



Constructing Space: Physical Versus Immaterial? Coffeehouse in the Ottoman/Turkish Society

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Abstract

Architectural space is a complex phenomenon, comprising of physical and immaterial characteristics. Physical, together with intangible variables, define space. The concern of this study is to understand and discuss space in the example of coffeehouse of the Ottoman-Turkish society, the underlying issues related to the existence and endurance of the coffeehouse space in spite of the societal and environmental transformation going on within its context in history. The approach followed is interpretation of literature, selected texts that use coffeehouse as setting. The aim is to initiate further search for understanding the generic issues that form space and ensure its continuity.

Keywords:

Space, Literature, History,
Coffeehouse, Culture

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INTRODUCTION

Architectural space bears immaterial connotations, although it is a physical entity. Physical characteristics, together with the intangible, define space, however either one may overrule the other and be more influential in making space a unique place. Some spaces owe their significance to their functional importance, some to their historical, cultural or spatial value. According to Lefebvre (1991) space is a social production based on meanings and values related to spatial practices and perceptions.

Space is a part of daily life bound to social and ritual activities. Coffeehouse, a space chosen from the daily life of the Ottoman-Turkish society, originated as a space of social interaction open to men, has experienced change in many aspects, such as spatial layout, furniture, equipment and users; however has continued to exist. Coffeehouses may be grouped among spaces that are defined strongly through the social and cultural significance they possess. The concern of this study is to discuss the underlying issues related to the existence and endurance of the coffeehouse space in spite of the societal and environmental transformation going on within its context, through interpretation of literature and to initiate further search for understanding the generic issues that form space and ensure its continuity.

A HISTORY OF COFFEEHOUSE

The origins of the coffeehouse can be traced to the early cultivation of coffee beans on the plateaus of Yemen and Ethiopia, the setting where the early coffeehouse space emerged, later to spread around the region, to Arabia and Anatolia. (Desmet 1999: 15) The first coffeehouse known to exist was dated to 1511, and was located next to a mosque in the city of Mecca, a typical activity area; the public space. Similar spaces started to appear in growing numbers in Cairo, by early 1600s and in Istanbul by mid 1600s. (Desmet 1999:16) Early coffeehouses in the Ottoman world were at the centre of the town, located next to a mosque or near a complex called 'kulliye'. These complexes comprised of different functions such as healthcare, educational, religious and commercial facilities and were governed by the foundations owned by the statesmen. Coffeehouses scattered around the neighbourhoods in later periods. Their number which was about fifty during the reign of Kanuni reached six hundred by 1595. (Desmet 1999: 34) By the seventeenth century, coffeehouses had started playing active role in the daily life and culture of the neighbourhoods. Coffee drinking became popular among women in private, and among men in public places. Coffeehouses prospered in variety and

quantity, in time. Unver referring to earlier sources classifies coffeehouses mostly according to owners, users or to location. Among those, he mentions a type where the attendants were artisans, another type where local people in the neighbourhood attended and one where music, theatre and punch performances were held. There were special coffeehouses where hashish addicts regularly attended. (Unver 1963: 60) Some coffeehouses belonged to a certain group of people or to trade guilds. David mentions a specific one where janissaries attended. (David: 36) Regardless of the type, coffeehouses have experienced change in time, keeping certain inherent features. (Heise 2001:31)

Following Mecca, Cairo, and Istanbul, another version, 'cafe' had emerged in the European cities. As effects of westernization extended in daily life especially in Istanbul, cosmopolitan coffeehouse besides the traditional emerged at Pera and Bosphorus regions open to both men and women. (Desmet 1999:58) Today neighbourhood coffeehouses (mahalle kahvesi) that have only men visitors, such as labourers, artisans, taxi drivers, still exist, besides contemporary cafes that are open to both sexes.

COFFEEHOUSE SPACE AND THE SOCIETY

The traditional, social structure of the Ottoman/Turkish society started undergoing transformations beginning with the eighteenth century. The most dominant element of change, noted in daily life of the society, was related to the influence of western culture due to increasing relations with the West. Changes went on with the following political and military struggle years, the upheaval of the sultanate and the revolutionary period resulting in the foundation of a new secular, republican state, all of which were reflected on the social life, religion, sites of economy and production, and eventually the built environment. Spaces bearing traditions of the Ottoman background, among which coffeehouses existed, underwent changes accordingly. New building types and functions replaced old ones; some building types completely diminished, while some survived with adaptations. Transformation also included intangible issues of space. According to the new trends in public life, sexual segregation diminished in most public spaces with the exception of the mosque, the bathhouse and the coffeehouse. In the former two, there were designated spaces for both sexes while in the latter; space was designated only for men. Coffeehouse that had originated as a male space continued to survive as a space for men while going through a series of some changes. Today, the coffeehouse space and the ritual of coffee drinking still exist in all regions of Turkey including urban and rural settlements, and in

regions that used to be within the borders of the Ottoman Empire.

Information on the spatial characteristics of coffeehouses is scarce. According to Unver, the traditional main space varied in size depending on the size of central area that the entrance was connected. This interior space was surrounded by a seating called 'sedir' where people used to sit in groups and chat. The central space was paved with marble. (Unver 1963: 60) In some of the neighbourhood coffeehouses there used to be a special corner for hairdressers with the necessary furniture and equipment (Unver 1963: 61). A typical spatial feature of the coffeehouse was the integration of interior to the street, an extension to the public life and space. This ranged from transparency of the facade to provision of exterior seating. Certain coffeehouses, including the janissary type, had a small pool at the center and a mezzanine for musicians. General interior layout of space comprised of an area for drinking coffee, corners for seclusion, area for preparation, and a space for musicians or traditional performances-galanty show- (Karagoz, meddah), depending on the type. (David 1999: 130) Coffeehouse in spite of the common characteristics did not develop into an architectural type as in the case of other traditional spaces, such as the house, the bathhouse, the mosque and the madrasah.

Observation of the physical characteristics of contemporary coffeehouse reveals that it has been simplified into an ordinary retail space with tables and chairs and a kitchenette for tea and coffee preparation. The tables and chairs replaced the sedir, the activities were reduced to playing backgammon, card games, watching television and chatting. What survives, and what provides the coffeehouse its distinct position in the society today, seems to be its socio-cultural characteristics that can be traced in the identity of the attendants and their relations and in the activities that take place.

Users of the coffeehouse throughout history have varied from artisans to trades people, to government administrators, to intellectuals, and people coming from various income levels. The only invariable feature is the attendants. The attendants being all male, brings up the subject of gender into discussion. Women are excluded from this space, for the only reason of being women. This place is publicly open only to men and not to women and therefore a men's community, a socio-cultural sphere for men alone is formed within the space of the coffeehouse. The gendered characteristics can be attributed to religious beliefs, segregating male and females. Another point of view would be interpreting this space as a space of seclusion for men where they feel comfortable and secure, a familiar environment. It may

as well be related to power relations between people, may be interpreted as a space created for the males.

As the coffeehouse emerged in the Ottoman society where majority experienced Islamic religion, where lives would be lived in a triangle of the house, the bazaar and the mosque/convent, the coffeehouse became an important component of the wards as a new male space. Men started to go out of their houses to spend time with other male friends, in these spaces. According to David (1999) coffeehouses existed as if they were an extension of the house for men, where they would meet, chat together and would share a new space of freedom, a sense of belonging, free from the household matters, discussing manly subjects. (David 1999:38)

Segregation in space due to gender may be attributed to the Islamic way of living, especially when it is integrated with political power, states restrictions for male and female existence in society and designates areas for each sex separately. Following the Islamic tradition, it was not customary in the Ottoman-Turkish society, for women to socially interact with foreign men; go out of the house or do things by themselves. Women used to gather with female friends at homes or bathhouses denoted only for female. In the traditional Ottoman house, there used to be separate entrance and designated living areas for men and women visitors. In other words, the streets and the public areas belonged to men, while house interiors belonged to women.

Male dominance in coffeehouses may be attributed to the universally existent gender differences. According to Franck, it is assumed that the world is divided into two realms where women 'belonged in or near the dwelling', and men had easy access to places out of the dwelling, where they could meet others. This tendency of asymmetrical division of the environment, as two realms continues to exist in a variety of ways, in many Islamic countries, Greek and Bedouin settlements and US cities and suburbs. (Franck 2002: 350) Segregation existed in the early examples of cafes in European countries and women met certain restrictions in using the space. However coffeehouses open to both sexes prospered in number. (Heise 1996: 96) Coffeehouse exhibits a unique case in the Turkish society. Exclusion of women in this space, that has always existed, still continues to exist without much questioning.

FROM SPACE TO ARCHITECTURAL SPACE

Space may be defined in a variety of ways according to disciplines. For architects it may be defined as an area for designated user and function. Architects aim to create space with a character, i.e. places for people. Some spaces may attract people and become places yet others may not. Design and



creation of architectural space are complex phenomena. Besides physical, intangible issues of architectural space need to be explored in the design process. In this paper we examine the coffeehouse space with its physical and immaterial characteristics through literature.

For anthropologists space is materially and culturally produced and architecture can be taken as one of those culturally produced artefacts. For architectural historians and theorists, architecture is continually reproduced through use and everyday life. Space can be produced by builders, designers and users of buildings. (Rendell 2002: 102) It is an outcome of social practices in the sense of political economical means furthermore all power relations including the gender originated are involved.

Theoretical basis for evaluation of space as a social production had been established by theorists like Heidegger, Lefebvre and Giddens. In Lefebvre's words; "Social space is a social product - the space produced in a certain manner serves as a tool of thought and action. It is not only a means of production but also a means of control, and hence of domination/power." (Lefebvre 1991: 27) For Foucault 'space is fundamental in any form of communal life; space is fundamental in any exercise of power'. (Foucault 2000: 437)

Lefebvre and Foucault not only suggested architecture was socially produced and involved social constructs, moreover they suggested that space could serve as a means of control, domination and power. Even the use of space by an individual is a product of social power relations, rather than individual free will. Space is not only a medium for interaction, but also is produced by interaction of power and gender relations. (Koskela, 1999: 112) Hays (2000) referring to Foucault states that 'space is the material wherein discourses about knowledge and power are transformed into actual relations of power.' Power may be experienced in space in a variety of ways. It may be symbolic and be related to economy, religion, state, colour, race and sex. It may be physical; power may be exercised physically in buildings as in the case of spaces of confinement such as workhouses and prisons. Same spaces may impose power on one group and does not on another. For example suburban American house may be experienced as a space of refuge for man, while it may be a power imposing space, a concentration camp for woman. (Marcus and Cameron 2002: 69) Butler discusses the relation between the body, the activity and the space emphasizing the significance of repeated activities performed in exterior space in the formation of gender: 'gender is an identity tenuously instituted in exterior space, through a stylized repetition of acts'. (Butler 2000: 97)

According to Fortuijn et.al., some spaces are more attractive for men, where they have authority and women feel excluded, and gendered character of spaces is related to the use of space, bearing power relations and meaning. (Fortuijn et.al.2004: 215) Traditions, cultures attribute roles to each sex. Witig defines gender as 'the workings of "sex" where "sex" is an obligatory injunction for the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize itself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility' (Butler 2000: 96) pointing out that each sex performs, within specified socially constructed roles. Rendell emphasizing the historian's role states that gender not only reflect lives as they were lived but it is constructed by the historian through interpretation and selection of material in explaining history. (Rendell 2000: 20)

TEXTS

Research related to coffeehouses is scarce and mainly from foreign sources. Besides the work of a few local and international researchers, foreign travelers visiting the city of Istanbul during the reign of the Ottoman had written their memoirs that are still being referred today. In this context, literature acts as a source to explore the past and as a mirror reflecting the society. Being an important local source on the subject, it provides an appropriate medium to discuss social and cultural context of the coffeehouse in history and gives the opportunity of seeing and interpreting this issue through a local perspective.

History of Turkish novel goes back as far as 1870 s and the subject of the early novels are limited to daily lives of upper classes, people close to the palace and the settings are limited to interiors of houses, specifically mansions. With the Republican period, authors began concentrating on themes, related to the lives of ordinary people. Public spaces in towns; streets, coffeehouses emerged as settings. Among the novels of the Republican period, some authors concentrated on the contemporary period, i.e. the Republican period while others on the late Ottoman period. The selected texts¹ provide the opportunity of examining the coffeehouse setting in this transition period.

Randomly selected texts from the Turkish Literature, in which coffeehouse is narrated as setting are the medium for interpretation of space in this study. The selected short stories and novels are starting from the turn of the twentieth century, the transitional period that describes a critical border in Turkish history, where political and cultural transformations are implemented and the outcome reflected on the built

environment. These novels provide us issues of discussion on social realities of the country.

METHOD

In this study, for exploring the coffeehouse and its continual existence as a social and cultural entity through literature, the method followed is hermeneutic-phenomenological approach that uses idiosyncratic descriptions to point toward general qualities and describes the nature of a phenomenon as it has meaning and place in the lives of people who experience it. (Seamon 2007: 18) Defined as an interpretive study of human experience, phenomenology aims clarifying and describing human life as it is lived. This approach offers a way to look at person and environment relationship for understanding its complex structure. Dealing with the theory and practice of interpretation, hermeneutics helps the researcher discover meaning in the texts, takes people from their usual recognitions to new understandings. While in the selected texts, authors explain and reveal the daily life and experience of the structured people in a structured context, they still reflect the aspirations and characteristics of real individuals, the society and their reflection on the built environment.

Evaluation of the texts follows a format. Each text is evaluated through the ideas, discussions and activities of actors' i.e. users of the coffeehouse. The texts describe a variety of figures, all male, such as the coffeehouse keeper, teacher, imam, retired state employee, drunkard, radical religious man, butcher, young man, crazy man, well educated man, artisan, performer of local arts, writer, vagabond, local administrator, labourer to name a few. The female figures of the coffeehouse in the selected texts are scarce; they are the actress who sings and dances as the entertainer for the male spectators and a small girl in the story 'Singer Melek'. (Ali 2006: 92)

The activities that take place in coffeehouses also vary, which include playing at backgammon, playing traditional musical instruments, singing, acting –the praiser performances (meddah), the galanty (Karagoz) show- drinking tea and coffee, taking opium products, reading newspaper, listening to radio, getting a haircut, reading letters. The characters are either introduced through the author's description, or through their own dialogue. Discussion subjects vary from daily life activities to neighbourhood gossip such as integrity of the neighbourhood girls, including so-called philosophical and political talk.

EVALUATION

Evaluation of the texts, gives clues in understanding the characters of the attendants, the relations among them in that specific setting, and discovering the coffeehouse as a space. Texts reflect individual and societal characteristics, contemporary and daily issues and the concerns of the society. The atmosphere created by conversation and behaviour of the people in the coffeehouse, reveals that they act as a community and detect any outsiders who happen to interfere. A basic human characteristic, describing somebody as 'the other', discriminating that is different, is apparent in this atmosphere. Among many others, the following quotation is an example of the attitude toward the outsider. As narrated; *'At that moment, someone entered in. Everybody stopped talking, although there were talks going on, before he entered. Silence went on as those playing at backgammon, closed their game boards with a sudden noise and left.'* (Faik 1970: 11) Attendants of the coffeehouse community, through their conversation, form opinion on public issues. While they act as a whole, they may suddenly split into opposing groups, among which power struggle is detected. In this atmosphere, discussion between two people may transform into a struggle between two groups that may influence the formation of the public opinion. Dichotomies of the individual and the group, the outsider and the neighbourhood group, the minority and the majority, all of which charge power onto each party, are created. Range of subjects of discussion and the extent of struggle may vary. In the example of the novel *Deli Filozof*, the coffeehouse owner Hasan Basri complains about the physical struggle causing the hairdresser's mirror to break in the coffeehouse. He exclaims: *'Oh my, is this place an academy of philosophy or house of religious fanatics? All mad talks are made here.'* (Gurpinar 1999: 70)

In the texts, the space defined by the activities and relations of the people, emphasizes the coffeehouse as a social space. The coffeehouse has a unique position in the lives of local people; it is a place of approval. Quotation from Kemal, *'When he returned to the village, he would enter the coffeehouse saying "hello aghas" and would give out cigarettes that he brought from the city to his fellow villagers like his Gaffur Agha does'* (Kemal 2002: 10) shows the importance of coffeehouse as a place for sharing and approval in one's community, emphasizing the prestige gained by visiting the city. People experience a sense of belonging, become part of a group and experience public approval in the coffeehouse as in the case of Kemal's characters: *'He said "let's go to my dad's coffeehouse ... does your father own it? ... no, it's somebody else's, but my father likes the place and goes there since thirty years whenever he visits Istanbul."'* (Kemal 2002: 180)



Coffeeshouses are narrated as centres of communication, both in terms of collecting and conveying personal and public information. According to Hattox, flow of information may reach a level that would carry intentional false information, especially related to women's integrity. (Hattox 1998: 89) An example from the texts gives us supportive information:

'Recently, when Tevfik's daughter Rabia was the major concern of the neighbourhood, head fireman (tulumbacibasi) 'brother Sabit' gathered his team at a corner of the coffeeshouse, to talk about her expected marriage ... A young man in the group addressed Sabit saying " you are the bravest of the young men in the neighbourhood ... you are a bachelor as well ... it's your responsibility to keep this girl in order. Who else can do it?"' (Adivar 1969: 87)

Some authors emphasize the educational aspect of the coffeeshouse space. It is a place for learning, a place where letters are read and written for the illiterate. Mintzuri in his memoirs from the period of Abdulhamid II, explained how he used to read and write letters for other attendants of the coffeeshouse. (Mintzuri 2002:11) In the following example, coffeeshouse is portrayed as a place where letters are read and shared: *'With the letter in his hand, he would run to the coffeeshouse and show it to everyone saying "I received a letter from my son"'* (Kemal 2002: 138)

People listen to the news in the radio, read newspapers publicly and discuss public and political matters. A political discussion may turn into a struggle as in the following case: *'two coffee households, therefore two opposing parties started to fight over their ideas.'* (Kemal 2002: 225) The flow of information and the activities taking place in a coffeeshouse may range from personal to public, reach a level that may even cause the state authorities to interfere, or to impose power. Tevfik in 'The Clown and his Daughter' was put to jail because of his punch performances that had been reported by the government spies: *'Tevfik, who runs the Kabasakal Coffeeshouse started his performance ... the figures reflected on the screen, were both entertaining and critical ... Tevfik's "spendthrift" character was cunning and skilful. He never got broke. He wasn't any different than Abdulhamid's -sultan in power- notorious employees.'* (Adivar 1969: 86) This quotation indicates how the coffeeshouse space may act as a setting for political criticism of the governing of Sultan Abdulhamid II.

As discussed above, complex set of relations in the coffeeshouse produces a space that is open to interpretation in different terms and levels among which power holds a specific place. In some examples, the coffeeshouse becomes the local

gathering area for political groups. In others, power relations between the attendants produce dominating and respected figures in the coffeehouse, such as the coffeehouse owner who is portrayed as a privileged individual who has access to personal information of the people in the neighbourhood. The most dominant of all, attendants of the coffeehouse are all male; women do not enter this space or interfere with its public sphere.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

The texts reveal that coffeehouse as a socio-cultural space plays an important role in the lives of the people in the Ottoman-Turkish society. This space is a miniature world, reflecting the society in conjunction with the contemporary issues. Coffeehouse is an integral and living part of the society. Each male member of the society finds an appropriate place in this space according to his social status.

Coffeehouse is a space where women interference is restricted. As recorded in the texts, the attendants of the coffeehouse are all male except in two cases: a female singer and a small girl in the short story 'Singer Melek'. The story takes place in a coffeehouse where music performances were held. A female singer takes stage accompanied by a few musicians every night. As quoted: '*Violin, lute and Melek (female name) each, once in a while, made an attempt and raised their voices*' (Ali 2006: 92) The other female figure appearing in the selected texts is a young girl who came to pick up his father. '*The small girl popped her head in at the door and called her father, she did not enter the coffeehouse.*' (Ali 2006: 94) These two female figures seem to have no significance as an individual in the plot and in the coffeehouse space even though the singer's name appears as the title of the story, revealing the physical and symbolic female non-existence in space.

Existence of the coffeehouse as a male space may be associated with the contextual ties of early coffeehouses i.e. non secular, Islamic society. Issue of sexual segregation in the Ottoman-Islamic world, included all public spaces such as mosque, market, street and coffeehouse. Traditions in an Islamic society required the discrimination of women in public space. With the republican reforms, however, women have gained civic rights and freedom to access the public life. Public spaces such as streets, schools, administrative or recreation spaces all have become open to both sexes. Women have had access to these spaces with the exception of the traditional coffeehouse which seems to conserve its boundaries strictly. Men have kept their privilege of being the only attendants of this space, as a projection of their 'unofficial' power over women in the society.



In that respect, coffeehouse is an example of gendered space symbolizing power of men over women. 'The institutionalized boundaries' dividing the parts of society reflected in public space use, as in the case of coffeehouses, can be 'expressed as the recognition of power in the expense of the other'. (Mernissi 2003: 489) The mental division of space and the power attributed to men i.e. influence of intangible issues have reached an extent where women are excluded from this space physically, making the coffeehouse, a gendered space reflecting power of men over women.

It is possible to discuss 'power and space' in the example of coffeehouses in different terms. In some cases, individuals or groups may impose power on others. The conversation between characters often concentrates on political issues. Individuals easily forming groups or parties may create power relations. Another version, an alternative power to state authority, which had always existed in the history of coffeehouses, is recognizable in the texts. Alternative power perceived in the texts may be explained through Habermas' 'bourgeois public sphere' where private people –citizens- come to form a public, claim the public sphere against the authorities. Confrontation, opposition originating in public space against the authority, that developed in the salons in France, learned and literary societies in Germany and coffeehouses in England (Milner, Browitt 2002: 78) had similarly been experienced in the coffeehouses of Turkey.

Coffee drinking consequently coffeehouse, due to its potential for anarchy, confronted a series of oppositions and had been questioned by authorities throughout the course of history. Their activities had been restricted and prohibited from time to time; they had frequently been closed down. Government spies had penetrated into this influential public gathering place, in order to collect information and provide control over the society. In the early periods, madrasah claimed that coffee was harmful for the health and therefore was forbidden by the religion. The reasoning behind the restrictions was the shariah law. Coffeehouses were blamed for keeping people from going to the mosque and worship. (Toros 1998: 31) During an important prohibition in Ottoman times, in the period of Suleiman the Magnificent, even the trade ships that brought coffee from Egypt had been banned. Other prohibitions followed during the reigns of Selim II, Mourad III and Ahmed I on this politically active space. Only after the seventeenth century, the authorities abandoned their negative attitude towards the coffeehouses. (Desmet 1999: 44) Power relations seem to have taken different forms, however continued to exist.

The coffeehouse as a space seems to owe its long lived existence to this complex pattern of relations. It houses a basic

function: public gathering for coffee drinking; yet meaning associated with and pattern of relations that originate from this space, are quite complicated. Pattern of relations among individuals, sexes, groups or authority, define a space more remarkable in terms of its social and cultural connotations than the physical. Yet, social relations, cultural identity and physical characteristics are integral parts of space forming a whole. In that respect, power/significance of coffeehouse as a space lies in its continual existence, bound to the pattern of relations, all of which shape space and architecture. Consideration of space as a social product leads us to think that architecture is engaged with external factors and is open to influence coming from social, political and economical factors, and ideologies. The space is a construction in both senses of the word - physical and immaterial- and it is expected to form mutual relationship with the user. Further research on this subject may open way to researchers working on architecture, design, space and cultural studies in understanding and creating space.

NOTES:

1. The selected texts are from the following examples of literature: Neighbourhood Coffeehouse (Mahalle Kahvesi) / S.F. Abasiyanik (1906-1954), Feminist (Feminist) / M.S.Esendal (1883-1952), Singer Melek (Hanende Melek) / Sabahattin Ali (1906-1948), Spirit of a Town (Bir Kasabanin Ruhü) / Ilhan Tarus (1907-1967), The Clown and his Daughter (Sinekli Bakkal)

(First published in English in 1935) / H.E.Adivar (1884- 1964), The Mad Philosopher (Deli Filozof) / H.R.Gurpinar (1864-1944), Migrating Birds (Gurbet Kuslari) / Orhan Kemal (1914-1970)

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RESUME

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