportation hub for the growing metro lines and public buses. The square is home to the city's largest luxury hotels, and the area surrounding the square is very densely populated by restaurants, bars, shops, and hotels. All these elements make the Taksim neighborhood a critical destination for both the local population and visitors to Istanbul. Taksim Square also has historic significance for the modern Republic of Turkey and its predecessor, the Ottoman Empire. The Ottoman era stone reservoir from the mid-18th century, still standing on the edge of the Taksim Square, is the oldest architectural development in the area.

The area's historical significance was enhanced by the Artillery Barracks, built in the early 19th century, near the present Gezi Park. It was used by military services until the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the 20th century. Accompanied by the changes in the political atmosphere and the state structure, the function of the Artillery Barracks changed over time. First, the open space inside the barracks was transformed into a stadium during the early days of the modern Republic of Turkey starting from 1923. Because the area was reconsidered as part of the master plan for Istanbul by popular French urban planner and architect Henri Prost, the Artillery Barracks were demolished in 1940 and the area became a public park: Taksim Gezi Park, which ultimately became the only park area in central Istanbul for the Taksim area.



Image2. Proposed view from above of the Taksim Square of the completed redevelopment project. This includes both the pedestrianization project and the Artillery Barracks proposed to be built where Gezi Park stands.
 (Source: Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality)

The Taksim Square redevelopment plan is twofold: the first part involves the pedestrianization of the square by constructing traffic tunnels proposed in 2007. The square was envisioned as a big concrete block reserved for pedestrian use and also integrated with Gezi Park. The second part, introduced in 2011, involves significant alteration in the function of the Gezi Park area. The Artillery Barracks are to be reconstructed and used as a shopping mall complex that also contains luxury residences, office spaces, and a convention center. This implied the removal of the Gezi Park public space in favor of new spaces of consumption. In other words, the Taksim Square project evolved from a pedestrianization project into a massive redevelopment project involving Gezi Park in four years. Besides the public opposition following the plan revision made in 2011, several legal appeals were put forward by professional groups under the Union of Chambers of Architects and Engineers (TMMOB) to halt the redevelopment project in defense of the public benefit. Despite the ongoing legal appeal process, construction for the pedestrianization component started in October 2012.⁵ A series of formal attempts involving practices of formal citizenship through the invited spaces of state bureaucracy (i.e., legal appeals conducted by the organized civil society) was thus ineffective. Practices of substantive citizenship in the context of Taksim redevelopment were not in play until the construction involving Gezi Park started. There was no physical action taken in terms of starting the redevelopment involving Gezi Park until end of May 2013, the start of Gezi Uprising.

From a policy point of view, the planning process of the Taksim Square redevelopment project is a representative case of authoritarian, undemocratic, and exclusionary urban policy making. In Istanbul, several urban renewal projects have been conducted and are still being planned in a similarly top-down fashion (Karaman 2013b). The Taksim Square project is an example of how policy makers make adjustments to the urban space in favor of the circuits of capital to gain competitive advantage among other cities at both national and international levels. The “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodore 2002), represented in national and local governments in Turkey, operates through authoritarian practices when it comes to urban redevelopment (Zunino 2006). In the case of Gezi Park, the public green space is undervalued by

the market because it does not directly contribute to profitability or economic rents generated by built environment. The political will to replace the park with a shopping mall summarizes the practices in neoliberal urbanization at a theoretic as well as a practical level.

2. Insurgent Practices of Citizenship to Protect Gezi as a Public Space

From Invited Spaces to the Invented Spaces of Gezi

The Gezi movement arose from a series of actions taken by organized civil society and concerned citizens gathering around these groups. These efforts to organize turned into broader networks of solidarity representing the Taksim Gezi Commune.⁶ Initial acts of protests to raise public awareness of and popular support against the Taksim Square redevelopment project consisted of a series of festivals in Gezi Park.⁷ However, organized civil society efforts were limited by the formal channels provided by the state to its citizens to express their discontent. These efforts took the form of running public awareness campaigns and organizing public meetings about the details and consequences of the redevelopment project and filing lawsuits against the plan revisions. Organized civil society's actions started to transform when developers attempted to destroy trees in the park. This attempt was accompanied by the police state's excessive use of tear gas against the small group of protesters at the park. Taksim Solidarity⁸ made a public call to occupy Gezi Park and denounced the police violence targeting peaceful protesters. This call resonated with the anger and frustration of the masses in the city of Istanbul. After the start of the occupation (with its permanent and temporary residents), Gezi Uprising moved beyond the invited channels into a range of invented spaces of protests to be heard. At the core of these innovative actions were performative acts that symbolically asserted protesters' rights to the city and urban space.

In the next two sections, we focus on the symbolic and performative practices of the "people of Gezi." The "people of Gezi" are a combination of individuals and civic organizations fed up with neoliberal aggressions on people's life spaces; they take part in actions that are collective or non-collective (after Bayat 2010), but are always against privatization of the city. First, we look at the Taksim Gezi Commune, which is the Occupy movement that took place within the park's boundaries. Second, we present three examples of performative practices taking place in Gezi and the area around it: the Resisting Piano; the Standing Man; and the Table on Earth. We discuss these actions based on their constitutive principles of insurgency: they are counter-hegemonic, transgressive, and imaginative (see Miraftab 2009). We highlight how the performative aspects of these insurgent practices allowed them to spread spatially and temporally and become not only a part of collective memory but also a potent force that helped to stop the redevelopment project of Taksim. We suggest these might deserve to be seen as practices of development—development of public spaces by undoing specific elitist planning projects.

Taksim Commune

Gezi Park naturally became the core location for the invented spaces of the Gezi movement for two weeks, until the riot police forced its evacuation. The decision to "occupy" the park was a practical solution to avoid raids and defend the park against the construction teams ready to destroy the park. The Occupy movement in Gezi was carried on by permanent residents who lived within the park territory the whole time and temporary residents paying regular visits to the community in the park. The main demand of the protesters occupying the park was obvious: Gezi Park was to remain as a park, not to be redeveloped as a part of the

Taksim Square redevelopment project. Later, Taksim Solidarity declared the full set of demands of the citizens occupying Gezi Park (Reclaim Istanbul 2013).

The immediate demands involved the resignation of officials enforcing violent repression; prohibition of teargas bombs; release of detained citizens (in the course of Gezi protests); and abolition of “all the meeting and demonstration bans affecting all squares and public areas.” Taksim Solidarity also declared that the content of the rising reaction involved “reaction to the pillaging of ecological heritage with plans and practices,” including a third bridge over Bosphorus, a third airport in Istanbul, Canal Istanbul, demolition of Atatürk Forest Farm in Ankara, and hydroelectric power plants across the country. Also, “rightful demands of the victims of urban transformation” and “the demand for the removal of all barriers between the citizens and their right to education and health service” were mentioned as underlying reasons behind the public reaction under the cause of Gezi (Reclaim Istanbul 2013).⁹



Image 3. a. Views from the Taksim Gezi Commune: tent area (left); b. Street view from the park with a banner at night (right).

The Occupy movement in Gezi Park referred to itself as the Taksim Gezi Commune from the first days of its residency in the park. People of the commune met all their needs within the park’s boundaries: eating, sleeping, cleaning, healthcare, entertainment, etc. All these services were provided at no monetary cost; people were expected to contribute to the commune based on their capabilities. Exchange was conducted through goods and services rather than money. As a physical space, Gezi Park also accommodated a range of activities of collective character, including a public library for sharing books; public gardens; a performance stage for concerts, theater, and ballet; provision of child care, and spaces for group prayers and yoga groups in designated areas of the park. All sorts of material, public, and social needs were met within the park by the residents of the park in exchange for contributions from others. Hence, the settlement in the park was rightfully referred to as Taksim Gezi Commune.



Image 4. a. Views from the Taksim Gezi Commune: community garden (left); b. Taksim Gezi Commune public library (right)

Gezi Park Commune, with its permanent and temporary residents in its two-week presence, can be interpreted as a solid declaration of willingness to live collectively with diversity rather than homogenizing or individualizing any groups represented in the park. Decisions regarding daily operations within the park commune and the demands of the movement were all made through park forums, sparking the experience of direct democracy within the commune. In the diverse community of Gezi Commune, impoverished, disempowered, pious, secular, LGBTT, and working youth were among the groups represented. The political manifestation of the commune, through its invented space with its shared facilities and communal practices in the absence of state authority, represented “the demand to be counted, named, and recognized, and performatively staged by those ‘that do not count’” (Swyngedouw, 2015: xx).

When the commune was destroyed by the violent police attack with water cannons and tear gas on June 15, 2013, the experience of Taksim Gezi Commune was carried on at several park forums held in other neighborhoods. The first forum after the evacuation of Gezi Commune was held in the neighborhood of Taksim as a replacement for the Gezi forum. This was followed by neighborhoods in other parts of Istanbul, and within two days, neighborhood park forums had spread across the country. In this regard, the short-lived experience of direct democracy in the Taksim Gezi Commune spread across the country. The government’s attack on Gezi triggered the decentralization and localization of activism at the neighborhood in various parts of Turkey. In the context of the Gezi movement, spread of activism is an example of proliferation of insurgencies, which we interpret as a reflection of “a sign of the return of universal ideas of freedom, solidarity, equality and emancipation” (Badiou 2012; Swyngedouw 2015: xx). Through the adoption of Gezi commune’s performative acts of substantive citizenship by other neighborhoods, the political ideals of Gezi movement intensify, contract, and localize.

3. Performative Acts in Invented Spaces of Gezi Movement

- *The Resisting Piano*



Image 5. Taksim Square and the “Resisting Piano” recital

On June 13, two days before the Taksim Gezi Commune was attacked and destroyed, a German pianist, Davide Martello, started an open air recital at the center of Taksim Square. Residents of Gezi Commune and people passing by the square, many wearing helmets to protect against a potential police attack, enjoyed the piano recital music for 14 hours (Guardian 2013). The event later turned into an open-mic with participation of other musicians, performance artists, and audience members. The “guerilla pianist” played on the following day on the same spot, at the center of the Taksim Square. Despite its short presence, the piano surrounded by the people quickly became a powerful symbol of the transnational solidarity generated around Gezi Park. Unfortunately, the piano was later confiscated by the police following the raid on Gezi at the prime minister’s order. Following the *detention* of the piano, the incident of musical occupation in the Taksim Square received even greater popular support. Shortly after the confiscation, people started to refer to it as the “resisting piano” of Gezi.

The piano recital on the square was the first incident of a transgressive act that extended the performative act of citizenship in Gezi beyond the park’s boundaries. The piano performance on Taksim Square should be considered as a part of Gezi politics that “emerges where it is not supposed to be” (Swyngedouw 2015: xx). The performativity of the urban insurgent practices are precisely their transgression of “symbolic order.” They are transgressive because their occurrences disrupt the symbolic order and the “symbolic framing” (Swyngedouw 2015 XX).

Resisting piano of Gezi is a case of place-based tactic that symbolically and performatively resists the redevelopment in Taksim because it reinvents the square and gives it a new meaning through its imaginative use of public space. It also spurs the transnational networks

of solidarity temporally and spatially. The “guerilla pianist” of Gezi returned to Turkey in May 2014 to perform in memory of the Soma mining massacre,¹⁰ again using the public space in different cities in Turkey, including the town of Soma and Taksim Square. Performative acts of citizenship in imaginative forms find a place in the collective memory of solidarity—temporally, spatially, and transnationally. This individual action, taken by a German pianist to express solidarity with the ideals of Gezi, shows the global frustration with authoritarian neoliberal market-based politics. These performative acts of political contestations are simultaneous and imaginative, but these characteristics do not imply transiency, as seen in the case of the resisting piano.

- *Standing Man*

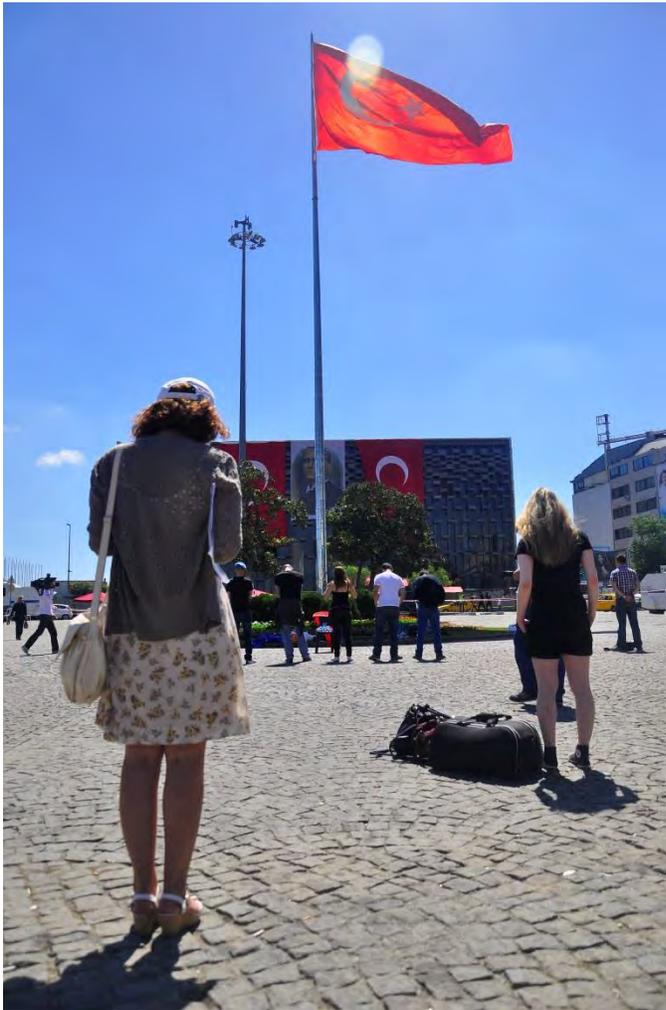


Image 6: Standing men and women. People joining the Standing Man in Taksim Square, facing the Ataturk Cultural Center (AKM).

On June 18, 2013, a young man¹¹ started an unorthodox form of protest: standing still. He stood still for eight consecutive hours on Taksim Square facing the Ataturk Cultural Center (AKM),¹² which bore the wall-sized image of Atatürk, the father of the nation and its modern state in Turkey, with the national flags of the country on each side. The act of standing while

facing these figures provoked a collective memory of the foundations of modern Turkey that resonated with many among the opposition to the national government. In just the first hour, hundreds of people joined the *Standing Man*. In a few hours, the news about the Standing Man of Taksim spread across the country through social media, and copycat protests cropped up all over the country in solidarity with the man, who literally stood up for the ideals of the Gezi Movement. The public sphere thus became the “space of appearance” for the people of Gezi (see Butler and Athanasiou 2013).

Standing Man challenged the police state’s codes for what constitutes acts of resistance, and bewildered police forces on how to handle the supposedly passive protests of masses “just standing.” The bodily presence of people in the public domain, as Butler and Athanasiou also assert, generates a certain performative force through the “We are here” message that should also be re-read as “We are *still* here” despite the dedicated efforts of dispossession and oppression (2013: 196). Here “the collective assembling of bodies is an exercise of the popular will, and a way of asserting, in bodily form, one of the most basic presuppositions of democracy, namely . . . of social and political existence” (196). When urban citizens are excluded from urban development projects as disposable populations deprived of their basic rights of existence and dignified lives and livelihoods in cities, then surely the collective assemblies of their bodies in one place is not only an expression of rage but also refusal to be disposed of—“persisting, insisting on their continuing and collective ‘thereness,’” as Butler and Athanasiou (2013: 197) articulate. Clearly, the political effectiveness of a form of protest lies in the meaning it produces in a specific context (see Scott 1985). The Standing Man protest became an innovative act of citizenship practice precisely because of the political, spatial, and historical context in which it took place.

- *Table on Earth*

On July 9, 2013, after more than a month had passed since the start of Gezi movement, people of Gezi gathered around *Table on Earth*. It was the first day of Ramadan,¹³ and many expected the nature of Ramadan would inevitably end the Gezi Park protests. Instead, people of Gezi reinvented the space of the most popular street in Istanbul (Istiklal), blending the ideals of the Gezi movement and the rituals of Ramadan. Following the public call made jointly by the two pious groups in Gezi Commune (Anti-capitalist Muslims and Revolutionary Muslims), people occupied the light-railroad passing across Istiklal Avenue to break their fast. The function of the railroad was reinterpreted as a form of a dinner table, hosting hundreds of people sharing their food with one another. Gathered around the Table on Earth, as they named it, some were breaking their fast while others were only there to show their solidarity with the pious groups. This innovative act of using the tramway probably formed the longest and most diverse dinner tables ever set, in the middle of the most vibrant neighborhood of the city and surrounded by high-end luxury restaurants.

Gezi’s collectively formed dining table is a case in which people appropriated the (social) space and reproduced their own (social) space (see Lefebvre 1991). People sitting along the Table on Earth occupied the tramway and disrupted the urban flow on Istiklal Avenue, which is a key location for capital flows in the city of Istanbul. By disrupting business as usual, people of Gezi created an alternative use for the space. This practice of Table on Earth is a complex social construction based on collectively shared meanings and values. Thus, the significance of the social space created with the appropriation of the street is socially produced. Producing new spaces for resistance and solidarity, people claim and practice their right to the city, a “right to

change [them]selves by changing the city”; this “transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the process of urbanization” (Harvey 2008: 23).



Image 7: a. Table on Earth, Istiklal Avenue, July 2013 Photo Credit: Yagiz Karahan (Left)
Image 7b: Soma Protests, Kadikoy, May 2014. Photo Credit: Sendika.org (Right).

Like other innovative acts of citizenship practices of Gezi, the reinvented space of the railroad on Istiklal Avenue persists in the collective public memory. In May 2014, in the aftermath of the mining disaster in Soma, thousands gathered to protest and denounce the negligence of the mining company and the government’s misconduct leading to the killings of the workers. The physical space of the light-railroad, this time in the Kadikoy neighborhood, was reinvented as thousands gathered for mourning the workers.

Occupying the road makes a statement about halting the flow of things considered as ordinary in the city, such as light-rail traffic. It is in essence shaped collectively and based on the idea of being equal on the very same platform, sharing and having access to the same goods under the same conditions—equally. This symbolic act can also be seen as an effort to experience the idea of real democracy; as Ranciere (1999) puts it, it begins from the assumption of equality (Purcell 2015). In that respect, the insurgent practices of Gezi in general and Table on Earth specifically can be interpreted as a “path of democracy” in which equality is a starting point.

Conclusion

Taking the recent Occupy movement in Istanbul’s Taksim Gezi Park as a point of observation, we highlight specific spatial practices and place-based tactics and strategies that activists use to resist exclusionary and aggressively market-based urban development projects in the

contemporary neoliberal city. Inhabitants of Istanbul do have the legal right to live in Istanbul, but the real estate capital interests, through the state and private developers, uproot them from the city by eradicating the public spaces they use. When sanctioned channels for citizen participation in decisions that matter to them ignore their interests and rights to inhabit this city and enjoy its public spaces, people fight back, inventing their own spaces and forms of participation to assert their right to urban spaces. Through invented spaces and forms of participation, they can ultimately assert their kind of urban development—one that is not elitist and does not exclude them from urban public space. Studying the creative practices in urban contestations around Gezi Park redevelopment, we stress that beyond the invited spaces of participation—those that are routinized, provisioned, and recognized through the status quo channels—we need to take seriously the power of invented spaces of activism—those imagined outside the conventional frameworks of political participation or contestation. Innovative acts of citizenship performed in public space, we show, disrupt the “urban business as usual” in symbolic and pragmatic terms to assert citizens’ right to the city and bring counter-development against exclusionary urban development projects and processes. Through creative practices by which citizens express, communicate, symbolize, and perform their right to exist in the city, inhabitants of Istanbul assert their right to the city outside the formal legal process.

The performative acts of protest we document in the case of the Gezi movement provide empirical evidence about the power of people to develop a public sphere and public space from below. When the public space of Gezi Park was threatened by the forces of neoliberal dispossession and expropriation, people were able to reclaim a public square and its use against the state and private developers’ interest. These were acts performed individually and collectively to expand the uses of the very urban space that capital aims to limit to those with greater economic resources—excluding the public in favor of enhancing private benefits. We interpret these insurgent acts as practices of development—unorthodox and innovative, yet concrete in their spatial outcome and gain.

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Notes

¹ According to the survey conducted among the Gezi Park protesters, 58.1% of the protesters were at the site in defense of their liberties; 37.2% were there to protest the government; and 30.3% were there to protest the prime minister’s attitude and statements. Only 20.4% mentioned the protection of the park as their primary reason to join the protests (KONDA 2014). Thus, a significant portion of the Gezi Park protesters declared restrictions on liberties,

government interference in their personal/daily lives, and the prime minister’s authoritarian rule as their reason for joining the protests (Taştan 2013).

² Ministry of the Interior, cited by the Human Right Foundation of Turkey (<http://arsiv1.tihv.org/index.php?gezi-park-eylemeleri-bilgi-notu-5-temmuz-2013>).

³ This decision was made by the Council of State in May 2014 following a lengthy legal process, almost a year after the start of mass demonstrations and six months after the completion of the pedestrianization component of the Taksim redevelopment project. Gezi Park today remains as it was, right next to the completed restructuring surrounding it. Yet the rest of the development project for the area is completed, despite a series of legal appeals and court decisions in favor of halting the project.

⁴ Istanbul Cultural and Natural Heritage Preservation Regional Board Decision [Istanbul II Numarali Kultur ve Tabiat Varliklarini Koruma Bolge Kurulu karari] (http://www.mimarist.org/images/pdf/ler/EK_2_09Subat2011_II_Nolu_Kurul.jpg).

⁵ See <http://www.mimarist.org/2012-08-13-16-09-05.html>.

⁶ Taksim Platform was initially formed by academics in the field of urban planning, architecture, and civil engineering in 2011, and later it became part of a larger civil society platform called the Taksim Solidarity.

⁷ These park festivals and were organized by a small group of young, progressive students of architecture called *Architecture for All*. There were ten Gezi Park Festivals organized between March 2012 to September 2012, with rapidly increasing popular support (Architecture for All [Herkes icin Mimarlik] 2012). Gezi Park festivals provided the initial political platform for concerned citizens (both organized and unorganized), physical space for collective action, and ground for dialogue on defense of the public green space of Gezi. They also provided a new meaning and identity to the park. People who had not been actively using the park began to spend time there and claim ownership by “being there” (Ekmekci 2014).

⁸ The civil society network formed with the participation of 118 groups, including trade unions, political parties, numerous progressive civil initiatives, student organizations, and professional groups of doctors, lawyers, engineers, architects, and planners (Taksim Solidarity 2013).

⁹ The list declared by the Taksim Solidarity as the reasons giving rise to the Gezi movement is longer and broader than represented here. We mention only the ones that are immediately relevant to the framework of right to the city. The complete list can be reached at Reclaim Istanbul’s website (<http://reclaimistanbul.com/2013/06/07/demands-of-occupygezi-movement/>).

¹⁰ The Soma mining massacre took place on May 13, 2014, in western Turkey. It cost over 300 lives of mining workers. It is considered a massacre because of neoliberal labor policies that undervalue the security of the working class for the sake of higher corporate profits. The broader issue is Turkey’s faulty record of worker security (Sandal 2014).

¹¹ Erdem Gunduz, a performance artist based in Istanbul.

¹² AKM building is also a part of the dispute over the Taksim Square redevelopment. It is home to multiple stages for performance arts, concert halls, and galleries. Besides its functional value, it has great symbolic value for Istanbul since it is associated with the modernization project led by Atatürk. Prime Minister Erdogan also declared his plans for demolishing AKM and replacing it with a “baroque” opera house.

¹³ Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, and it is observed as a month of fasting by Muslims worldwide.