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The Role of Local Governments in the Transformation of Public Spaces: The Case of Atakum City Square

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Abstract

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Beyond being physical spaces, public spaces are critical for social interaction and social integration. Local governments have great influence over public spaces due to their authority to regulate, improve and open these spaces for use. Power conflicts between local governments and plan changes accelerate the transformation of these spaces. This article examines the effects of interventions and power dynamics in planning processes on the transformation of public spaces through the example of Atakum City Square. It presents a theoretical framework for public spaces and squares and evaluates how planning decisions and local government actions affect the functionality and social dynamics of public spaces. In the study, qualitative and quantitative methods are combined to collect data through spatial observations, interviews with local government representatives and user surveys. The main findings show that the power dynamics of local governments affect the functional structure of the square and lead to a narrowing of the diversity of activities. Despite physical improvements, social inclusion deficiencies persist. This study contributes to the literature by providing recommendations for the preservation of democratic and inclusive public spaces.

Keywords: Public Space ; Power Dynamics ; Local Governments ; Plan Changes ; Atakum.

1. Introduction

Public spaces in cities are places that reflect socio-cultural, economic, and political dynamics and are located at the heart of social interaction (Carmona, 2010). “By providing public spaces that are welcoming to everyone, cities have the potential to foster a sense of community and belonging for individuals” (Husain & Salem, 2024). According to Carmona, although these spaces are often idealized as open and inclusive arenas for social interaction, political expression, and cultural change, in practice, this idealized conception rarely materializes in daily urban life. He emphasizes that public spaces are not equally accessible to all, often subjected to privatization, security measures, and restrictive regulations. Moreover, power relations and governance processes significantly influence who uses these spaces and how they are used (Carmona et al., 2008). Zoning amendments and planning interventions in these areas may expose power dynamics between local governments and other actors, potentially leading to conflicts.

In this context, the transformation of public spaces is not limited to physical or spatial reconfigurations, but also emerges as a reflection of political and economic struggles waged over these spaces. Especially under the influence of neoliberal globalization, planning has increasingly become a state instrument that serves consumption-oriented spatial production and urban entrepreneurialism (Eraydın & Taşan-Kok, 2013; Peck, 2005; Peck, Theodore & Brenner, 2009). This transformation indicates that planning practice is not merely about regulating the physical environment, but has evolved into a mechanism of power shaped by economic interests and political strategies. Particularly, the interplay between property relations, legal frameworks, and scales of governance has profoundly influenced how urban space is planned, turning urban space into a determinant component of political and economic agendas (Smith, 2008; Booth, 2005).

Within this framework, Harvey’s (2003) concept of the “right to the city” offers an important point of reference. Harvey argues that this right has been increasingly curtailed in favor of market dynamics and investment-driven projects, highlighting that spatial regulations carry not only functional but also ideological and symbolic meanings. While spatial arrangements in public spaces have the potential to foster social inclusion, if misdirected, they can also reproduce social exclusion (Gehl, 2010; Low & Smith, 2006).

In this regard, the transformation observed in Atakum Urban Square is not only a matter of physical restructuring but also constitutes a public space where social practices are reshaped through the interventions of local governments and

the power relations embedded in those interventions. As one of the key public spaces in the region, Atakum Urban Square has undergone significant physical and functional changes in recent years, serving as a tangible example of political and institutional interventions in spatial planning processes.

The planning decisions made by local governments and the power dynamics among them play a decisive role in shaping these transformations. The zoning amendments and physical modifications implemented in the square over time have directly impacted the functionality and inclusiveness of this public space. This situation necessitates an examination of the forms of intervention by local governments in public spaces and the social implications of these interventions.

The aim of this study is to analyze the transformation of Atakum Urban Square—an urban public space—over time into different forms of public use, and to understand the impact of planning decisions and the power relations among local governments on this transformation. In this framework, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

- How have the planning decisions and interventions of local governments influenced the transformation of Atakum Urban Square?
- How have power dynamics and conflicts between local governments altered the square's functional structure and user profile?
- To what extent have the physical arrangements supported social inclusivity and the notion of a democratic public space?

To address these questions, the study employs both qualitative and quantitative data gathered through spatial observations, interviews with local government officials, and surveys with users. Through the case of Atakum Urban Square, the study aims to offer a multidimensional and comprehensive analysis of the influence of local governments on public spaces. Contributing to the academic discussions on the relationship between local governments and public spaces, and shedding light on more democratic and inclusive planning processes, are among the central objectives of this research.

2. Planning and Governance Processes of Public Spaces

2.1. The Concept and Significance of Public Space

Public spaces are areas that meet the daily needs of urban residents and facilitate social interaction (Carr et al., 1992; Gehl, 1996). These spaces are not merely physical environments; they also play a crucial role as social arenas that strengthen relationships among community members, provide open access to all individuals, and enable a variety of activities (Rapoport, 1977, as cited in Ayataç, 2018). Public spaces “are intended to depict scenes of social activities, gatherings and interactions among residents” (Husain & Salem, 2024). Public spaces are regarded as spatial representations of social inclusivity and civic engagement, in line with the principle of accessibility. Therefore, evaluating public spaces solely based on their aesthetic or functional characteristics is insufficient. While Krier (1991:15) defines public spaces as the voids between all built structures in cities and other settlements—offering a physical perspective—it is important not to overlook the social meanings embedded within these spaces.

Theoretical approaches emphasizing that public spaces extend beyond the physical dimension conceptualize them as dynamic social environments shaped by practices and experiences (Lefebvre, 1991). Similarly, Habermas (1989) underlines the societal role of public spaces, describing them as integral components of public life where public opinion is formed and individuals can express themselves freely. According to Habermas, these spaces are essential for the development of democratic societies, as they are where freedom of expression and the right to participation are tangibly exercised.

Public spaces not only strengthen social bonds among individuals and foster a shared sense of urban identity (Carr et al., 1992), but also serve as inclusive and egalitarian areas of social interaction where multicultural structures become visible. In this regard, public spaces represent the spatial dimension of citizenship and reinforce the democratic nature of urban life. As settings that encourage social relationships, they also play a significant role in shaping human behavior (Gehl, 2010).

Furthermore, public spaces are meeting grounds where different socio-cultural groups come together, interact, and where social diversity becomes observable (Carr et al., 1992). With these characteristics, they function not only as sites of physical encounters, but also as platforms where social bonds and collective solidarity are nurtured. However, the increasing dominance of market-oriented approaches in contemporary urban planning, the subordination of planning principles to political authorities, and the influence of neoliberal policies on spatial regulation have gradually weakened the social functions of public spaces (Harvey, 2003).

In conclusion, public spaces should not be regarded merely as physical voids within the urban fabric or transitional zones between structures, but as multi-layered social environments that contribute to the formation of democratic life, strengthen networks of social interaction, and reinforce civic consciousness. Thus, their definition should go beyond physical attributes and incorporate a comprehensive approach that considers their embedded social, cultural, and political functions.

2.2. Local Governments and Public Space Governance

Public spaces are areas open to the access and use of all urban residents, essential for ensuring the economic and social functionality of the city, and typically governed under public or collective ownership (Tekeli, 2023: 106). Local governments are the primary actors in the regulation and utilization of public spaces; however, central government, the private sector, and civil society organizations may also play roles in this process (Madanipour, 2010). Moreover, these actors often engage in power struggles over public space. The management and transformation of such areas is a dynamic process that is particularly influenced by the actions of local governments. Consequently, local administrations

are among the key decision-makers in the planning, regulation, preservation, and development of public spaces (Low & Smith, 2006).

In Turkey, local governments are responsible for the design, use, and maintenance of public spaces as stipulated in the Municipality Law No. 5393 and the Metropolitan Municipality Law No. 5216 (Official Gazette, 2005). However, fulfilling these responsibilities depends largely on local political authority, its relationship with the central government, and available economic resources. Hence, the governance of public spaces transcends being a purely technical process and becomes inherently political and administrative in nature.

Historically, public spaces have been areas of primary intervention due to their symbolic role in representing the power and prestige of ruling regimes, often undergoing transformation with political change (Kürkçüoğlu, 2014: 126). Once local authorities recognize the societal value of public spaces, they tend to create new and attractive spaces not only as physical transformations but also as demonstrations of political achievement. In this regard, investment in public spaces is often used as a strategic governance tool aimed at gaining public approval and demonstrating administrative success (Madanipour, 1999). Nevertheless, in cases of political discord between local and central governments—or among different tiers of local government such as metropolitan and district municipalities—this process may turn into conflict rather than collaboration. Authority conflicts over public spaces can significantly affect their future (Tekeli, 2023: 131). In such scenarios, decisions regarding land use and management become closely tied not only to spatial planning but also to political and economic interests.

In Turkey, the multi-actor structure of the planning process and the blurred boundaries between central and local authorities often lead to jurisdictional conflicts in public space governance. Although Tekeli (2023) and Madanipour (2010) emphasize the dominant role of local governments in managing public spaces, they also highlight that a lack of coordination with central authorities inevitably results in delays and conflicts within spatial planning. The case of Atakum Urban Square exemplifies this: although initially designed as a square, the area was later repurposed as a park. When evaluated in the context of its surroundings, the case reveals how political and administrative tensions between metropolitan and district municipalities have directly impacted the future of this public space. Thus, public spaces reflect not only spatial tensions but also the instrumentalization of planning by political power and representational struggles. In conclusion, the role of local governments in public space governance extends beyond physical and spatial interventions. This process is directly linked to broader social objectives such as encouraging the active participation of different social groups in public life, promoting social cohesion, and enhancing civic engagement. Public spaces function as key venues for strengthening social ties, where individuals from diverse social, cultural, and economic backgrounds can come together and interact (Madanipour, 2010). In this context, local governments shape public life not only through infrastructure investments but also through the organization of social events, cultural programs, and participatory processes. The effective ownership and management of this process by local authorities ensures the transformation of public spaces into more sustainable, inclusive, and widely embraced shared environments.

2.3. Transformation of Public Spaces and Planning Interventions

It can be argued that power is the defining element in shaping cities, and that politics is the primary instrument through which this power is exercised (Landry, 2006; qtd. in Şanlı, 2016). In other words, the physical configuration of cities, the prioritization of certain values, and the implementation of specific policies are all determined by the power relations and political processes among various actors. In this framework, local governments play a central role in decision-making mechanisms, as they determine which public spaces will be preserved, which will be transformed, and how they will be used.

Therefore, the transformation of public spaces should not be viewed merely as a physical reorganization process, but rather as a spatial reflection of power dynamics. Lefebvre's (1991) assertion that "(social) space is a social product" underscores that space is not only a physical entity but also a product of social relations. Similarly, Low and Smith (2006) argue that public spaces have gradually lost their democratic and inclusive characteristics, becoming commercialized and tightly controlled environments. This highlights that the public nature of space should be evaluated not only through ownership structures but also through social interactions, spatial practices, and user profiles.

For instance, the transformation of a publicly owned sports facility into a park by a municipality represents a form of public-to-public transformation. Such interventions are typically implemented through planning processes and are directly shaped by political will, institutional structures, and spatial strategies (Tasan-Kok, 2008). Accordingly, planning interventions in public spaces should not be limited to considerations of ownership; rather, they must adopt a holistic approach that includes multidimensional analyses of function, accessibility, and user demographics.

In conclusion, transformations focused on changes in public functions—specifically public-to-public transitions—must be assessed in a multilayered manner within the field of planning. These transformations raise critical questions such as how the public interest is defined, by whom it is defined, and within which institutional frameworks these decisions are made. As such, a more inclusive and sustainable perspective is needed to ensure the continuity and preservation of the public character of urban spaces.

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Research Design and Case Study

This study investigates the transformation process of a public space formerly known as *Atakum City Square (100th Year City Square)* and currently referred to as *Samsun Atakum Library Park*. A mixed-methods research approach was adopted, integrating both qualitative and quantitative data. Fieldwork included public opinion surveys, interviews with local government representatives, site observations, and spatial analyses.

The study area is located in Atakum, one of the central and rapidly urbanizing coastal districts of Samsun Province. As the second most populous district in the province, Atakum is distinguished by its strategic location along the Black Sea coast, its demographic density, and dynamic urban development characteristics. The area under examination is situated along Alparslan Boulevard, one of the busiest transportation corridors in Atakum, and is also locally known as the *100th Year City Square*.

Atakum City Square was designed and constructed by Atakum Municipality between 2018 and 2019 and subsequently opened for public use. Covering a total area of 9,472 m², it is located within the boundaries of Mimar Sinan Neighborhood, at the intersection of Abdullah Gül Boulevard and Alparslan Boulevard. The surrounding area includes educational institutions, commercial zones, socio-cultural facilities, ground-floor retail units within residential buildings, and other park areas (Figure 1a–b).



Figure 1a. Location of Atakum District and Its Neighborhood Boundaries.

Figure 1b. Urban Location of the 100th Year City Square and Its Associated Road Connections.

The reason for selecting this area as a case study lies in the direct reflection of the transformations in the function of the public space—driven by the changing policies of local governments over different periods—on spatial planning decisions. The area in question has been continuously redefined with new functions through plan modifications implemented by different local administrations across various time periods. These interventions have led to changes in the level of social inclusivity within the space. As a result, the transformation of the area necessitated an examination not only of its physical characteristics but also of its socio-spatial dimensions.

In this study, the physical transformation of the area was analyzed by comparing the spatial arrangements associated with square and park functions. Additionally, from a socio-spatial usage perspective, the way users appropriate the space, the types of activities hosted, and how these uses have evolved over time were evaluated in relation to interventions by local authorities. Finally, the planning policies implemented by local governments concerning this public space were examined in detail, and their impacts on the functionality of the square were revealed.

3.2. Participants

Primary quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to 103 participants. To ensure diversity, participants were selected from individuals present in the study area on different days of the week and at various times of day. Demographic information such as age, gender, educational background, and frequency of park usage was also recorded. In addition to the survey, interviews were conducted with officials from the urban planning departments of Atakum Municipality and Samsun Metropolitan Municipality.

3.3. Materials and Tools

The research materials included the study area itself, relevant written and visual literature, audio recordings from interviews with relevant institutions, zoning plans, surveys, and photographs taken in the field. The data were organized and analyzed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS version 27.0.

3.4. Procedures and Protocols

The data collection process consisted of three main stages. In the first stage, the physical condition of the park and user behaviors were documented through on-site observations. The second stage involved administering the surveys in person by the researcher within the study area. This survey aimed to assess the social impacts of spatial transformation and to examine users’ spatial perceptions, satisfaction levels, and usage habits. It included Likert-scale and multiple-choice questions. The third stage involved interviews with local government officials, focusing on planning decisions related to the transformation of an urban square into a library-park. These interviews provided insights into the interventions within the study area, planning processes, adopted decisions, and implemented projects. All research activities were conducted in accordance with ethical standards, ensuring participant anonymity and confidentiality.

4. Results

4.1. Plan Analysis

This section of the study was prepared based on information obtained from interviews with officials of Atakum Municipality and Samsun Metropolitan Municipality, as well as the relevant zoning plans (Figure 2). Atakum City Square (currently known as Library Park) presents a noteworthy example not only as a case of physical public space production but also in terms of the transformation of intergovernmental power relations, authority distribution, and decision-making mechanisms among local administrations.

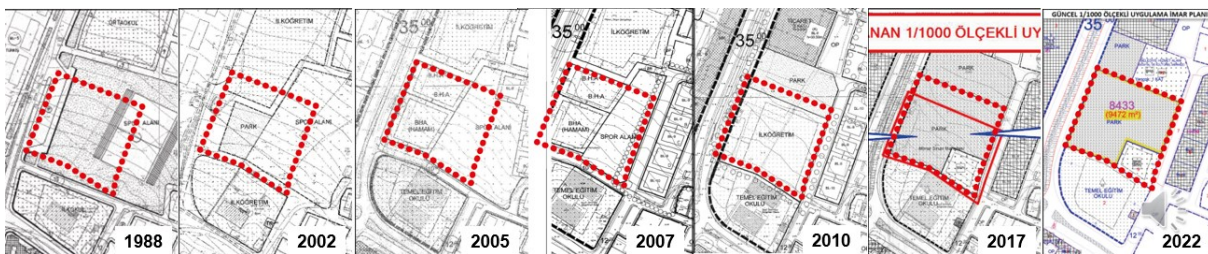


Figure 2. Atakum City Square Planning history.

(Source: Created by the author with plans received from the municipality.)

The area was first designated as a sports facility in the 1988 zoning plan and has undergone multiple plan modifications over the years. These changes were implemented by both district and metropolitan municipalities at different times, each reflecting the political and administrative priorities of its respective period. With the city’s urban expansion toward Atakum, the area’s urban use value increased, intensifying intervention attempts by various actors. In 2002, the area was zoned for education, park, and sports functions; in 2005 and 2007, municipal service and sports facility functions were added. During the same period, development conditions for surrounding parcels were altered, increasing the permitted building heights from three to ten floors, thereby intensifying urban density. Although these interventions were claimed to address expropriation and ownership issues, they drew criticism from the perspective of public ownership and fundamental planning principles.

The frequent changes to planning decisions reveal that the space became a tool of political power struggles rather than a matter of spatial quality. Following the district municipality’s interventions, a resolution passed by the Samsun Metropolitan Municipality Council in 2015 transferred responsibility for park areas larger than 10,000 m² and roads wider than 14.5 meters to the metropolitan municipality. This decision resulted in the transfer of authority over Atakum Square to the metropolitan level.

However, the first physical implementation in the area was undertaken by the district municipality in 2019, designating the area as a “city square.” The same municipality began constructing a monument consisting of 100 columns in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Republic. Yet, this structure was sealed off and later demolished by the metropolitan municipality on the grounds that it violated the zoning plan. Numerous lawsuits were filed throughout these processes. These developments revealed significant disputes between the two local authorities regarding the distribution of authority and responsibility. The demolition of the monument, the suspension of investments, the sealing of the area, and the ensuing compensation claims turned the site into a conflict zone.

Ultimately, a plan revision made by the Samsun Metropolitan Municipality in 2022 designated the area as a park, which was opened to the public in 2024 (Table 1).

Table 1. Planning and Usage Processes of Atakum City Square Between 1988–2024. (Created by the author).

Year	Responsible Authority	Plan Type	Proposed Land Uses	Actual Use	Notes
1988	Metropolitan Municipality	Master Plan	Sports Area	-	-
2002	Atakum Municipality	Plan Amendment	Primary School + Park + Sports Area	-	-
2005	Atakum Municipality	Revision Plan	Municipal Service Area+ Sports Area	-	Surrounding residential area added and allowed higher building heights

2007	Atakum Municipality	Revision Plan	Municipal Service Area+ Sports Area	-	More than 40% of the land was allocated for public use; surrounding buildings increased from 3 to 10 stories; designated as commercial + residential area
2010	Atakum Municipality	Plan Amendment	Primary School Area	-	
2017	Samsun Metropolitan Municipality	Plan Amendment	Park+Municipal Service Area	-	
2019	Atakum Municipality	On-site Implementation	-	Square	First implementation in the area; designed as an open public square
2022	Samsun Metropolitan Municipality	Plan Amendment	Park+Municipal Service Area	Square	
2024	Samsun Metropolitan Municipality	On-site Implementation	-	Park	Redesigned by the Metropolitan Municipality as a park

This process clearly illustrates the lack of continuity and institutional coordination in local-level planning. Planning decisions were shaped more by the preferences of successive administrations and political actors rather than long-term strategies and participatory processes. Each new administration attempted to leave its political imprint, often at the expense of the continuity of public space, while user needs and spatial integrity were largely sidelined.

In conclusion, the case of Atakum City Square clearly demonstrates the shortcomings in implementing fundamental principles such as multi-actor governance, public interest, planning integrity, and institutional cooperation at the local level. In this context, the area has become not only a physical public space but also a stage for administrative and symbolic struggles.

4.2. Physical Transformation of the Area

The area, which was configured as a square in 2019, functioned as a representational public space characterized by extensive hard surfaces and ceremonial zones, offering an open space for citizens. However, following the transformation in 2024, a significant portion of these hard surfaces was removed and replaced with green spaces, seating areas, walking paths, and children’s playgrounds.



Figure 3a. Square status of the area (2019).



Figure 3b. Parking status of the area (2024-2025).

The physical appearance of the area in 2019 and 2025 has been documented through a comparative photographic analysis. These visuals (Figures 3a–b) clearly illustrate the shift in the intended use of the space. While the area functioned primarily as a venue for ceremonies and temporary events during its designation as a square, its identity as a park has prioritized individual and everyday uses.

This transformation also signifies a shift in public space usage from collective, event-based functions to more quiet, individual, and leisure-oriented practices. Such a change can be interpreted as a spatial reflection of how the governing authority redefines publicness and the meaning attributed to public space.

4.3. Survey Findings and Statistical Evaluation

Within the scope of this study, a survey was conducted with 103 participants to assess public perception and spatial usage tendencies regarding the transformation of Atakum City Square into a park area. The collected data were analyzed through various themes, such as awareness of the transformation process, modes of space utilization, and the level of social inclusivity. The findings offer significant insights, particularly in relation to local government decision-making processes, the impact of physical interventions on user behavior, and the social function of public space.

- **Perceptions of Local Governance and Decision-Making Processes:** 35% of respondents stated that they were not informed about the process of converting the square into a park, indicating a lack of transparency in decision-making. In response to the question "What is the most influential factor in the transformation of the area?", 39% referred to planning decisions, 28% to political factors, and 12% to disagreements among local administrations. These results reflect a perception that, beyond planning, political orientations and administrative ambiguities also play a critical role in shaping the transformation. Although planning decisions are seen as the primary driver, the underlying political intentions behind these decisions should not be overlooked.
- **Functional Transformation of Public Space:** Before the transformation, the square was used for cultural events (33%), ceremonies/rallies/gatherings (22%), leisure/rest (14%), socializing (7%), and commercial activities (4%), while 20% of respondents used the area merely as a passageway. This distribution illustrates that the square previously served as a multifunctional public space that fostered participation and social interaction. However, a significant shift in use patterns was observed after the transformation: 28% of respondents reported using the area for rest and leisure, 23% for children's play, and 20% for walking or sports. Usage based on events and social interaction dropped to 9%. The decline from 55% to 9% in social and collective use suggests a substantial weakening of the democratic and political functions of the public space.
- **Social Inclusivity and Spatial Accessibility:** Survey results indicate that the focus on individual-oriented functions such as resting, walking, and children's play has led to a narrowing of social inclusivity. This shift hinders the creation of a shared public ground where diverse social groups can interact. The fact that 20% of respondents still use the space merely as a transit route suggests that the spatial intervention has failed to fully integrate the area into urban life. With the reduction of event-oriented spaces, opportunities for public participation—particularly for youth and communities—have diminished, negatively impacting social interaction within urban life.

These findings suggest that while the physical transformation is generally perceived positively in terms of user satisfaction, the lack of spaces for public events has emerged as a point of criticism. Ultimately, the transformation of Atakum City Square is not solely a matter of physical restructuring; it also reflects a reshaping of power relations and social practices orchestrated through local government interventions within the realm of public space.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study demonstrates that, in the case of Atakum City Square, local governments are not merely agents of physical intervention in the transformation of public spaces, but also political and governance-oriented actors in spatial decision-making processes. The functional transformation that took place between 2019 and 2024 clearly reveals the influence of intergovernmental authority conflicts and political orientations on planning processes. Although the physical improvements to the square were generally well-received by users, the lack of administrative coordination and the decline in functions that promote collective use have weakened social inclusivity. This highlights the need to evaluate public spaces not only in physical terms but also with regard to their social and symbolic functions.

Findings from the user surveys particularly indicate that the space has been redefined through individual-oriented activities, while event-based and community-oriented uses have significantly declined. This undermines the inclusive, participatory, and multifunctional character of public space. The fact that 35% of participants were unaware of the transformation process indicates a disconnect from the principles of transparency and participation in planning. In this context, Harvey's (2003) concept of the "right to the city" must be reconsidered within a framework where access to decision-making is limited, as seen in the Atakum case. Similarly, Lefebvre's (1991) notion that space is a social product becomes more tangible through this example. The question of how public space is shaped is not solely a matter of physical design, but is inherently tied to the political orientations, institutional power dynamics, and temporal strategies of local governments. In Atakum, frequently altered planning decisions have revealed a tendency toward political symbolism and interventionism rather than spatial continuity. This aligns with Low and Smith's (2006) observations that public spaces are becoming increasingly controlled and prone to social exclusion.

In conclusion, the transformation of Atakum City Square should not be viewed merely as a physical restructuring; it also represents a reshaping of social practices, spatial meanings, and user experiences. Planning and implementation processes in public spaces must be grounded in democratic principles, social inclusivity, and long-term urban visions. In this regard, it is essential to strengthen institutional coherence among local authorities, enhance participatory decision-making mechanisms, and approach public space not solely in terms of aesthetics or functionality, but also as a platform for fostering social cohesion. Only then can public spaces evolve into sustainable and symbolic environments that reinforce the shared urban experience, rather than being temporary manifestations of shifting political agendas.

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Conflict of Interests

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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