



The Role of Art in the Construction of Public Space: Istanbul Biennials from 1987 to 2019

Elif Eş and Guliz Ozorhon

Abstract

This study focuses on the interaction of public space and art, and uses the Istanbul Biennale (1987–2019) as an example to explore the role of art in public space. This study firstly examines public space, art in public space, and public-art issues, and discusses the relationship between public space and art from the past to the present. With its layered and dynamic structure, the Biennale provides a rich space for examining this relationship. The Istanbul Biennial, during its 32-year history, where this relationship can be observed in a certain continuum, was chosen as the field of study. In this study, the distribution of the Istanbul-Biennial in the city, the types of venues used and the relationship between these venues are investigated. For the analysis, firstly, the discourses, themes and curatorial expansions of the 16 biennials were searched through literature and printed media. Secondly, the exhibition venues and their locations/distributions in the city were mapped separately. Eventually, it has been determined that the biennials, which were initially located in the historical city center of Istanbul, have gradually expanded their area and even started to evolve into an open-air exhibition spreading to the peripheries and distant parts of the city in recent years.

Keywords

Art • Biennial • Interaction • Transformation • Public Space • Istanbul

E. Eş (✉)
MSc City and Architecture at Ozyegin University, Istanbul,
Turkey
e-mail: elif.es@ozu.edu.tr

G. Ozorhon
Department of Architecture at the Ozyegin University, Istanbul,
Turkey
e-mail: guliz.ozorhon@ozyegin.edu.tr

1 Introduction

Urban-public-areas; are parts of the city where coincidences, interactions and experiences are experienced. Every activity that takes place or takes part in a public space changes the space, or in other words, reproduces the space. Art events in public spaces are among the most transformative of the spaces they are in. It is important to examine this transformation at the urban/art intersection and to understand the contribution of this transformation to the city and social life. This research will try to understand public space/art communication through the pluralistic structure of the Istanbul Biennale and will make visible the diversity of public space/art associations. This information will both provide a new perspective in terms of understanding the dynamics of urban-public spaces and will guide the art activities that will take place in the public space in the future.

2 Scope and Significance of the Study

Urban-public spaces, as important parts of cities and individuals' lives, are in a strategic position in terms of physical, social, psychological, economic, symbolic, aesthetic and political aspects (Akkar Ercan, 2007). Public spaces are the parts of the city where daily and social life is maintained, they are dynamic places where sharing takes place. Art in a public space can sometimes be a piece of work describing a public space, an artwork or artistic activity displayed in a public space, or it can sometimes constitute a public space as a whole (Worth, 2003). McCarthy (2006) defines public art as an art specific to a certain field; Sharp et al. (2005) define it as art that aims to relate not only to the physical but also to society.

Art in the public space provides a multifaceted interaction with the social aspect, leaves the place of the white cube and creates a new atmosphere of interaction in the city. Biennales differ from other art events in public spaces in that they are

organized globally, using both aural and visual arts, and play an educational role by organizing workshops and conferences for artists. Thus, with the biennial spread to the city, the impact of art on the city and its citizens increases, and art becomes gradually effective in the city through public spaces and even transforms. Since Istanbul as a metropolis is a multi-layered city compared to other cities in Turkey, the biennials that have been organized in Istanbul for many years offer a potential in exploring the possibilities of urban/art interaction.

3 Conceptual and Methodological Approach of the Study

This study examines the role of art in the construction of public spaces, using the example of the Istanbul Biennale held from 1987–2019. It begins with a conceptual study of the city, public space, the transformation of public space, and the role of art in the transformation of public space (Fig. 1).

After the conceptual framework was established, the fieldwork was conducted in two parts (Fig. 2). In the first

part of the study, with the qualitative data collection method; The historical process of the Istanbul-Biennials, its themes, curatorial expansions, the social events affecting the biennial and the places where the biennials take place have been systematically brought together and compiled through discourse analysis by scanning the articles, books and graduate theses and other publications related to the subject. In the 2nd part, the development of the Istanbul-Biennial relation is made visible with the chronological traces and mappings made. In addition to other sources of information, this stage used the official website of İKSV, the institution that organizes the Istanbul Biennial. The exhibitions organized in the extent of the biennial and the spaces used are mapped. Thus, in the thirty-two-year adventure of the biennial in Istanbul, it has been shown in which regions the route created by the exhibition spaces interacts with the city. The contributions of the biennial to the city, the transformation of unused spaces into exhibition spaces, and the contribution of open spaces are discussed. Trying to understand the potential of the Biennial to organize/renovate the public realm in Istanbul.

This study will contribute to the literature in terms of understanding the impact of art on the transformation of the city and will show the potential of this interaction. Thus,

Fig. 1 Conceptual approach (Source Authors)

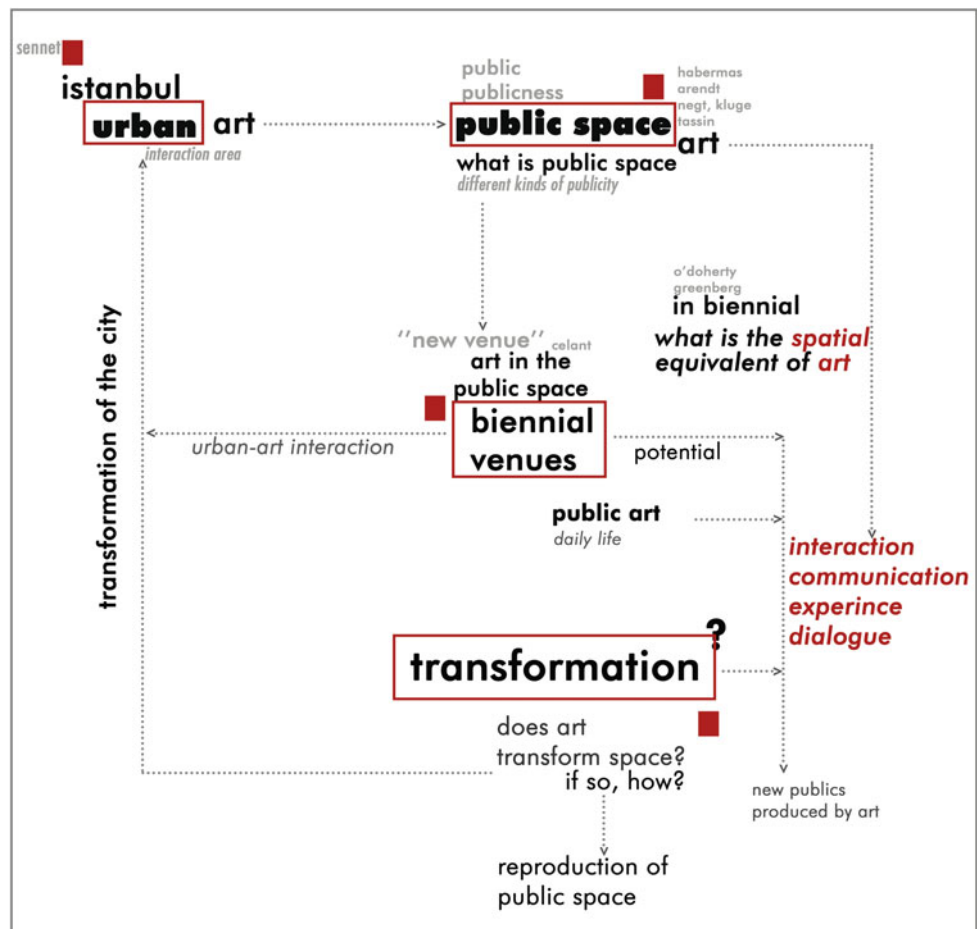
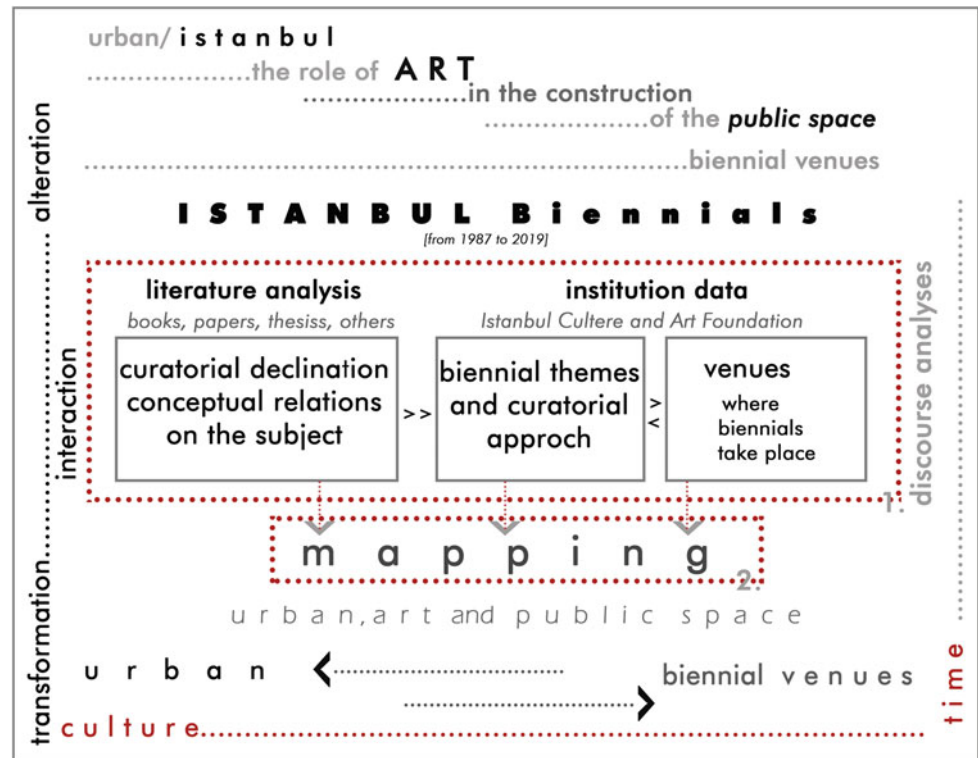


Fig. 2 Method of the study
(Source Authors)



while producing the future scenarios of the city, it will be possible to evaluate these potentials.

4 Major Findings

The main findings of the research are:

Early period/to be in the historical center (1–8)

- The first two biennials; themes on contemporary art in old buildings are organized in the space of the historic peninsula. Although Istanbul started to be used as an art scene in the 5th-8th Biennials, it did not have a strong exist in the city. Therefore, it can be said that the relations of these activities with the city have been limited.

Second period/different trials (9–12)

- The 9th biennial gave up the use of historical places and moved its center to today's Istanbul. This event is a breaking point. The 10th Istanbul-Biennale began to see the city as a space of dialogue, and instead of forming a symbolic connection with the exhibition space, it followed a process by which the exhibition audience can also connect with the exhibition space. The 11th and 12th Biennials are organized as museum exhibitions, isolating themselves from the city.

Third period/sprawl (13–16)

- The 13th Biennial withdrew from the public space under the influence of the Gezi resistance movement to create an urban-space for itself. The 14th Biennale, with the most use of space, has spread to the city, turning the city into an open-air exhibition. Therefore, the 15th and 16th Biennials focus on the use of public spaces.

The spread of the biennial venues to the city

- The Biennale has begun to turn into a city tour by integrating various fields. Thus, the Biennale offers citizens a new experience by rethinking the city, exploring the possibilities of the city and different perceptions through travel. Therefore, it can be said that with the holding of the Biennial, the boundaries of public space have expanded, the power has also increased, and even public space has been reconstructed by art.

5 Conclusion

The Istanbul Biennale began on the Historical Peninsula with the theme of contemporary art in traditional buildings, and over time expanded around the city, adding various venues to its structure. The use of venues in the historical

city center (in the Historical Peninsula and Beyoğlu regions) stands out in the biennials. Historic buildings are sometimes used in Istanbul Biennale (e.g., Hagia Irene, Yerebatan Cistern), and sometimes used through renovations (e.g., Antrepo, Feshane). Sometimes biennales are placed on streets and squares to be more visible in the city. Biennale, where inert spaces in cities are reproduced, recreated and added to life through art. Without a stable place, the Biennale began to exploit the potential of the city dynamically, forging a stronger relationship with Istanbul over the years and expanding the area of activity from the center to the periphery of the city.

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