

Participatory living heritage planning in practice: Lessons from Balıkçıköy, Istanbul

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Abstract

This study examines the participatory process of an ongoing conservation-oriented urban planning initiative in Balıkçıköy, a registered cultural heritage site in Maltepe Istanbul, through the conceptual lens of the living heritage approach. Drawing on in-depth interviews with local residents and planning professionals, it investigates three interrelated dimensions: the acknowledgment of local values, the translation of community knowledge into planning decisions, and the equity of representation across the process. Although a range of participatory tools was employed, the findings indicate that participation largely remained at a consultative level, with limited influence on strategic outcomes. While local values were documented, their integration was constrained by expert-driven frameworks. Rather than evaluating final outputs, the study focuses on participatory dynamics, arguing that meaningful heritage planning requires transparent dialogue, shared authority, and a sustained commitment to co-producing decisions with communities.

Key words: Heritage planning, community participation, knowledge integration, conservation planning, urban governance

1. Introduction: From material- and value- based conservation to the living heritage approach

After World War II, approaches to cultural heritage conservation became institutionalised, leading not only to technical advancements but also fundamentally transforming knowledge production, accuracy criteria, and decision-making authority. A brief analysis of cultural heritage conservation in a historical context suggests three distinct periods, first defined by Poullos, 2014: positivist-materialist period (1960-1980s), interpretivist-evaluative period (1990-2000s), and participatory-community-oriented period (post-2000s). Understanding these periods with their differences and shifts is important to describe the living heritage approach, which is the main topic of this study.

During the positivist-materialist period, conservation was framed as a scientific-technical field. The 1964 Venice Charter established this approach by emphasizing the documentary value of heritage and endorsing scientific methods as the sole valid basis for intervention. Knowledge was seen as measurable, objective, and universal. Authenticity was defined through material components, applying uniform criteria regardless of cultural or geographic context. Although UNESCO's concept of the "common heritage of mankind" (1972) and the "integrated conservation" approach of the 1975 Amsterdam Declaration expanded the focus from individual monuments to urban areas, the core paradigm remained unchanged (Muñoz Viñas, 2005). Material authenticity continued to dominate (Jokilehto, 1999), and decisions were led by experts. This approach was criticized for forcing cultural diversity into a uniform model.

By the 1990s, the limitations of the earlier one-dimensional approach had become evident. UNESCO's development of the concept of Outstanding Universal Value shifted the focus of conservation from purely physical attributes to the values embodied in heritage (Bortolotto, 2015). Beyond aesthetic and historical dimensions, social, economic, symbolic, and spiritual meanings began to be considered. A turning point came with the 1994 Nara Document on Authenticity, which emphasised that authenticity must be understood within its cultural context—marking a shift from a Eurocentric to a multicultural perspective. Similarly, the 1999 Burra Charter restructured the conservation process into the stages of understanding-deciding-intervening, centred on the notion of cultural significance.

During this period, knowledge production became more multidisciplinary, and stakeholder perspectives started

to be acknowledged. Yet, value assessments continued to be shaped primarily by expert opinion, and meaningful community participation remained limited. Smith (2006) critiqued this value-based approach through the concept of authorized heritage discourse, arguing that experts tend to prioritise certain values while marginalising others. This highlights how heritage definitions remained constrained within a narrow framework and how genuine public involvement was still largely absent.

The growing emphasis on locality, shaped by globalisation and post-colonial critiques (Poulios, 2014; Ndoro and Wijesuriya, 2015), challenged the expert-dominated conservation paradigm (Waterton and Smith, 2010). These critiques revealed that conventional conservation theory relies on hegemonic knowledge systems and often disregards local cultural contexts. In the emerging paradigm, valid knowledge derives not only from technical expertise but also from the real-life experiences and everyday practices of local communities (Wijesuriya et al., 2013).

As Harrison (2013) argues in his notion of dialogical heritage, the pluralistic nature of heritage values necessitates democratic conservation processes. Decision-making has thus evolved into a multi-actor practice involving experts, community members, managers, and users. This community-oriented paradigm positions local communities as key stakeholders in heritage conservation (Wijesuriya, 2015; Labadi and Gould, 2016) and views change as a sign of vitality rather than a threat (Poulios, 2014).

ICCROM's 2015 People-Centred Approaches document provides a structured framework for translating the emerging principles of living heritage into practical strategies (ICCROM, 2015). As dialogical, community-driven heritage practices gained prominence, the document offered concrete methodologies to support inclusive, locally grounded conservation efforts. By reframing conservation as a collaborative and continuous process of 'living together,' it foregrounds local agency, values, and capacities, and supports the shift toward participatory and pluralistic governance. In line with Healey's (1997) communicative planning theory, which emphasises inclusive dialogue and the co-construction of meaning in spatial governance, the document contributes tools to facilitate negotiation and mutual understanding among diverse heritage actors.

2. Making living heritage participatory: potentials and challenges

2.1. The importance of the community-oriented perspective brought by the concept of living heritage

The concept of living heritage, which enabled the transition to a community-oriented conservation paradigm, brought about a fundamental shift in perspective for conservation practice. The main contribution of this perspective is to change the ontological definition of heritage: Heritage is no longer a static 'object' to be preserved, but a dynamic 'process' that is constantly reproduced in the everyday life practices of communities (Wijesuriya, 2015). This ontological shift is driving fundamental changes in conservation practice. As Waterton and Smith (2010) emphasise, heritage is no longer understood as a collection of physical objects, but as the social practices and value systems constructed around them. The shift from passive beneficiary to active subject, as described by Jigyasu (2015), highlights how communities are now positioned as central actors in the conservation process.

The continuity-change balance, as conceptualised by Poulios (2014), provides the operational framework for the living heritage perspective. This approach redefines change not as a threat to heritage, but as a sign of its vitality. It asserts that decisions about what kinds of change are acceptable can only be made by the communities that sustain the heritage. In response to Smith's (2006) critique of authorized heritage discourse, this perspective centres the value systems, priorities, and meaning-making practices of communities within conservation processes. Heritage is thus no longer viewed as static objects to be preserved and displayed, but as dynamic spaces where collective memory is sustained and social dialogue is fostered.

This community-oriented perspective brought about by the concept of living heritage makes participatory approaches in planning processes mandatory. This necessity stems from the nature of the living heritage perspective and manifests itself in three main dimensions. The need for knowledge production stems from the definition of living heritage as a process. Heritage knowledge, continually reproduced through the lived practices of

communities, can only be accessed from within those practices. In this context, Healey's (1997) communicative planning theory is crucial: without integrating diverse forms of knowledge, the dynamic nature of heritage cannot be reflected in planning. This renders the traditional 'informing' and 'consulting' levels of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation insufficient. Instead, a co-production of knowledge becomes a necessity rather than a choice. The need for inclusive decision-making arises from the fact that the continuity-change balance cannot be maintained through external interventions. Since this balance emerges from lived practices, only the communities that sustain these practices can manage it. Fishkin's (2009) deliberative democracy models highlight the importance of democratic dialogue in such decision-making. Similarly, Ostrom's (1990) co-management approach emphasises that the ongoing processes of maintenance, reproduction, and adaptation essential to heritage survival require genuine community ownership. On another note, the legitimacy imperative stems from the institutional need highlighted in Harrison's (2013) concept of dialogical heritage. If heritage is constantly renegotiated, such negotiation must occur under democratic conditions. Fairclough's (2009) notion of democratic heritage stresses that these processes are essential for ensuring social legitimacy.

The living heritage perspective faces a key paradox in practice. While community knowledge and participation are essential, existing institutional structures often limit this involvement. This gap reflects an underlying interest in preserving existing power relations. Chitty's (2017) community-based heritage management approach addresses this paradox by enhancing community autonomy and control over heritage. It offers a way to reconcile the democratic participation required by living heritage with institutional sustainability. This highlights three key questions for implementing participatory living heritage planning: How do communities assess their heritage, and how can these assessments be systematically integrated into planning? How should participatory planning processes be designed and conducted? What are the main barriers to implementation, and how can they be addressed? The following literature review examines existing research and theoretical frameworks that address these questions.

2.2. Transferring community knowledge to the planning process

Recognising the role of community attitudes in sustaining living heritage raises a core question: How can the diverse values that communities assign to heritage be systematically integrated into planning? Transferring community-centred heritage knowledge into planning requires systematic data collection and participatory methods. Community-based mapping combines local knowledge with expert cartography by visualising spatial perceptions. Focus groups enable comparison across demographic groups' heritage views. Participant observation reveals how communities engage with heritage in daily life. Oral history captures the lived knowledge of older generations and supports intergenerational transfer. Digital ethnography and social media analysis explore younger groups' heritage perceptions and content production. Crowdsourced inventories, social media mapping, and virtual reality tools complement traditional methods. Online platforms offer access for those unable to join in person—such as remote communities, the elderly, disabled individuals, or working parents—though digital exclusion risks must be addressed. Community-based inventories promote local involvement in identifying, classifying, and prioritising heritage. Narrative research and storytelling workshops help communities express their heritage through their own concepts. Defining the role of community knowledge through procedural transparency is essential. It ensures that how community insights shape planning outcomes is traceable and supports the sustainability of participatory governance.

Sustainable participatory living heritage planning depends on three key conditions. First, capacity building (Simpson, 2008): strengthening communities' technical knowledge, organisational skills, and leadership. Second, flexibility (Brown et al., 2013): establishing regular evaluation and adaptation mechanisms. Third, egalitarian power sharing (Logan, 2012): ensuring balanced decision-making where no single stakeholder dominates. When these conditions are met, participatory planning becomes a responsive and effective tool that aligns with both community needs and the dynamic nature of heritage. Urban cultural heritage sites offer examples of these principles in action. In Barcelona's El Raval neighbourhood, inclusive representation brought together residents, artisan groups, municipal actors, and conservation experts on equal footing—preserving the historic fabric while preventing social exclusion (Degen and García, 2012).

2.3. Implementation challenges to participatory heritage planning

The implementation of participatory heritage planning, despite its theoretical appeal, encounters various practical barriers. Research examining real-world applications has identified recurring challenges that limit the effectiveness of participatory approaches.

Participatory heritage planning faces several interconnected challenges, particularly within institutional and legal frameworks. As Taylor (2016) points out, heritage institutions are often shaped by traditional, expert-led models. Conflicts between conservation boards and local governments, stemming from overlapping authority, can obstruct the implementation of community-driven projects. Ndoro and Wijesuriya's (2015) research in Africa shows that colonial-era institutional structures continue to limit community participation. In many site management plans, community input remains consultative, while decision-making power is retained by expert boards.

Power imbalances and issues of representation also hinder meaningful participation. In traditional neighbourhood meetings, older men tend to dominate discussions, while the voices of women and youth are often sidelined. Ethnic and religious minorities similarly face structural barriers to being heard. Cooke and Kothari's (2001) concept of the "tyranny of participation" highlights how such processes may reproduce existing hierarchies. For example, when dominant community actors or interest groups claim to speak for the entire community, the perspectives of tenants and other less visible groups often go unrepresented.

A lack of resources and capacity further complicates participation. Chirikure et al.'s (2010) study in Africa shows that communities often lack the technical knowledge and financial means required for heritage management. They may be unfamiliar with traditional repair methods or conservation project planning. Even basic needs—such as organising meetings, hiring facilitators, or securing venues—may remain unmet, deepening dependence on experts and limiting community control.

Conflicts of interest and diverging priorities also create challenges. As Logan (2012) notes, heritage stakeholders often have conflicting goals. For example, the tourism sector may push for increased visitation, while residents raise concerns about noise and congestion. Similarly, luxury real estate projects can clash with tenants' fears of displacement. Short-term, project-oriented funding models also undermine participatory continuity. As Leask and Fyall (2006) highlight, heritage initiatives often rely on time-limited funding. Community committees formed during 2–3-year EU projects are usually dissolved once the project ends, leading to the abandonment of participatory mechanisms and loss of social capital. Cultural and contextual differences further complicate implementation. Caftanzoglou (2001) and Landorf (2009) show that participatory approaches face distinct challenges across settings. In some cases, traditions that prioritise elder authority may conflict with egalitarian participation models.

Systematically understanding and adapting these challenges to local contexts is essential for effective participatory living heritage planning. How such universal challenges manifest within Turkey's institutional structure and social dynamics must be examined within the framework of the local planning system.

3. A brief review of the local planning system: Turkey's legislative capacity for participatory living heritage

After identifying key challenges in implementing participatory living heritage planning, it is essential to assess how well Turkey's current planning system supports the participatory processes this approach requires in order to effectively understand the case study context.

Turkey's cultural heritage planning system is grounded in Law No. 2863 on the Protection of Cultural and Natural Heritage (1983), supported by additional laws such as No. 5366 and 6306. However, this legal framework shows limited alignment with the three core principles of the living heritage approach: integrating community knowledge into decision-making, power sharing, and democratic legitimacy. The practical implications of these limitations arise not only from legal texts but also from complex dynamics, including institutional structures,

professional culture, participation practices, and political priorities. Articles 6 and 7 of Law No. 2863 require “necessary examinations and investigations” in identifying and registering protected areas, yet these procedures rely solely on technical expert assessments. The law includes no provisions for systematically incorporating community knowledge. Conservation Boards base their decisions on technical reports and plans, excluding the experiential knowledge of local communities. Although Annex Article 2 envisions consulting relevant institutions, NGOs, and property owners during the area management plan process, this remains limited to a consultative level. Moreover, the regulations lack binding procedures for systematically collecting and processing community knowledge.

The most explicit participation provisions appear in the Conservation-Oriented Development Plan (CODP) process. While the 2005 regulation required public meetings, a 2019 amendment made them optional—held only “when deemed necessary.” This shift weakened public influence in decision-making. Similarly, Law No. 5366 on the Conservation by Renovation and Utilization by Revitalization of Deteriorated Historical and Cultural Properties, and Law No. 6306 on Transformation of Areas under Disaster Risk contain no explicit participation requirements, leaving implementation to central authorities. This undermines the living heritage principle of “managing change with the community” and enables rapid, investment-driven planning.

In Turkey, participation remains at the “information” and “consultation” levels of Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of citizen participation, lacking the legal and institutional foundations needed to support equal public involvement in decision-making. Conservation Board members are appointed solely by the Ministry, with no institutionalised mechanisms for local citizen representation, social balance, or civil oversight. Also, while legislation defines the framework for participatory planning, differences in practice cannot be explained by legal texts alone. The emergence of varied practices across cities under the same laws reflects the influence of institutional, professional, and social factors. In Turkey, planning and conservation education and practice remain largely technical and physically oriented. This limits experts’ engagement with community knowledge and creates distance from participatory methods (Kayasü and Yetişkul, 2014).

The capacity of municipalities—in terms of staff, expertise, and budget—shapes the quality of participatory processes. Well-resourced municipalities can support more meaningful engagement, while others conduct participation superficially. The success of such processes also depends on local communities’ organisational strength and prior experience. Some neighbourhoods mobilise effectively, while others lack this capacity. In areas under tourism, investment, or redevelopment pressure, participation is often side-lined. Cases like Tarlabası, Sulukule, and Fener-Balat show how economic priorities have overridden community needs (Kuyucu and Ünsal, 2010).

4. Methodology

This study evaluates the effectiveness of the participatory planning process conducted in Balıkcıköy urban conservation area located in the Maltepe District of Istanbul, during the preparation of the Balıkcıköy CODP. Balıkcıköy was selected because the planning process explicitly aimed to implement participatory methodologies in heritage conservation, providing an opportunity to critically examine the application of participatory principles within Turkey’s institutional context.

A qualitative methodology was adopted, structured through a two-stage data collection process. The first stage involved content analysis of participation reports and documents to examine how community inputs were recorded, framed, and who was involved. In the second stage, semi-structured interviews were held with local residents and planning experts to explore their experiences and perceptions in depth. Data were analysed thematically using MAXQDA software. Coding followed an inductive approach, informed by literature on participatory heritage planning and spatial practices.

Purposive sampling was used to reach individuals residing in Balıkcıköy who were involved in the participatory planning process. A total of seven interviews were conducted: four with local residents and three with planning experts. Resident selection considered age, gender, occupation, and length of residence to capture diverse social

profiles and experiences. Participants ranged in age from 37 to 67 and included artisans, journalists, and others. Their ties to the area varied from lifelong residents to artisans with 25 years of experience. Planning experts were selected based on institutional roles—such as coordinator, assistant branch manager, and project staff—and experience with participatory planning.

Interviews with local residents focused on three main themes:

1. **Translating community views into planning decisions:** Participants were asked about opportunities to participate, how their views were reflected in the plan, the clarity of communication, integration of community demands into decision-making, and the existence of feedback mechanisms.
2. **Representation of neighbourhood values:** Questions explored perceptions of Balıkcıköy's cultural and historical values, how these were conveyed to planners, the role of everyday experiences in the planning process, representation of intangible heritage, and the balance between conservation and change.
3. **Inclusiveness of the participation process:** Participants evaluated how accurately their views were reflected in reports, whether participation barriers were addressed, if diverse opinions were equally considered, and whether outcomes were shared transparently.

Institutional interviews were structured around five core questions, addressing:

1. identification of cultural values,
2. participatory planning methods used,
3. criteria for evaluating community input,
4. diversity and inclusiveness of participants, and
5. recommendations for improving future participatory processes.

The raw interview data were first reviewed to identify common themes and outliers, followed by discourse analysis of the coded content. The three main themes aligned with the question sets developed through field observations and were further broken down into secondary categories (Table 1). Observation notes from the researcher's open participation were incorporated where relevant. Finally, findings from the literature review and case study were evaluated together to revisit the research questions and overall topic.

Table 1. Coding themes

Main Themes	Sub themes
Local values and patterns of daily life	• Physical environment and structural memory • Spatial memory and identity construction • Social practices and collective rituals
Transforming local people's views into planning decisions	• Disconnect between demand and decision • Technical knowledge and local knowledge and experience • Institutional complexity and jurisdictional ambiguity
Representation of all views	• Participant composition and demographic diversity • Temporal and spatial dynamics of participation • Information sharing and process traceability

5. Results

5.1. The Balıkcıköy conservation area and its planning process

The case area is located in Yalı Neighborhood, Maltepe district, Istanbul, lying between the E-5 (D100) Highway and

Turgut Özal Boulevard, bordered by the E-5 to the north, the coastal road to the south, Hasan Polat Stadium to the east, and Orhangazi City Park to the west (Figure 1). Originally a traditional fishing settlement with strong ties to the sea, its coastal connection weakened after the construction of the coastal road in the 1970s, resulting in a spatial structure increasingly disconnected from the shoreline.

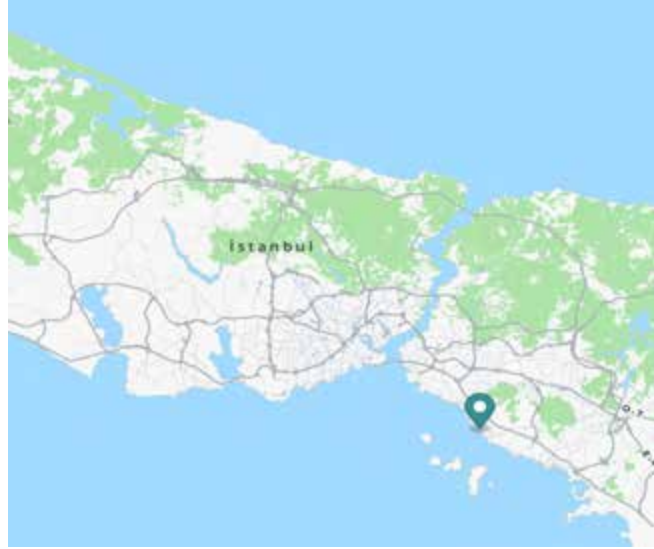


Figure 1: Location of the planning area in Istanbul (Source: Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, 2024a)

Key features of the area include Beşçeşmeler Square, İskele Square, Feyzullah Mosque, traditional houses, and narrow streets, which together define its distinctive urban character (Figure 2). Beşçeşmeler serves as both a functional hub and a symbolic focal point. The organic street layout reflects typical coastal settlement patterns, but growing development pressure and functional changes have led to a gradual deterioration of the urban fabric.



Figure 2: Balıkçıköy Urban Conservation Area (Source: Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, 2024b)

The area was designated as an Urban Conservation Area in 1990 by Istanbul Cultural and Natural Heritage Conservation Board No. II. It covers a total of 12.5 hectares, including the protected zone and its buffer area (Figure 3). The 1/500 and 1/5000 scale Conservation Plans approved in 1998 remain in effect. The plan revision process began with a 2019 decision by the Regional Conservation Board.



Figure 3: The boundaries of the planning and urban conservation area, (Source: Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, 2024b)

In 2021, the 1/5000 scale Balıkçıköy Conservation-Oriented Revision Master Plan received presidential approval from the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality (IMM). Later that year, following the transfer of planning authority from the district municipality to the IMM, the 1/1000 scale Implementation Plan was also approved. By early 2022, the planning process actively commenced, with opinions sought from relevant institutions. Analyses on natural structure, land use, built environment, transportation, and technical infrastructure were conducted based on 2022 data and made available digitally. Between 2022 and 2023, analysis-synthesis studies, conservation zoning plans, and the Urban Design Guide were completed with input from institutional stakeholders, fieldwork, and participatory processes. In 2023, the plan was approved by the IMM Assembly and submitted to the Regional Conservation Board in 2024. That same year, the plans were returned with revision requests, and revision efforts are currently ongoing.

The Balıkçıköy CODP implemented a participatory planning methodology based on six core principles.

- Transparency ensured openness from start to finish, with all activities shared publicly;
- Objectivity promoted equal and fair treatment of all participants;
- Inclusiveness aimed to represent diverse social groups and foster dialogue;
- Needs assessment focused on identifying and discussing stakeholders' on-the-ground needs;
- Deliberation encouraged open discussion of conflicting views and expectations;
- Feasibility emphasized evaluating proposals in light of their practicality and public benefit.

Various data collection methods were employed to operationalise the participatory approach. Public meetings supported information sharing, awareness raising, and consultation. Surveys, spatial marking exercises, and a participation desk were used to gather input from local residents, shopkeepers, and visitors. Additional methods included focus group meetings, one-on-one interviews, city councils, and exploratory walks to sustain dialogue and consultation throughout the process (Figure 4). The following activities were carried out as part of the participatory planning process:

- Balıkçıköy introductory forum (June 9, 2022): An open-air forum was held in Beşçeşmeler Square, where residents, shopkeepers, and users were informed about the conservation area, planning process, and urban design guide. A Q and A session followed.
- Cultural centre meetings (June 23–25, 2022): Over three days, meetings were held with five neighbourhood cultural centres to discuss street revitalisation through cultural functions, public space improvements, infrastructure needs, and ways to enhance social interaction.
- Participation desk and spatial marking: One-on-one interviews were conducted at a participation desk in Beşçeşmeler Square, while participants marked problems and suggestions on a digital map via an online tool.
- Urban design guide meeting (September 9, 2022): Held at the Chamber of Architects, this meeting presented the draft urban design guide. Alternative scenarios for square and street layouts were evaluated through design criteria.
- Interviews with local actors (March 9, 2022): Representatives from BEKSED and the Katılımcı (Participatory) Maltepe Newspaper were consulted to gather views on local challenges, opportunities, and recommendations.



Figure 4: Participatory planning activities by IMM (Source: Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, 2024b)

5.2. Local values and daily life patterns

Physical environment and structural memory

Local participants perceive Balıkçıköy's physical environment as a strong anchor of collective memory. Old buildings are associated with personal memory cues such as "the coffee left by the Greeks," "tandoori smells," and "Communist Kenan's house," reflecting both the area's multicultural past and the spatial grounding of individual memories (İ, 67, local resident). Beşçeşmeler, in particular, is identified as a key focal point with both nostalgic and symbolic significance (N, 43, NGO representative; M, 64, local journalist).

Expressions like "silently being demolished" and "abandoned to its fate" reflect widespread concern over the loss of physical heritage. Participants associated the street texture with a past characterized by low-density, gardened, countryside living. The transformation over time was voiced critically through remarks such as "it was a summer place" and "now we cannot see the sea."

In planners' discourse, the physical environment is framed primarily as a site of technical intervention. Tools such as registration fiches, 3D models, façade arrangements, and circulation schemes are used to enhance the visibility and accessibility of historic buildings (Planner M; Planner N). References to Beşçeşmeler focus on functionality rather than emotional meaning. Emphasis on circulation and visual continuity reflects a technical optimisation of the street texture, with limited attention to its cultural significance.

Spatial memory and identity construction

Interviewee narratives indicate that local identity in Balıkçıköy is shaped not only by the physical environment but also by personal histories and shared community memory. A sense of belonging is reinforced through long-term residence and being born and raised in the neighbourhood, transforming the place into a carrier of biographical identity. İ's (67, local resident) remark, "we are the ones who have the real say," reflects a claim to legitimacy grounded in both historical continuity and lived experience. Beyond daily use, this sense of belonging is deeply tied to individual and collective memories. N's (43, NGO representative) remark, "we used to play on

these streets," reflects the spatial imprint of childhood, while M's (64, local journalist) statement, "this fountain connects me to life," shows how physical elements become emotional anchors. Temporally, participants idealise the past, constructing a "golden age" narrative with expressions like "it was like Bodrum" and "it was a tourism town." These narratives express both criticism of current changes and a sense of loss, marking ruptures in the experience of belonging.

Local identity in Balıkçıköy is shaped by both micro-level personal references and macro-level historical narratives. Phrases like "Communist Kenan's house" and "Hacı Kahve's house" reflect how individual memory is embedded in the physical fabric of the neighbourhood, while statements such as "this is where Maltepe was born" emphasise the historical depth of collective identity (İ, 67, local resident; G, 46, shopkeeper). In planners' narratives, belonging and memory are often treated as externally observed behaviours or data sources for planning. Planner E's remark that "a protectionist attitude was observed among the participants" reflects an understanding of belonging as an object to be identified, rather than a lived experience. Similarly, Planner N's statement "citizens shared their memories and we tried to reflect this in the planning decisions" suggests that memory-based inputs are mediated through a planning lens. From this perspective, identity tends to be shaped through physical interventions, supported by tools such as pedestrian connections, public focal points, and façade arrangements.

Social practices and collective rituals

Local participants describe Balıkçıköy's social fabric through past neighbourhood relations, shared rituals, and daily practices. Statements like "everyone knew each other," "you couldn't go home without having tea at 5 p.m.," and "there was a culture of helping each other" reflect sustained forms of social interaction (İ, 67, local resident; N, 43, NGO representative). Among ritual practices, the Turkish Republic Day celebrations stand out. Narratives such as "local dances used to be played" and "people walked around in war costumes" highlight both the vibrancy of the tradition and its spatial requirements (M, 64, local journalist). However, this continuity has been disrupted, as expressed by G (46, shopkeeper): "the square cannot accommodate it in its current form." Social belonging is said to persist in small-scale spaces such as modest cafés, street conversations, and fountainheads. These places strengthen individual and collective bonds, as reflected in expressions like "it connects me to life" and "we are on very good terms with the shopkeepers" (M, 64, local journalist).

Planners tend to view social practices as sources of observation and data. The decline of rituals like the October 29 celebrations is attributed to spatial issues, such as "winter gardens blocking public space." The lack of playgrounds and inadequate public gathering areas were noted in reports under the category of social needs. Past social practices—such as the "tavern and raki culture"—were treated by planners as historical references derived from observation and archival sources, rather than as lived local experiences (Planner M). However, most local residents noted that the tavern culture in Beşçeşmeler Square is not a unique value of the area's past. Overall, official correspondence and institutional opinions appear to have been the primary sources guiding the planners during the process.

5.3. Transforming the insights of local people into planning decisions

Disconnect between demand and decision

During the Balıkçıköy planning process, local participants were able to share their demands in meetings and engage directly with planners. While they acknowledged that their views were noted and recorded, there was little clarity on how much these inputs influenced actual plan decisions. N (43, NGO representative) reflected a sense of limited impact with the remark, "even if we object, not much changes. Planner N stated that data collection was systematic, with field observations and meeting notes analysed thematically. However, she did not clarify how this information was communicated or shared with local stakeholders.

The tension between local demands and planning objectives is clearly reflected in the debate over winter gardens. Shopkeepers defended them for their economic value, while residents complained that they limited access to the square. In response, the planning team recommended their removal, citing disruption of public space continuity and obstruction of historic buildings. Planner E's remark— "the frequency of requests was important, but

public interest was also taken into account”—indicates that while local demands were considered, final decisions were ultimately guided by the principle of public interest.

Technical knowledge vs local knowledge-experience

The planning process reveals an asymmetry between technical expertise and local experience. In Balıkçıköy, technical knowledge largely shaped decision-making, while local knowledge was primarily used during data collection. Planners noted that input from residents was categorised under thematic headings in plan documents (Planner E). However, how this information was translated into specific decisions and shared with stakeholders remained unclear. Local participants noted that they were able to share their experiences, but were unsure whether this input influenced outcomes. Statements like “we told them, but the decision is still the Board’s” (N, 43, NGO representative) and “I attended the meeting, but we couldn’t see what happened afterwards” (M, 64, local journalist) highlight a disconnect between participation and decision-making.

Planners explained that the process relied on institutional opinions, archival records, registration slips, and technical analyses by BİMTAŞ (Planner M; Planner N). These sources, drawn from official documents, were directly incorporated into the planning materials. Local knowledge—such as neighbourhood memory, usage patterns, and oral narratives—was included only after being filtered through technical evaluation. The presentation of technical information also limited access. Although plan documents were made available online, this was insufficient for users with low digital literacy. M (64, local journalist) noted that she accessed the documents through her own efforts, while other participants struggled to obtain them. The complexity and technical nature of the language used also emerged as a barrier. M (64, local journalist) remarked, “I had difficulty understanding some parts,” while N (43, NGO representative) described the participation desk as “like a touristic place,” criticising the information as superficial. Planner E acknowledged this issue, noting that efforts were made to simplify terms—for example, saying “zoning” instead of “Master Plan” to improve understanding.

Institutional complexity and ambiguity of authority

The Balıkçıköy planning process involved multiple actors, including the Conservation Board, Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, and Maltepe Municipality, all exercising overlapping authority. Most local participants viewed the Conservation Board as the final decision-maker. N (43, NGO representative) expressed this perception, though the quote was incomplete in the original input—please feel free to provide the rest if you’d like it included.

Institutional authority conflicts were made tangible by the failure to implement an approved project. G (46, shopkeeper) noted that a project developed by the artisans’ association was approved by the Conservation Board but not implemented by Maltepe Municipality. The lack of clearly defined institutional responsibilities left local residents without a clear point of contact, resulting in unresolved expectations. İ (67, local residents), M (64, local journalist), and G (46, shopkeeper) stated that despite collecting numerous signatures to pedestrianize Küçükyalı Street, they received no definitive response from any authority. Some participants remarked, “the Metropolitan Municipality has the authority, but we’re left dealing with the local municipality.” Participants noted their exclusion from the Urban Design Guide process. N (43, NGO representative) stated, “we were not invited to some technical meetings,” while M (64, local journalist) remarked that technical experts deliberately avoided involving local residents, which led to their exclusion.

5.4. Representation of all insights

Participant composition and demographic diversity

Participants offered varied reflections on the demographic composition of stakeholders involved in the Balıkçıköy planning process. İ (67, local resident) remarked, “I was the only local,” highlighting the underrepresentation of long-term residents. Regarding age groups, Planner M noted, “children could have been worked with, and the night population could have been interviewed,” indicating limited inclusion of children and evening users. Socio-economic and interest group disparities were also evident. Commercial actors—especially shopkeepers—were well represented, likely due to debates over winter gardens. In contrast, the voices of non-commercial users, such as families, public space users, and recreational visitors, were less visible. Planner E acknowledged

this imbalance, stating, “the diversity of participants could have been wider,” suggesting that institutional actors were aware of representational gaps.

Temporal and spatial dynamics of participation

Several observations were made about the timing and spatial organisation of participation activities. Planner E noted that “the area becomes more crowded in the evening,” suggesting that scheduling meetings primarily in the morning may exclude evening users and the working population. Concerns were also raised about how meetings were announced. N (43, NGO representative) stated, “we found out later that some meetings were held,” while İ (67, local resident) recalled, “suddenly a crowd came to the square, and when I saw there was a plan meeting, I joined.” These accounts highlight how the timing and communication strategies of participation events can unevenly affect access for different user groups.

Information sharing and process traceability

Participants reported contributing to the process but receiving little information about the final outcomes. İ (67, local resident) noted, “we did not see the final version of the plan,” while N (43, NGO representative) stated, “we participated but no one informed us afterwards.” G (46, shopkeeper) highlighted the lack of traceability with the remark, “no feedback was given.” Some participants said they were unaware of the plan’s approval status and were only told it had been uploaded online. M (64, local journalist) pointed to digital inequalities, saying, “I was able to access it, but not everyone can.” From the institutional side, Planner E emphasised the timing of feedback, observing that “if it is not responded to in a short time, belief decreases.”

6. Discussion and conclusions

The participatory living heritage planning process in Balıkçıköy drew attention for its methodological variety and institutional involvement. Despite this, it faced key limitations regarding the influence of participation on decision-making and its perceived legitimacy among the community. Various tools—such as introductory forums, cultural centre meetings, participation desks, online mapping, thematic public meetings, and design guide workshops—were employed to create a formally inclusive model. Yet, participants often questioned whether these tools led to meaningful participation or shaped actual planning decisions. For instance, many participants were unclear about how activities like the participation desk in Beşçeşmeler Square or the mapping of local issues influenced planning outcomes. Remarks such as “We participated, but then no one provided any information” (N, 43, NGO representative) and “We couldn’t see the final version of the plan” (İ, 67, local resident) highlight a lack of feedback and process transparency. These concerns indicate that participation was largely limited to data collection and aligned more with the “consultation” level in Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of participation.

Although the process followed participatory principles, the integration of local knowledge into planning decisions was limited. This is especially relevant to the study’s second theme: how community knowledge informs decision-making. While local input was included in planning documents, it was filtered through technical frameworks, and the details of this transformation were not communicated back to the community. In cases like the exclusion of winter garden proposals for “public interest,” technical priorities prevailed over community demands. This reflects the reproduction of what Smith (2006) terms ‘authorised heritage discourse,’ where local knowledge served a supplementary rather than central role.

Participant narratives reflect not only information but also expressions of identity and belonging. Statements like “This fountain connects me to life” (M, 64, local journalist) and “We are the real decision-makers” (İ, 67, local resident) illustrate that spatial memory and local values imply both physical and social ownership. This aligns with the study’s first theme: local values and everyday life patterns. However, in the planning process, these values were often reduced to functional elements, stripped of their cultural context within the technical discourse. According to Healey’s (1997) communicative planning approach, such values should inform decisions, yet in Balıkçıköy they remained largely illustrative rather than operative.

The third main theme, “representativeness and equality,” becomes central when examining participant experi-

ences. Access to meetings, the selection of invited groups, and the ability to follow the process directly shaped the inclusiveness of participation. Comments such as “I was the only local person there” (İ, 67, local resident) and “some meetings were held in the morning, so workers couldn’t attend” (N, 43, NGO representative) reveal how temporal and social constraints limited representation. Although planners acknowledged that “participant diversity could have been broader,” this issue was not addressed through structural changes.

At the institutional level, the involvement of multiple actors—such as the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, the district municipality, and the Conservation Board—created confusion and weakened participants’ focus on solutions. Comments like “the Board approved it, but the municipality did not” or “we went to the local municipality, but the authority lies with the metropolitan municipality” illustrate a lack of clarity in the chain of authority. This ambiguity reduced public motivation to engage. According to Healey’s governance-based model of participation, this case highlights the need to strengthen both horizontal and vertical communication mechanisms.

When these findings are evaluated through the lens of Court and Wijesuriya’s (2015) three-stage cyclical participation model in living heritage planning, the Balıkçıköy planning process appears to have been relatively effective in the first phase, “Discovery and Understanding.” A variety of tools were employed to explore community perceptions, local values, and priorities; rich qualitative data were collected through activities such as community forums, participation tables, and online mapping. However, during the second phase, “Visioning and Strategy,” the integration of this local knowledge into decision-making processes remained limited, as the planning vision was primarily shaped by expert-driven definitions. In the third phase, “Implementation and Monitoring,” the absence of participatory feedback mechanisms and the inadequate dissemination of the final draft plan outcomes to the public hindered the development of a cyclical and adaptive planning process. This indicates that participation was largely confined to an initial data collection exercise, falling short of the principles of continuous learning and shared governance central to the living heritage approach. The Balıkçıköy case thus highlights the importance of not only engaging communities in the discovery phase, but also ensuring inclusive collaboration throughout strategy development and implementation in order to fulfil the transformative potential of living heritage planning.

In conclusion, while the Balıkçıköy planning process adhered to formal participatory principles, it fell short in key areas such as influence on decision-making, the integration of local values, and equitable representation. Technical tools alone were insufficient to establish democratic legitimacy. The process underscored the need for deeper structural changes—particularly in decision-making authority, information transparency, and representational balance. Taken together, the findings reveal structural tensions between participatory ideals and practical implementation in the Balıkçıköy case. The study’s three core themes—(1) recognition of local values, (2) the link between information and decision-making, and (3) representational inequalities—offer a valuable lens for evaluating the transformative potential of participatory planning, not only in Balıkçıköy but across other protected areas in Turkey. Future research should assess the long-term impacts of these dimensions through broader case studies to determine whether participatory mechanisms function as effective tools for equitable governance or remain constrained within procedural boundaries.

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