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Questioning Publicness Through Architectural Form: The Case of Atatürk Cultural Center

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Abstract

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This research explores the spatial production of publicness in Istanbul's Beyoğlu district after 2010 urban transformations. The study examines how contemporary cultural nodes mediate the shifting perceptions of publicness amidst the tension between architectural intentions, institutional management, and everyday social practices. By utilizing Henri Lefebvre's spatial triad (conceived, perceived, and lived space), the research interprets literature-derived publicness criteria through a qualitative lens. The Atatürk Cultural Center (AKM) is examined as a case study to uncover the relationship between its spatial configuration, management-driven institutional publicness, and the lived reality of its users. By examining the multi-layered thresholds of the node, the research explores how design choices and administrative protocols influence civic interaction and the realization of public life. This evaluation offers a critical perspective on contemporary cultural spaces in Istanbul, contributing to the academic discourse on the evolving and contested nature of urban publicness.

Keywords: Publicness, Spatial Triad, Urban Threshold, Institutionalized Publicness.

1. Introduction

The concept of publicness in contemporary architecture has evolved. It is no longer defined by simple accessibility. Instead, it has become a contested terrain. In this space, design intentions, institutional protocols, and social practices intersect. Under global neoliberal urbanism, cultural buildings are used as tools for urban branding. This creates a significant paradox. Architectural forms may appear transparent, but the social realities within them remain strictly controlled. This paper investigates the spatial production of publicness within Istanbul's post-2010 urban landscape, focusing on the Atatürk Cultural Center (AKM) as a pivotal node. This study has adopted a qualitative research design to examine the publicness of space within a multi-layered structure. The methodological process consists of three main stages: First, to operationalize the publicness debates in the literature, an indicator distillation study was conducted using 44 peer-reviewed articles selected from the Scopus database; the 18 identified indicators were classified into five dimensions (spatial-physical, management-political, social-user, cultural-aesthetic, and sustainability-environment). In the second stage, a structured 'walkthrough observation' sheet, developed based on these dimensions, was applied during four site visits covering different time periods at the AKM. In the final stage, the empirical data obtained from the field were analyzed through the lens of Lefebvre's spatial triad (conceived, perceived, lived), critically examining the tensions between the promise of architectural transparency and administrative control mechanisms through a dialectical reading.

1.1. Background and Context

Urban space is more than a physical assembly of forms. Following Henri Lefebvre (1991), it is a dynamic field of social production. Here, political strategies and everyday practices constantly interact. Cultural nodes act as the primary sites where this tension becomes visible. According to Habermas (1989), these structures represent democratic transparency and the potential for social encounters.

Taksim Square stands as the focal point of Istanbul's urban morphology, where social movements and public representation are most strongly felt. Zeybekoglu Sadri (2017) defines the "scale" of this square beyond its physical dimensions, interpreting it as a profound symbol of urban publicness. However, this symbolic scale is inextricably linked to the physical restructuring of the city. As Bozdoğan and Güner (2024) observe through the "palimpsest phenomenon," the morphological evolution of Istanbul's major routes and centers often involves a process of overwriting historical layers with new urban narratives. In this context, the new Atatürk Cultural Center (AKM) project emerges not merely as a standalone structure but as a pivotal element in the ongoing morphological restructuring of the Taksim-Beyoğlu axis.

The Beyoğlu district, traditionally the heart of Istanbul's collective memory, underwent a significant transformation following the 2010 European Capital of Culture process. This period marked a threshold where spatial production was increasingly influenced by neoliberal urban policies characterized by the privatization of cultural infrastructure and market-oriented spatial governance. Consequently, the historical fabric of Beyoğlu has been increasingly integrated into global market narratives. AKM is a monumental symbol within this context, positioned at the intersection of architectural legacy and the contemporary realities of institutional spatial management.

1.2. Problem Statement and Research Gap

While 21st-century global urbanization policies reconfigure cultural structures with the promise of "opening them to the city" and "revitalization," they lead to a paradoxical transformation in the quality of publicness. Within this framework, Neil Smith (2002) noted in his discussions on the "revanchist city," urban regeneration projects often use culture as a tool for gentrification, paving the way for the privatization and surveillance of public space. The spaces produced in this process may offer democratic promises such as "transparency" and "accessibility" at the architectural shell level, while leading to forms of publicness that are restricted in terms of ownership and management.

Current architectural literature often addresses contemporary cultural nodes like AKM through restoration techniques, conservation principles, or design aesthetics. However, studies that methodically examine the qualitative tension between the claim of openness offered through architectural form and the institutional management practices that discipline this space remain limited. This gap in the literature necessitates a critical engagement of Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* (1991) and its triadic conceptualization (conceived, perceived, lived) with contemporary urban reality. Positioning AKM beyond its function as an opera house offers a critical perspective for understanding the evolving nature of urban publicness.

1.3. Objectives and Research Questions

This research examines the spatial publicness of the Atatürk Cultural Center (AKM). In this context, it investigates the relationship between architectural design intentions, observed spatial practices, and user behaviors, while exploring the tensions between spatial intent and social reality. By examining the building as both a material object and a social construct, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do the multidimensional publicness criteria, synthesized from contemporary global literature, manifest within the physical and social layers of Atatürk Cultural Center?

RQ2: Is there a perceptible tension between the architect's "conceived" vision of transparency and the actual "lived" spatial experience encountered by the urban public?

RQ3: To what degree do institutional management protocols and physical barriers redefine or restrict the public boundaries originally suggested by the building's architectural form?

1.4. Significance and Structure of the Paper

The originality of this study lies in its focus on the complex relationship between architectural form and publicness, offering a critical re-evaluation of contemporary cultural buildings that are often addressed through design-oriented frameworks in architectural literature. Rather than treating Lefebvre's spatial dialectic as a conceptual reference, the study mobilizes it as an analytical framework to examine the relationship between architectural space and everyday practices. This approach enables a multi-layered investigation that brings together architectural form, institutional control, and user experience. The paper adopts a hybrid methodology combining qualitative field observations, based on architectural walkthroughs and analytical sketches, with a structured evaluative matrix of publicness criteria. Through this approach, the study aims to critically assess how spatial design and institutional frameworks shape the conditions of public life.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 presents the methodology, including the literature-derived five-dimensional publicness matrix and the field protocol. Section 3 reports the findings of the Publicness Audit, organized through Lefebvre's three spatial layers. Section 4 discusses the synthesis of findings, comparison with previous studies, strengths and limitations, and implications. Section 5 concludes with a summary, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Study Design and Setting

The methodology of this research is structured as a qualitative spatial evaluation, designed to analyze the Atatürk Cultural Center (AKM) through a systematic "Publicness Audit." The process began with a thematic literature review of 44 peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2026, identified via Scopus. Articles were included if they explicitly addressed publicness, accessibility, spatial use, management, or user experience in relation to cultural buildings or urban public facilities, and excluded if they focused solely on technical conservation, structural performance, or historical description without an evaluative publicness dimension.

The search combined keywords describing publicness in cultural buildings ("publicness dimensions," "publicness criteria," "publicness indicators," "evaluation criteria for publicness," "publicness metrics") with the boolean operator AND, and intersected with building-type keywords ("cultural building" OR "theatre" OR "opera house") together with the post-occupancy lens ("post-occupancy evaluation"). From this corpus, 18 distinct publicness indicators were distilled and organized into five interdependent dimensions (e.g., Aykutlar et al., 2021; Carmona, 2010; Chen et al., 2025; Huang et al., 2025; Imam et al., 2023; Lopes et al., 2019; Mantey, 2017; Mehta, 2014; Mejía Gómez & Segovia Cueva, 2025; Oh et al., 2023; Xiao et al., 2024): (1) Spatial-Physical, (2) Social-User, (3) Management-Political, (4) Sustainability-Environmental, and (5) Cultural-Aesthetic. Where indicators with overlapping definitions appeared in different sources

(e.g., "physical accessibility" and "barrier-free entry"), they were merged under a single canonical label and counted once. The summarized dimensions and the supporting literature that form the basis of this audit are detailed in Table 1. This research uses these dimensions as a primary framework for direct on-site observations. Field observation allows for a critical comparison between the "conceived" architectural intentions and the "lived" reality of the building's operations. By interpreting AKM's spatial performance through these five thematic lenses, the study evaluates how administrative protocols, physical connectivity, and collective memory intersect within the contemporary management of the site.

Table 1. Five-Dimensional Publicness Matrix and Literature Framework.

Dimension	Key Criteria and Indicators	Supporting References (Selected)
1. Spatial & Physical	Accessibility, Physical Configuration, Functional Performance, Multifunctionality	Kim & Park (2025); Varna & Tiesdell (2010); Mauricio & Chuquipoma (2025)
2. Social & User	Inclusiveness, Social Interaction, Diversity of Users, Diversity of Activities, User Satisfaction, Sense of Belonging	Mehta (2014); Mantey (2017)
3. Management & Political	Management Protocols, Ownership, Public Engagement, Economic and Social Equity	Li et al. (2022); Kimmel et al. (2020); Wang et al. (2025)
4. Sustainability & Environment	Environmental Quality, Wayfinding	Lee & Seo (2023)
5. Cultural & Aesthetic	Aesthetic Value, Civility	Bozdoğan & Gürer (2024)

2.2. Evaluation Framework and Fieldwork Instruments

The analytical toolkit developed for the Publicness Audit of AKM comprises an integrated set of instruments designed to capture the interplay between architectural performance and institutional management. Central to this toolkit is the Systematic Evaluation Matrix, which was synthesized from the literature review to establish a standardized benchmark across the five dimensions previously defined.

This theoretical foundation was operationalized during fieldwork through a Qualitative Observation Sheet, a tool used by the researcher to record circulation hierarchies, define spatial thresholds, and document the impact of institutional filters. To ensure every observation is grounded in the building's actual geometry, these findings were superimposed onto architectural floor plans and sections through annotated analytical sketches. This spatial mapping process allows for the systematic identification of physical barriers and behavioral patterns, facilitating a critical comparison between the "conceived" transparency of the design and the "lived" reality of the site's current operations.

Fieldwork was conducted during four site visits between February 2026 and April 2026, distributed deliberately across different operational states of the building: a weekday morning (low programmatic load), a weekday evening before an opera performance, a Saturday afternoon (peak visitor flow), and a Sunday evening. This distribution was intended to surface variation in the building's lived publicness across temporal and operational regimes, on the assumption that publicness is not a static property but is co-produced with use.

2.3. Research Procedure and Spatial Analysis

The research protocol was executed in three sequential phases to ensure a robust qualitative evaluation, summarized in Figure 1. In Phase I (Theoretical Synthesis), the five-dimensional publicness matrix was established through the structured thematic literature review. Phase II (Qualitative Field Protocol) involved a systematic architectural walkthrough and on-site documentation. During this stage, the researcher recorded the physical performance of AKM, focusing on visual permeability, threshold definitions, and the impact of institutional filters through analytical sketches and field notes. In Phase III (Data Integration), these field observations were synthesized to evaluate the alignment between the building's design intent and its operational reality, and consolidated in the audit matrices presented in Section 3 (Tables 3–5).

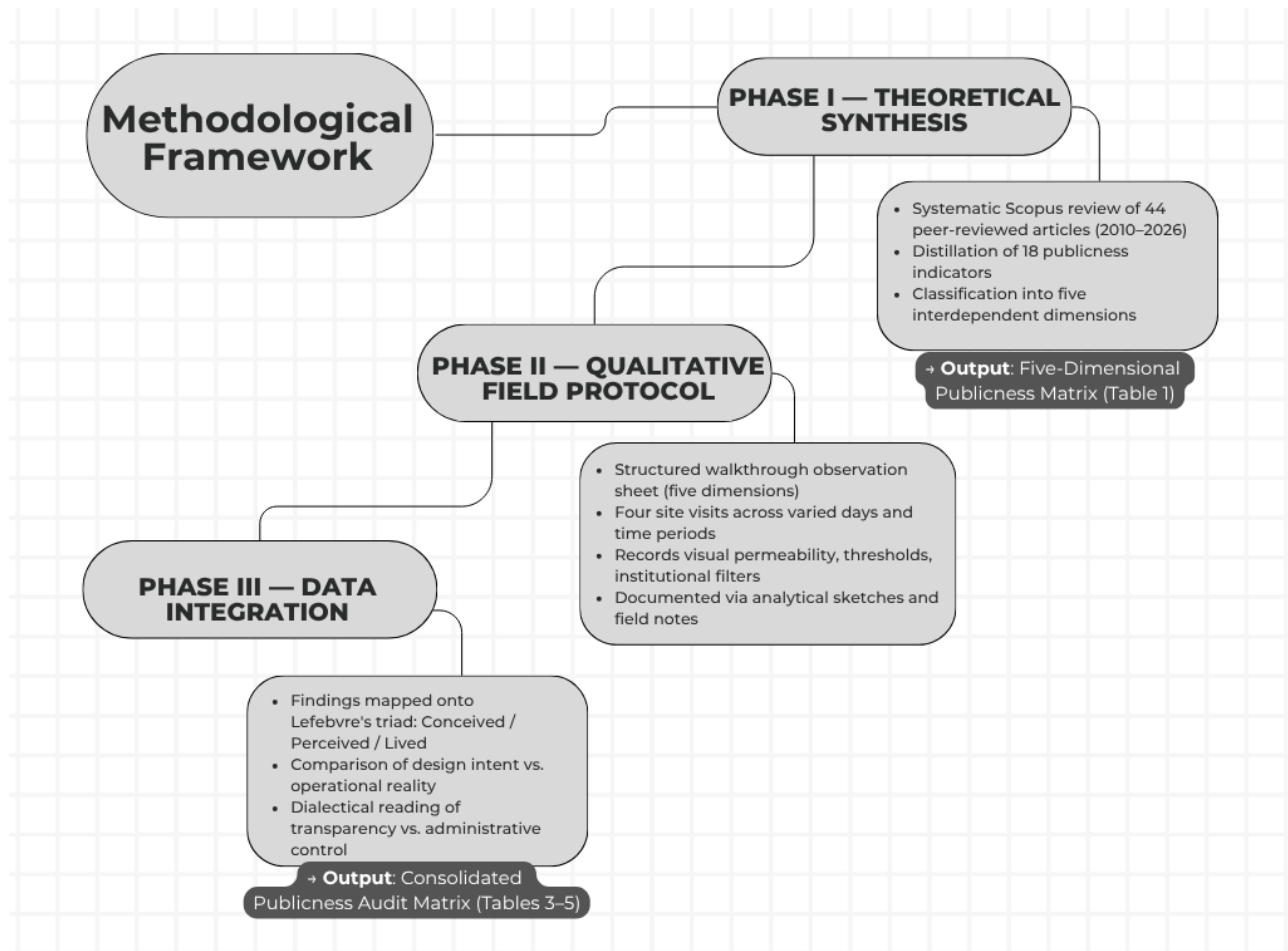


Figure 1. Methodological framework of the three-phase Publicness Audit (produced by the author, 2026).

To operationalize this framework, the analysis adopts Lefebvre's spatial triad (1991) as its primary substrate:

- **Conceived Space (Representations of Space):** analyzed through architectural floor plans, sections, and analytical sketches to identify the designer's initial goals regarding transparency and public invitation.
- **Perceived Space (Spatial Practice):** documented through the Qualitative Observation Sheet, focusing on circulation hierarchies, physical barriers, and the impact of management protocols on daily movement.
- **Lived Space (Spaces of Representation):** interpreted by superimposing the researcher's professional observations of user appropriation, dwelling, and avoidance. This process identifies the spatial friction between the intended openness of the cultural center and the restrictive nature of institutional control.

This study adopts a pragmatic operationalization of Lefebvre's triad, mapping each dimension to the data source most likely to surface it. The mapping is not intended as a strict ontological partition. Lefebvre's three moments are dialectically entangled, and any single dimension—say, environmental quality—may belong simultaneously to design intent (conceived), to spatial practice (perceived), and to bodily experience (lived). The mapping in Table 2 should therefore be read as an analytical entry point rather than an exhaustive partition.

By utilizing this layered approach, the research ensures that every qualitative finding is grounded in the building's actual geometry and verified through the lens of the established publicness indicators.

Table 2. Methodological Alignment of Research Questions and Data Collection Tools.

Lefebvre's Layer	Research Dimensions	Criteria	Data Source	Analysis Focus
Conceived	Spatial-Physical & Cultural-Aesthetic	Accessibility, Physical Configuration, Functional Performance, Multifunctionality, Aesthetic Value, Civility	Plans, Sections, Analytical Sketches	Architectural Intent & Transparency
Perceived	Management-Political & Sustainability-Environment	Management Protocols, Ownership, Public Engagement, Economic and Social Equity, Environmental Quality, Wayfinding	Walkthrough Observation Sheet	Control, Filters & Spatial Practice
Lived	Social-User	Inclusiveness, Social Interaction, Diversity of Users, Diversity of Activities, User Satisfaction, Sense of Belonging	Field Observation & POE Indicators	Sense of Belonging & Appropriation

3. Results

This section presents the findings of the Publicness Audit conducted at the Atatürk Cultural Center (AKM). The results are organized through Lefebvre's three spatial layers (conceived, perceived, lived) and read across the five publicness dimensions established in Section 2. A consolidated rating of all indicators is presented in Tables 3–5 at the end of this section, providing a transparent record of the audit's qualitative judgments.

3.1. Conceived Space: Spatial and Cultural Dimensions

In the framework of Lefebvre's spatial triad, the Conceived Space represents the "representations of space"—the conceptualized, planned, and ideated vision of the architects. This sub-section analyzes AKM through six indicators that decode the designer's intent and the building's spatial ambitions.

3.1.1. Accessibility and Physical Configuration

The architectural intent focuses on integrating the building with Taksim Square by extending the urban fabric into the interior. The Kültür Sokağı ("Culture Street") axis is designed as a physical continuation of the square, aiming for a seamless transition between the exterior urban void and the interior cultural volume. Stepped access is paired with a ramp on the left flank to maintain barrier-free entry, and lifts and escalators are integrated throughout the level changes along the spine. As recorded in Figure 2, the threshold between square and atrium is articulated as a low, distributed edge rather than a monumental plinth, which is a clear declaration of conceptual openness.

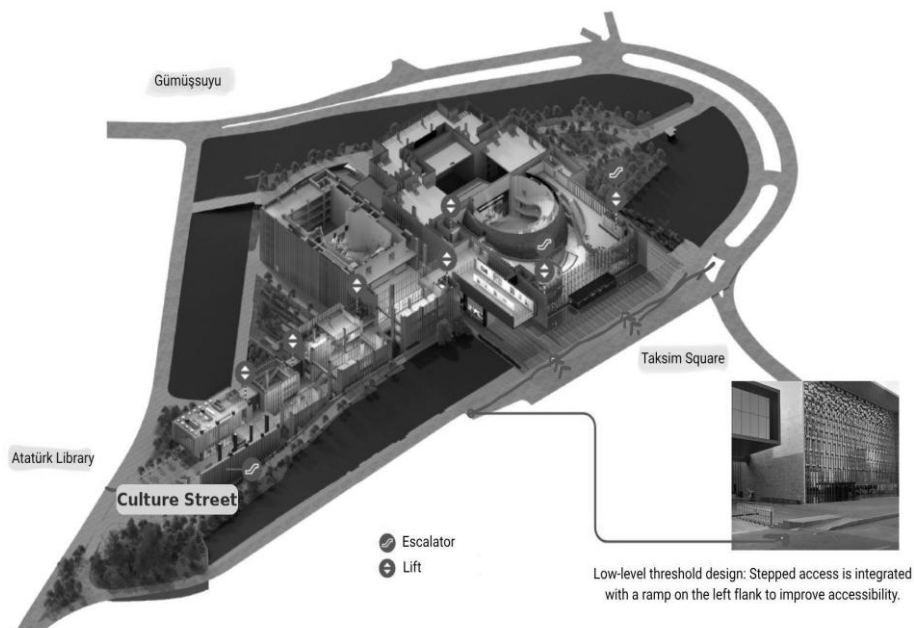


Figure 2. Accessibility analysis (Dalgali, 2026) on AKM layout plan (Akmistanbul, n.d.).

However, this intended continuity is fundamentally challenged by the operational fragmentation encountered during vertical circulation. An examination of the basement floor plans reveals that the elevator cores serving the lower levels open directly into the parking garage zone (Levels B3–B4), requiring re-entry through a separate security sequence to

access the cultural program. This configuration transforms a routine level change into a programmatic interruption, structurally undermining the continuous spine envisioned by the Culture Street concept. Furthermore, as shown in Figure 3, the multi-story library section reveals a significant gap in barrier-free continuity: the upper gallery levels lack a dedicated lift connection, placing them outside the accessible vertical circulation network. These sectional decisions indicate that the barrier-free language of the primary axis does not extend consistently through the building's full depth, subordinating inclusive access to the formal priorities of the monumental entrance sequence.



Figure 3. Photographs from the library (produced from field documentation by the author, 2026).

3.1.2. Programmatic Complexity and Multifunctionality

The spatial configuration of AKM is characterized by a high degree of multifunctionality. As evidenced in the programmatic section (Figure 4), the building is not a singular theater but a complex cultural node housing an opera house, library, gallery, exhibition halls, recording studios, restaurant, cafes, and retail. The architect organizes these functions through a stratified strategy that separates them programmatically while maintaining visual dialogue through the central atrium and the Culture Street spine.

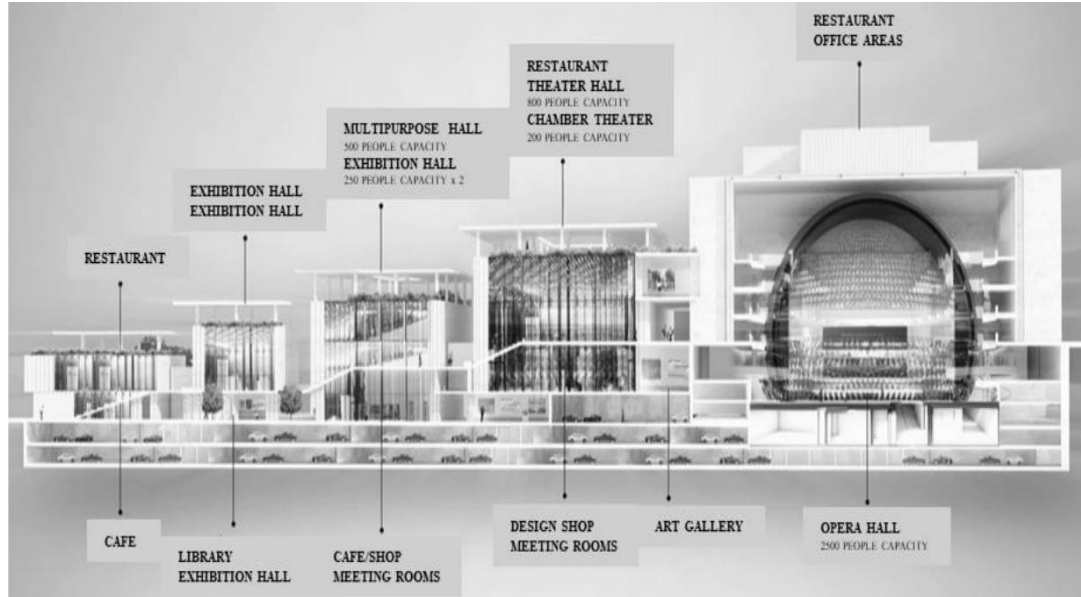


Figure 4. Section showing the spatial layout of the new AKM building (Adapted from Şahin Diri & Bekar, 2025).

3.1.3. Cultural Publicness and Aesthetic Value

The aesthetic value of AKM is rooted in its symbolic representation. The iconic red ceramic sphere of the Opera House serves as the heart of the project, visible from the square through a high-transparency glass facade (Figure 5). This design choice functions as a symbolic invitation, aiming to project the building's cultural prestige onto the urban stage. The preservation of the original facade's rhythm ensures historical continuity, reinterpreting the architectural DNA of the 1969 structure.

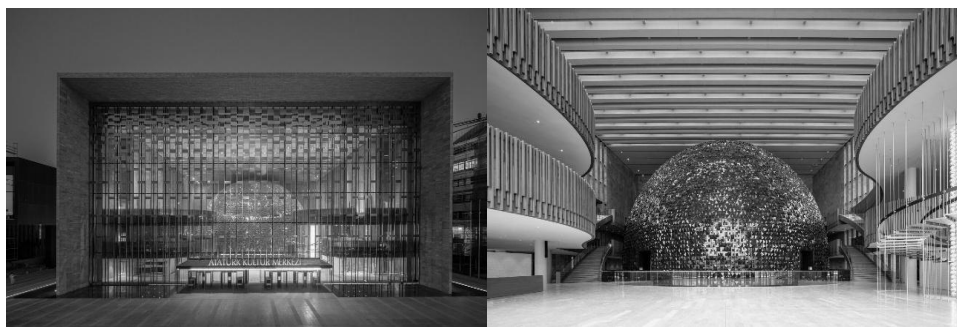


Figure 5. (a) AKM facade photograph; (b) red ceramic sphere of the Opera House (Akmistanbul, n.d.).

3.1.4. Security and Civility

The design incorporates security protocols as administrative thresholds integrated into the entrance sequence rather than as freestanding barriers. The civility of the space is intended to be modulated by its high-end material palette and monumental scale; the prestigious environment is designed to project a register of cultural seriousness.

3.1.5. Functional Performance

Beyond its artistic mission, the building's functional performance is grounded in technical excellence, including acoustic isolation of the halls and the thermal refuge provided by the foyers. The intended physical configuration creates a sheltered urban oasis for the public, protecting them from extreme weather conditions while maintaining a visual link to the city. The Perceived analysis examines whether this oasis is actually delivered.

3.2. Perceived Space: Administrative, Operational, and Environmental Realities

While the Conceived Space focuses on architectural intent, the Perceived Space examines actual spatial practice: how the building is managed, who controls its narrative, and how it performs environmentally. This sub-section analyzes the gap between AKM's statutory publicness and its operational reality.

3.2.1. Management, Ownership, and Public Engagement

High-security protocols and institutional control characterize the management of AKM. Although the building is legally a public asset, the sense of ownership is mediated by mandatory security checkpoints at every main entrance (*see Figure 6*). Field observations across the four visits suggest that these filters transform the public from "right-holders" into "visitors," limiting spontaneous engagement. The institutional atmosphere, while prestigious, creates an invisible barrier that appears to favor visitors already familiar with formal cultural settings, resulting in a user profile that is more visitor- and event-oriented than broadly everyday urban.

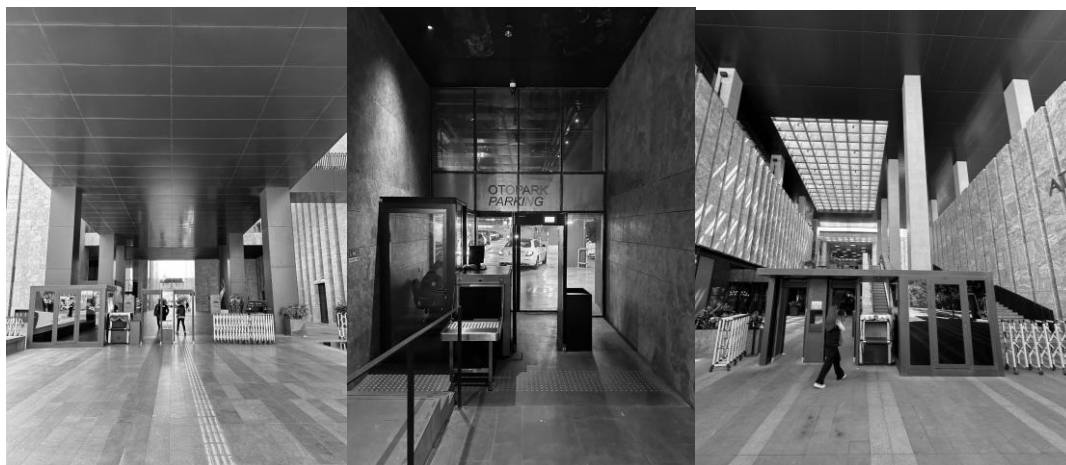


Figure 6. Security thresholds at the AKM entrance sequence (produced from field documentation by the author, 2026).

3.2.2. Economic and Social Equity

The audit reveals a tension in social equity. While the program includes free-access areas such as the library and the ground-floor lobby, the overall experience is calibrated toward a specific demographic. The prestigious material palette and high-culture branding act as a socio-economic filter. As a result, the building appears to offer a limited form of socio-demographic inclusivity. Rather than fully absorbing the broader everyday public of Taksim and adjacent neighborhoods, it tends to support a more selective and culturally oriented pattern of use.

3.2.3. Environmental Quality and Sustainability

AKM demonstrates high environmental quality in terms of thermal and acoustic comfort within the main halls. However, the architectural orientation toward the prevailing northeasterly winds creates a significant micro-climatic challenge. Culture Street axis acts as a wind corridor, where high-velocity drafts intersect directly with designated waiting and social

interaction zones. This 'wind tunnel effect' discourages stationary activities, forcing the public into a mode of rapid transition rather than civic engagement.

3.2.4. Navigation and Wayfinding

The assessment of the building's internal navigation reveals a legibility gap. Although signage is physically present near primary circulation nodes (elevators and grand staircase), essential amenities such as restrooms lack immediate visual clarity. The need for verbal inquiry to navigate secondary spaces indicates that wayfinding is not intuitive, forcing a reliance on staff assistance rather than autonomous spatial experience. This is a subtle but consequential restriction on publicness, since autonomous movement is a precondition for the unscripted and unsupervised forms of inhabitation that support more inclusive public life.

3.2.5. Synthesis of Perceived Realities

As a comprehensive summary of the perceived dimension, Figure 7 maps the intersection of administrative, operational, and environmental factors at AKM. The diagram visualizes how the continuous architectural axis of Culture Street is fragmented in daily practice by the interplay between micro-climatic conditions (the wind corridor effect) and institutional filters (security thresholds). By categorizing the space into high, medium, and low publicness ratings, this synthesis illustrates the gap between the building's statutory openness and the restricted lived reality produced by operational regimes.

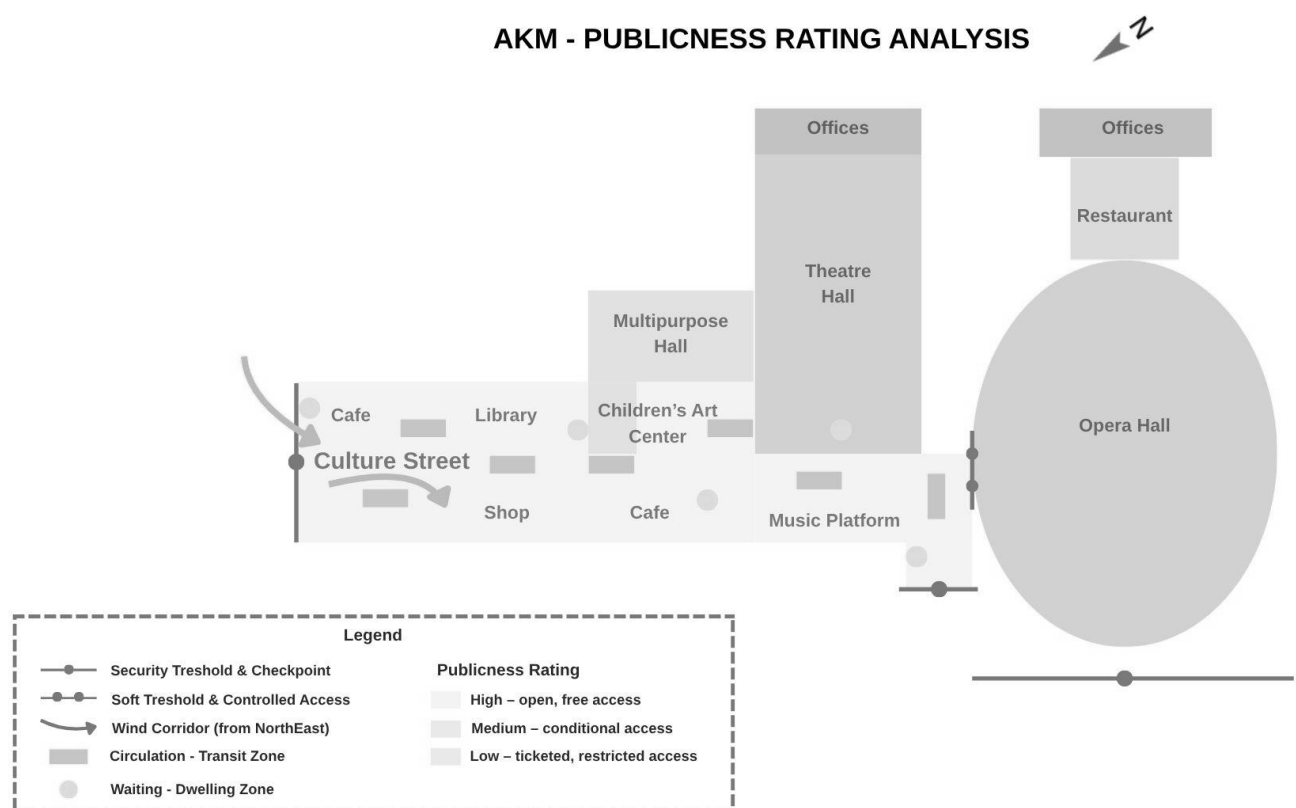


Figure 7. Wind analysis and publicness usage mapping (produced from field documentation by the author, 2026).

3.3. Lived Space: Social and User Dimensions

The Lived Space (Representational Space) is the space as experienced through the symbols, behaviors, and bodily practices of its inhabitants and users. At AKM, this dimension reveals the ultimate paradox between architectural transparency and socio-spatial exclusivity.

3.3.1. Inclusiveness and Diversity of Users

Field observations indicate that AKM's inclusiveness may be mediated by its institutional prestige. While the architectural intent was to create a house for the public, the observed diversity of users remained limited during the field visits. The observed user profile appeared to be dominated by ticketed-event visitors, library users, and tourists, while informal youth groups and everyday passers-by were less visible during the observation periods.

3.3.2. Social Interaction and Participation

Primary circulation elements, such as the grand staircase, appeared to function primarily as sites of transition rather than social catalysts. In line with Augé's (1995) framework, these areas were observed as "non-places" of rapid movement. The limited availability of informal seating may reflect a lack of spontaneous social encounters among strangers. Consequently, lingering behavior seemed predominantly confined to regulated spaces like the library or cafe.

3.3.3. Diversity of Activities and User Satisfaction

The diversity of activities within AKM is one of its most significant contributors to public vitality. The building hosts a wide array of programmatic offerings. This high level of functional density ensures that the space is utilized for a multitude of reasons throughout the day. Field observations indicate that this programmatic variety supports longer stays and more active use among those who enter, transforming the building from a singular performance venue into a multi-layered cultural node. However, the activities present remain within a narrow band: cultural consumption, study, dining, and photography. Civic, political, informal meeting, and unprogrammed lingering activities, often associated with more inclusive forms of public life, are largely absent. By catering to specific cultural interests rather than to the full spectrum of urban life, the architectural complex fosters a vibrant but bounded lived experience.

3.4. Consolidated Audit Matrix

Tables 3–5 consolidate the qualitative findings of the audit into three evaluation matrices, organized by Lefebvre’s spatial layer, providing a transparent record of the rating logic across all 18 indicators traced in the field. Ratings are qualitative judgments grounded in the four observation visits and in the comparison between conceived design intent and observed operational reality. The matrix illustrates the central pattern of the case: the Conceived layer is rated predominantly High, while the Perceived and Lived layers are rated predominantly Low or Mixed. This stratification is the audit’s principal empirical finding.

Table 3. Publicness Audit Matrix for AKM — Conceived layer (Spatial-Physical and Cultural-Aesthetic dimensions).

Layer	Indicator	Field Observation Note	Audit Rating
Conceived	Accessibility	Culture Street axis extends the square inward via a low-level threshold; however, vertical circulation is fragmented by elevator routes (parking area) and a lack of lift access to upper library galleries.	Medium
Conceived	Physical Configuration	Linear arrangement along the Culture Street spine; programmatic volumes legible from the central atrium; clear primary axis but secondary circulation underdetermined.	Medium-High
Conceived	Multifunctionality	Opera, library, gallery, recording studios, retail, and food service co-located within a single armature.	High
Conceived	Aesthetic Value	Iconic red ceramic Opera sphere reads through the glazed facade; original facade rhythm preserved as a palimpsest of the 1969 building.	High
Conceived	Civility	Material palette and proportional system project a register of cultural prestige and refinement.	High (but exclusionary)
Conceived	Functional Performance	Acoustic isolation and HVAC of halls are integrated; foyers conceived as climatic refuges and threshold spaces.	High

Table 4. Publicness Audit Matrix for AKM — Perceived layer (Management-Political and Sustainability-Environment dimensions).

Layer	Indicator	Field Observation Note	Audit Rating
Perceived	Management Protocols	Mandatory bag-check and metal detector at every public entrance; staff visible at all atrium thresholds; selective opening of side entries.	Restrictive
Perceived	Ownership	Legally public asset under General Directorate of State Theatres / TR Ministry of Culture; operationally framed as institutional rather than civic.	Mixed
Perceived	Public Engagement	No participatory programming observed beyond ticketed events; no community noticeboard, no informal usage of foyer for non-ticket-holders.	Low
Perceived	Economic & Social Equity	Free-access zones (library, ground-floor lobby) coexist with prestigious paid programming; the dominant atmosphere reads as formal, event-oriented, and tourist-facing.	Low-Medium
Perceived	Environmental Quality	Halls thermally and acoustically excellent; atrium experiences periodic wind drafts due to wind-tunnel effect through the Culture Street corridor.	Mixed
Perceived	Wayfinding	Primary circulation legible; secondary amenities (restrooms, entrances to library) require staff inquiry; signage inconsistent across levels.	Low-Medium

Table 5. Publicness Audit Matrix for AKM — Lived layer (Social-User dimension).

Layer	Indicator	Field Observation Note	Audit Rating
Lived	Inclusiveness	Observed users appeared to be dominated by ticketed-event visitors, library users, and tourists; informal youth groups and everyday passers-by were less visible during the observation periods.	Low
Lived	Social Interaction	Atrium and grand staircase observed primarily as transit zones; lingering occurs mainly adjacent to cafe seating and the library entrance; spontaneous stranger-to-stranger interactions were rarely observed.	Low
Lived	Diversity of Activities	Reading, study, ticketed performance attendance, photography by tourists, and dining are dominant; civic-political, informal-meeting, and unprogrammed-loitering activities are absent.	Medium
Lived	Diversity of Users	High programmatic density generates functional variety, yet the observed user profile remains relatively selective; the broad urban diversity of Taksim Square appears to be filtered by the building's formal and prestigious threshold.	Low - Medium
Lived	User Satisfaction	Observed use patterns around the cafe and library suggest a relatively comfortable atmosphere; however, hesitation at the entrance thresholds indicates a possible perceptual access barrier for non-ticket-holding visitors.	Mixed
Lived	Sense of Belonging	Behavioral cues (postural caution, lowered voices, hesitation at thresholds) suggest the building is read as a place to visit rather than a place to inhabit.	Low

4. Discussion

4.1. Interpretation of Key Findings: The Synthesis of Spatial Layers

The findings of the Publicness Audit illustrate the dynamic relationship between the three layers of Lefebvre's spatial triad at AKM. The interpretation focuses on how the conceptual design is transformed through management and physical presence, and on how each research question is answered by the evidence.

Response to RQ1 (multidimensional manifestation). The five publicness dimensions distilled from the literature are unevenly realized at AKM. The Spatial-Physical and Cultural-Aesthetic dimensions register strongly and consistently—they are the dimensions most fully delivered by the architecture itself. The Management-Political and Social-User dimensions register weakly, while the Sustainability-Environment dimension is internally split: the halls are strong, the transitional spaces are not. This stratification supports the central argument of the paper: publicness is not a single property of a building but a layered outcome that depends on the alignment of architecture, institution, and inhabitant.

Response to RQ2 (conceived–lived tension). The audit identifies a clear tension between the conceived vision of transparency and the lived experience of users. The architectural intent (Conceived Space) emphasizes a high-transparency glass facade to bridge the square and the interior. However, this transparency is highly dependent on external lighting conditions; the high reflectivity of the glass during daylight hours often obscures interior activities, creating a visual disconnect. At night, when the interior is brightly lit, transparency operates as intended—but the building is then inhabited only by ticket-holders, so the visual openness greets a closed social space. Architectural transparency and social openness, in other words, do not run on the same schedule.

Response to RQ3 (institutional redefinition of public boundaries). The audit demonstrates that institutional management protocols substantially redefine the public boundaries suggested by the architectural form. The most consequential mechanisms are the security threshold, the wayfinding regime, and the implicit dress and behavior codes communicated by the material palette. Together, these mechanisms convert the architectural promise of public-as-right into an operational reality of public-as-visitor. The Culture Street corridor channels northeasterly winds across waiting zones. The cumulative effect is a building whose physical form invites and whose operational form filters.

Social stratification and programmatic success. While the variety of functions (library, studios, cafes) attracts a range of user motivations, the Lived Space appears to be shaped by a relatively selective user profile. The atmosphere and the institutional nature of the management create a cultural filter. The observed patterns suggest that the space functions more as a destination for specific cultural consumption than as a spontaneous ground for everyday public life.

A Threshold Typology for AKM. Across the audit, the term "threshold" surfaces repeatedly. The findings suggest that AKM produces at least four distinct threshold types operating in series: (i) physical thresholds (steps, ramps, doors); (ii) administrative thresholds (security checkpoints, ticket controls); (iii) symbolic thresholds (material palette, scale, decorum cues); and (iv) micro-climatic thresholds (the wind drafts that discourage dwelling in the atrium). A user crossing from Taksim Square to the central atrium passes through all four. Each is individually permissive in principle, but together they constitute a layered filter that progressively narrows the lived public. This typology offers a transferable analytical category for evaluating other contemporary cultural buildings beyond AKM.

4.2. Comparison with Previous Studies

In comparison to the original 1969 AKM, the current iteration demonstrates a significant increase in multifunctionality. While previous studies on the old AKM highlighted its singular role as an opera house, the present findings show that the inclusion of recording studios, the library, and retail has broadened the public engagement spectrum, at least at the level of program. Regarding publicness, the findings align with critiques of privately-owned public spaces (POPS) developed in the Anglo-American context (Németh & Schmidt, 2011; Kayden, 2000), in which security and management protocols prioritize control over spontaneous social encounter. AKM is not legally a POPS, it is publicly owned, but it exhibits the same operational signature: physical openness combined with managerial closure. This convergence suggests that the POPS critique is not strictly a question of ownership but of governance regime, and that publicly-owned cultural buildings can produce institutionalized public outcomes when operated under similar managerial logics.

The findings also resonate with Varna and Tiesdell's (2010) five-dimensional star model of publicness (ownership, control, civility, physical configuration, animation), and converge in particular on the dimension of control as the limiting factor at AKM. They depart, however, in foregrounding the climatic dimension, a register typically absent from publicness frameworks but important in transitional Mediterranean/Marmara climates where buildings are expected to provide refuge. The Lefebvrian framing used here also extends Joshi and Nagarsheth's (2024) projective-survey approach to spatial quality by adding a triadic structural layer above their attribute-by-attribute reading.

4.3. Strengths and Limitations

Strengths: The core strength of this study lies in its analysis of an institutional building through Lefebvre's spatial triad (conceived, perceived, lived). By employing this method, the research examines the discrepancies between the architect's intent on paper and the reality experienced by users. The five-dimensional matrix synthesized from 44 Scopus articles is itself a contribution that can be reused for comparable cultural buildings. The consolidated audit matrices in Tables 3–5 provide a transparent, indicator-by-indicator record of the qualitative judgments and support replication and contestation.

Limitations: The audit was conducted by a single researcher, raising the possibility of single-observer bias. The four-visit observation window captures temporal variation but is not a longitudinal record. No structured user interviews or surveys were conducted, so user perspectives are inferred from observed behavior rather than reported directly. The qualitative ratings in Tables 3–5 (High / Medium / Low / Mixed) are the researcher's expert judgments grounded in the literature framework, not statistically validated scores. Future iterations should incorporate inter-rater verification, semi-structured user interviews, and complementary quantitative measures (visitor counts, environmental sensor data for the wind-tunnel finding) to balance the expert-led audit with subjective and instrumental evidence.

4.4. Implications and Future Directions

These findings highlight the critical need to shift from concentrated security filters toward "soft threshold" typologies in spatial governance. To foster socio-spatial integration, future cultural nodes should decentralize administrative control and integrate unprogrammed, weather-buffered zones outside ticketed perimeters. Furthermore, the observed wind-tunnel effect demonstrates that micro-climatic refuge is a structural prerequisite for urban publicness, necessitating environmental simulations during early conceptual design phases.

Future research should expand upon these findings across three axes: (1) applying the proposed five-dimensional matrix to other cultural nodes in Istanbul to determine if AKM's restricted publicness is idiosyncratic or systemic; (2) investigating how the broader Kültür Yolu (Culture Route) initiative impacts the public ecology of the Taksim-Beyoğlu district; and (3) tracking AKM's lived experience longitudinally to assess whether its socio-demographic stratification softens with user familiarity or becomes structurally self-reinforcing.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of Key Findings

This study evaluated the spatial publicness of the Atatürk Cultural Center (AKM) through a qualitative audit organized by Lefebvre's spatial triad and structured around five dimensions distilled from a 44-article literature review. The audit traced 18 indicators across conceived, perceived, and lived layers and consolidated the findings in a transparent rating matrix. The principal finding is a stratified discrepancy: AKM's conceived publicness—articulated through the Culture Street axis, the glazed facade, the iconic Opera sphere, and a multifunctional program—rates highly across architectural indicators, while its perceived and lived publicness, shaped by security protocols, micro-climatic friction, and a culturally-coded atmosphere, rates substantially lower. The architectural form opens; the operational regime filters. Together, they produce a condition of institutionalized publicness: the formal apparatus of a public space without the degree of unscripted social life associated with more inclusive publicness.

5.2. Implications of the Findings

Three implications follow. For architectural theory, the findings argue against treating publicness as a property attributable to form alone; publicness is a layered outcome co-produced by design, governance, and inhabitation, and only an analytical framework capable of holding all three layers simultaneously, such as the Lefebvrian triad operationalized here, can render it visible. For practice, the findings point toward the design of soft thresholds: distributed security, weather-buffered dwelling outside the ticketed perimeter, and the explicit programming of unprogrammed time. For policy, the findings caution that publicly-owned cultural buildings are not automatically public spaces; the governance regime under which they operate is decisive.

5.3. Limitations of the Study

As outlined in Section 4.3, the study is bounded by the use of a single observer, a four-visit observation window, and the absence of structured user surveys or environmental instrumentation. The audit ratings are qualitative judgments rather than validated scores. The case is also a single building in a single city, limiting external generalizability. These limitations frame the findings as a structured, replicable starting point for further inquiry rather than as a final account.

5.4. Recommendations for Future Research

Future work should extend this audit framework along three axes. First, comparison: applying the same matrix to a sample of Istanbul cultural nodes, and to publicly-owned cultural buildings in other cities, would test whether the conceived-perceived-lived stratification observed at AKM is a generic feature of contemporary cultural architecture under neoliberal governance regimes, or specific to particular institutional contexts. Second, methodological triangulation: integrating user interviews, behavioral counts, and environmental sensors with the qualitative audit would strengthen each layer of the triad with its own complementary evidence. Third, design experimentation: post-audit interventions could be evaluated through repeat audits, such as opened side entries or pop-up seating in the foyer, to test which threshold types are most amenable to repair. Across all three axes, the central question worth pursuing is whether the form of cultural building represented by AKM can be operated differently, or whether its institutionalized publicness is structural.

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