Building Beyoğlu

Histories of place in a central district in Istanbul

Maessen, J.M.A.H.
This dissertation has analysed the historicity of place-making in Beyoğlu between 1950 and 1990. It has highlighted how different communities ‘made their place’ in Beyoğlu, while at the same time ‘claiming space’ in local, national and international processes of education, cultural diplomacy and the cultivation of culture broadly conceived. In order to render visible the continuities and discontinuities in historical processes and representations, the dissertation has provided a broad temporal overview before proceeding to the period of focus and engaging with primary material that had in various cases not been used before. It sheds new light to the question how communities in and of Beyoğlu have imagined themselves in relation to their surroundings. By means of six case studies the dissertation has shown how Beyoğlu as a contested place has maintained a pivotal position in a variety of institutionalized or semi-institutionalized communities, at the local, national and international scales. It has provided insight into how diverse communities within the area coped with the changing reality of Istanbul’s development from an imperial capital, to a semi-provincial city, to an ever-expanding ‘global’ metropolis. It has attempted to also lay bare why the conflation of representations of loss and decay with historical developments in the context of Beyoğlu is problematic and shown the degree to which the district’s identity and legacy has historically been contested. The dissertation also has shown how divergent representations of cosmopolitanisms, decay and dichotomies between low-culture and high-culture can be instrumentalized and reoriented by a diverse range of communities. It furthermore demonstrates the diffuse nature of continuities and discontinuities in the urban landscape before and after the 1950s, which further counter essentialist representations of loss and decay. Such rep-
resentations of decay, loss and perversion intersect with a decrease and change of functionality, demographic shifts and the dilapidation of architecture and infrastructure. The representations, however, also lead to anachronistic discourses on Beyoğlu’s development from the 1950s onwards, replicated in the mass media, by novelists, but also by civil society actors, academics, private enterprises and governments.

The dissertation started by positioning the research project into a broader theoretical debate and discussing how it benefits from previous studies in history, architectural history, historical geography, anthropology and urban planning. It demonstrated how research on Beyoğlu in the second half of the twentieth century fits into a broader historiographical gap in urban history and historical geography, which is not (sufficiently) addressed by either historians or geographers. It showed the complexity of positioning a study in between disciplines, yet at the same time renders visible the added value of proceeding beyond disciplinary boundaries. It argues indeed that historians and historiography can greatly benefit from a better understanding of categories that have been developed and discussed in geography for several decades. As Denis Cosgrove has pointed out, one of the most meaningful categories in that sense is landscape, i.e. the imagining of people’s relation to their surroundings, how they construct these and subsequently imagine themselves in it.1 The analysis of post-1950s Beyoğlu, and more particularly the six cases presented in this thesis, show the significance of understanding the constructedness of place-making and how different scales – local, national and international – can seamlessly intersect in a local context. Analysing Beyoğlu through Cosgrove’s definition of landscape helps to understand how widely divergent social groups such as high-school students, teachers, freemasons, diplomats, German speakers, English speakers, cinema visitors, actors, producers and urban activists have envisioned and experienced their relationship with this district.

The development of Beyoğlu can to a certain degree be considered in the context of urban development in Europe after the Second World War. As Moritz Föllmer and Mark B. Smith have argued, understanding European urban centres is crucial to understand the historical development of European societies after 1945.2 In that context, Istanbul...
bul can be considered as the most dramatic example of rapid and massive urbanisation in Southeastern Europe. The city, however, also provides additional room for reflection on an alleged dichotomous relation regarding urban development on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Turkey in post-war Europe may arguably have been institutionally anchored in the West-European or North-Atlantic ‘bloc’, yet the high degree of governmental centralization and fragility of its democracy further undermines a dichotomous representation of Europe in bloc fashion. As shown in chapter 1, Istanbul’s development provides nuance to this view by providing a case of hyper-urbanization as a direct consequence of policies made at the national level. In a local context this dissertation therefore also fits in a broader paradigm of critical studies that have argued against interpretations for instance of Beyoğlu and its urban landscape as an island of exceptionalisms in the late Ottoman Empire or as a case of general neglect of Istanbul after the foundation of the Turkish Republic.

From a temporal point of view, furthermore, discussing Istanbul from the perspective of a pre- or post-Second World War demarcation also is much less natural since the changes in Istanbul and Beyoğlu were in many ways only partly shaped by the turmoil at the global stage between 1939 and 1945. Although various processes ran in parallel to other burgeoning metropoles in Europe and elsewhere on the globe – rapid urbanisation, industrialisation, radical transformation of urban infrastructure to facilitate car traffic – many of the processes leading towards urban transformation were initiated before 1945. As has been explained in chapter 1, Istanbul also witnessed an expansion of its borders through suburbanization and notably the expansion of informal housing, the so-called gecekondu. The case of Beyoğlu, however, notably shows how representations of post-war historic urban centres, have overdetermined the dwindling of core functions. Pertaining specifically to Beyoğlu, this study has shown that ideas on Beyoğlu’s revival through its ‘rediscovery’ and gradual gentrification from the late 1980s onwards, downplay the significance of Beyoğlu on a local, national and international scale. The three schools discussed in this dissertation may be considered as representative samples of foreign-language elite schools in Beyoğlu, which retained their reputation and influence after the Second World War. Föllmer and Smith contrast the effects of suburbanization in the United States versus Europe, where in the latter case suburbanization was soon followed by a renewed attention for the old urban centres. Beyoğlu is a case in point, although – as has been noted in various cases in this study – with the departure of large portions of its (non-Muslim) residents, the district would also lose a significant portion of its cultural and social capital, cosmetic appeal and witness strong shifts in the balance of its functionalities by day in contrast to those by night. This means that the experience of the area could differ considerably between day and night when its core functionalities shifted from a centre for business, social gathering and education changed to a centre for ‘cheap’ nightlife. This is in fact similar to the observation Edhem Eldem has made about representations of Pera and Galata’s history as an interplay between ‘luxurious shops, brasseries, theaters, and café-concerts’ and ‘taverns, brothels and sleazy hotels’ respectively. It is what Eldem describes as a ‘silent majority’ that becomes obliterated in between.

The enforced or voluntary departures of residents on the other hand, also resonates in discourses of loss and challenges notions of continuity. From a functional point of view, for instance, it should be stressed that the district retained much of its significance and even witnessed an increase in some of its existing core functions. As has been argued in chapter 1 moreover, it was in Beyoğlu itself and its direct vicinity that experiments with high modernist architecture by local and international artists were executed in the 1940s and 1950s. A high concentration of the country’s reputable schools were found in this district or its direct surroundings, positioning it as an enduring centre for the education of the country’s elite. It also had and continues to have a pivotal role in the social life of various of Istanbul’s local and foreign communities. From that perspective, this study has demonstrated that in all cases under scrutiny a strong correlation between place, material landscapes and community can be observed. As Cosgrove argues in the context of landscape studies, these sequences of events and choices are not simply natural, they are all constructed, and reflect a conscious process of building relations between individuals, institutions, communities and their surroundings. Analyzing these processes of building relations between actors and surroundings in the context of Beyoğlu undermines the overdetermined representations about the district’s demise or corruption.
From that perspective, the Teutonia chapter has demonstrated that what provided the primary incentive for the club to keep itself alive at the end of the 1970s, when it was essentially facing its demise, was the desire to retain its building for an unspecified ‘German purpose’. We see here in fact that the imagined community of Teutonia, which once held a pivotal role in the community of Bosporusdeutschen and other German speakers, had gradually fallen apart due to a variety of circumstances ranging from a lack of engagement, a troubled history, to the settlement of what in the past was its former member target group in different areas of the expanding city. Had the club fronted by Arthur Kapps not been able to successfully reinvigorate and reorganize itself with the goal of reclaiming its building, it may have been well possible that Teutonia had ceased to exist over four decades ago rather than succeeding in maintaining itself as a point where the interests of German-speakers could converge. Dynamics in Germany, moreover, from the rise of Nazism to the exodus of German academics and the Cold War’s German East-West divide would also resonate along the Bosphorus.

The case of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons similarly shows that the idea of ownership of place has an important position in the decision of the freemasons to remain in the area. After an enforced period of relative inactivity between 1935 and 1948 the Grand Lodge was able to successfully reclaim its properties in Istanbul in the 1950s, regained its potential, managed to acquire a number of new buildings on the Nur-i Ziya Sokak and even had a new building constructed in the 1970s. The fact that an influential community deliberately chose to sustain its presence in Beyoğlu counters the idea of a district that was bleeding out and becoming ‘corrupted’ during the 1970s and 1980s. It also shows that Beyoğlu could be preferred over newer districts. Whereas in the case of the English High School, the German High School and the Cercle d’Orient there was a strong urge to move away from Beyoğlu, the freemasons chose to stay. Apart from economic incentives, the individual narratives of Ziya Umur and Remzi Sanver demonstrate that sentimental or cultural reasons pushed the Grand Lodge to remain in its place. The Grand Lodge belonged in Beyoğlu, since its temples had been there since the arrival of freemasonry, but also because Beyoğlu’s idiosyncracies in terms of history, diversity of communities and functions were more befitting to the Grand Lodge than other districts in the city. These permitted the brethren to blend into the district’s sociocultural mosaic.

The significance of ownership of place is further exemplified by the case of the Cercle d’Orient. Demonstrating the duality and coexistence of narratives, one of an elite club and the other of a local and national hub for cinema production and viewing, this case shows the impact of rapid and chaotic urbanization on various levels, local as well as national. Since the Cercle d’Orient never owned the Beyoğlu building in which it resided, it was apparently easier for the club to abandon it, particularly since it already had access to an alternative location summer location on the Asian side of the city. More broadly, the case of the Cercle d’Orient parcel also demonstrates the complexity of place-making if ownership is legally established. The chapter has demonstrated how the parcel has become the spatial centerpoint of cinema production in Turkey, yet this significance was entirely disregarded during the process of leasing the building by a state organisation to a private party. This demonstrates the limits of place-making in the district and, notably, the limits of informal place-making beyond that of institutional actors. The Yeşilçam film industry, however, does show how a particular locality can become a national symbol of cultural production. This industry has significantly added to Beyoğlu’s reputation and reality as an urban and national centre, notably in the 1960s and 1970s.

The cases of the English High School for Girls and the German School both have shed light on how place-making can also be a process that is partially enforced or established by faits accomplis determined at levels beyond the influence of the schools or their respective administrations. Both schools were severely obstructed by the Turkish state in developing plans to move their buildings to sites that they considered more suitable to facilitate accessibility and growth in the future. They therefore remained in Beyoğlu not necessarily because they felt a strong and heartfelt connection with the area and building, but rather since they had no other options to be reestablished elsewhere without jeopardizing the school’s future. It is in part also for that reason that correspondence found in the National Archives in London and the Politisches Archiv in Berlin respectively, repeatedly points to the problems the location of the building and the buildings themselves caused for a proper functioning of the institutions. This shows how the effects of a geopo-
Political status quo – the stipulations of the Lausanne Treaty – had a direct impact on local contexts and, importantly, grew out to be increasingly significant focal points in cultural diplomacy. This thesis has therefore also shown how closely interconnected Beyoğlu was with local, national and international contexts. In both schools the original purpose of the schools, i.e. providing schooling for the local Anglo- and Germanophone communities, had been diminished by the 1950s. The ongoing efforts of the British and German governments to keep these expensive schools open – the English Schools are cited as the only British schools receiving direct funding from the British Council and the German School is presented as the most expensive school funded by the German government – should be considered in the light of these countries’ efforts to maintain good relations with Turkey. As such, international geopolitics and bilateral relations had and have a direct effect on the core functions of Beyoğlu. In the case of the EHSG, it would not be the severe financial and practical difficulties that would signify its closure, but rather a new political wind in Great Britain with Thatcherite austerity, which had long-lasting effects on a wide range of governmental institutions. Nevertheless, even then efforts were made to at least partially sustain the school’s legacy when it had already formally become a Turkish state school. Both the EHSG and the German School have been two places considered to be vital to building a positive impression of Great Britain and the Federal Republic of Germany respectively, among a local intelligentsia in Turkey. Through these institutions, local children were exposed to foreign languages and curriculae, essentially creating hyphenated community identities.

Contrary to this, the chapter on the Galatasaray High School shows how Turkish French-speaking alumni of the school felt a strong connection with this district. Although it should be mentioned once again that a different source corpus was used in this case, the alumni’s demonstration of strong feelings of attachment to the location of the school is remarkable. This is further amplified by the connections that are built in the high school’s narration of its own history, which harks back not only to its predecessor that was founded in the late nineteenth century, but also to the Palace School from the late fifteenth century, an interesting case of an invented tradition. The strong feelings of attachment and sense of belonging to the school’s site in Beyoğlu are actively cultivated by the various alumni associations connected to the Galatasaray High School. Similar to the case of the Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons the alumni here cultivate representations of their sense of belonging to Galatasaray and that of the school to Beyoğlu. The places of these institutions feature prominently in the imagining of the community. The Grand Lodge has its temple, main offices, library facilities and restaurant in the premises at Nur-i Ziya Sokak, making it one of the most important point of gatherings and reference for Turkey’s Freemasons. The Galatasaray High School, apart from having its main student campus in the middle of historical Beyoğlu, periodically is the scene for gatherings of alumni, for instance with the annually organized traditional alumni day, known as the Pilav Günü (Pilaf Day). The locations in Beyoğlu thus hold a pivotal significance in the imagining of the community, but also in the ritualized enactments of the embodied communities. Both institutions, moreover, make their presence known to the outsiders, passers-by, through place names, symbolism and architecture, yet at the same time display seclusion, through institutional traditions, armed doors and tall fences, demonstrating that Beyoğlu belongs in part to them, but that they are distinct from their surroundings as well.

Finally, in conclusion, I argue that the period between 1950 and 1990 in Beyoğlu has been largely overlooked in historiography and historical geography, which fits a broader trend in the analysis of European urban settings. As Föllmer and Smith point out, in historical research, most studies of urban transformation have focussed on the period preceding World War II. This analysis has therefore aimed to further underscore the importance of studying recent urban history, to understand the development towards present-day situations and conflicts in urban settings and how they correlate with national and international events or trends. It furthermore counters conceptions of the dilapidation and loss of function of historic urban centres after the Second World War. What the case of Beyoğlu demonstrates is that the area was next to decline – primarily caused by the forced departure of significant portions of its residents – subject to a significant deal of continuity in its functions and on the other hand saw gradual shifts in its usage profile and users’ profiles. As has been noted previously, this had a catalyzing effect on existing representations of Beyoğlu as a place of squalor, moral
decay, vulgarity and essentially a Janus-faced district; a space for business, education and culture during daytime and of shady nightlife at night. Identifying, analyzing and critically commenting on these representations, their origins and correlation with historical developments, retains its relevance in the Beyoğlu of today as well. What Atkinson and Cosgrove signal in the case of Rome thus holds true for Istanbul and Beyoğlu as well: these are all highly complex and palimpsestic historical landscapes and as such any major intervention to their landscape ‘must negotiate these historical complexities, layers, and associations’.

As Eldem has argued in the case of Beyoğlu, however, this fundamentally layered nature of the urban landscape is oftentimes underrepresented and skewed into a pastiche of something that it may have partially been. Regardless of whether it is referred to nostalgically as a lost culture of perfect cosmopolitanism or equally uncritically dismissed as a space of moral decay and squalor, the complexity of the urban landscape is neglected. This pertains equally to the layers of the first decades of the Turkish Republic and before, as it does to the periods between the 1950s and the 1990s. Acknowledging and investigating these layers never loses its relevance. As the 2016 New York Times article quoted at the outset of this thesis shows, the trope of decay continues to be replayed in even the most recent popular representations of the city. This dissertation is, in that sense, a critical call to those who try to dismiss the right to place making and history writing and those who represent the area through the lens of overdetermined nostalgia.
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**Maps**

All historical cartographical material designed by Eduard Goad, 1905. Courtesy of IFEA/Salt Araştırma, numbers 35, 37, 38, 39 - identifiers: APLGDPEGA35, APLGDPEGA37, APLGDPEGA38, APLGDPEGA39.

All contemporary cartographic material designed by Hans Smolenaers © 2019. Edits by Enno Maessen.

**Images**

Image 1 – Photo by Enno Maessen, 2018.


Image 20 – ‘İstiklal Caddesi yayalaştırma sonrası görünümü’, Salt Araştırma, identifier: CALIST0061.


Image 26 – Photo by Enno Maessen, 2018.


Image 34 – Photo by Enno Maessen, 2018.


Image 39 – ‘Ahmet Mekin’, i.pinimg.com/originals/9a/4c/c6/9a4cc6f3cdd2a5a9ad5fcb1b92c81fa5.jpg.


Image 41 – Photo by Enno Maessen, 2018.


Image 46 – Photo by Enno Maessen, 2018.


Image 49 – ‘Backyard of Galata Mevlevihanesi with the building of Deutsche Schule [etc.]’, Wikimedia, commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Deutsche_Schule_Istanbul#/media/File:Galata_Mevlevihanesi_M%C3%BCzesi_10.JPG.


Image 51 – Photo by Enno Maessen, 2018.
This dissertation analyses the development of one of Istanbul’s historical districts, Beyoğlu, between 1950 and 1990. It explores the historicality of place-making in Beyoğlu through the lens of six case studies. The dissertation’s historical focus – 1950 to 1990 – follows Istanbul’s development from a middle-sized city into a metropole, ending with the acceleration of gentrification processes in Beyoğlu. Geographically, it has as its focus the area known as Beyoğlu, although that name is conceived primarily as a geographic container from a discursive point of view. As the research presented here highlights, what is associated with Beyoğlu as an area is a dynamic process subject to change over time. The dissertation also contributes to broader debates in urban history, examining the period after the Second World War. Modern urban history has been criticized for its tendency to focus predominantly on the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Studies that do focus on contemporary issues, moreover, have struggled in integrating their research into the broader range of topics featuring in the disciplines of social and cultural history, dealing mostly with issues of planning instead. This dissertation attempts to overcome those absences, while also engaging with conceptual frameworks from historical and cultural geography.

Through the six case studies, revolving around three associations and three schools, it highlights how different communities ‘made their place’ in Beyoğlu, while at the same time ‘claiming space’ in local, national and international processes of education, cultural diplomacy and the cultivation of culture broadly conceived. It sheds new light on the question of how communities in and of Beyoğlu have imagined themselves in relation to their surroundings. The dissertation also shows how divergent representations of cosmopolitanism, decay and divisions between low- and high-culture can be instrumentalized and reoriented by a diverse range of communities. It furthermore demonstrates the diffuse nature of continuities and discontinuities in the urban landscape before and after the 1950s, thus countering essentialist representations of loss and decay about the district. Such representations of decay, loss and perversion intersect with the district’s gradual decline and change of functionality, demographic shifts and the dilapidation of architecture.
and infrastructure. The representations, however, also lead to anachronistic discourses on Beyoğlu's development from the 1950s onwards, replicated in the mass media, by novelists, but also by civil society activists, academics, private enterprises and government actors. The dissertation argues, indeed, that perceptions of the district's transformations in terms of its socio-cultural composition and built environment have resulted in a discursive over-determination of the area's various identities (including cosmopolitanism, urban deterioration, socio-cultural marginalism a place where people fail to claim their rights to the city). The dissertation highlights, rather, the historical complexity of processes of place-making in the district, thereby problematizing popular narratives of continuity and discontinuity in Beyoğlu.
van verval, verlies en pervertering komen samen met de geleidelijke achteruitgang van het district en de verandering van zijn functieprofiel, demografische schommelingen en het verval van architectuur en infrastructuur. De representaties leiden echter tot anachronistische verbevingen over de ontwikkeling van Beyoğlu na de jaren 50, die worden herhaald en hergebruikt door massamedia en schrijvers, maar ook door activisten uit maatschappelijke organisaties, academici, bedrijven en overheden. In dit proefschrift wordt bepleit dat de verbevingen over de verandering van het district in termen van de sociaal-culturele samenstelling van zijn gemeenschappen en de bebouwing hebben geleid tot discursieve ‘overdetermining’ van de identiteiten van het gebied en de associaties daarmee (bijvoorbeeld kosmopolitisme, stedelijk verval, sociaal-cultureel marginalisme en een plaats waar burgers er niet in slagen hun recht op de stad op te eisen). Het proefschrift benadrukt de historische complexiteit van processen van ‘place-making’ in het district en problematiseert daarmee populaire narratieve van continuïteit en discontinuïteit in Beyoğlu.