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## A Discussion on the Urban Identity of Bursa through the Case of The Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater

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### Abstract

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The Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater, established in the 1930s in Bursa, is one of the symbolic artifacts constructed in line with the modernization steps of the Turkish Republic and holds a significant place in the city's urban identity until today. On the 100th anniversary of the Republic, the building serves not only as a performance venue but also as a memory space that strengthens the connection between Bursa's urban identity grounded on centuries-old Ottoman tradition. From this perspective, the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater is discussed as a cultural bridge between the past and the present of the city. Accordingly, the Theater emerges as a living cultural asset besides its architectural and historical heritage significance. Thus, this study revealed that the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater is not merely an architectural structure but a living component of the urban identity of Bursa, contemporarily contributing to the city's cultural and authentic fabric.

**Keywords:** Ahmet Vefik Paşa Theater; Bursa; Urban identity; Collective memory; Republican architecture.

### 1. Introduction

The establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923 brought about grandiose changes in the country's social, cultural, and political contexts. The centuries-old heritage of the Ottoman Empire remained and was sustained elaborately, while the new Republican edifices have rapidly been constructed, primarily in Ankara and İstanbul. At that time, Bursa had a special place in Turkey's ongoing agenda as the former capital city of the Ottoman Empire, which served from 1335 to 1363. Due to its convenient location, Bursa housed the chief commercial roads of the time and became a strategic point on the Silk Road. This way, the city remained a trading center throughout history and became a living stage of grand changes in Anatolia. The proclamation of the Republic became one of the significant ruptures in Bursa, leading to comprehensive transformations in the social and urban structures of the city. As a concrete representation of that transformation, the change in the built environment became concrete symbols that carry the new, modern Republican initiatives with an elaborate maintenance of the Ottoman heritage of the city.

At the historical city center of Bursa, the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater symbolizes the city's double-edged significance. On the one hand, the building remains a significant heritage from the Ottoman Empire; on the other hand, the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater represents the modern Republican reforms intended to be achieved in the cultural structures of the society. While the original building was located at Heykel on Atatürk Street, the contemporary building was built by the governor, Şefik Soyer, as the People's House in 1935 and then enlarged as *the Marmara Cinema* by Edip Akyürek, the mayor, in 1951. In 1957, the building was allocated to the Bursa State Theater as *the Ahmet Vefik Paşa Theater*. Thus, the Theater witnessed the grandiose change of the Ottoman Empire and has remained as a continuous performance venue for the city following the establishment of the Turkish Republic. (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Aerial view of the immediate vicinity of the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater. (Base Map: Google Earth, 2025).

Methodologically, this study is based on architectural documentation and historical mapping of the city and the building to compose a comprehensive reading of the era, enabling to understand the multi-layered meanings of the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater. The field observation methodology is used to enrich the scope of the research and understand the building's contemporary stance in the urban context of Bursa. As a significant supplementary methodological approach of the study, the discourse analysis is used to majorly combine Pierre Nora's *Lieux de Memoire* and Aldo Rossi's *theory of artifacts* within the frameworks of the cultural identity and national identity studies by composing an overall understanding how the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater became a memory space for Bursa and a representative artifact in the urban context, housing implicit meanings behind. Thus, this study contributes to composing the long life-story of the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater as a cultural heritage of the city that has been used for centuries and aims to place a critical edifice in the further studies on cultural sustainability initiatives of Bursa by illuminating new sights into the Republican architecture researches of the city both in the building and in the urban scale discussions.

## **2. Bursa: Understanding the City from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic**

In 1326, Bursa was conquered by Orhan Gazi (1281-1362), and the first settlement was established in Hisar. In the following decades, a wide range of khans, mosques, and madrasas were found in different neighborhoods outside of the fortress, and the city began to expand toward the west-east axis (Dörtok Abacı, 2007). As a strategic point on the Silk Road, the city was rapidly developed and, in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, became a significant commerce and production center on a global scale (Eray & Kutlu, 2021). Accordingly, the city's commercial performance was mainly conducted in khans and bazaars, resulting in an authentic urban fabric consisting of courtyards and a longitudinal trade axis at the city center. Although grand bazaars and shopping corridors shaped the center, the rest of the city was organized by the Ottoman tradition, with narrow streets and dead ends, especially in the housing regions (Cerasi, 1999).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Anatolian lands underwent a grand transformation due to the Tanzimat Reform Era, which brought about comprehensive renovations and modernization steps in every level of life (Enlil, 1999). At that time, Ahmet Vefik Pasha became an active statesman, charged with the Ministry of Education, the Head of Government of the Ottoman Empire, and the governor of Bursa in the 1800s. Accordingly, the urban renovation of Bursa was mainly conducted with the leadership of Ahmed Vefik Pasha, and it aimed to establish “a new and modern Ottoman city” as the new showcase of the Empire (Köprülü Bağbanç, 2007).

On the one hand, Bursa had been passing through an overall reconstruction and modernization process; on the other hand, the city witnessed many devastating disasters, including earthquakes and fires in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1801 and 1863, a large part of the city was burned down, and following that, construction techniques were updated to be flame-resistant, and the use of wood substantially decreased (Kumaş, 2020). Besides the fires, many earthquakes damaged Bursa from 1855 to 1860, and the new city planning initiatives were begun using Western techniques and urbanization methodologies. Then, the Suphi Bey Map was drawn as the first cadastral map of the city and became a template for the city's further development (Kumaş, 2020). Accordingly, Ahmet Vefik Pasha was mainly grounded in that plan, and as the first step of the urban scale renovations, enlarged the city's main arteries (Keleş Eriçok, 2013). However, the new boulevards of the city destroyed numerous buildings, and the integrity of the historical city center was damaged (Keleş Eriçok, 2013). As a significant renovation, Ahmet Vefik Pasha increased the accessibility of Bursa from the other cities of Anatolia by opening expressways from Kütahya and Eskişehir. Here, the construction activities of Ahmet Vefik Pasha could be categorized as the opening of the new arteries, the reconstruction of the historical monuments, the establishment of the new neighborhoods, and the construction of new institutions to concretize modernization steps in Bursa (Aslanoğlu, 2000). While the main arteries were expanded in the city, new institutions were constructed rapidly, including hospitals, municipal buildings, and government offices (Aslanoğlu, 2000). Thus, the Republican era of the city came into prominence with the construction of cultural centers and governmental buildings, which were supposed to represent the new and modern ideology of the Republic, including the People's Houses, theaters, cinemas, and cultural centers. Moreover, the

renaming of the main arteries, such as the Streets of Atatürk, İsmet İnönü, and Fevzi Çakmak, could be interpreted as urban scale symbolization of the new Turkish identity in the centuries-old Ottoman structure of Bursa. In this way, the city represented the multi-layered structure of the modernization and institutionalization after the declaration of the Republic. Hence, Bursa carves out a unique niche in Turkey, besides its authentic character as the strategic capital city of the Ottoman Empire, which has grand commercial and historical value.

Following the establishment of the Republic, Bursa became an urban symbol representing Turkey's centuries-old Turkish identity (Ulusoy, 2018). The grand change in the policy synchronously affected the built environment of cities in Turkey as modern symbols of the newly established government. Accordingly, besides Ankara and İstanbul, Bursa came to the forefront in the Early Republican Period as the former capital of the Ottoman Empire with its centuries-old architectural heritage. The urban planning initiatives were conducted by C. C. Lörcher, H. Prost, and L. Piccinato in Bursa, following their planning commissions for Ankara and İstanbul (Dostoğlu&Oral, 1999). Development in industrialization could also be valued as another significant factor in shaping the new cities of the Republic. In a parallel vein, in Bursa, the establishment of the İpek-İş Factory in 1925 and the Merinos Factory in 1938 can be argued as leading examples of the new industrialized city (Türkoğlu Önge, 2019). As a result of the grand migration from villages to the cities, urban planning initiatives had a vital role in meeting the needs of the increasing population (Sağlam, 2016). However, the earthquake occurred in 1927 and the fire in 1958, the historical region of Bursa was devastated, and a significant part of the city center was destroyed (Köprülü Bağbancı, 2007). Especially after that time, a series of laws were enacted to develop the Republican cities nationwide within an organizational order. Accordingly, the city center was preserved as the historical zone of the city that housed silk trade offices, and the periphery of the area was reconstructed with governmental and public buildings (Köprülü Bağbancı, 2007). In this way, Bursa was reorganized and reconstructed by the Republican ideals, while the Ottoman heritage of the city was elaborately preserved. The centuries-old cultural identity of Bursa has been valued with the careful initiative of the urban planning strategies, and the Ottoman edifices have been protected from the devastating effects of the passing of time. In this way, the establishment of the Republic initiated a new and modern way of preserving the cultural identity of Bursa while improving the city in a modern and Republican manner in every structure of urban life.

### 3. Symbolizing an Urban Identity: The Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater in its Urban Context

As a pioneer statesman, the name of the Theater comes from Ahmet Vefik Pasha, who significantly participated in constructing the Turkish national identity. By making grand participations in the Turkish language and its use in daily and formal speeches, Ahmet Vefik Pasha became one of the pioneers of the newly established Turkish mindset. In order to widely spread his linguistic works all over the country, many theater plays, novels, and academic studies were performed, read, and benefited in theaters, libraries, and public institutions (Sarıçoban, 2018). In this way, the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater has become the first Turkish theater established in Bursa to take concrete steps towards the city's modernization, educational, and cultural development, on the site of the Ziraat Bank at the Heykel Square, today. (Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** The Heykel Square across the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater on Atatürk Street. (Author's personal archive).

The building was used until 1957, when it was moved to the contemporary building, which was initially designed as the People's House of Bursa by Münevver Belen, one of the leading female architects of the Turkish Republic. When the architectural design competition was held in 1938 to construct a People's House in Bursa, Belen's project was selected with its functional and modern plan typology consisting of a cinema hall, classrooms, and administrative units (Dostoğlu, 2002). Following the closing of the People's Houses in 1950, the building served as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Government Office for a short time (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater on the Atatürk Street. (Author’s personal archive).

In 1951, the building was enlarged and used as *the Marmara Cinema* until its allocation to the Bursa State Theater in 1957 as the Ahmet Vefik Paşa Theater. From its first building as the People’s House, the site of the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater became a cultural center for the city (Figure 4). The Theater’s unique education and cultural development focus reflected the Republican ideal. Following its conversion into a cinema and then a theater, the building has remained in use as a living performance venue in the city, with its ongoing cultural activity until today. Moreover, the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater houses theater festivals worldwide as a striking cultural symbol of the Turkish Republic at the center of the former capital city of the centuries-old Ottoman Empire, to this day.



**Figure 4.** The collonaded entrance hall and the interior details of the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater. (Author’s personal archive).

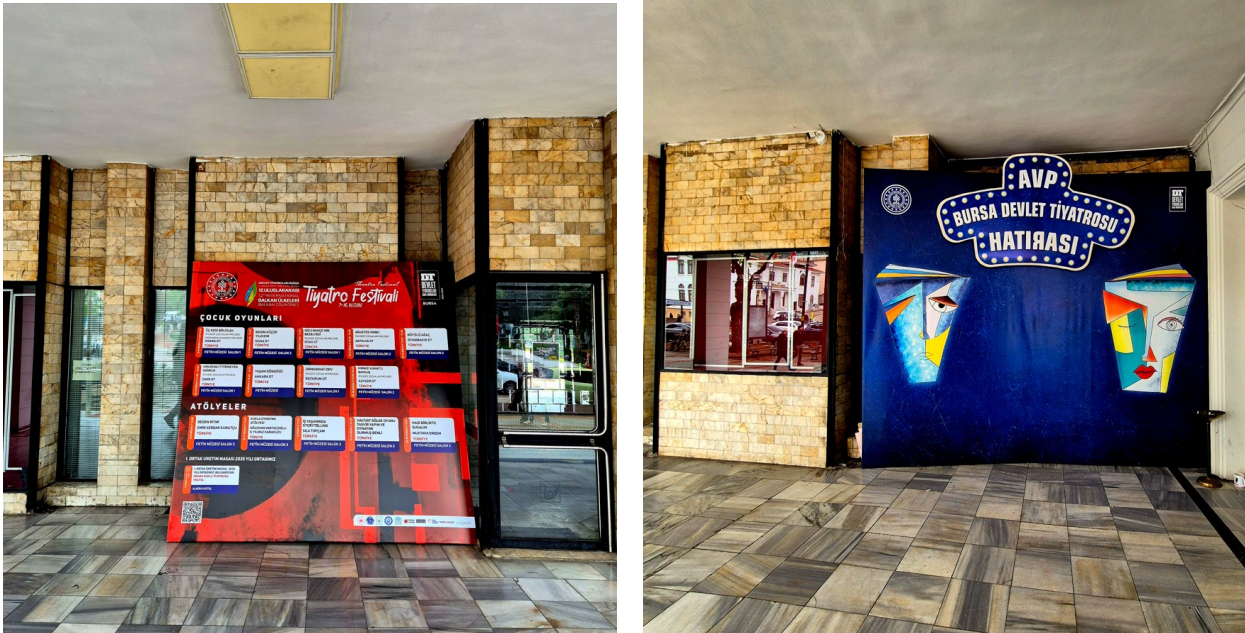
As Castells pointed out, cultural identity and the formation of cities have a mutual interaction with the era's power relations and dominant ideologies (Castells, 1997). Accordingly, cities not only consist of geographical positions or built environments, but the ruling class's power relations, ideologies, and values also shape them. Thus, a city consists of multifaceted relations of society, administrators, and various governmental or non-governmental institutions (İlhan & Ediz, 2019). The historical background and the cultural basis of a city continuously affect the formation of the city in time, and ongoing contexts transform a city's urban form and identity (Ulusoy, 2018). From this perspective, identities are constructed within social, cultural, political, historical, and institutional contexts to generate well-defined communities (Hall, 2003). Thus, identity becomes a strategic composition continuously reconstructed in practical processes in societies (Jenkins, 2004).

Here, cities and the built environment emerge as concrete focal spots in societies to connect individuals around specific values based on customs, traditions, and memories, and provide stages to generate sharing between people by creating symbols of those values. Nora (1984) designates "*memory spaces*" to describe those mediums over spaces, objects, rituals, or symbols. Accordingly, memory is continually constructed with the ongoing social, cultural, or political contexts. In a similar perspective, Rossi (1982) integrates cities into the memory discourse as compositions, which are made of the accumulation of meanings, traces, and symbols concretized in the built environment. This way, *urban artifacts* become permanent elements of cities that are continuously transformed, changed, and gain meaning in time by carrying the city's memory (Rossi, 2006). In a broader sense, belonging could be defined as a representational relation established upon common cultural values and a shared geographical land. Both theories value public squares, monuments, religious buildings, and museums as memory spaces and urban artifacts of cities that carry the memory and identity. As a significant perspective to that theory, Hall proposes that

cultural identity is shaped around and by the collective memories of a society, its architectural spaces, and symbolic meanings (Hall, 2003). On the one hand, Nora asserts that memory spaces are vital stages to protect and transfer identities, and Rossi incorporates urban artifacts as ideological mediums to sustain physical continuity in cities. On the other hand, Hall enhances the discussion by suggesting that those spaces are not frozen and unchangeable. On the contrary, they have alterable and transformative characteristics that can carry various meanings in changing contexts. Thus, cultural identities are valued not as end-products but as processes continuously transformed and re-created by the ongoing agendas in cities. Thus, a city could be defined as a physical space in which social structures are generated and commonly shared values are continually transformed, transferred, and produced over time (Ender Altay, Eyüpoğlu & Bozkurt, 2021).

#### 4. Conclusion

The Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater is contemporarily located in the city's historical center, representing the Turkish Republic in concrete and living terms. The theater's strategic location illuminates the city's multi-layered structure, housing the centuries-old Ottoman heritage and the hundred-year-old Turkish Republic. On the other hand, the architectural stance of the building symbolizing the modern construction technologies of the era represents a new mindset in symbolizing the new, modern, and developed Republican identities of the country. From this perspective, the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater is discussed as a cultural bridge between the past and the present of the city. Accordingly, the Theater emerges as a living cultural asset besides its architectural and historical heritage significance. The building houses international theatre festivals contemporarily and proposes a photo corner for the visitors to physically retain their memories and the city's urban identity. (Figure 5).



**Figure 5.** The photo corner and the poster of the Theater Festival at the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater. (Author's personal archive).

With its centuries-old Ottoman history and a hundred-year-old Republican identity, Bursa proposes rich urban artifacts that could be discussed within those discursive formations. The city becomes one of the key examples with its centuries-old existence in the Anatolian lands as a strategic administrative, commercial, and cultural center. Specific to the study, the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater stays in use as an active performance venue in Bursa while carrying the long life story of the city and its ruptures as a memory space. On the one hand, the building comes into prominence as the pioneer of the Western-style theater culture; on the other hand, it remains unchanged until today as a strategic continuity point in the cultural identity of Bursa. Hence, the building could be valued as a significant urban artifact in Bursa regarding its continual use and unchanged cultural function within the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic. In this way, the building becomes a memory space in the urban context by symbolizing the modernization steps of two different ideologies and stays in use as a contemporary performance venue for each era. Thus, this study revealed that the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater is not merely an architectural structure but a living component of the urban identity of Bursa, contemporarily contributing to the city's cultural and authentic fabric. By actively participating in the city's daily life with its site at the core of the city center, the building proposes focal activity spots with its architectural spaces, theater plays, and festivals regularly held under the national and international organizations. In this way, the Theater serves as a performance venue and a memory space that strengthens the connection between Bursa's Republican urban identity, grounded in centuries-old Ottoman tradition. From this perspective, this study values the Ahmed Vefik Pasha Theater in Bursa as a cultural bridge between the past and the present of the city, which is not only an architectural edifice but also a living cultural asset from the late Ottoman times until today. Hence, the active use of the building over the hundred years transformed the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater into a living cultural heritage in Bursa both its building-scale authenticity representing the Early Republican

architecture and its urban-scale value as a performance venue as a striking showcase of the grandiose progress in the social and cultural life of the city beginning from the late Ottoman period to the modernization reforms of the Turkish Republic which contemporarily remains in use until today.

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### Conflict of Interests

The Author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest.

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