

(Re)Production of Urban Space through Cultural Events: Legacy of the Bergama Festival

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Abstract

This study explores how planned events temporarily reshape public spaces while permanently transforming their form, function, and meaning. Focusing on the Bergama Festival, it examines the shift from a region-wide celebration across the Bakırçay Basin to a city-centred event held in modern and historical public spaces. The research primarily relies on archival analysis of past events and the spatial mapping of these findings to trace the transformation of public spaces. While the festival enhances cultural vitality and public engagement, its increasing commercialisation and spatial compression risk marginalizing residents and diminishing inclusivity. By analysing the socio-spatial dynamics of event spaces, the study contributes to debates on public space, cultural heritage, and urban equity, offering insights for planners and policymakers to create more inclusive and resilient urban environments.

1. Cultural Events as Urban Agents: Rethinking Festivals in the Public Space

Cultural events, particularly festivals, have increasingly come to be understood as significant urban agents that contribute to the social, spatial, and symbolic reproduction of public space. Drawing on Habermas's (1989) concept of the public sphere, planned cultural events can be seen as arenas where individuals express opinions, engage in dialogue, and contribute to the construction of public discourse and communal life. However, the extent to which these events strengthen the public sphere depends on their underlying intentions whether they cultivate civic engagement or serve primarily commercial or entertainment-driven goals.

From a sociological perspective, Castells (2000) identifies public spaces as contested terrains where collective identities are formed and negotiated. In this context, festivals and other cultural events provide crucial platforms for these expressions. Similarly, Bourdieu (1990) emphasizes that the organization and experience of planned events reflect cultural practices and underlying power relations, revealing how spatial transformations are shaped by, and in turn shape, social dynamics.

The performative aspect of public events is further illuminated by Goffman's (1959) concept of the "presentation of self," which highlights how individuals use events to navigate and negotiate public identities. Massey's (1991) work on the "global sense of place" complements this view by challenging static definitions of place, instead emphasizing the interplay of global processes, local dynamics, and personal experiences in shaping public space. From this perspective, events are not merely activities situated in space but symbolic expressions that actively transform it (Sennett, 2017).

Lefebvre's (1991) spatial triad, conceived, lived, and perceived space, provides a critical theoretical framework for understanding the multifaceted role of events in urban life. Within this framework, events are understood as "celebrated moments of time and space" that shape and mediate the relationship between society and the urban realm (Elden, 2004). Festivals thus serve as temporal articulations of the spatial dialectic, making visible both the physical and symbolic layers of public life.

In recent decades, there has been a growing shift from enclosed venues to open public spaces as preferred locations for cultural events. Richards and Wilson (2004) argue that the private sector increasingly uses public space as a stage for promoting events, while local governments utilize festivals as tools to "stage the city" in global inter-urban competition (Colomb, 2012). Smith (2016), however, pushes this discourse further by advocating for event planning that reflects the dynamics of the city and its inhabitants a transformation from the notion of "city as stage" to "city as staged."

Jakob's definition of a planned event as the "deliberate organization of an elevated emotional and aesthetic experience" underscores the aesthetic and affective dimensions of public events. Stevens (2007) views such events as choreographed moments that enrich the streetscape, while Montgomery's (1998) Form-Activity-Meaning (FAM) model provides a concrete framework for assessing their impact. According to this model, festivals and similar events activate public space through diverse uses, enhance social interaction, and create meaningful, memorable experiences. However, the commercialization or imposition of such events can alienate

users and diminish the inclusiveness and democratic potential of public space.

Urban thinkers such as Jane Jacobs and Jan Gehl offer valuable insights into how cultural events can align with principles of vibrant and inclusive public space. Jacobs advocates for diverse, people-oriented spaces where social life can flourish. Within this framework, events such as street festivals and community markets can transform underutilized areas into active hubs of social life, exemplifying Jacobs' notion of "eyes on the street." Gehl's distinction between necessary, optional, and social activities similarly helps articulate how planned events can enrich public life by intersecting with different types of spatial engagement.

Crucially, the management and governance of public space are vital in supporting or undermining the success of cultural events. Carmona (2010) emphasizes the importance of designing accessible, active, and socially engaging spaces. Effective event planning must not only address physical design but also ensure that public spaces remain open, inclusive, and meaningful in both everyday use and during special occasions.

Finally, Smith (2016) categorizes the transformative impacts of festivals into three spatial dimensions. First, formal and monumental public squares can be animated and democratized through participatory cultural events. Second, parks often subject to restrictive control can be temporarily reactivated as open, communal spaces. Third, by closing streets to vehicular traffic, festivals reclaim urban space from privatization and consumerism, fostering communal experiences and spatial justice.

Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that cultural events when thoughtfully conceived and inclusively implemented are not merely spectacles but critical instruments in the social production and transformation of public space. Through their temporal nature and symbolic richness, they hold the potential to sustain urban vitality, foster civic identity, and reinforce the democratic life of cities.

2.Layers of Heritage and Change: Tracing the Historical Trajectory of the Bergama Festival

The Bergama Kermesi, Turkey's one of the first local festival held continuously for 89 years and initiated under Atatürk's leadership with the aim of promoting local values, has been selected as the field site for this study due to its diverse and multi-dimensional character. The festival comprises a variety of events, including cultural and artistic performances as well as sports activities, taking place across the city's public open spaces over the course of a week. The kermes supports Bergama's international visibility and tourism, fosters the marketing of local products and economic revitalization, and facilitates encounters between villagers and townspeople, locals and tourists, and citizens and artists

With its rich historical, cultural, and natural assets, Bergama was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 2014 under the title "Pergamon and its Multi-Layered Cultural Landscape." In addition to its tangible heritage, comprising successive layers from the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman periods, Bergama's intangible cultural heritage has also been formally recognized and registered in line with UNESCO's principles. A prominent example is the Bergama Festival (Bergama Kermesi), held annually since 1937 in response to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's directive: "An opportunity should be provided to promote this exceptional corner of our country through a fair or festival for its people.". As one of the oldest festivals in Turkey, the Bergama Festival now in its 89th edition, represents a vital expression of the city's living heritage.

Today, the term kermes, used to describe this week-long local festival, refers, according to the Turkish Language Association (TDK), not only to festivities, holidays, and fairs, but also to collective events organized for the public good, such as communal efforts and fundraising events. In its first 15 years, the Bergama Kermesi was organized entirely by civic initiative, specifically by the "Bergama'yı Sevenler Derneği" Later on, the responsibility for organization and funding was assumed by the Bergama Municipality, with contributions from the public, the district governorate, and the Bergama Foundation for Culture and Arts (BERKSAV) (Eriş, 2011).

The poster archive offers a valuable clue for understanding the shifting approach to how the Bergama Festival has been presented over time (see Figure 1). In its early years, graphic designs prominently featured traditional folk dances and the city's rich historical heritage. However, these representations gradually faded into the background. Notably, following the rise of neoliberal influences in the post-1980s period, the poster for the 54th festival included the logo of a global beverage company that sponsored the event, a clear indication of commercialization. In the

posters from the 2010s onward, elements of Bergama's local identity are largely absent. Instead, the focus shifts to promotional images of performing artists scheduled to give concerts during the festival. This transformation in the visual language of the posters alone reveals that the festival, originally intended to highlight local values and represent the place, has increasingly been compelled to forfeit its authenticity in the face of global dynamics, evolving into an event more focused on chasing popularity than celebrating local heritage.



Figure 1: Posters of the Bergama Festival from 1938 to 2024

This situation demonstrates that the event has gradually shed its original character of representing, promoting, and reproducing the space. Instead, it has assumed a new role that contributes to the consumption of space. Rather than fostering new cultural expressions or sharing what is unique to Bergama, the festival increasingly mirrors mainstream popular culture. In doing so, it drifts away from its initial function as a platform for the articulation of local identity, becoming a stage where imitation replaces authenticity and commodification overshadows cultural rootedness.

Cultural policies in Turkey have undergone significant transformations since the early Republican period. With the establishment of community centres “Halkevi” in 1932, cultural activities such as theatre, music, literature, and folk dance were institutionalized, positioning “Halkevi” as central venues for local festivals and artistic expression. The transition to a multi-party-political system in 1950 led to a partial decentralization of cultural initiatives, encouraging private sector involvement. In 1958, the closure of Halkevleri marked a turning point, as municipalities and private actors took over the organization of public cultural events. During the 1960s and 1970s, rapid urbanization and cultural pluralism saw the diversification of events in major cities, while popular culture flourished in informal settlements.

The 1980 military coup brought increased censorship and repression in the arts. Between 1983 and 2000, neoliberal policies contributed to the commercialization of cultural events, with international festivals emerging in big cities. The 1990s witnessed the rise of global cultural forms in Turkey, including music festivals, independent theatres, and biennials. In the 2000s, metropolitan municipalities like Istanbul and Ankara began to exert greater influence over cultural policy. By the 2010s, cultural events held in public spaces were increasingly shaped by security, profit-driven motives, and urban transformation agendas. The 2013 Gezi Park protests underscored the central role of public space in cultural production, sparking alternative forms of cultural expression. However, growing concerns include the homogenization of event programming and venues, the suppression of spatial diversity, overcapacity, and cultural degradation.

The Bergama Festival, with its nearly nine-decade history, stands as a unique cultural formation that encapsulates the evolving dynamics of Turkey's cultural policies, urban transformations, and local identity politics. Initially conceived as a celebration of Bergama's rich cultural heritage and a civic act of local representation, the festival once offered a platform for promoting both tangible and intangible assets of the city. However, as revealed through the changing actors, aesthetics, and spatial strategies of the event, the Bergama Festival has undergone a significant transformation from a place-based, community-oriented expression of heritage to a commodified spectacle shaped by neoliberal imperatives. While it continues to attract attention as a cultural attraction,

the shift toward a popularity-driven and commercially influenced format undermines its potential to act as a generator of cultural continuity and urban meaning. This transformation signals not only a detachment from the festival's founding ethos but also a broader struggle for authenticity, inclusivity, and cultural memory in the face of global and local pressures. Understanding this trajectory is vital not only for reclaiming the cultural integrity of the Bergama Festival but also for informing more equitable and place-sensitive cultural policy frameworks that prioritize collective memory, local participation, and spatial justice.

3. Shrinking the Festive Geography: From the Bakırçay Basin to the City Core

Located in the northern part of İzmir Province, Bergama has long held a central role as a cultural and commercial hub in Western Anatolia (see Figure 2). As the modern inheritor of ancient Pergamon, the town's unique archaeological wealth, layered historical fabric, and diverse natural landscapes have positioned it as a key tourism destination within the region. This potential has been further amplified since Bergama's inscription on the UNESCO World Heritage List, which has brought greater national and international recognition. In this context, the Bergama Festival (Bergama Kermesi), held annually since 1937, plays a critical role in both the promotion of the city's tangible and intangible cultural heritage and the active reproduction of urban life. Serving as a bridge between past and present, the festival not only invites residents and visitors to engage with the city's legacy but also transforms Bergama into a space of collective celebration and memory.

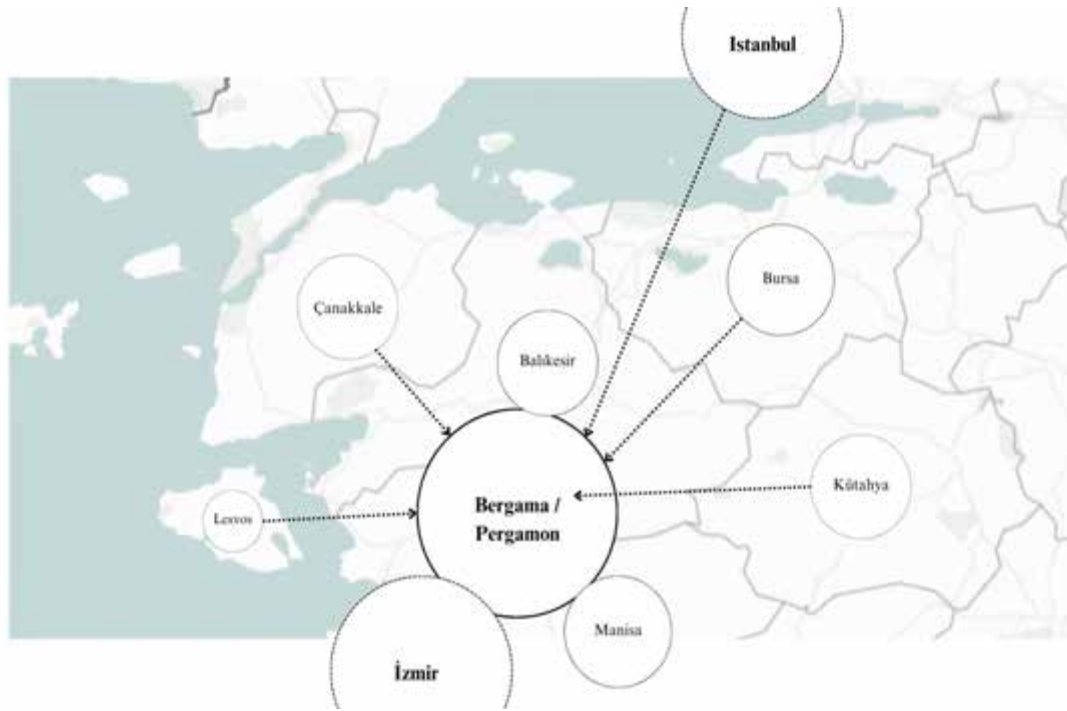


Figure 2: Bergama's regional position with surrounding settlements

In its foundational years, the festival was envisioned as an event that connected the urban and rural, drawing on the full geography of the Bakırçay Basin, from the coastal settlements of Çandarlı and Dikili to the forested heights of the Kozak Plateau and the agricultural plains of Göçbeyli and Kınık (see Figure 3). Through this expansive geography, the festival embraced a diverse array of local identities and practices. Seaside festivities along the Aegean coast, sports competitions in the forests, and folkloric performances, particularly the traditional "Bengi" dances of the plain villages collectively reflected the rich and pluralistic cultural identity of the wider basin. In this sense, the festival functioned as a powerful agent of territorial representation, producing a spatial narrative that connected nature, history, and cultural expression across multiple settlements.

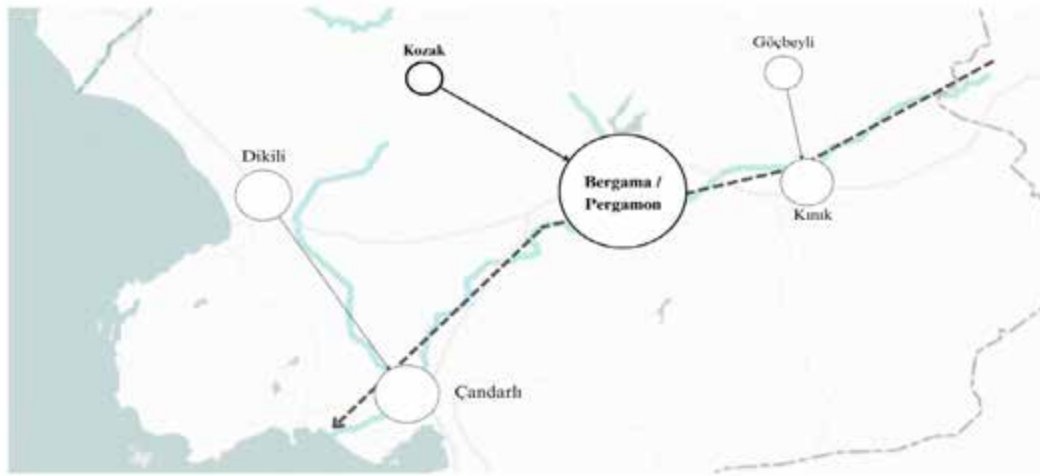


Figure 3: The geography of the festival spread in the Bakırçay Basin

However, over time, structural shifts in administrative boundaries and governance frameworks have significantly reshaped this geography. With the transition of Bergama into a district of the İzmir Metropolitan Municipality and the redefinition of local government jurisdictions, the festival's spatial scope has gradually narrowed. Practical considerations such as transportation, security, visibility, and institutional control have contributed to the centralization of festival activities within the historic core of the city. As a result, key venues now include symbolic urban spaces such as Cumhuriyet Square, Atatürk Boulevard, and historical sites like the Red Basilica, Asklepion, and the Arasta district. While these locations lend prestige and cultural depth to the event, they also signal a marked shift: from a basin-wide, inclusive celebration of shared rural-urban identity to a centralized, curated spectacle within the city's core.

The only remaining trace of the festival's once expansive geography lies in the final-day celebrations held in the Kozak Plateau, a symbolic gesture toward its rural roots. Yet even this tradition faces the risk of becoming a ritualized performance rather than a genuine extension of the festival's original ethos.

The contraction of the festival's geography mirrors broader trends in urban governance, cultural commodification, and spatial politics. What was once a decentralized celebration fostering territorial belonging and collective identity across the Bakırçay Basin has been reconfigured into a more controlled, urban-centred event. While this shift may offer advantages in terms of visibility and logistical management, it raises critical questions about authenticity, inclusivity, and the politics of cultural representation. As public events become increasingly embedded in strategies of city branding and tourism promotion, there is a growing need to revisit the spatial logic of festivals like the Bergama Kermesi, not merely as performances in space, but as active instruments in the production of space, identity, and memory.

4.The Power of Bergama Festival to (Re)produce Urban Space

Public festivals have long been recognized as influential tools in shaping the spatial, social, and symbolic dimensions of cities. In this context, the Bergama Festival (Bergama Kermesi) offers a compelling case for understanding how recurring cultural events can participate in the (re)production of urban space. Since its inception in 1937, the festival has not only functioned as a celebratory ritual rooted in local heritage but has also played an active role in redefining the spatial narratives and practices within the city. Through its varied programming, from parades and performances to exhibitions and street activities, the festival temporarily transforms Bergama's urban fabric, reactivating public spaces, reassigning symbolic meanings to historical sites, and creating new rhythms of urban life. More than a reflection of cultural identity, the Bergama Festival becomes an agent in the production of space, mobilizing collective memory, political narratives, and everyday encounters.

Although the festival has become largely confined to the city centre, limited to its historical and modern public spaces, it retains significant power to (re)produce urban space. This potential is most evident in the spatial

diversity of event venues, which collectively form a unique urban event landscape. The festival activates a wide range of spatial typologies, including historical sites, parks, squares, streets, public buildings, and natural areas (see Figure 4). While central squares serve as stages for concerts and large public gatherings, parades and ceremonial processions animate the main boulevard, creating temporary flows of movement and spectatorship. Elevated parks located on the city's dominant hills provide scenic vantage points, transforming into collective viewing platforms that extend the experiential field of the events. At the same time, Bergama's layered historical environment, comprising archaeological landmarks and cultural heritage sites, offers an evocative backdrop, enriching the festival's spatial atmosphere and reinforcing the symbolic connection between past and present. Thus, the festival reclaims, reconfigures, and reinvests meaning into these spaces, temporarily reshaping the city's spatial rhythms and enhancing its public life.

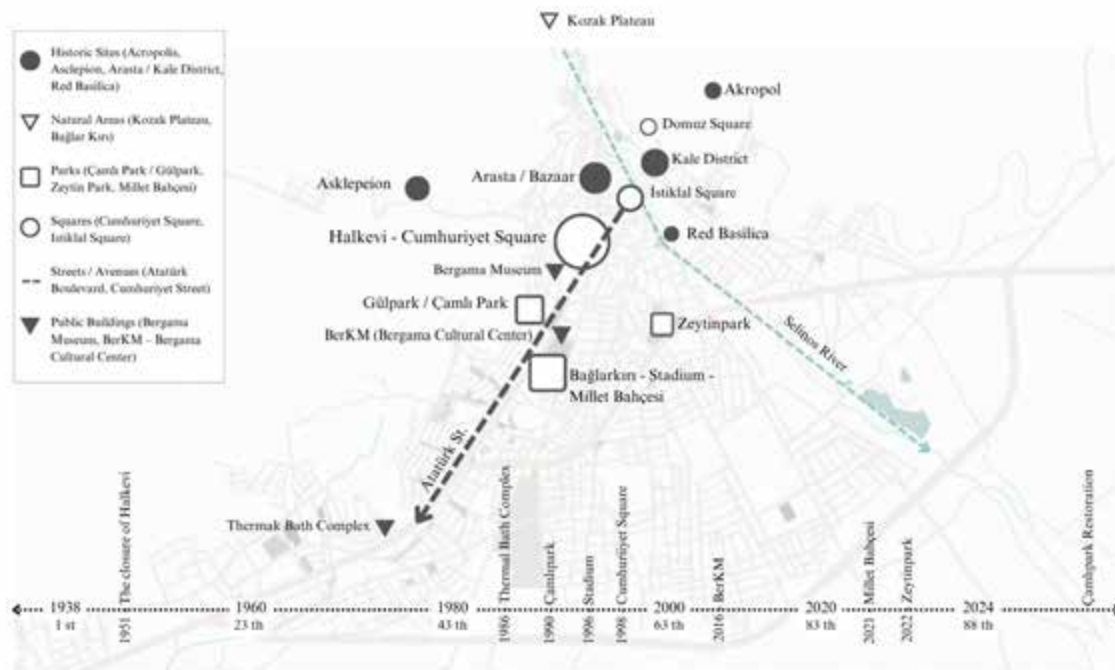


Figure 4: Distribution of the Bergama Festival across different urban space typologies

This spatial reconfiguration is most clearly embodied in Cumhuriyet Square, which has become the epicentre of the festival's urban imprint. Originally the garden of the Halkevi (Community House), the square has undergone multiple transformations aligned with broader political and cultural shifts in Turkey. While its earliest traces go back to the early Republican period, shaped by ideals of Westernisation and civic identity, the space has been continuously redefined through successive interventions. The most decisive transformation took place in 1998, when celebrated architect Cengiz Bektaş redesigned the square with a vision centred on spatial experience and collective memory, explicitly to accommodate festival activities. Since then, Cumhuriyet Square has functioned as the primary venue for major performances, including folk-dance shows, opening ceremonies, award distributions, and especially evening concerts that draw large crowds. During the most recent edition of the festival (2-8 September 2024), this site hosted the highest concentration of events, temporarily reshaping both the functional logic and symbolic meaning of the space.

In addition to the square, various public spaces, such as Atatürk Street, Arasta, and Çamlı Park, are temporarily defunctionalized during the festival, as their everyday uses are suspended in favour of programmed activities. The transformation also extends to historically and culturally significant sites such as the Akropolis, Asklepeion, Red Basilica (Kızıl Avlu), and the ancient theatre, whose accessibility is reconfigured to allow large-scale gatherings, performances, and public engagement. While this strategy increases the visibility of Bergama's cultural assets and expands the festival's experiential landscape, it also risks overexposure and commodification. Particularly since the 2000s, neoliberal influences have prompted a gradual shift in festival content, increasingly favouring

popular cultural acts to attract broader and often external audiences. This trend has amplified the appeal of the festival but has simultaneously narrowed its connection to local cultural practices and community identities. As a result, the festival becomes more consumption-oriented, and urban spaces, particularly central ones, are pushed to accommodate excessive demands, which may displace everyday users, diminish local belonging, and alienate long-term residents from their own city spaces.

In recent years, a growing institutional fragmentation has begun to constrain the symbolic impact and spatial potential of the Bergama Festival. While the event itself is organized and embraced by the local municipality, many of the city's most significant historical sites such as the Asklepeion and the Acropolis are managed by the central government through the Ministry of Culture. This divide has led to a disconnection between the festival and these emblematic locations, reducing the festival's ability to activate historically and spatially meaningful venues. This is particularly striking given that both the Asklepeion and the Acropolis include amphitheatres, making them naturally suited for performances and collective gatherings.

In addition to this institutional tension, evolving spatial interventions in the city have also influenced the festival's capacity to reproduce urban space. A key example is the area known as Bağlarkırı, which in the early years of the festival served as a major venue and host site. Over time, Bağlarkırı was transformed first into a stadium and later into a "Millet Bahçesi", thereby losing its function as a festive space. This shift illustrates how urban development decisions can sever historical continuities in public event geographies. Nevertheless, the city has also seen the emergence of new public venues that are being integrated into the festival landscape, such as Zeytinpark and the Bergama Cultural Centre (BerkM). These additions suggest that while certain traditional spaces are lost or repurposed, new possibilities for cultural expression and spatial activation are still being created. This tension between spatial loss and renewal encapsulates the broader challenge of sustaining the festival's urban role in a rapidly changing cultural and political environment.

Public space emerges as a dual entity within this context. On the one hand, festivals enliven and democratize urban environments, offering opportunities for collective memory, cultural performance, and temporal reappropriation. On the other, they intensify spatial pressure, potentially marginalizing everyday users and transforming public domains into semi-exclusive eventscape. The Bergama Festival thus represents both an opportunity and a challenge in terms of urban policy: it revitalizes and redefines space yet simultaneously contributes to spatial inequalities. This study contributes to broader debates on urban space and cultural event policy by critically examining the mechanisms through which festivals shape the physical and symbolic dimensions of cities. By highlighting the spatial consequences of shifting festival geographies, it offers insights for planners and policymakers seeking to balance visibility, accessibility, and inclusivity in the use of public space, especially in heritage-rich, yet socioeconomically fragile, urban settings like Bergama.

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