

“Through Istanbul’s marketplaces: the materiality of the market”

Freek Janssens*

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(*) University of Amsterdam (f.janssens@uva.nl)

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Through Istanbul's marketplaces: the materiality of the market

Freek Janssens, University of Amsterdam (f.janssens@uva.nl)

Introduction

In Istanbul, more than 350 markets pop-up every week in different neighbourhoods in the city. As this paper argues, it is the materiality of the market – a lightweight structure of poles, ropes and tarps that instantly creates shared shopping arcades – that not only provides residents with fresh food and immigrants with an income, but it opens up pathways into neighbourhoods that are perceived to be inaccessible otherwise. The deprived area of Tarlabası in central Istanbul is a case in point, where urbanites only dare to come, and meet the residents, on market days. As such, marketplaces in Istanbul play a crucial role in the development of a tolerant and inclusive city.

Being able to physically construct the canopies that make up these marketplaces, this paper continues to argue, is the prime quality of the market trader, and something that is taught from father to son. The planned closure of all the city's markets by the local authorities, as part of grand urban renewal schemes, therefore not just deprives Istanbul of its present markets, but by losing the craft and practical wisdom of creating a market, it also deprives the city of marketplaces in the future, and hence of inclusive public space.

Research methods

This paper is based on ethnographic research that took place in Istanbul in 2012. Initially, twenty markets have been visited. During these first visits, short topic-based conversations have been held with around ten people, both traders and customers as well as local officials such as the police – all lasting less than ten minutes – and subsequent second visits were arranged to discuss selected topics more in depth. Next

to this, formal interviews were arranged with civil servants in the various Boroughs in Istanbul. Through a snowball-effect, new informants were identified. When these interviews were conducted Turkish, an interpreter was present to facilitate English-Turkish translation. As Istanbul's governmental organisations are very top-down, it was often more difficult to speak to people lower on the administrative ladder (e.g. actual market managers) than to speak to officials in higher ranks. As a consequence, I spoke to the vice-president of the Borough of Kağıthane (Mr. Mustafa Oğuz Toktekin) and the presidents of both the Borough Kadıköy (Mr. Selami Öztürk) and the Anatolian-side Chamber of Market Traders (Mr. Mehmet Emin Yazar).

Next to conversations and interviews, the paper relies on participant-observation. As relationships were formed with some market traders, the author had the opportunity to participate in the setting up and running of a market stall on several occasions. It was through these moments, that the author developed an insight into the practical wisdom of running a market stall in Istanbul.

Urban marketplaces

Cities have historically been shaped by the way they were fed. As Steel (2009) so vividly shows by referring to present day street names in London – such as Fish Street, and Cow Cross Street – the growth and shape of the city was closely intertwined with the food producing countryside's ability to feed it. To a large extent, therefore, the local authorities that ruled the city derived their legitimacy to rule from their ability to safeguard a steady supply of food. It is for these reasons, that city authorities erected formal marketplaces in the city – often on central squares and in front of the city hall or another important place of authority.

Indeed, as Harvey and others (Harvey 1973: 216; Scott & Storper 2014: 4) have demonstrated, markets and cities are two sides of the same coin. They co-evolved in specific economic situations and specific locations in which agricultural surpluses could sustain a situation of differentiation into social classes where one product could be

traded against another. In that sense, the term ‘urban marketplace’ is a pleonasm, for it is the market that elevates a village to the status of a city. As Bestor puts it:

Throughout history, cities and markets have sustained each other, the former providing location, demand, and social context for the latter; the latter providing sustenance, profit, and cultural verve to the former (Bestor 2001: 2992).

Yet despite their interconnectedness, the relationship of the city authorities with their markets has not been straightforward, for not only did the authorities have to facilitate the market – to legitimise their power, but also to collect taxes – they also had to control their sprawl and regulate their operations. This dual task – both facilitating the market as well as policing the marketplace – characterised the relationship of the city authorities with their markets, as twins that both need, and hate, each other.

In discussing eighteenth century grain trade in Paris, Kaplan argues that the dual task of the local authorities gave birth to a conceptual distinction between the ‘market principle’ on the one hand, and the ‘market place’ on the other. The first refers to a system of relations in which prices are determined through a balancing act of supply and demand, and through which resources such as food are distributed. The market principle was thought to operate best autonomously, free from interference of the government (Kaplan 1985: 25). Opposing the market principle – and, as Kaplan argues, compensating for its elusive character that prevents governments from grasping it – the marketplace is the physical location where traders and customers interact. It is a place that requires, and allows for, surveillance and regulation and, if needed, repression. In Kaplan’s words, ‘the marketplace as a physical site served as the linchpin of the regulatory apparatus’ (Kaplan 1984: 27), it presented to the authorities the immorality of the market and, above all, the possibility to moralise it.

In the eyes of many city authorities, market traders are greedy, cheeky and ill-mannered folks who try to take their profit on the expense of honest citizens. As such, market traders have generally been guarded with suspicion. This is true of the vendor who sells his products from a stall in the marketplace, but even more so of those folk

that walk the streets with their ware. Cross and Morales expose the moral narrative in the authorities' attitude:

Street vendors are accused of many things: of being dirty and 'ugly,' of not paying their share of taxes, of selling illegal or contraband goods, of being unhygienic, of blocking public transit, and of making too much noise. But ... the underlying complaint by many city administrators, local businesses, or residents is that they are there (emphasis in original, Cross & Morales 2007: 19).

Guided by their abhorrence of the market trader, market halls were built all over Europe to confine the sprawl of traders and to demarcate the marketplace. In Britain, for example, more than seven hundred market halls have been built since 1750 (Schmiechen & Carls 1999: 144). This enthusiasm to physically enclose the marketplace, I argue, is the materialisation of a particular urban normativity that depicts the market trader, and in extension the market place, as the embodiment of all the woes of the market.

Istanbul's periodic markets

The history of Istanbul – for a long time the Byzantine and later Ottoman capital – initially followed the same path as the other European cities, and a nineteenth century traveller to Istanbul would be overwhelmed by the variety of products and traders that he encountered in the Fish Market on the river banks as he is on his way to the Grand Bazaar (De Amicis 1878: 71-72). Indeed, Istanbul was fed through numerous specialised markets, as well as various periodic markets – 'pazar' in Turkish, from the Persian رازاب ('bazaar') – that popped up in different locations in the city on different days, such as the Wednesday Market in the Fatih neighbourhood and the Thursday Market in the Galata neighbourhood (Ünlü-Yücesoy 2013). Today, there are more than 350 of these type of marketplaces a week in Istanbul.

When Turkey became a republic in 1923, attention of the national government shifted to Ankara, the new capital city, and Istanbul was 'forgotten.' As the city shrunk, so did its markets, although their structure was largely left untouched. After the second world war, Istanbul started to recover and, for the first time since the end of the Ottoman era, the city's population increased again. Industry was developing along the Golden Horn, which attracted low skilled workers from all over Turkey. Building a strong, economically robust city was considered crucial for the development of Turkey, even if the government could not cope with the consequences of this rapid growth. Indeed, in order to 'accommodate' the massive influx of labourers from Anatolia, the authorities conveyed the responsibilities for housing, infrastructure, education and, indeed, food provision, to the incoming migrants, who were expected to take care for themselves. Istanbul, in this period, embraced an urban development approach that can be characterised as 'planned informality': due to a lack of means to satisfy the new demands, the authorities turned a blind eye towards illegal improvisations and settlements. This resulted in the creation of vast 'gecekondu' neighbourhoods – literally 'built overnight,' a term that refers to makeshift houses that were constructed informally on unclaimed or government owned land around the city – at the city's fringes and, at the same time, the massive squatting of abandoned houses in the historical neighbourhoods of the city, especially in the Borough of Beyoğlu, the centre of non-Muslim Istanbul before the proclamation of the republic (see also Aksoy 2009). In parallel to the 'planned informality' that was visible in the provision of housing in Istanbul, the city also got well perfused with periodic markets, which proved quick to adapt to the new demand of the new residents.

Public alleys

Istanbul's markets thus differ from their European counterparts, especially with regard to their immutability. Whereas markets in London – but also in countries such as Spain and Italy – are housed in market halls or other covered structures, the periodic

markets in Istanbul wander around in the city, popping up in one neighbourhood in one day, only to disappear and land in another neighbourhood another day.

Both in terms of their temporality, as well as their spatiality, Istanbul's markets are very flexible. They need to adapt to different situations each day, as they move through the city. Their physical structure, therefore, also has to be very light. Traders generally rent only benches from the municipality, and they have to provide the rest of the market structure themselves. This need for flexibility and adaptability renders Istanbul's markets their particular shape.

Periodic markets in Istanbul are made with only three basic components: poles, ropes, and tarps. With these three elements, traders are able to transform open space, such as streets, and alleys, into large, covered marketplaces. With the ropes, tarps are connected to buildings, trees, or other objects, and additional height and structure is provided by the metal poles that are put in place by not much more than ropes that fixate them in various directions. By physically hooking into the fabric of the city, large continuous canopies are erected under which traders and shoppers are protected from the elements. These canopies are lightweight, yet comprehensive structures that protect against the direct sunshine, rain and snow, but let sunlight through to illuminate the resulting market. What might look like a fragile construction to an outsider, and perhaps even a dangerous one as the wind occasionally gets under the tarps and lifts the metal poles meters into the air, is seen as indestructible by the traders, because it is precisely the flexibility of the market structure that allows it to endure in all conditions.

Indeed, the market structure is not only strong and solid enough to provide for an ideal shared, and safe, canopy for the market, but it is also fast and flexible enough to accommodate all kinds of urban situations and to adapt to changing environments. The Wednesday Market in Fatih, for example, occupies multiple blocks in the neighbourhood and turns the otherwise open streets into a lively shopping experience on every Wednesday. On Thursday mornings, then, nothing reminds of the crowds that were there the day before. Characteristic of periodic markets in

Istanbul is their firm and complete structure on market days, and their complete absence on nonmarket days.



[Figure 1: A shared public plaza emerges on Thursdays in Sanayi, Kağıthane. All images made by the author, Istanbul, 2012.]



[Figure 2: On Sundays, the structure of the market in Tarlabaşı, Beyoğlu, adapts to the environment.]

This ephemeral quality of markets in Istanbul ensures that they never fully claim the spaces they occupy. Şanal and Şanal rightfully note that periodic markets rarely use public spaces that are normally associated with markets, such as central squares. Rather, the periodic markets in Istanbul take place on what Şanal and Şanal refer to as ‘open space’ (Şanal & Şanal 2008: 301), spaces that are, although physically accessible, underused as spaces of interaction because in many cases, motorised traffic that uses the space as a throughway dominates. Indeed, the markets, by creating these ‘public alleys’, turn ‘open space’ into real public space, where people not only have the possibility to interact with others, but actually do so (Hajer & Reijndorp 2001; Watson 2009; Anderson 2011). As Şanal and Şanal conclude:

the importance of the street markets endurance as a common urban archetype in the fabric of Istanbul lies in its intensification of existing open-space resources, its impromptu collaborative structures, and the rhythmic, yet ephemeral, animation of urban neighbourhood’s public space (Şanal & Şanal 2008: 301-302).

Or, as Tsuruta puts it, Istanbul’s periodic markets ‘create a spatial change with their presence’ (Tsuruta 2008: 297). She continues:

Since cars can’t enter the streets on days when the markets are set up, a natural pedestrian area forms. In this pedestrian area vendors and buyers can directly communicate face to face and a street which is calm for six days can suddenly come to life for a day. For that day only, below these awnings, the voices of the sellers and the generally female customers mix and a cheerful crowd brings life to the neighbourhood (Tsuruta 2008: 298).

By turning streets into ‘public alleys,’ markets in Istanbul create gateways, or routes, into neighbourhoods that might otherwise not be as accessible. The market in Tarlabaşı, in Beyoğlu, is a good example of this. Just a few blocks down the road from the famous Taksim square – one of the main touristic sites in Istanbul and the heart of

the city's nightlife and entertainment – Tarlabası's grandeur as a classy Greek and Armenian neighbourhood changed dramatically when the inhabitants of the houses had to leave the neighbourhood and the country after the proclamation of the republic, and when the four-lane Tarlabası Boulevard definitely cut the neighbourhood off from the popular and gentrifying Beyoğlu. Immigrants – initially Kurds, but increasingly also Africans – started to occupy the empty houses, and the city's outcast, most notably the transvestites and prostitutes, found in Tarlabası their new home.

In the eyes of many – both residents as well as city officials – Tarlabası is now a ghetto. Its fame as a criminal area rose steadily over the last decades, and a firm image of Tarlabası as a no-go area, where you always risk being attacked with a knife for your pocket money – could take roots among Istanbulites (in particular those who do not live, or know anyone who lives, in Tarlabası). Because of this image, the location close to Taksim, and the aesthetic potential of the neighbourhood once it is cleared from its current inhabitants, the Borough of Beyoğlu has commenced a controversial urban transformation project that aims to turn Tarlabası into a touristic and high end part of the city (Kuyucu & Ünsal 2010; Aksoy 2012).

Meanwhile, every Sunday, market traders transform a few blocks in Tarlabası into a lively market where everyone who would not normally go to Tarlabası feels welcome to go. Literally, the market opens up the neighbourhood to the rest of the city by providing a safe and familiar environment. Ada, a student in Istanbul, explains that she would never go to Tarlabası under normal circumstances. But under the white canopy of the market, the perceived dangers of Tarlabası are temporarily bracketed off, and shoulder-to-shoulder with transvestites and African immigrants, Istanbulites stroll the streets of Tarlabası. In the market, people like Ada, and with her many more, engage in what Anderson (2011) has called 'folk ethnography,' that is, the practice of collecting, sharing, testing, and adapting a myriad of different stories that pave the way for tolerant, inclusive cities.

What the case of Tarlabası demonstrates in a very explicit way, is how the transformative and ephemeral quality of markets in Istanbul creates dynamic routes in

the city that cut through perceived barriers of neighbourhoods and that open up gateways and destinations into unknown parts of the city. By following these routes – every Sunday in Tarlabaşı, but also every Wednesday in Fatih and every Thursday in Kağıthane, for example – people follow the market traders in their movements through the city.

Being a market trader

For most of the traders in the periodic markets in Istanbul, it is not so much the product that they are trading that defines their occupation, but the fact that they are trading itself. Indeed, most market traders are not potato traders or lemon traders, but ‘market’ traders. ‘Being a market trader’ refers to the qualities and experiences that are needed to not only buy and sell products in the market, but more importantly, to be able to physically construct the market. Being a market trader means that you know how to turn ropes, poles and tarps into a shared canopy. It means that you know how to spot suitable places to connect your rope, how to climb up onto buildings and trees and to make the correct knots, how to estimate the strength of the winds that get under the tarps, and the locations of the poles within the streets. These qualities are normally acquired over time, by practicing with other family member who teach the craft of being a market trader.

Davut, a young man who, like his companion Mahmut did not finish school, has learnt how to be a market trader from a young age, as he helped out his father selling carrots, tomatoes and other vegetables in the market. Every Thursday, he and his partners arrive in Sanayi Mahallesi and transform the street into a shared canopy by skillfully and quickly raising interconnected tarps that are fixed to elements in the street that might be difficult to spot for the general public, but are overtly visible to Davut. It is with great joy that, one Friday morning in the market in Sanayi, Davut and his friends watch how a young boy who helps them out in order to become a market trader himself, struggles to reach the hook above the window and to tie up the rope firmly so that it will hold the tarp on the other end of the rope. He has not yet acquired

the skills and the way of seeing that enable market traders to turn open space into shared spaces.



[Figure 3: In the market in Sanayi, Kağıthane, a young boy learns how to use the surroundings for creating the market.]



[Figure 4: Estimating the position of the poles in relation to the tarps is a quality that is learned over time.]

New Istanbul

After years of neglect by the central authorities in Ankara, a new era began for Istanbul in the late twentieth century which is characterised by a rise of the city's status both internally in Turkey as well as internationally. In the new Istanbul, informal spaces are under threat. The Justice and Development Party (AKP), now single-handedly ruling Istanbul both from within the city and from Ankara, has abandoned its populist approach that justified the principle of planned informality, and embarked on a neo-liberal road of city branding, tourism, and global investment (Tokatli & Eldener 2002: 217). But in order to open up the country, and especially Istanbul, to the world, the city – or so it goes – has to be formalised, its spaces have to be rationalised and made calculable, and it has to get rid of all those elements of the period of planned informality that are still visible everywhere, in particular the informal housing and the uncontrolled sprawl of the markets. Indeed, as Keyder remarks, land in new Istanbul has become a commodity – and one that turned out to be a favoured object of speculation (Keyder 2009: 45). By now, the whole of Istanbul is transformed into a large scale urban renewal project, where the focus is on the improvement of the physical qualities of the neighbourhoods and the beautification of the city, while the people who actually used to live in those redevelopment areas are often overlooked.

Investment in the built environment of the city is not a new phenomenon within neo-liberal economies, yet, as Harvey has shown, it is also not without its contradictions. Local and national politicians in Istanbul, aware of the inherent problematic nature of such an economic growth, try to avert a looming crisis of over-accumulation by facilitating what Harvey has called a 'spatial fix' (Saunders 1986: 264; Harvey 2001: 24). It is in this sense that we should understand the clearing of Istanbul of its numerous markets to make way for new real estate development projects. Indeed, faced with unparalleled growth that was made possible only by accepting informal developments earlier, the city now seeks to 'heal' its wounds of informality, and has opted for an entrepreneurial approach towards urbanism, characterised indeed by a preference for

public-private partnerships that invest in places, or ‘placemaking,’ in a speculative manner (Harvey 1989: 7; 2012: 100; Kuyucu & Ünsal 2010: 1496). This ‘governance by spectacle,’ as Harvey puts it (Harvey 2006: 28), is of course not unique to Istanbul: other capitalist cities, such as Amsterdam or London, have in fact preceded it – the latter being almost a textbook example of urban entrepreneurialism.

A similar fate has fallen upon Istanbul’s markets, as land has simply become too valuable to be left to market traders. Apart from their function as tourist attractions that simulate Ancient Times, the specialised markets such as the Fish Market in Eminönü and the Grand Bazaar have lost their social value as marketplaces. As enduring and, in the eyes of some city officials, embarrassing signs of a past informality, several Boroughs in Istanbul are actively relocating, downsizing, or closing their markets and replacing them with new, privately owned, shopping malls. As Mörtenböck and Mooshammer put it, these periodic markets now ‘give way to the political pressure to create a new architectural order, which is supposed to restore some form of urban normativity’ (2008: 152). As Öz and Eder argue: ‘the relocation represents a new redistricting of urban space through income and class boundaries creating in effect a divided or dual city’ (Öz & Eder 2012: 306).

Contrary to the informality that the government perceives in the street markets, the new shopping malls are ‘fixed’ in the triple sense of the word: they are the result of government driven efforts to ‘repair’ the signs of informality in the city, they are ‘solutions’ to the contradictory nature of capitalist overinvestment, but they are also ‘stable and secure’ spaces – the famous Kanyon shopping centre, for example, deploys security guards at its entrances (which, notably, are directly connected to the new metro network in the city) to provide a ‘safe’ shopping experience where you can even find an ‘authentic’ farmers’ market simulacrum.

Out of the twenty markets in Istanbul’s Kağıthane district, ten are currently listed as problematic because they occupy inappropriate space, such as narrow alleys. Six of these market have already been moved out to designated, closed off sites, and the remaining four will soon be transferred as well, according to vice Borough President

Mustafa Oğuz Toktekin (Toktekin 2012). In anticipation to the relocation of the markets, the municipality of Kağıthane tries to downsize the existing markets by discouraging new traders to begin and by no longer issuing new licences to aspiring traders. Step by step, thus, the Borough will be stripped of its street markets.

On the other side of the Bosphorus, Kadıköy Borough President Selami Öztürk similarly deploys a narrative of otiose and nuisance, when he explains how markets have lost their function as food suppliers to the city and remain solely as spaces of dirt and noise. The Borough welcomes residents who sue the Borough over ambulances that cannot pass through as a pretext to close the markets (Öztürk 2012).

Conclusion

The ephemeral character of Istanbul's periodic markets – they pop up in different parts of the city on different days – is, this paper has argued, not just a coincidence that happens to be convenient for shoppers. Rather, it is their materiality that enables them to transform open space into public space, and thereby open up otherwise inaccessible spaces of the city to urban residents. Creating these 'public alleys,' this paper has furthermore argued, is the main quality and defining characteristic of a market trader: they learn the art of making – out of nothing more than tarps, ropes and metal poles – resilient yet flexible structures from father to son.

Closing down Istanbul's markets therefore not only deprives Istanbul of its present markets, but also the expertise that market traders have that enables them to construct these markets. As a consequence, the city also loses its future markets, and hence some of its most important public spaces. It is therefore necessary that the marketplace, and the market trader in particular, reclaim their space in the city.

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