

# Reading the LGBT Movement through its Spatiality in Istanbul, Turkey

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*This article reviews the development of the LGBT movement in Turkey and argues that the existing literature provides an incomplete analysis of the relationship between this movement and the urban spaces that enabled it. We approach the LGBT movement literature with the questions of ‘What is the relation between neighborhoods changing under the neoliberal policies and the LGBT movement? How has the LGBT movement responded to such spatial changes?’. To answer these questions, we divide our article into two main sections. In the first part, we review the existing studies that focus on the LGBT movement in Turkey to briefly present the evolution of the movement. This review demonstrates the lack of spatial consideration of the struggles between the movement and state and society, particularly in Istanbul, where neoliberal policies have enabled significant urban redevelopment. In the second section we develop our central argument, and then discuss the importance of spatiality to understand: 1) The role and power of space in the LGBT activism and movement as an enabler of organizing, and 2) How the community has found ways to not only survive and live but also to create spaces of resistance against the exclusionary and displacing processes of neo-liberal structuring of the city. To these ends, we focus on Beyoglu, Istanbul where the LGBT community reached a critical mass and formed the movement. We focus on the sub-districts of Cihangir in the 1990s before its gentrification, Tarlabasi in 2000 through its state-led gentrification process and Gezi Park Movement in 2013 to understand the enabling role of these spaces and their transformation into spaces of resistance.*

**Keywords:** LGBT movement, LGBT activism, LGBT spaces, spatiality of the LGBT movement, Turkey, gentrification, displacement, resistance

## INTRODUCTION

This article reviews the development of the LGBT movement in Turkey and argues that the existing literature provides an incomplete analysis of the relationship between this movement and the urban spaces that enabled it. In addition, we recog-

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nize the impact of neoliberal policies on the movement and the spaces in which it operates. We approach the LGBT movement literature with the questions of “How has the space been affected by neoliberal policies? What is the relation between changing neighborhoods and the LGBT movement? Has this neoliberal restructuring of space been a concern of the LGBT movement in Turkey? If so, how has the LGBT movement responded to such spatial changes? And in return, has the movement been guided by this process and broaden its scope beyond the visibility, recognition and right struggles in any way in Turkey? We look for answers of these questions in the existing literature of LGBT movement.

The majority of the extant literature that analyzes the course of the LGBT movement has been produced by scholars from disciplines such as gender studies, sociology, and literature. While we acknowledge the criticality of these studies in a worldwide context which often ignores or silences LGBT voices and their need for safe spaces, as urban planners we argue that a spatial perspective is needed to analyze the influence of the urban context on LGBT community growth and empowerment.

To do so, we divide our article into two main sections. In the first part, we review the existing studies that focus on the LGBT movement in Turkey to briefly present the evolution of the movement. Most of the current studies that focus on the movement provide a historical overview of it. Others touch on LGBT activism in relation to LGBT rights and the political atmosphere of Turkey.

In the second section we develop our central argument, and then discuss the importance of spatiality to understand; 1) the role and power of space in the LGBT activism and movement as an enabler of organizing. 2) How the community has found ways to not only survive and live but also to create spaces of resistance against the exclusionary and displacing processes of neo-liberal structuring of the city. To these ends, we focus on Beyoglu, Istanbul where the LGBT community reached a critical mass and created the movement and associated together to form activism. We focus on subdistricts of Cihangir in 1990s before its gentrification, Tarlabasi in 2000 through its state-led gentrification process and Gezi Park Movement in 2013 to understand the enabling role of these spaces and their transformation into spaces of resistance against the exclusionary and displacing processes created by the neo-liberal re-structuring of the city.

To guide our analysis we ask questions of how has the government used “fear of the queer” to manipulate ‘traditional moral values’ as a justification to enable the neoliberal restructuring of the space? We look at the effects of neoliberal policies on the space through a Harveysque lens (Harvey 2008) on neoliberalism recognizing that “in the past three decades (since the 1980s) the neoliberal turn has restored class power to rich elites” (p.32) and highlighting the ways that neoliberalism “created new systems of governance that integrate state and corporate interests, and through the application of money power, it has ensured that the disbursement of the surplus through the state apparatus favours corporate capital and the upper classes in shaping the urban process.” (p.38). In such an environment, urban restructuring occurs

by displacing the poor, the underprivileged and those marginalized from political power, resulting in “fortified fragments, gated communities and privatized public spaces kept under constant surveillance” (p.32). Violence towards physically deteriorated areas is legitimized in the name of civic improvement and renovation. This lens illuminates us for the struggles of the LGBT community in Beyoglu where they lived and also resisted.

## LGBT COMMUNITY IN TURKEY

Turkey, as a religious and conservative country, celebrates heteronormativity and marginalizes same sex sexualities and gender nonconforming identities. The extent of such marginalization is influenced by the intensity of bigotry at neighbourhood scale and the general attitude of the state in the broader picture. Furthermore, the coping mechanisms of LGBT individuals can be enhanced or undermined depending on their class statuses.

After the coup in 1980 and through 1990s, LGTB community, particularly trans individuals were represented in the private media channels within a sexist and homophobic context. These were the years that the initial seeds of the “fear of the queer” were being sown nationally through broadcasting (Gurel, 2017). Although the visibility of the LGBT community was rising, it can only be characterized as a rather negative depiction of the community as a sinful individuals, outcasts and even as monsters. However, efforts and negotiations regarding Turkey’s membership in the European Union (EU) through the end of 1990s moderated somewhat the attitude of the state towards the LGBT community compared to the junta rule years of 1980s. These changes partially enabled LGBT organizations such as LambdaIstanbul and KAOS GL to be established in 1990s, gaining greater visibility and legitimacy in the face of ongoing backlash towards the community. Certainly, the stated desire of the newly established Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002 to enter EU coincided with the agenda of LGBT organizations in terms of enhancing LGBT rights.

Unfortunately the more recent adoption of a series of constitutional amendments in 2010 and 2017 strengthened the position of Prime Minister Erdogan and eventually enabled his transition from prime minister to the president of the country. At the same time Islamist AKP rhetoric has encouraged the Turkish state and society to become more conservative, religious and oppressive. While homophobia has always been widespread in Turkey and homosexuality has been perceived as a deviation and illness by some public officials and the military organizations, today, not only certain types of sexualities but sexuality itself and all its expressions are being perceived as a taboo (Ozbay, 2015).

In the face of such conservative social values, elsewhere in Turkey, Beyoglu with its housing, employment and entertainment opportunities has always been one

of the most accepting neighborhoods in Istanbul enabling the LGBT community along with the other marginalized groups to carve out their spaces (Atalay & Doan, 2019; Oz, 2009; Yuzgun, 1993).

## UNDERSTANDING THE EVOLUTION OF THE LGBT MOVEMENT IN TURKEY

The first visible signs of the modern LGBT movement in Turkey appeared in the 1970s as support groups formed among LGBT individuals in Ankara and Izmir. Unfortunately, the military coup d'état that occurred in 1980 changed the political climate, instituting repressive policies for the LGBT community which delayed the maturation of the movement (Tapinc, 1992; Erol, 2011; Partog, 2012). For the LGBT community, particularly for trans individuals, the coup d'état meant several prohibitions. Effeminate actors and singers including crossdressers were banned from appearing on state television, and gender confirmation surgeries were suspended. The state actively began targeting the community and particularly harassing trans individuals (Gurel, 2017).

The resulting political atmosphere in the 1980s forced the majority of LGBT individuals to be invisible and keep themselves to themselves (Erol, 2011). In such an environment, the LGBT community came together in the hidden or less visible parts of the city such as parks, isolated bars, hammams or movie theaters not only to socialize but also to discuss their problems (Erol, 2011). Due to this need for discretion, prior to the formation of LGBT organizations such as Lambda Istanbul and Kaos GL in 1990s, the LGBT movement emerged as part of the Radical Democratic Green Party which was composed of anti-militarists, atheists, and feminists in Istanbul in the mid-1980s (Erol, 2011; Gorkemli, 2012; Partog, 2012; Tapinc, 1992). The discussion of LGBT rights by the Radical Democratic Green Party publicly opened the arena for the other political parties and in a sense pushed them to present their own standing in relation to LGBT community which could not transcend assessing homosexuality as deviance, illness, and immorality.

While the 1980s might be characterized by the struggle between the community and police oppression that limited efforts to come together as a movement, the 1990s are recognized as the time when the LGBT community began the struggle to form their own organizations. A newly formed queer group called Rainbow collaborated with a queer group coming from Germany to organize the first lesbian-gay parade in 1993 in Beyoglu, Istanbul under the name of "Christopher Street Day" (Yildiz, 2007). However, the parade was banned by the Istanbul Municipality as "contrary to the values and traditions of Turkey" ("Ozetle; Lambdaistanbul", n.d.; Yenilmez, 2017). But, as an outcome of these meetings and exhaustive discussions, "Lambda Istanbul" was established as an organization that sustained its work through gatherings at different locations including the gay bars and restau-

rants that LGBT individuals frequented in Beyoglu, Istanbul. Furthermore, these activists maintained close contact with feminist groups such as Mor Cati (Purple Roof), which were also beginning to flourish in the 1990s and organizations such as İnsan Hakları Derneği (Human Rights Organization) which were located in Beyoglu (“Ozetle; Lambdaistanbul”, n.d.; Yildiz, 2007). During the same period the Turkish feminist movement was working toward institutionalization, although the LGBT movement, despite their efforts noted above, would wait until 2000s to be formally recognized. It was critical for the LGBT community to get organized in collaboration with other groups such as feminists and human rights organizations because Turkish Associations Law which was adopted in 1983 had strict restrictions that kept LGBT community from organizing until it was amended in 2004 as part of the EU negotiations.

Lambdaistanbul was also in close communication with another LGBT organization “KAOS GL” which was in operation in Ankara and started their publications in 1994 (Erol, 2011; “Ozetle; Lambdaistanbul”, n.d.; Partog, 2012; “Tarihçe”, n.d.; Yildiz, 2007). KAOS GL was established with the utopian ideal of “reaching a genderless society” (Erol, 2011, p.449). After the banning of the first pride parade in 1993 in Istanbul, another milestone for the LGBT movement came with a KAOS GL parade that involved in May 1-International Workers’ Day in Ankara in 2001 with banners stating “We’re homosexuals, we’re real, we’re here!”, “Compulsory heterosexuality is a humanity crime!”, “Liberation of homosexuals will also free heterosexuals!” (Erol, 2011, 457). This very public act of the LGBT community received broad media coverage noting that “homosexuals look nothing different than the workers and students in the public demonstration” (Erol, 2011, 457). Erol’s (2011) study suggests that the movement was tending toward normativity and equality struggles rather than demanding radical changes or deconstruction of established identity and institutions.

Although Lambdaistanbul and KAOS GL took important steps and represented the LGBT community, it was mainly middle-class gay men who steered debates within the queer community. It was for that reason that lesbians and trans people felt the requirement to form their own organizations (Yildiz, 2007). As an example, the Sisters of Venus was established by three women in Beyoglu, Istanbul (Atalay & Doan, 2019; Cad, 1996; Yildiz, 2007). They also worked closely with other feminist organizations and helped them to question assumptions of heterosexism and compulsory heterosexuality (Erol, 2011). However, similar results could not be achieved more broadly. For instance, Partog (2012) analyzes the politics of Turkey’s LGBT struggle in the context of queer theory, arguing that feminism and antimilitarism have been major two movements that could more visibly integrate with the LGBT movement.

The turning point in the movement was Turkey’s integration with global neoliberalism under the governance of Turgut Ozal that enabled the development of a broader understanding of civil rights including LGBT rights (Partog, 2012). The

Ozal era came as a transition to civilian rule after the coup in 1980, so it was perceived as a democratization process. Ozal worked to implement liberal economic policies and to strengthen the relations with Western countries which was interpreted as having an impact on both economic development and liberal political environment in Turkey (Ozen, 2013).

Partog (2012) divides the development of LGBT movement into three phases (see Table 1), with the years between 1993-2000 as the period of identity formation struggles (rather than identity politics) of LGBT movement against the norms of society. In this first period of the movement, efforts of the LGBT community were more towards being accepted by the society as 'normal' individuals who are not so different from the rest of the society. Thus, Partog (2012) sees that era as the years when LGBT community worked to accept themselves and to be accepted by the society. Yet, he almost describes that era as a nonpoliticized one. However, unlike Partog (2012) we think the identity formation struggles of the community and their first initial steps to form their own organizations such as Lambdaistanbul and KAOS GL in 1990s, and the resistance of the trans individuals against the police brutality and displacement, were already parts of a politicized process even though the community itself might not be aware of during that time.

After Turkey was officially announced as a candidate for the European Union (EU) in 1999, expectations rose for the improvement of conditions for minorities as well as broader civil rights for the LGBT movement (Cetin, 2016). Thus, during Partog's second period the movement became more visible with public pride parades and collaboration with other organizations in 2000s. All the collaboration with different groups on the ground opened up space for further discussions of gender identities and sexual orientations while academicians also started to work on "identity" issues in this second period. Today, there are two groups of activists and scholars, one of which is tied to the identity politics with the belief that a political visibility comes with it and the other which thinks "identity" itself is a problematic tool of power that can easily be exclusionary (Partog, 2012, p.175).

Partog's (2012) third period begins with a recognition that discussion of class and social rights within the LGBT movement is critical to a deeper understanding of the possibilities of the movement. Partog (2012) harshly criticises the current situation of the movement with its continuing focus solely on identity politics and the discussions of civil rights, and suggests that a queer theory framework is needed to deconstruct the sole focus of the movement in order to include broader radical changes beyond the identity politics and civil rights and struggle for equality. However, during pride parades we observe banners of the participants showing a variety of concerns such as issues of social justice, opposition to oppression of ethnic minorities, and militarism, indicating that the LGBT movement may not be so narrowly focused on their own "identity politics" agenda and undermining Partog's argument. Furthermore, we believe in the possibilities that queer theory can provide for the LGBT movement in Turkey, but we also acknowledge that activism on

the ground and theories in the scholarly work may not resonate simultaneously. In her ethnographic study of activist and non-activist queers in Istanbul, Savci (2016) mentions how the transnational circulation of knowledge on gender and sexuality can create its own disciplinary mechanism and regimes of truth and be exclusionary as well as being emancipatory. We see the circulation of queer theory through this lens. Since Partog's study was published in 2012, use of queer as a word in Turkey has risen considerably. We are aware of events such as 'Queer Olympics' which has been held since 2017, 'Queer Tango' and 'KuirFest (QueerFest)' since 2011. However, the extent to which the implications of queer as a theory is internalized by different LGBT groups and individuals within the movement and activism is still uncertain.

**Table 1:** Course of LGBT movement in Turkey

1990s	2000s	Present (the period after 2012)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identity formation struggles to be accepted</li> <li>• As "normal"</li> <li>• Emerging as part of the Radical Democratic Green Party which was composed of anti-militarists, atheists, greens and feminists in Istanbul in the mid-1980s</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identity politics asking for</li> <li>• Equal rights</li> <li>• Collaboration with other movements and groups such as antimilitarists, feminists</li> <li>• Pride parades</li> <li>• Rising visibility</li> </ul>	Struggles to include <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• class,</li> <li>• social rights (as opposed to civil rights),</li> <li>• (deconstructive) identity discussions through utilization of queer theory in the movement.</li> </ul>

Source: Adapted from Partog (2012).

Cakirlar (2017) explores three documentary projects "Proudly Trans in Turkey (by Gabrielle Le Roux, 2012), My Child (by Can Candan, 2013), and Trans X Istanbul (by Maria Binder, 2014)" as part of what he names as "screen activism" (p.44). He analyzes "the ways in which complex regional and local formations of sexual dissidence emerge" (p.58), using a careful exploration of these documentaries to provide information not only about trans activism but also about the conflicts and the structural violence they experienced in the city. Furthermore, Cakirlar acknowledges the fact that these films in collaboration with the LGBT individuals present an image of cities as not only the place of victimization but also as a space for contention and resistance.

In contrast to the former studies, Cakirlar's (2017) analysis of these three activist documentary projects finally provides a solid introduction to the struggle for space in the city. In response to the omission of a spatial perspective in much of the literature reviewed, the second section of our paper explores the development of the



LGBT movement in relation to an imagined, idealized and transformed cityscape under the neoliberal restructuring.

## FILLING IN THE BLANKS: READING THE MOVEMENT IN RELATION WITH SPATIALITY

Although we can discern the importance of space by reading between the lines of the literature discussed above, we argue that the failure to explicitly discuss the spatial dimensions of the movement remains a critical blind spot. Thus, to bring a new and additional perspective, in this section we explore the (missing) role of space in the LGBT movement (in the literature) from two aspects; 1) Space as an enabler of LGBT organizing and 2) Space as the ground of neo-liberal structuring of the city and reflection of this process on the LGBT movement and activism. We recognize the spaces where the community has come together to organize since the emergence of the movement, by exploring three scenes of cleansing, gentrification and urban transformation projects; Ulker Sokak, Cihangir in 1990s, Tarlabasi Transformation Project in 2000s and Gezi Park Protests in 2013. All three of these spaces are located within walking distance of the neighbourhood of Beyoglu, Istanbul.

### *Beyoglu, Istanbul*

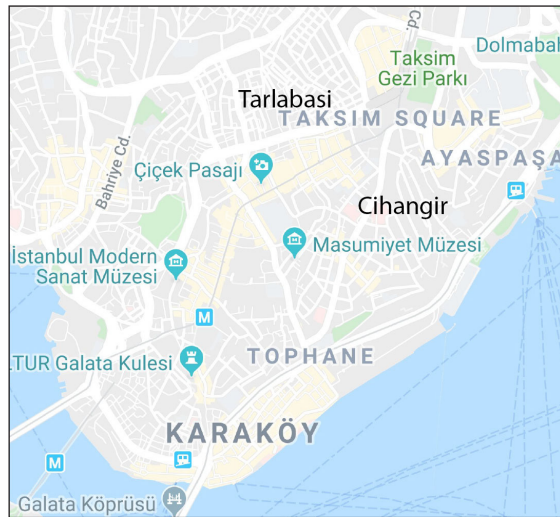
Beyoglu, located at the city center, had always been the cosmopolitan core of not only Istanbul but also Turkey (Figure 1). During the Ottoman era Beyoglu had a considerable number of ethnic minorities and non-Muslim population including Levantines, who were mostly French and Italians; Greeks, Armenians, and Jews (Dokmeci and Ciraci, 1999). However, after the establishment of Turkish Republic a combination of harsh regulatory policies such as the Wealth Tax and social unrest such as the 6-7 September Riots, caused the district to lose some of its multiethnic character until the second half of the 20th century when the abandoned apartments of Tarlabasi begin to be occupied by other minorities and marginalized communities such as Kurds and African immigrants. Historically the district has also been home to the entertainment venues such as bars, clubs, movie theaters, shops, hotels and also embassies of foreign countries. In addition, Taksim Square, located in Beyoglu, is a central gathering space that serves as a destination for both tourists and residents of Istanbul as well as being a critical area for public protests and demonstrations.

Thus, it is no surprise that Beyoglu has always been one of the most crucial focal points for the LGBT community with its relatively welcoming character. The area has not been dominated by a particular group but rather has been home to broad spectrum of the LGBT community including individuals from lower class as well as the upper class, young, old, from different ethnic groups<sup>1</sup>. Located at the center of Istanbul, it provided a wide variety of opportunities for housing, employment,



entertainment, and socializing as well as hosting fierce protests and parades throughout history. A variety of political and human rights organizations also chose Beyoğlu as their locus, including the LGBT community where organizing reached a critical mass and gained visibility over the years. Although these features and characteristics of the district have been referenced in the literature in a general manner, we do not think enough consideration has been given to the role that Beyoğlu has played in the evolution of LGBT activism. For this reason, we want to explore the way several key spaces enabled organizing for the events that triggered and powered the LGBT movement.

**Figure 1:** Beyoğlu, Istanbul



### *Space as enabler of organizing and places of resistance*

Queer theorists and activists often interpret the streets as the most accessible sites from which to call into question heterosexual hegemony. Podmore (2001) shows us that streets are public spaces where, due to the mobility and chaos of the crowd, hegemonic relations of power are never complete. Thus, they provide countless opportunities for haphazard social interaction, transient sense of communality and desire. However, for sure, streets are not the only places where LGBT community occupies, expresses identities and gathers but also cafes, bars, restaurants are the arenas where the community comes together, socialize and organize (Kenney, 1998; Retter, 1997). If we look at beyond the institutionalized structure of the LGBT movement, we can think of bars and beerhouses, movie theatres, and spaces of other organizations as well as parks and homes of LGBT individuals in Beyoğlu, Istanbul as the emerging places of LGBT activism. These places were within walking distance

to each other in Beyoglu and they acted as the first sites of solidarity formations before the LGBT organizations were formally recognized and found stable places for themselves. Homes were places where the trans community lived communally (Selek, 2001); Gezi Park was the place where they were able to cruise (Ozbay, 2017) but also where they were frequently profiled and stopped by the police; movie theatres provided affordable and available arenas to meet and socialize (Erol, 2011); and finally gay bars which usually had gay ownership were available for coming together as a community.

However, these spaces were not provided to the LGBT community as a right to the city but rather were carved out as part of the larger debate about who owns the city (Haritaworn, et.al., 2018). Although Beyoglu has had a relatively welcoming character for the community compared to the other parts of the country, what we see is that all the places in which the LGBT community has lived, passed, occupied, entertained and socialized are also places that have emerged after much struggle and became places of organizing and activism. The Turkish LGBT community found ways to not only survive but also created spaces of organizing and resistance.

Unfortunately the very same places where the LGBT community formed their living spaces, created alternative forms of living, and organized collectively, were also the areas that underwent neo-liberal restructuring. In the following section, we present three different cases of gentrification and urban transformation projects that became spaces of resistance for the LGBT community and added to the activism of the community: 1. Gentrification of Cihangir; 2. Tarlabasi Renewal Project; and 3. Gezi Park Project that led to Gezi protests. To start with, we ask ourselves a set of questions. Does the LGBT movement and/or the scholarly literature take into consideration the role of space as enabler while “addressing systematic marginalization and oppression in and beyond queer and trans communities” (Haritaworn et al., 2018, p.3; Gocer, 2011)? What queerphobic logics derived from the “fear of the queer” strategies (a logic basically saying “society should be afraid of the queer individuals/community”) are at play in the continued pathologization of certain city spaces while confining them as respectable or degenerate in order to prepare the ground for the neo-liberal restructuring (Bacchetta, 2012; El-Tayeb et.al., 2015; Haritaworn et al., 2018; Gocer, 2011; Razack, 2002)?

Our discussion and questions are inspired by the edited collection of “Queering Urban Justice”, Sandercock (1998) and the interview conducted by Kaos GL in 2011 with Mucella Yapici who is the secretary general of Environmental Impact Assessment Department of the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects. Yapici, herself an architect and activist, witnessed the projects that affected the current shape of Istanbul as a member of the Chamber of Turkish Architects. During an interview conducted by Kaos GL about the urban transformations and renewal projects and their effects on inhabitants, particularly marginalized communities, Yapici stresses the importance of spatiality and right to the city discussions in the LGBT activism. One anecdote about a movie theatre makes it explicit who

writes urban history. Yapici describes a meeting about the renovation of an historical movie theatre in Istanbul, saying that “the demolition of a movie theatre was required and legitimized with the fact that it had been one of the scenes of homosexuality and public sex” (Gocer, 2011), illustrating the exercise of “homonormative control over land and real estate” (Haritaworn et al., 2018, 10).

The “queering urban justice” (Haritaworn et al., 2018) framework asks questions such as: “How is the city distributed?”, “Who is left with its costs and benefits? Whose histories of arrival, whose contributions to artistic and political movements are honoured, taught, published, and institutionalized?” (p.215) in a similar vein to Sandercock’s (1998) criticism of the “official stories” of urban planning history (p.2). In the context of Beyoglu an urban justice perspective would ask “what forms of policing-by both state, market and community occur” (Bacchetta et al., 2015, 774) in the name of protecting heteronormative neighbourhood life and their residents? Furthermore, how has the LGBT community responded to these changes? To answer these questions, we address space as the ground of neo-liberal structuring of the city and aim to read the reflection of this process on the LGBT movement and activism.

### *1990s, Gentrification of Cihangir*

Cihangir is located at the south east side of Beyoglu with a view of Bosphorus. As part of Beyoglu, the area hosted non-Muslim minorities in the building stocks that have mostly been designed in the 19th century and early 20th centuries. This district has also been affected by the culture, art, and entertainment of Beyoglu. However, the character of Cihangir as a portion of Beyoglu changed through certain regulations and events such as wealth tax which affected the non-Muslim businesses, and 6-7 September riots against the Greek population in the district that occurred in 1940s and 1950s. Yet, the district still preserved its attraction for diverse communities including the LGBT individuals.

Traditionally many night clubs and taverns located in Beyoglu welcomed cross-dressers to perform and formed an important element in the slowly expanding queer spaces in Istanbul in the 1960s and 1970s (Siyah Pembe Ucgen, 2012). In these places the low key visibility of non-normative individuals was not a problem until the 1980 coup d’etat that imposed new regulations banning the appearance of crossdressers in the bars and clubs where they were mostly working as entertainers. In Istanbul the elimination of night clubs as workplaces for trans individuals forced them to use their residences as both their living and working places in Cihangir, Beyoglu (Selek, 2001). Then, as one of the very first examples of not gayborhood but transborhood, the area would be called as “lubunistan” coming from lubunya which means in Turkish, feminine man or trans female. While trans community created a queer safe space for themselves where there was “room for difference” beyond the “violent surroundings of hegemonic space”, and which was “welcoming to non-normative identities and practices” (Pascas et.al., 2018), this occupation and use of homes in “lubunistan” attracted the attention of neighbours, resulting in an increase

in calls for more policing in the district. And in collaboration with “beautification associations” and neighbourhood inhabitants the increased police presence turned into cruel and oppressive raids that targeted the trans community (Doan, 2010) and the houses in which they were living to displace them (Oz, 2009; Selek, 2001).

This resistance to displacement was a key turning point for LGBT activism after the first hunger strike against the police brutality at the steps of Gezi Park. Long before the Gezi Protests in 2013, the steps of Gezi Park witnessed the first hunger strike of the LGBT community in 1987 against the increasing brutal attacks of the police force, particularly towards trans individuals, (Siyah Pembe Uçgen, 2012; Zengin, 2014). This action pre-dated the establishment of the first LGBT organizations such as Lambda Istanbul in Beyoglu and Kaos GL in 1990s. We speculate that much like gay men coming together to organize politically in the Castro (Castells, 1983), it was the power of trans community living together that enabled such effective protest and demonstration and became the first visible sign of today’s LGBT activism and movement. These first seeds of the activism were planted in the communal style living houses in Cihangir and were carried to the public space with which the community was very familiar. The pressure and the urgency on trans individuals to create their own spaces were both a burden and an opportunity enabling them to organize in alternative and creative ways to answer policing and criminalization. Through sharing space they not only dealt with conflict, but also built critical communities through which they formed their solidarities, worked together and resisted oppression. Although the community was dispersed at the end, they resisted the displacement for a long period of time (see also Zengin, 2014).

Once home to transgender community before its gentrification, Cihangir today hosts, upper class, young professional gays, lesbians and bisexuals along with a range of heterosexuals among the “bohemian squad”.

#### *2000s, Tarlabasi Renewal Project*

Once home to non-Muslim minority population until 1960s, the character of Tarlabasi changed in similar fashion to Cihangir in response to regulations such as wealth tax which affected the non-Muslim businesses and the social unrest that triggered riots against the Greek population in the district (September 6-7). While non-Muslim groups abandoned their neighborhoods, vacant housing stock attracted the newcomers of Istanbul including immigrants from rural parts of the country, Kurds, African immigrants and trans individuals who were mostly marginalized. Although for long years it was neglected, Tarlabasi eventually caught the attention of local and central government who decided to transform the area through an urban renewal project which we see as an example of urban entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989) where gentrification, as a corporate creation form of “capital-led colonialization of urban space with relations to globalization in terms of architectural design, investment strategies, social cache-boosting marketing strategies and non-local global lifestyles” have occurred (Davidson 2007, p.87).

In Tarlabasi city officials pointed to the “deprived” character of the area, labelling it as “degenerate”, “dangerous”, “unsafe”, and therefore “in need of policing” and furthermore planting the seeds of transphobia and homophobia. These government characterizations laid the groundwork for cleansing the district by the local municipality. Subsequently the district was declared an urban renewal area for further development with the release of Law 5366, Law for the Protection of Deteriorated Historic and Cultural Heritage through Renewal and Re-use, the urban transformation project “Tarlabası Yenileniyor” (Tarlabası is being Renewed) (Islam, & Sakizlioglu, 2015). Since both the local and central government were from the same party, AKP, the reconfiguration of the legal infrastructure to implement Law 5366 was relatively easy and in a sense, this process set the ground for broader state-led gentrification. Calik Holding won the bid for the urban transformation project in a public-private partnership with Beyoglu Municipality and advertised the upcoming project as “preventing decay, creation of a new safer, healthier, livable area integrated to the city with an emphasis on the historical and cultural heritage of Tarlabasi.” (Islam, & Sakizlioglu, 2015, 253). The renewal project was legitimized by presenting the neighborhood as a nest of all sorts of criminal activities and through the continued use of the “fear of the queer” trope. As a result of the ongoing project, many local residents were displaced and new developments have been targeting upper-class luxury condo and office clients (see Figure 1 and 2).

**Figure 2:** Tarlabasi, before the project



After leaving Cihangir, the trans community in Tarlabasi was confronted by a more organized structure of state and private sector partnership and their sharp interventions in the cleansing of the area. Trans individuals in this case continued to struggle against the dislocation, and found innovative ways to survive. Although being trapped within the restructuring of neoliberal governance that has been established through public-private partnership between the local government and private



real estate developer which has been drastically changing the character of the district, trans community found their own solution to their housing problem within the existing capitalist system (Misgav, 2016). As an alternative to housing solutions, “The Trans\* Home” project was established in 2013. On their website, The Trans Home is described as “a home for trans\* who currently have no place to stay, trans\* and LGBTIQ refugees and asylum seekers from North – Africa and the Middle East, threatened by violence. The Trans\* Home is a self-created, self-help structure, run by experienced Trans\* providing a safe and sustainable shelter. It supports strategies to protect vulnerable LGBTIQI refugees and asylum seekers.” (“Trans\* Home Project, n.d.).

**Figure 3:** Tarlabasi, after the project



Both Cihangir (Selek, 2001; Zengin, 2014) and Tarlabasi (Zengin, 2014) have been critical sites of radical activism in the wake of gentrification and particularly state-led gentrification. While Cihangir has been one way or another a part of discussions in the literature regarding the LGBT issues, we point out the missing discussions of Tarlabasi and the significant potential of the community acts in the LGBT activism and movement (Gocer, 2011).

### *Gezi Protests, 2013*

The Gezi Protests started as a demonstration to protest the decisions of the city government to turn Gezi Park, one of the few remaining open spaces in Istanbul, into a shopping mall based on a replicate of Ottoman Barracks (Baydar, 2015; Erol, 2018; Karakas, 2018; Ozbay & Savci, 2018; Shevtsova, 2017). Located in Beyoglu, for many years Gezi Park has been one of the cruising places of the LGBT community where they could also practice public sex (Erol, 2018; Ozbay & Savci, 2018; Yildiz, 2007). Erol (2018) argued that “the activism of LGBTQ identified individuals and groups, and their presence in the protests had concerns beyond environmentalism- they contested attempts to redefine the park in neoliberal and heteronorma-

tive terms.” (p. 429). In a similar vein, Ozbay and Savci (2018) also pointed out the historical significance of the park for the community as one of the mobilizing reasons for queer people “to hold on to the publicness of the park in the face of the government’s plans to demolish and replace it with a shopping mall” (p.517). Indeed, protests in the park provided examples of alternative forms of resisting and claiming space. Protestors including the LGBT community set up their tents in the park, spent their days and nights gaining global media attention and receiving support from people throughout the world. Unfortunately, local media represented the protestors as “terrorists” (a further elaboration of the ‘fear of the queer’ strategy), and a threat to Turkish values, well-being and prosperity of the country. In contrast, the Gezi Park protestors exchanged food and water, medical supplies, books and performed free concerts. In these formations, monetary exchange was not a valid form of payment. With reference to Esping-Andersen (1990) and Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006); Ozbay and Savci (2018) described these moments as instances of “decommodified” communality (p.517).

**Figure 4:** LGBT Pride Parade, Taksim Square, Beyoglu, Istanbul, Just after Gezi Protests in 2013



The Gezi Park protests also created a critical space for increasing the visibility of the LGBT activist movement. Pride parades which are held on Istiklal Street in Beyoglu and started with gathering of participants at Taksim Square by Gezi Park reached record attendance numbers in 2013 and 2014 after Gezi Movement, but



have been banned since 2015 (see Figure 4). The banning of the parade is likely because, protests were not only about saving a green area from the conservative-neoliberal practices of the government but also resisting against the ongoing authoritarian regime. This broad-based coalition attracted a broad diversity of protestors including minorities such as Kurds, Armenians, LGBT, as well as Kemalists, nationalists and created opportunities for places of solidarity among diverse groups. When pride parade was held during the Gezi protests in 2013, protestors came from all these diverse groups to show solidarity with the LGBT community and marched with them because they were already resisting together in the Gezi Park.

In addition to the cases of trans activism over the space which we have witnessed during Cihangir and Tarlabasi gentrification processes, Gezi Park protests provide another model in regard with what possibilities gender and sexuality may present against the privatization and heterostructuring of space.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The progression of discussions of LGBT activism and movement in Turkey has changed from the struggle to form an individual and collective identity which might be socially accepted to demanding equal rights and including class and social rights in the conversation. When we evaluate the LGBT activism in Turkey today, we conclude that a majority of lesbian and gay activism still uses slogans of “get used to it, we’re here”, “equal rights” while trans activism fights to gain attention to “hate crimes”, and “trans killings”. In a similar vein, literature on LGBT communities in Turkey centers the identity issues, social problems of the community, discrimination and the attitudes towards LGBT individuals as their main themes. Within the last years, several studies used a queer lens to analyze the relation between the Gezi protests and LGBT related issues. However, we recognize the lack of explicit discussions of the spatial dimensions of the movement both in activist and scholarly work.

This narrow focus on visibility, rights and recognitions is described as one of the limitations of LGBT activism (Haritaworn et al., 2018) and it is suggested that we should push the borders of LGBT activism beyond the “holy trinity” of gay marriage, hate crime and gays in the military (Nair, 2008; Haritaworn et al., 2018, p.13) to include broader issues linked to urban social justice. Achieving this kind of shift requires a greater focus on the “space” which enables us to understand cities as sites of both power and innovative ways of resisting and placemaking as in the examples of Cihangir, Tarlabasi and Gezi Park in Beyoglu, Istanbul. Only then, we can grasp the possibilities of an LGBT activism and movement that makes “space” and “urban justice” as one of its concerns. Beyoglu is one of the places in Turkey, where the LGBT community reached a critical mass and had several key spaces which enabled organizing for the events that triggered and powered the LGBT movement. In these spaces, the community found ways to not only survive and live but also created

spaces of organizing and resistance against the exclusionary and oppressive practices of neo-liberal restructuring of the city at the state, market and community triangle (Bacchetta et al., 2015).

Beyoglu with its affordable housing in Tarlabasi and once in Cihangir, bars, cafes, movie theaters, employment opportunities, streets that provided opportunity to mingle, Gezi park to cruise, being the location of human rights and feminist organizations had critical and crucial place for the LGBT community activism and movement. The activism process which started informally in forms of resistance against the police brutality and discrimination in the neighbourhood level in Cihangir, through the power of space as enabler, opened the ways of organizing formally. Although urban planning cannot go further being a tool at the hands of local and central government to serve the state-led gentrification of the area in Tarlabasi, trans individuals showed the creative space making strategies of the community forming a trans house for themselves. We recognize such activities as the critical parts of the LGBT activism which are usually neglected in the discussions that focus on more organized, formal structures of the movement.

In their study Misgav and Hartal (2019) suggest the urgent need for the queer movement to become reachable not only to LGBT individuals but also to queer victims of the neo-liberal economy along with other groups such as queer refugees and people in remote and rural areas. Yet, what we observe in Istanbul, Turkey case, through the analysis of Beyoglu and three different urban restructuring processes that occurred under neoliberal conceptualizations of the space and effected the LGBT community, is that LGBT activism and movement should recognize the power of the space and its role in the (everyday) resistances of the LGBT community to go beyond discussions of equal civil rights and recognize the different forms of oppression.

## NOTES

- 1 We know the area as a diverse one. However, deeply talking about the class, ethnic and age differences among the LGBT community in Beyoglu would require us to conduct our own field study.

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