

An uncanny ‘Terrain Vague’: Yedikule Gasometer Complex

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Abstract

As new spaces add new experiences to the urban life, the spaces that were previously deemed valuable turn into vague areas. These areas, which hosted various experiences once, has been forgotten in some way, left behind and remained idle. The concept of “Terrain Vague” that was brought up once more by the Catalan architect De Sola-Morales twenty years ago is a unique tool to examine these areas. When the recent past of Istanbul is examined, a countless number of industrial production buildings and facilities, which have lost their functions completely, become visible as perfect “Terrain Vague”.

De Sola-Morales’ asks “How can architecture act in the terrain vague without becoming an aggressive instrument of power and abstract reason?” The answer to this significant question will be looked for in the examination of Yedikule Gasometer Complex. This complex still bears the marks of Istanbul’s industrial past and could be described as “Terrain Vague” within the current use of the term. The values that Yedikule Gasometer introduces to the urban life, its current uses and modes of being vague will be analyzed. The analyses will be discussed through the concept of ‘uncanny’ and by adopting the approach of Surrealism to these types of spatial situations.

Keywords

Industrial Archaeology, Yedikule Gasometer, Terrain Vague, Uncanny, Palimpsest.



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1. A new perspective on the concept of palimpsest

While reading the urban space as a “palimpsest”, the first thing one thinks of is a sort of stratification that emerges from the destruction of the old as part of physical continuity and construction of the new. However, this folding does not only indicate physical continuity, but also conceptual and cultural continuity in the city. So when the palimpsestic nature of the city is explained in terms of physical processes; notions that are essentially related to the city such as time, memory, culture, identity and experience would be neglected.

Looking at the urban space from Baudelaire’s perspective of palimpsest presents an interesting way to decipher the aforementioned stratification. Baudelaire compares memory to something that is erased when written on; hence he refers to it as palimpsest. The palimpsest of memory (*le palimpseste de la memoire*) consists of individual memories that are superimposed on each other. These memories are irreversible, indestructible and ineffaceable (Baudelaire, 1860). The palimpsest of memories that each individual constructs with his/her own countless number of experiences in the urban space are also the generator of the collective memory regarding the city and urban space. Reading the city through a version of palimpsest that is indirectly defined via collective memory allows for a richer viewpoint.

After the industrial revolution, urban space started to be organized as a tool for the capitalist economic system. Today, the capital also abandons the classic way of production, the means of production (machines) or the consumer goods, and rushes to the production of space. In space needs and desires can reappear as such, informing both the act of producing and its products” so the relations with the urban space can not stay as same as it should be (Lefebvre, 1991). The rapid changes that the urban space has undergone recently due to many successive ruptures require a new palimpsest metaphor for the definition of the city.

As a consequence of memory’s palimpsestic nature, it can be expected

from the memory, under normal circumstances, to work as a memory generator machine where an individual’s relations of experience to space accumulate, are superimposed, and remembered if need be. However, in a system where desires and needs are constantly redefined, the relation between individuals and urban space cannot be established as anticipated (Lefebvre, 1991). The current system stimulates the consumption of pleasure and the entertainment within space. Hence, individuals experience space with a kind of intoxication of turning their desires into pleasure. At this very point, it is possible to talk about “amnesia” that shows up in the individual and social memory in the context of experiencing the urban space.

Istanbul is a city where the past, present and future is experienced simultaneously and where cultural intensities pressures, disintegrations, and ways of coexistence can be observed all at once. The construction/destruction policies that gained momentum with the modernization process have currently reached an unprecedented level in Istanbul. Experiencing euphoria of desire in this fast-paced daily life, the citizens of Istanbul lose their grip on their memories. This leads to a deep void in their memories. The urban space becomes an instrument for the satisfaction of fetishized “newness” that is constructed as a need all the time. This situation brings along a critical question: What kind of attitude will the authorities develop when an urban space loses its ‘newness’ and becomes “old”?

The old industrial production areas in Istanbul, which bear the marks of society’s recent daily life in the memory, are considered worthy of examination in this context. The concept of Industrial Archeology, which was introduced around the seventies and has become a significant notion for various disciplines since then, is central to the discussions concerning the preservation of buildings that have been witnesses to the industrial past (Palmer & Neaverson, 1998). It is important to present a critique of the current construction/destruction policies and come up with novel approaches

¹*Amnesia, in the general sense, is a state in which a person cannot recall his/her memories and retrieve the information in the memory due to various medical reasons. The relation between amnesia and palimpsest is established through the loss of memory due to alcohol ingestion. It is called ‘alcoholic palimpsest’ in the medical literature (Semple & Smyth, 2013). In the state of ‘alcoholic palimpsest’, an individual numbs the part of his/her brain where memories are stored through ingestion of alcohol or other foreign substances. In this state mind cannot create new memories. The individual can recall every memory prior to the alcohol or substance ingestion. However, under the influence of alcohol/substance the individual cannot remember any memories belonging to that period or can only recall bits and pieces since the memories are not stored in permanent memory. The urbanites in Istanbul city also experience the city in this way, under alcoholic palimpsest, with inebriation.*

regarding the industrial buildings in Istanbul, which constitute a significant part of the memory of the city and its citizens alike, through the example of “Yedikule Gasometer Complex”.

2. A look at the city as the space of palimpsest memory: Terrain vague-s

The term “uncanny/unheimlich”, which has been studied in a broader framework by Vidler in the context of architecture, can be an effective tool in deciphering the individuals who live in a drunken state of mind while evaluating his/her immediate environment as a result of modernity and also the urban spaces that the individuals leave behind with this drunkenness.

Throughout its history, the term “uncanny/unheimlich” has been used to describe personal and aesthetic issues. Used firstly in literature to define “haunted” houses or castles, the term uncanny then started to be widely used in psychoanalysis with Freud to describe the loss of familiarity and sense of fear that the individual experiences. The German word “unheimlich” is the opposite of “heimlich” literally meaning “belonging to the home”. For Freud “unhomeliness” meant more than a simple sense of not belonging; it is the sudden return of familiar objects, which were once suppressed, in unexpected and unfamiliar forms as if in a dream (Vidler, 1994). Having lost his/her memory regarding the recent past, the urbanite lives in a state of amnesia and cannot produce any new memories in the process of modernity². S/he is alienated even from herself/himself and from the environment where s/he is supposed to feel safe. The sense of uncanny is the inevitable outcome of rapidly developing big cities; their disturbingly heterogeneous crowds and the newly-scaled urban spaces (Benjamin, 1973). Currently, the two separate moods that the concept of uncanny emphasizes, namely the self-alienation and alienation from one’s immediate environment are so intertwined that they feed each other. When the concept of uncanny is considered in the context of industrial archeology, the industrial structures that have been abandoned and left idle upon losing their functions are the urban spaces

²Dellaloğlu maintains that Turkey’s modernization process is different from the West. Modernization of the Western society was born of the internalization of the past as a critique of it in retrospect; however, this process did not take place in Turkey. In this context, it is possible to claim that the Western society is more traditional than Turkey. While a 300-year-old hat store in Paris still has customers, an ordinary café in Nişantaşı (Istanbul) may feel the need to redecorate its interior every year. It is because the phenomenon of being modern is perceived as the consumption of the new. In this example, Dellaloğlu underlines the state of amnesia and the problematic relationship of Turkey to its history (Dellaloğlu, 2013).

that disseminate and trigger the sense of uncanny.

The current states of these old and uncanny industrial areas in the city can be examined through the concept of “Terrain Vague” which was brought forward by Spanish architect Sola Morales almost twenty years ago.

Even though the word “Terrain” corresponds to the word “land” in English (also has the same meaning in Turkish), its conceptual meanings contain spatial connotations regarding especially the urban areas. The word terrain hints at urban components/spaces and even buildings that are directly connected with the city. “Vague”, on the other hand, embraces meanings that come with adjectives such as inconsistent/moving, indeterminate, ambiguous and uncertain. The first use of the term Terrain Vague goes back to a photograph that was taken by the famous surrealist photographer Man Ray in 1929 (Figure 1). The photograph shows an urban area that accommodated various experiences earlier, but eventually lost its use value and turned into a sort of abandoned place (Walker, 2002). Here the photograph functions as a time-image that presents an old story about the urban life. When art encounters a “terrain vague”, it tries to observe and understand its potentials.

For establishing the relationship between the terms “vague” and “uncan-



Figure 1. Terrain vague, 1929, Man Ray.

ny”, it is both useful and necessary to underline the fact that the perception regarding the concept of uncanny in art differs from its use in psychology. In art uncanny is synonymous with ‘with grabbing hold of collective values that may become entirely alienated from the remembrance and memory of things held over from the past which, at the present, in a sense exist solely as a fragmented whole’ (Akay, 2005). So the question is what are these *collective values* that have been constructed through the memory in question?

The urban space, which is produced in the process of modernity, is used until it loses its function and then it is abandoned. Since the dwellers of the city are in a state of alcoholic palimpsest during this process, they are not able to form memories about the space and keep them in mind. The reason why space forces uncanny senses of a person is not about the physical conditions of the place; it is a result of self-alienation that steals from the memory of an individual. The abandoned urban space activates the sense of uncanny in the dwellers of the city and after a while, this quality of uncanniness just sticks to the place. At this point, it can be said that the loss of collective values within the context of Istanbul results from an inability to create new memories about the urban space in the modernization process. All of the lost memories that cannot be stored in the memory are the lost collective values that were mentioned before.

Different actors adopting different evaluation systems approach to these disquieting uncanny industrial ruins in their own ways; however, the necessity of getting rid of the uncanny feeling is the common ground where all the actors meet.

Architecture perceives vagueness as something insecure, undefined or not productive. Upon encountering a foreign, undefined territory, the architecture always tends to impose limits, set rules and introduce familiar elements into it to make it recognizable, identical and universal (Morales, 1995). In the re-functionalization process of these spaces, the design idea that is fiercely defended emerges as a tool of

justification in the context of contemporary architecture. “The re-functionalizations that are realized as a result of common value judgments with standard programs lead to the over-domestication of the eccentric nature of the production spaces. Transforming these spaces for human activities instead of mechanical processes is some sort “disorientation” process” (Cengizkan 2006).

As it can be seen, this system works like a cycle. In order to break this cycle, it is necessary to introduce a different system of value to change the direction of the trajectory. At this point, Morales’s approach is significant.

“How can architecture act in the terrain vague without becoming an aggressive instrument of power and abstract reason? Undoubtedly, through attention to continuity: not the continuity of the planned, efficient, and legitimized city, but of the flows, the energies, the rhythms established by the passing of time and the loss of limits... we should treat the residual city with a contradictory complicity that will not shatter the elements that maintain its continuity in time and space.” (Morales, 1995)

3.A terrain vague in Istanbul: Yedikule Gasometer Complex

A special kind of industrial complex in the industrial landscape of Istanbul, gasometers have an important role in the city’s modernization process. Gasometers were established in order to light up the important buildings first, and then the urban spaces such as streets, avenues, and squares with the help of atmospheric pressure and air gas. This function of the gasometers is an important phenomenon for the interior formation of the modern city. A city is a place where you can walk both during the daytime and at night thanks to the gasometers.

The first gas plant was founded in 1853 to lighten up the Dolmabahçe Palace in Istanbul. In time, the required gas for the illumination of streets in Beyoglu and Pera were also provided from that plant. Kuzguncuk Gasometer was also founded during the same period. The intention was to light up the Beylerbeyi Palace. However, it lost its function in the time when Kadikoy Hasanpasa Gasometer, which



Figure 2. The locations of gasometers in Istanbul.

was established in 1982 to meet the demands of the Anatolian side, began to fulfill the needs of Üsküdar (Figure 2). The Yedikule Gasometer, which was also opened to use towards the end of the 19th century, is the first gasometer complex that was built for public service (Figure 3).

Located in close proximity to urban life, gasometers are made up of various buildings with special properties. However, gasometers are the most important of these structures in terms of tectonics. Gasometers are machine structures that depend on a gas transmission principle based on the atmo-



Figure 3. The panoramic view of Yedikule Gazometer Complex, 2015 (Foto, E. Ozdemir).



Figure 4. Yedikule Gazometer, 2014, Emre Özdemir.

spheric pressure. When the gasometers were first built in Istanbul, their minimalistic steel structures and the motions of the air boilers inside them were their distinguishing characteristics from the surrounding structures. In the memory of the city and its dwellers, gasometers are a sacred symbol/ image of the industrial complex that lights up the city (Figure 4).

Gasworks plants, which were active until the 90s in Istanbul, have been transferred to the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and İETT as a result of a number of developments. They have come down from such a history. These facilities completely lost their functions. They hosted a countless number of events and situations that intensified their state of “vagueness.” They are seen as part of the “industrial heritage” and expect to be equipped with their “new” and “public” functions.

Among the gasworks plants in Istanbul, Yedikule Gasometer is perhaps the vaguest one both in terms of function and spatial background since it is the “uncanny” home of the urban waste, scraps, animals and Others (Figure 5).

Yedikule Gasometer is located at the corner where the land and sea walls of the Historical Peninsula meet. The historical background of the area, its proximity to the dungeons and its location above the sea walls make this place a unique example of the region’s palimpsestic character. Currently owned by İETT, the open areas of Yedikule Gasometer are where the old buses, various sizes of metal waste and electronic junk are accumulated. The presence of animal shelters within its boundaries and the number of stray dogs in the area intensifies the uncanny feeling of the space. Due to its nearness to the sea and the uncontrolled land-



Figure 5. Air photo of Yedikule G. Complex and the remnants in the area under preservation, 2015.



Figure 6. Yedikule Gasometer Complex, 2014, Emre Özdemir.

scape that covers the whole place, the region also attracts various bird populations. Homeless people of Istanbul use various buildings of the facility as a shelter. At present, the gasworks complex does not have definite functional and physical boundaries as it once had. Due to Marmaray Project, the suburb train line station that periodically disrupts the vague character of the region is abandoned to be opened in an unknown future (Figure 6). All of these different factors intertwine with the strong sensuality of the space such as the sounds of dogs and birds, industrial odors, the fragility of the remnants and wild landscape. All of these create the vagueness of the area and leads to an attractive, but unsettling aura. This aura covers the area like a blanket or a layer. It promises a vision of the complex record of what has happened there over the years and allows building dreams over a future that will never materialize.

With the current conservation policy, it seems unlikely to protect this vague state that creates this strange aesthetic. Given the possible commercial potential of the area, it becomes clear that this vague space disappears in a not too distant future.

How can architecture approach this vagueness, which harbors unique spatial potentials, without destroying it? Can such areas trigger a different architectural approach? Can one imagine the city in different ways through the potential of these areas?

4. The continuity of “uncanny”: Talking about the surreal through the reality of architecture

The answer to this critical question can be looked for in the term “unheimlich” and its interpretation in surrealism. The term refers to two basic points; the uncanny feeling that an individual experiences and the vague or abandoned urban spaces that create this uncanny feeling.

The way Surrealists deals with the concept could be inspirational in a different dimension. Contrary to general opinion, the way Surrealists interpret the concept of uncanny does not comply with Freud’s definition of the concept. Surrealism takes a stand against

the “normal” forms that the modernism imposes. The “real” is the uncanny for surrealism and surrealist approach prefers provoking it rather than avoiding it (Vidler, 2014).

Surrealists try to understand the mechanisms of the unconscious through dreams and try to show the brilliance beyond the visible and the beauties that are on the brink of decay and extinction (Artun, 2014). For them, the unison between the world and human beings is possible not through a compliance to an environment that establishes constancies, but through a purification from that very environment. When the individual gets out of “rationalist” and “unnatural” norms (by escaping to the imagination), s/he reaches a cosmic order. An independent imagination will be a manifestation and part of a cosmic world that is based on symbols, allegories, and myths (Ojalvo, 2012). It seems quiet hard to talk about surrealism in architecture that currently reflects the reality of the rational boundaries of thought.

In the context of architecture, surrealism is not an effort for finding the most surreal image or achieving creative intellectual activities in the lengthy design process. The moment when architecture gets closer to Surrealism is the moment when it arouses curiosity in the individuals who interact with space and enables the formation of different memories; so allow the occurrence of various images of thought in an individual’s mind. In this context, it can be said that the uncanny feeling that is stimulated by “Terrain Vague” indicates a surreal state. The memory that is numb to the experiences of daily life due to an inebriation of desire is not able to create affects like fear, curiosity and restlessness, whereas all these affects that are outside of the routine reality are triggered upon encountering an uncanny space. At this point, the space (this space is probably an incidental space, not a space created as a result of a long architectural design process) has the potential for allowing “surreal images of thought” in between sleep and wakefulness.

5. Conclusion and evaluation

Yedikule Gasometer Complex, with its uncanny and vague state, is considered as an example of this kind of space that is able to trigger un-familiar senses in an individual. When grounded with surrealist theory, this vague space creating a sense of uncanny requires a set of values that can be distinguished from the previous ones.

Is it possible for architecture (and maybe for the other actors) to approach this uncanny space by getting rid of all the other evaluation mechanisms and without ignoring the potentials of its experiences and vagueness?

The continuity of the memories is possible only when people transcend their concern of renewing the physical conditions of a space. The traces of a building's past (not only the physical traces) can become sustainable when its present meets on a terrain of newness that is nourished by the past. On the other hand, the continuity of the uncanny feeling is probable in a kind of newness (and one can look for this newness only by getting rid of the common 'new' norms) where all the others can meet and collide as a result of unpremeditated coincidences. In this kind of newness, the industrial past of the building, the experience of the other and the uncanny sense evoked by the space could be transferred to the next present without denial or domestication.

As long as the urban spaces with similar aging stories as Yedikule Gasometer Facility continue to be evaluated within the current evaluation system, which is based on the dialectic between the old and new, and as long as they are "renewed" or "demolished" as a result of this attitude, the memory will be the most important value to be lost beside the ostensible gains that are dressed with "new" clothes.

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