

An urban heritage that transform to survive: the case of Gençlik Parkı

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Urban parks are considered as very dynamic elements that both reflect socio economic transformations and contribute to shape those social and economic conditions. The current study focuses on the case of Gençlik Parkı (Youth Park) in Ankara, Turkey to examine how the park has transformed with respect to changing social and economic conditions. Occurred transformations have been analysed in four periods (1900-1950: early republican period, 1950-1980: rural migrations and urban change, 1980-2000: decline of the park, 2000-present: rebirth within Islamic neoliberalism). Each period is analysed on the basis of its social and economic character, cultural specificities and spatial dimension with particular emphasis on Gençlik Parkı.

The first period covers the establishment of the Republic of Turkey and its spatial implications. The city of Ankara selected as the capital of the republic and considered as the concretisation ground of the early republican ideals. The city has been planned according to aesthetical and functional standards as urban planning has been considered as a tool to realise a number of social and cultural policies. Being part of the process Gençlik Parkı appeared as an urban element that both reflect the social and economic aims of the early republic and as a tool to intervene into social and economic processes to form modern and secular westernised society. In this period Gençlik Parkı has been highly utilised by the inhabitants of Ankara as a social, cultural and sport centre.

In the second period considered within this research, Turkey experienced huge rural to urban migration flows due to modernisation in agriculture. Ankara, being the second largest city in the country affected from these flows more than other smaller cities. On the side of Gençlik Parkı, the user profile of the park changed to a

considerable degree. Government officers, republican elites and their families have been replaced with rural new comers and members of the newly growing commercial classes. As a result of these changes, the social and cultural emphasis on Gençlik Parkı functions have been replaced with consumption oriented functions which emphasised the growth of kebab shops, restaurants and tea gardens.

Following the social turmoil and economic crisis of late 1970s Gençlik Parkı entered into a period of physical degradation. In this third period the park became the struggle area of left and right wing political streams. The political tension not only distorted daily functioning of the park but also distanced ordinary users from the park. With the beginning of 1980s Turkey started to experience true character of the capitalist political economy through the implementation of neoliberal agenda. The new political economic situation caused changes in the leisure preferences of inhabitants as some could not find spare to for leisure while some others focused on consumption activities (later at shopping malls) as part of their idle times.

The fourth and final period considered within this research represents a rather peculiar moment in the world history as the ruling government (AKP- Justice and Development Party) started to reinterpret neoliberal policies with Islamic characteristics. In practice, what AKP has been doing was covering the negativities of the neoliberal policies with temporal solutions. The system was so successful that the party has been ruling the country and many cities in Turkey (including Ankara) for more than 13 years. In these years of Islamic neoliberalism Gençlik Parkı has been rediscovered as an economic entity and propaganda tool. On the one side, the park has been renovated and embellished with a renewal project and offered to the public as a commodity to be consumed. On the other side, Gençlik Parkı has been utilised as a marketing tool for AKP (active both at central and local level) and presented as a generous gift from the government. Although the park separated from its republican past both architecturally and functionally, the generosity of the AKP has highly appreciated by the users of the park who can only benefit from a number of identical tea gardens and kiosks and Ramadan festivities occurred once a year.

As a conclusion, the author wishes to discuss the relative social benefit of urban parks

- First, as a dynamic entities that that transform in the course of time according socio-economic changes
- Second as constant entities that only reflect their initial programs irrespective of changing socio-economic conditions.