Check for updates

Original Article

Fractured Memory: The Mnemonic Catastrophe of Istanbul's Vanished Theatre Buildings

Space and Culture
1–15
© The Author(s) 2026

Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/12063312261501659
journals.sagepub.com/home/sac


Sebla Arin Ensarioğlu[1]

Abstract

This article investigates the systematic erasure of late Ottoman theatre buildings in Istanbul as a critical act of spatial forgetting. Moving beyond architectural history, it theorises these theatres as vanished 'hybrid sites of memory' where a distinct 'Western-ish' modernity was negotiated. Developing a spatial typology, it analyses three socio-spatial arenas: the diplomatic court theatres, the cosmopolitan contact zones of Pera and the eclectic public sphere of the Historical Peninsula. Their collective destruction (by fire, demolition and redevelopment) is framed as a 'mnemonic catastrophe', actively dismantling the spatial anchors of a hybrid era. Methodologically, the study synthesises historical analysis of archival maps, contemporary accounts and architectural descriptions with theoretical frameworks drawn from memory studies and postcolonial geography. This erasure creates an urban illusion of the tabula rasa, severing cultural continuity and enabling each generation to perceive its artistic production as novel rather than connected to a layered past. The study contributes to debates on how the loss of spatial heritage enables the selective forgetting of complex, cosmopolitan urban identities and offers a transferable framework for analysing the politics of erasure in post-imperial cities.

Keywords

urban memory, Ottoman theatre, cultural hybridity, Istanbul, architectural erasure

Introduction: Stages of Transformation

The urban landscape is a palimpsest, where the superimposed layers of stone, space and memory collectively document the evolution of the city's cultural and political identity. In periods of profound transition, these layers are rewritten with particular intensity, rendering the urban fabric a vital archive of societal change. This phenomenon is particularly evident in the domains of public culture, such as theatres, opera houses and performance halls. These institutions function as both a reflection and a catalyst for societal aspirations. This article puts forward the argument that theatre buildings constructed in Istanbul during the late 19th century and the early 20th century

[1]Bursa Uludağ University, Turkey

Corresponding Author:
Sebla Arin Ensarioğlu, Department of Architecture, Faculty of Architecture, Bursa Uludağ University, Bursa 16059, Turkey.
Email: seblaarin@uludag.edu.tr

functioned not merely as passive receptacles for entertainment, but rather as central, active agents in the negotiation of a modern, hybrid Ottoman identity. These locations functioned as pivotal sites where the tensions between tradition and Westernisation, public visibility and imperial power, and cosmopolitanism and nationalism were physically staged and spatially resolved. Moreover, the subsequent near-total erasure of these buildings from the urban landscape represents a critical rupture in the city's cultural memory, forcing a perpetual cycle of reinvention and contributing to a modern 'illusion of the tabula rasa' in Turkish performing arts.

The 19th century marked the beginning of a significant transformation of the Ottoman Empire, a process that is clearly evident in the urban landscape of its capital. As the empire navigated political decline, financial dependency on Europe and sweeping social reforms, Istanbul itself underwent significant transformation. The city's population exhibited a marked increase in diversity, with a complex tapestry of religions, languages and lifestyles, collectively fostering a new, eclectic urban culture (Çelik, 1993; Denel, 1982). This era was distinguished by a distinctive modernity that could be termed 'Western-ish' in nature. This modernity can be characterised as a creative and often contentious adaptation of European models, resulting in a synthesis that was distinctly Ottoman in character, rather than a mere imitation (Işın, 1999). This synthesis was particularly evident in the cultural sphere, where the decreasing centrality of religion in public life created a more liberal environment for social gathering and artistic expression (Baydar, 2011). It was within this context that theatre, in its capacity as both an art form and a social institution, gained unprecedented prominence and the architecture built to house it evolved to meet new symbolic and functional demands.

Existing scholarship on this period has richly documented the history of Ottoman theatre, often focusing on theatrical troupes, play texts and the biographies of key figures (And, 1972, 1989, 1999; Sevengil, 1962). A number of studies have previously examined the urban development of Istanbul's districts, including Pera and the Historical Peninsula (Akın, 1998; Çelik, 1993). However, a significant gap remains at the intersection of these fields: namely, a comprehensive analysis of the theatre buildings themselves as architectural typologies that structured and reflected this social transformation. A further research question concerns the differences between the specific location, design and function of a court theatre and that of a public stage in Direklerarası or a cosmopolitan hall in Pera. In what ways can these differences be interpreted as indicative of the fragmented and contested nature of Ottoman modernity? Furthermore, what are the long-term cultural consequences of the physical destruction of this architectural heritage?

In order to address this gap, this study pursues three interrelated aims. First, it creates a spatial typology of Istanbul's theatre buildings in order to illustrate how hybridity was physically created in different urban areas. Second, it traces the chronology of their destruction to reveal the underlying spatial politics. Thirdly, it theorises this erasure as a mnemonic catastrophe, demonstrating how the loss of hybrid heritage facilitates selective forgetting and the production of a 'tabula rasa illusion' in urban memory. The central research questions guiding this inquiry are: (a) How did different theatre typologies constitute distinct geographies of hybrid modern subjectivity in late Ottoman Istanbul? (b) What does the chronology of their destruction reveal about the spatial politics of memory in a city transitioning from empire to nation-state? (c) What are the long-term cultural consequences of this architectural erasure for urban memory and heritage? By answering these questions, the study contributes to debates on urban memory and heritage by demonstrating how the materiality of hybrid built forms serves as a critical anchor for collective memory and how their systematic removal constitutes an active political process of forgetting.

This study proposes a tripartite typology of Istanbul's theatre spaces, mapping them onto the city's socio-geographic landscape, in order to address the aforementioned questions. The initial focus of this study is an examination of the Court Theatres of Beşiktaş (Dolmabahçe and Yıldız), with a subsequent analysis of their role as instruments of diplomatic power and selective Westernisation under Sultans Abdülmecid and Abdülhamid II. Secondly, the attention is directed

to the Theatres of the Historical Peninsula, with a particular focus on Direklerarası. In this region, an eclectic blend of traditional meddah and Karagöz, accompanied by Western-style drama, was meticulously crafted to cater to the local Muslim populace. This artistic endeavour signified a profound search for an indigenous theatrical language, a reflection of the cultural and linguistic richness of the region. The final focus of this study is the Theatres of Pera, the cosmopolitan heart of European-style entertainment. It is here that a multilingual and multicultural audience consumed opera, operetta and high art, thereby cementing the district's identity as a beacon of a new, secular lifestyle.

This article employs a historical analysis, drawing upon archival maps, architectural descriptions and contemporary accounts, in order to trace the life and death of these iconic structures. The analysis indicates that the fates of these monuments, whether through fire, deliberate demolition or repurposing, were not arbitrary but rather indicative of the persistent struggles concerning Istanbul's urban identity during the transition from empire to republic. The objective of this endeavour is to undertake an act of 'archaeological' recovery for urban memory by clearing the debris of this forgotten architectural history. This is of crucial importance for a nuanced understanding of the Ottoman past, as well as for confronting the challenges of cultural continuity and heritage in a modern metropolis that continues to build upon its vanished stages.

The article proceeds as follows: following this introduction, Section 2 explains the methodology of the paper and Section 3 establishes the theoretical framework of urban memory and hybridity. The fourth section of the text develops the spatial typology of the three theatrical zones. Section 5 provides a chronological analysis of the key theatres' construction and subsequent erasure, and the conclusion reflects on the implications of this loss for contemporary urban culture.

Methodology: Tracing the Life and Death of Theatrical Geographies

This study uses a qualitative, historical geographical approach to explore the creation, social significance and disappearance of theatre buildings in late Ottoman Istanbul. The research design is structured around three interconnected analytical procedures.

The study draws upon multiple primary and secondary sources. These include:

- Historical maps (e.g., the Pervititch and Goad insurance maps and the S.A.O.E.E.U. map of 1922), which provide spatial documentation of theatre locations and their urban contexts;
- Contemporary accounts (e.g., Ottoman and European newspapers such as the Journal de Constantinople, memoirs, and travelogues), which describe performances, audiences, and building designs;
- Architectural records (e.g., Fossati's drawings and Vallaury's projects), including building plans and renovation documents;
- Secondary scholarship (e.g., the foundational histories of Ottoman theatre by Metin And and Refik Ahmet Sevengil, and urban histories of Istanbul's districts by Zeynep Çelik and Nur Akın).

The theatres analysed in this study were selected based on three criteria. First, they represent the three distinct socio-spatial typologies identified in the literature: court theatres (e.g., Dolmabahçe and Yıldız), cosmopolitan Pera theatres (e.g., Naum, Concordia and Tepebaşı) and popular Historical Peninsula theatres (e.g., Ferah, Millet and Şark). Second, they were among the most architecturally and culturally significant venues of their respective eras. Third, they have now disappeared, enabling the study to focus on the politics and consequences of their loss. This study does not aim to be exhaustive, but rather to strategically select these venues as illustrative case studies within each typology.

The concepts of hybridity and memory were operationalised through spatial and historical analysis. Hybridity was analysed at three levels:

- Architectural form (the blending of Western typologies with Ottoman spatial practices);
- Social use (the composition of audiences and the repertoire of performances);
- Urban location (the geographical distribution of theatres across Istanbul's fragmented social geography).

Memory was operationalised through the concepts of mnemonic anchoring and mnemonic catastrophe. The former involved analysing how theatres functioned as 'lieux de mémoire' that stabilised collective memory, while the latter examined how their erasure dismantled these spatial anchors.

Historical sources present inherent limitations. Archival records are fragmentary, and many buildings lacked comprehensive documentation. Contemporary accounts are often subjective or selective. This study acknowledges these limitations and interprets the evidence critically, triangulating multiple sources where possible. The argument concerning the mnemonic catastrophe is necessarily interpretative, drawing on theoretical frameworks to infer the cultural ramifications of physical loss.

Theoretical Framework: Urban Memory and Cultural Hybridity

The present study is situated at the intersection of urban studies and cultural history, drawing upon two key theoretical paradigms to analyse its subject: the sociology of memory and postcolonial theories of cultural exchange. This theoretical framework enables the conceptualisation of Istanbul's late Ottoman theatres not merely as lost buildings, but as the vanished crucibles of a hybrid modern identity, whose erasure has profoundly shaped the city's cultural memory.

The City as a Mnemonic Palimpsest

The concept of urban memory posits that the city functions as a collective, externalised repository of a society's past, where history is inscribed in the materiality of its spaces. Maurice Halbwachs (1992), a pioneering figure in the field of memory studies, advanced the concept that collective memory is sustained by social groups and anchored in a spatial framework. It was asserted that for a group to reconstitute its past, it must 'place itself in the perspective of space which it still occupies' or has occupied. The stability of the physical environment is thus paramount for the continuity of memory.

Building on this, Aldo Rossi (1984), in *The Architecture of the City*, conceptualised the urban fabric as a palimpsest, whose 'urban artefacts' – monuments, typologies and districts – persist as the primary embodiments of collective memory. For Rossi, these artefacts are defined as 'a thing in itself, a work of art, and a repository of history'. These fixed points represent the nexus around which the city's evolving identity coalesces. Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) assumes critical relevance in circumstances where this organic, living memory (*milieux de mémoire*) becomes obscured or diminishes. *Lieux de mémoire* are defined as any significant entities, whether material or non-material, that have become symbolic elements of the memorial heritage of a community through human agency or the passage of time (Nora, 1989). Theatres, as edifices designed for collective gathering and symbolic performance, are inherently potent *lieux de mémoire*.

The demolition of such sites, therefore, cannot be considered a neutral act of urban renewal; rather, it can be understood as an active form of 'repressive erasure', as described by Paul Connerton (2008). The loss of these architectural anchors, as identified by Halbwachs, results in the dissolution of the spatial framework and consequently precipitates a rupture in the transmission of collective memory, engendering a state of 'social amnesia'. Recent scholarship has taken

the analysis of spatial forgetting in new and interesting directions. The concept of 'absent heritage' sheds light on how sites that challenge dominant national narratives are conspicuously absent from official memory, not by accident, but through active processes of neglect, reinterpretation or deliberate erasure (Macdonald, 2015). In post-imperial contexts, scholars have demonstrated how the material remnants of imperial pasts are selectively preserved or erased in order to forge coherent national identities. This mnemonic politics often targets sites associated with cosmopolitanism, colonial rule or multi-ethnic coexistence, rendering them invisible in both space and discourse (Lähdesmäki et al., 2019, 2020). This study contributes to these debates by demonstrating how Istanbul's vanished theatres exemplify this dynamic. They constitute an instance of 'absent heritage', the erasure of which facilitated the construction of a simplified, homogeneous national memory. This theoretical perspective elucidates the notion that the physical disappearance of Istanbul's theatres engenders a mnemonic catastrophe, thereby establishing the conditions for the 'tabula rasa illusion' that this article identifies.

Hybridity: The 'Third Space' of Cultural Encounters

The cultural production of 19th-century Ottoman Istanbul must not be described through a simple East-West binary, as this overlooks its complex reality. The concept of hybridity, as it has been developed in the field of postcolonial theory, offers a more sophisticated analytical framework. The centrality of Homi K. Bhabha's work in this context is indisputable. For Bhabha, hybridity is the inevitable and productive effect of the encounter between cultures in contexts of unequal power. This process, however, does not result in a harmonious convergence; rather, it engenders a 'third space', characterised by its disruptive nature. This third space, as Bhabha (1994) asserts, 'displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom'. It is from this ambivalent, intermediary space that novel, authentically local forms of modernity emerge.

This process can be further refined by Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the 'contact zone', which she defines as 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of power' (Pratt, 1991). The 'Western-ish' character of Ottoman modernity, a term this article adopts, is a direct manifestation of this hybridising process. This term denotes a stylistic and cultural idiom that engages with Western models while simultaneously inflecting, translating and subverting them according to local logics, needs and aesthetic sensibilities. This was not a failure to replicate perfectly, but rather a creative adaptation, a process of transculturation. It is important to clarify the conceptual status of the term 'Western-ish'. This article adopts the term to denote a spatialised cultural formation rather than a stylistic label or a measure of authenticity. 'Western-ish' signifies modes of architectural design, social practice and artistic expression that engage with European models while simultaneously translating, inflecting and subverting them according to local Ottoman logics, needs and aesthetic sensibilities. This term is preferable to 'Westernisation' because it avoids teleological assumptions about unidirectional influence. It also avoids 'hybridity' alone, which can become overly abstract. Instead, 'Western-ish' signals a geographically situated process of cultural negotiation, which was materialised in specific urban sites and produced identifiable spatial forms. The term is thus a marker of spatially produced identity, not a value judgement or a measure of approximation to a European norm.

This spatialised understanding of hybridity has been further refined by recent scholarship on heritage and urban transformation. Bull and Hansen (2016), for example, have developed the concept of 'agonistic memory', suggesting that heritage sites can encourage democratic discussion when considered not as set narratives, but as places of constructive disagreement. This perspective provides an insight into the political implications of erasure: the demolition of Istanbul's hybrid theatre spaces did not just destroy buildings but also eliminated the potential

for agonistic engagement with the city's cosmopolitan past. Furthermore, recent studies on urban heritage have demonstrated how neoliberal urban development accelerates the destruction of such sites by prioritising economic value over historical significance, actively producing what Smith (2006) terms 'authorised heritage discourses' that marginalise non-conforming histories. By framing Istanbul's theatres as materialised third spaces, this study positions them as sites where such contestation was once possible, and whose loss forecloses alternative narratives of urban modernity.

Synthesising the Framework: Hybrid Sites of Memory

The present article proposes a unified analytical lens by synthesising these two theoretical strands. The argument advanced here is that Istanbul's late Ottoman theatres functioned as hybrid sites of memory. These theatres were:

- Hybrid Artefacts: The architecture and utilisation of these structures embodied the concept of the 'third space' of cultural encounter, a term coined by Homi K. Bhabha (1994), blending European forms with Ottoman functions and social practices.
- Mnemonic Anchors: As prominent urban artefacts, they physically anchored the collective memory of this hybrid modern era, serving as tangible *lieux de mémoire* for a transformative period.
- Targets of Erasure: The destruction of them represents a dual loss: the physical disappearance of a unique architectural heritage and the active forgetting of the complex, hybrid identity they materialised. The eradication of these sites effectively signified the obliteration of a distinct historical trajectory towards modernity from the urban annals.

The present framework provides the conceptual tools to analyse, in the following section, how the tripartite typology of theatres in Istanbul constituted distinct modalities of this hybridity and, consequently, distinct facets of a now-vanished urban memory.

Mapping the 'Western-ish': A Tripartite Typology of Theatrical Space in Istanbul

The following section will apply the theoretical framework of hybrid sites of memory to develop a spatial typology of Istanbul's theatres. The three categories – Court, Pera and Historical Peninsula – represent not just different locations but also distinct 'contact zones' where the forces of Westernisation were negotiated, resulting in unique hybrid forms. The geographical distribution of these monuments across the city mirrors the fragmented and contested nature of Ottoman modernity itself (Çelik, 1993; Işın, 1999).

As illustrated in Figure 1, the theatre buildings of this period were concentrated in three discrete geographic and cultural zones, thereby establishing a distinct spatial typology that reflected the fragmented nature of Ottoman modernity. The Court Theatres, of which there were only two, were located in the Beşiktaş district and served as exclusive extensions of the imperial palaces. The Theatres of Pera, which were located along the Grand Rue de Pera (modern Istiklal Avenue), constituted the cosmopolitan heart of European-style entertainment. By contrast, the Theatres of the Historical Peninsula were primarily located in the vibrant entertainment quarter of Direklerarası, catering to a local populace with a more eclectic repertoire. This geographic distribution is not an accident; it visually maps the socio-cultural fractures and negotiations of the era. A salient and illuminating aspect of this map, however, is that it predominantly documents a bygone landscape. The vast majority of the buildings marked on the map have been lost, destroyed by demolition or so significantly altered as to be unrecognisable. While this study does not

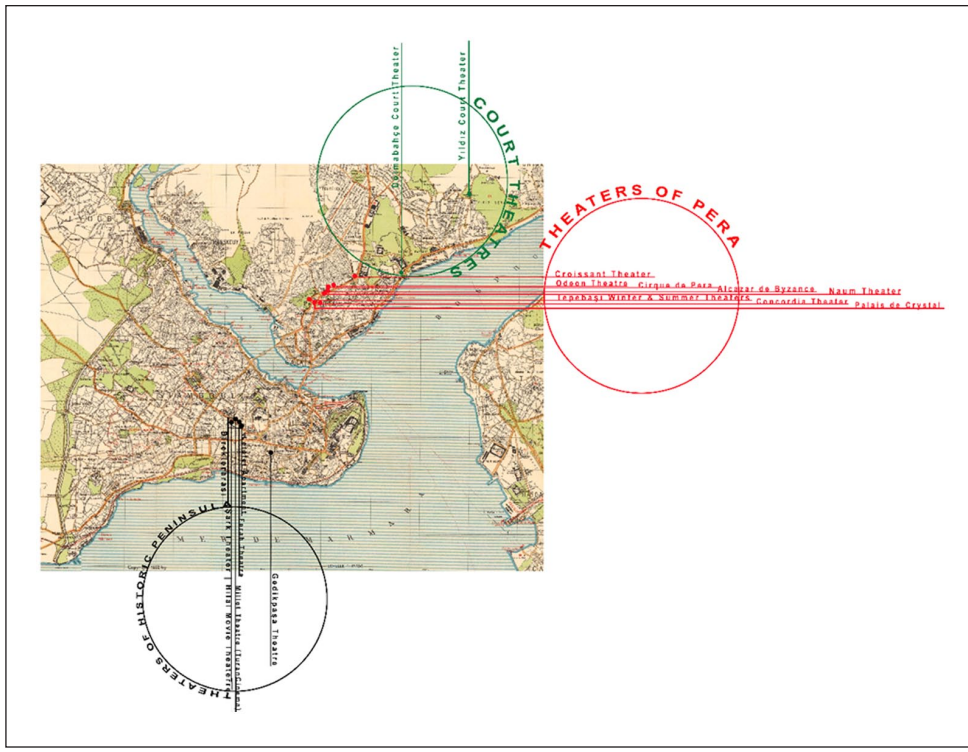


Figure 1. Theatre buildings in 19th- and early 20th-century İstanbul (S.A.O.E.E.U., 1922, 'Préfecture de la ville' map, [markings made by the author]. Original source: SALT research archive).

profess to be an exhaustive compendium of every theatre, it concentrates on those key structures within these three groups that most profoundly left their mark on the theatrical culture and urban memory of Istanbul.

Court Theatres: The Hybridity of Imperial Power

The Court Theatres in Beşiktaş (Dolmabahçe and Yıldız) were the most deliberate instruments of state-led hybridity. These spaces were conceptualised as Bhabhaian 'third spaces', wherein Western architectural terminology was appropriated for specific Ottoman political objectives. The Dolmabahçe Theatre, constructed during the reign of the extroverted Sultan Abdülmecid, adopted the European model of the opera house not solely for entertainment purposes but also as a stage for diplomatic theatre (Büyükünal, 2006). Its opulent chambers, which were utilised for post-performance banquets, amalgamated the Western typology with the Ottoman tradition of imperial hospitality, thereby engendering a hybrid space of geopolitical display (Sevengil, 1962). By contrast, the Yıldız Theatre, which was constructed under the introverted Abdülhamid II, can be regarded as a more isolated hybrid. The modest scale and heightened security of this theatre reflected a different negotiation, whereby the Western form was adapted in order to create a protected, familial space that nevertheless continued to signal modernity, albeit on the Sultan's own terms (Osmanoğlu, 1960). In both cases, the Sultan's loge, which was characterised by its elaborate yet enclosed design, emerged as the architectural symbol of this hybridity, representing a Western theatrical element that had been adapted to perpetuate the Ottoman protocol of the imperial gaze.

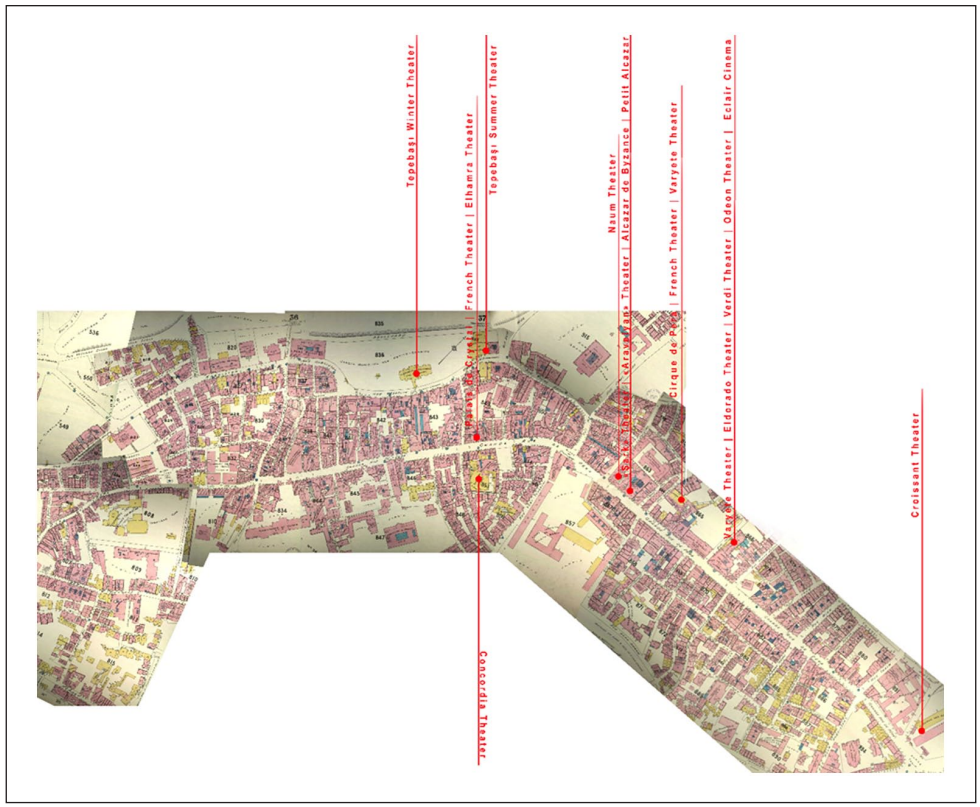


Figure 2. Theatres of Pera in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Charles Edward Goad map, 1905, [markings made by the author]. Original source: SALT research archive).

Theatres of Pera: The Cosmopolitan Contact Zone

The theatres of Pera (e.g., Naum, Concordia, Cité de Pera), most of which were located along the Grand Rue de Pera (Figure 2), were the quintessential 'contact zones' (Pratt, 1991) of Istanbul. Despite the European influence evident in their architectural style, their social life exhibited a vibrant hybridity. The establishment catered to a mixed audience of Levantines, Armenians, foreign diplomats and a Westernising Muslim elite (Ozhan Koçak, 2011). This social amalgam produced a unique performance culture. While European opera companies performed, the venues also hosted charity balls for the local community and, on occasion, Turkish-language troupes (And, 1989). The nomenclature of these spaces, ranging from 'French Theater' to 'Palais de Cristal' to 'Elhamra', reflects a multifaceted, multilingual identity. This district was not simply a microcosm of Europe; rather, it was a 'Western-ish' enclave where European forms were consumed and repurposed by a non-native bourgeoisie, thereby creating a new, cosmopolitan social reality that was uniquely Stambouliote. The transition from timber to stone following the great fires (Akın, 1998) served to physically consolidate this hybrid identity within the urban fabric, thereby establishing Pera as a potent *lieu de mémoire* for a bygone cosmopolitanism.

Theatres of the Historical Peninsula: The Eclectic Public Sphere

The theatres of the Historical Peninsula, centred at Direklerarası, exemplified the most fluid and popular manifestation of hybridity. This area constituted the crux of traditional Ottoman entertainment, and the transition to Western-style theatre can be characterised as a process of grafting

rather than replacement. The transition from the flexible space of the coffeehouse, which hosted meddah (storyteller) and Karagöz (shadow theatre), to the fixed proscenium stages of the Şark and Ferah Theatres signifies a spatial hybridisation (Karaboğa, 2011). The repertoire was equally eclectic, with Armenian-led troupes performing Western plays alongside traditional Ottoman acts for a predominantly Muslim Turkish audience (Arpad, 1988). This transition did not entail a radical departure from tradition; rather, it was characterised by a process of negotiation within a 'third space', culminating in the emergence of a popular culture that exhibited notable 'Western-ish' characteristics. The theatre district of Direklerarası has been recognised as a collective urban artefact, serving as a place of remembrance for the establishment of a contemporary Turkish theatre that is profoundly connected to, rather than detached from, its indigenous performance practices.

This tripartite typology demonstrates that the 'Western-ish' modernity of late Ottoman Istanbul was not a monolithic force but a spectrum of hybrid practices, with each practice creating a distinct version of the modern Ottoman subject in its own 'contact zone'. It is possible to consider these theatres as active, creative responses to a globalising world, rather than as imperfect derivatives, by viewing them through the lens of hybridity. The Court Theatres were notable for their hybridisation of power, the Pera Theatres for their hybridisation of cosmopolitan sociability and the Peninsula Theatres for their hybridisation of popular entertainment. Collectively, their architecture and use embodied what Émile Durkheim (1895/1982) would term a new 'social reality', which might be explained as a collective consciousness born from the interaction of diverse groups within the urban milieu. As edifices conceived for collective congregation and symbolic performance, they were inherently potent *lieux de mémoire*, their physical forms serving to anchor the memory of this transformative era. Consequently, the systematic eradication of these hybrid sites signifies a profound double loss: it is not merely an architectural disappearance but a mnemonic catastrophe. The spatial framework of this complex, negotiated identity has been actively dismantled, thereby creating the conditions for the 'tabula rasa illusion' identified in this article. Subsequent generations, deprived of the physical evidence of this rich performance culture, perceive their own artistic endeavours as entirely novel rather than as part of a continuous, if disrupted, historical trajectory. The subsequent section will delineate the chronology of this erasure, examining how the lives and deaths of these specific buildings concretised this rupture in Istanbul's urban memory. The analytical significance of the typology lies not only in documenting lost buildings but also in establishing a baseline for assessing the cumulative impact of erasure. By mapping how each theatre type produced a unique form of hybrid modernity, the framework enables us to recognise what was lost when each site was destroyed. Court theatres were a symbol of state-sponsored hybridity, and their destruction severed the material link to diplomatic modernity. The Pera theatres anchored a cosmopolitan hybridity, and their destruction eliminated evidence of multicultural sociability. Theatres on the Historical Peninsula anchored a vernacular hybridity, and their demolition fractured the memory of the eclectic origins of popular theatre. This layered geography of hybrid memory provides the empirical basis for the argument that their collective destruction constitutes a mnemonic catastrophe.

A Chronology of Erasure: The Life and Death of Istanbul's Theatres

In order to comprehend the profound cultural loss, it is necessary to trace not only the timeline but also the tangible architectural and social character of Istanbul's vanished theatres. The arrangement of these elements according to their chronological construction unveils a rich tapestry of hybrid spaces. However, the subsequent erasure of these hybrid spaces can be interpreted as representing the physical dismantling of an entire epoch's memory.

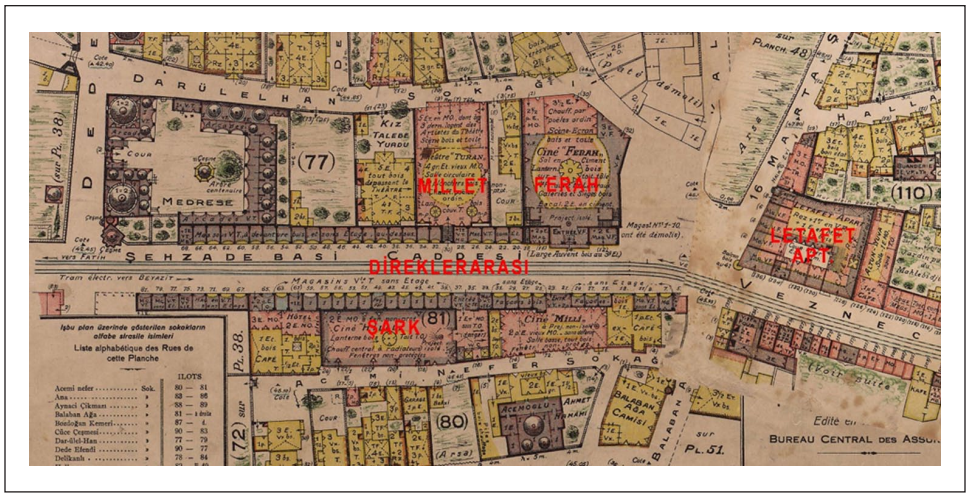


Figure 3. Theatres of Direklerarası in the early 20th century (Pervititch map, 1935, [markings made by the author]. Original source: SALT research archive).

The narrative commences in the Historical Peninsula, where Direklerarası underwent a transformation in the early 19th century, evolving from a collonaded street into the city's most vibrant popular entertainment district (Figure 3). Initially, performances were hosted in coffee shops, which were fluid spaces perfectly suited to traditional arts such as Karagöz, meddah and puppet shows. However, over time, permanent Western-style theatres were incorporated, creating a unique spatial and cultural hybrid (Göçmen, 2010; Karaboğa, 2011). This event initiated a period of significant theatrical growth, which in turn had a profound impact on the urban landscape.

The cosmopolitan district of Pera emerged as the catalyst for this transformation. The French Theatre (subsequently known as the Palais de Cristal and Elhamra) (c. 1827), with its horseshoe-shaped hall and 26 boxes stacked on six floors, established a model for European-style performance. The building's glass-encrusted entrance, which gave it its 'Crystal Palace' designation, subsequently became a notable landmark of the Pera district's modern identity (And, 1989). In 1893, it was decided to be renovated according to Architect Alexandre Vallaury's Project, and it hosted balls, dance nights and charity events besides theatre performances (Akın, 1998). However, this was soon eclipsed by the legendary Naum Theatre (c.1840). Although modest in scale, its horseshoe plan and interior were inspired by Milan's La Scala; it became the premier venue for Italian opera, symbolising both imperial prestige and the Sultan's personal interest in Western arts (And, 1989). Its social function was equally significant, serving as a venue where the Sultan and foreign dignitaries could see and be seen, in a manner similar to that observed in European capitals. As stated in numerous sources, the Naum Theatre project in 1848 was attributed to the renowned Italian architect Gaspare Fossati, while the project following the 1853 fire was attributed to the British architect Smith. Fossati's architectural drawings were presented as evidence in support of this assertion. However, there is no conclusive evidence that this project was implemented. According to the JdC (a local newspaper) dated 9 April, 1849, it is understood that the architect of that date was Smith, and Fossati's project remained only in the design phase (Durudoğan, 1999).

The mid-century period was characterised by a concurrent evolution of both courtly and popular stages. The Dolmabahçe Court Theatre (c.1859), a building designed by the renowned architects Schau, Diéterle and Hammond, was an outwardly evident manifestation of the region's political and cultural authority (Gerçek, 1997). The edifice comprises over 30 loges arranged on three rows, with the capacity to accommodate 300 guests for performances, followed by diplomatic feasts in adjacent halls. This configuration serves to integrate Western theatre with Ottoman imperial

hospitality (And, 1989). Across the Golden Horn, the Gedikpaşa Theatre (c.1859) commenced its existence as a circus before undergoing a transformation into a theatre. Under the management of Güllü Agop, it was renamed the Ottoman Theatre, a wooden structure with three-storey loges and a large stage that served as the crucible for a new, hybrid Turkish dramatic language, blending Western forms with local themes (And, 1989). Shortly thereafter, the dynamic theatre scene in Pera was further enriched by the Şark Theatre (also known as Aravelyan, Alcazar de Byzance) (c.1862). The transformation of the former Café Oriental into this new venue is indicative of the district's ongoing metamorphosis. Following the demolition of the original structure in order to facilitate the construction of the Pera tram line, a new building was erected on the site in 1884. This new structure was designed by architect Aznavur and was characterised by its technological sophistication. This new structure was a marvel of its day, featuring marble and bronze statues, two rows of boxes, and innovative thin iron carriers that replaced bulky columns to improve sightlines. The theatre was also equipped with a fire curtain and gas lighting, characteristics that are indicative of a modern and sophisticated playhouse (And, 1972; Durudoğan, 1999).

The latter part of the century was characterised by a further diversification of the species. In Pera, the Concordia Theatre (c.1871) offered both a winter theatre and a summer garden, catering to a leisure-seeking public (And, 1972). The Tepebaşı Summer and Winter Theatres (c.1872) were constructed on the grounds of the former *Petit-Champ de Morts* cemetery, a site of macabre symbolism, where the theatres themselves would eventually succumb to the flames. The winter theatre, which was originally constructed as a timber building by the architect Barborini, was later renovated into a 1,200-capacity *Amphi*, which hosted touring European theatre troupes. The renovation was carried out by Architect Campanaki (Akın, 1998; And, 1989). In addition to the renowned institutions such as Concordia and Tepebaşı, the Pera district boasted another noteworthy summer theatre, the Croissant Theatre, which was established circa 1874. In 1875, robust, movable circular curtains were installed in the Croissant Theatre to protect the audience against the wind and dust from the shooting in the drill hall. The venue had a capacity of approximately 2000; however, the acoustics were found to be suboptimal (And, 1989).

The Varyete Theatre (subsequently known as the Eldorado, Verdi and Odeon) (c.1875) was a lavish hall illuminated by hundreds of gas lamps, and which hosted operettas and, notably, large-scale masquerade balls during Carnival, thereby highlighting its role in the district's cosmopolitan social calendar (And, 1989; Sezer & Özyalçıner, 1995). Another venue bearing the name Varyete Theatre (later Ses Theatre) (c.1885) originated differently, having been constructed at the end of the Halep Passage as a circus for Cirque Tourniaire. Its transformation into a theatre, renamed the Théatre Cirque de Pera, was initially problematic; renovations by a French master builder failed to eliminate the persistent smell of the animal barn and inadequate lighting. A significant renovation in 1904 by Architect Campanaki, who added 70 loges, finally established it as a viable performance space. Subsequently, it functioned as a cinema, prior to re-establishing its theatrical function, thus constituting a rare survivor. Notably, as the Ses Theatre, it remains the sole establishment cited in this study that continues to serve its original purpose to the present day (And, 1989).

The final acts of construction served to reinforce the established typologies. The Yıldız Court Theatre (c.1889) was illuminated by electricity, which was a technological marvel at the time. It was constructed by Yanko, the son of Kalfa Vasilaki, during the reign of Abdulhamid II. In addition, D'Aronco's and Vallaury's names are cited as architects in certain sources. The theatre was designed with a capacity of 150 spectators and hosted international stars such as Sarah Bernhardt. The facility is currently employed as a museum, forming part of the Yıldız Palace Complex (And, 1989). Meanwhile, in Direklerarası, the early 20th century saw the establishment of a final, influential ensemble: the Şark (c.1908), Ferah (c.1911) and Millet (c.1913) Theatres. The Ferah and Millet theatres, the latter of which was horseshoe-shaped and inspired by La Scala, became the new home for the Darülbedayi (the Municipal Theatre) and leading Turkish actors like Kel Hasan and İsmail Dümbüllü, thereby cementing the area's role as the heart of a nascent national

stage (And, 1983). A pivotal yet ephemeral space within this ensemble was the Letafet Apartment. Originally a mansion, the building was assigned in 1914 to host the newly founded Darülbedayi, serving as its first official conservatory and headquarters under the direction of André Antoine. Despite the interruption to its function as a theatre school occasioned by the First World War, the institution's relatively brief existence represented a pioneering endeavour in the establishment of a modern, Western-style theatre tradition in the city, thereby establishing a foundational site for Turkish theatrical memory prior to its demolition in 1960 (Karaboğa, 2011).

This dynamic and progressive sequence, however, obscures a pervasive pattern of erasure. When viewed holistically, the specific losses compound into a catastrophic whole. The mentioned theatres can be grouped into three according to their fates of disappearance from the urban stage:

- Lost to conflagration: Fire was an inexorable agent. The Naum Theatre, a symbol of imperial cultural ambition, was destroyed in a district-wide blaze in 1870. Furthermore, a suspicious fire broke out at Alcazar de Byzance, despite the presence of fire curtains during the construction phase. Subsequent to this, the Tokatlıyan Hotel was constructed in its stead. These recurrent conflagrations in the cosmopolitan district expose a political economy of risk and 'accidental' erasure, with the effect that the architectural evidence of non-Muslim and Levantine cultural capital is disproportionately effaced. The Ferah and Tepebaşı Theatres, both pivotal to 20th-century performance, were reduced to ashes, the former in 1940, the latter in two separate, unexplained fires in 1970 and 1971. The French Theatre, which was also known as Palais de Cristal, was burned down in a fire in 1999, and after the renovation, the building started to be used as a night-club.
- Demolished in the Name of Modernisation: It is evident that a significant number of these were deliberately dismantled. The Dolmabahçe Court Theatre was demolished in 1937 to make way for a city square, a symbolic gesture that represented a significant departure from the imperial landscape. The entire Direklerarası ensemble, comprising the Şark (e.1958), Millet (e.1970) and Letafet Apartment (e.1960), was eradicated by urban renewal, obliterating the physical nucleus of popular Turkish theatre, fracturing the spatial continuity of that memory.
- Erased for Profit: The demolition of the Varyete/Eldorado building, a century-old theatre and cinema, in 2006, to make way for a shopping mall, is an act of neoliberal spatial production, where the market value of land triumphed over the cultural value of a century-old mnemonic site.

This systematic erasure has had a cumulative effect far greater than the loss of any single building, constituting a deliberate, if not always intentional, unwriting of a complex historical narrative from the urban palimpsest. The demolition of the Dolmabahçe Court Theatre signified the eradication of an imperial building; it also represented the severance of the tangible connection to a sophisticated modality of cultural statecraft, wherein architecture was employed as a means of geopolitical signalling. Absent the physical evidence of Dolmabahçe Court Theatre, it becomes challenging to comprehend the Ottoman Empire's nuanced, performative engagement with Western modernity, shaped through social and cultural structure. This engagement cannot be viewed as passive adoption; rather, it was a strategic, hybridising appropriation aimed at projecting power and prestige on a global stage. The demolition of the Pera theatres resulted in the eradication of the primary architectural landscape of a vibrant, multicultural cosmopolitanism. The loss of Naum, Concordia and Cité de Pera, among others, has resulted in the obliteration of the physical testament to a society where Levantines, Armenians, Muslims and foreigners co-created a unique 'Western-ish' social sphere. This erasure facilitates the creation of a sanitised historical memory that struggles to account for the deeply embedded, non-Muslim contributions to Istanbul's modern cultural fabric. Furthermore, it simplifies the city's history into monolithic national categories. The demolition of the Direklerarası ensemble, comprising the Ferah, Millet and Şark theatres, resulted in the

fracturing of the popular memory concerning the hybrid origins of Turkish national theatre. This loss obscures the vibrant eclecticism of the early 20th-century public sphere, where meddah and melodrama, the traditional coffeehouse and the Italianate proscenium arch coexisted and cross-fertilised. The outcome of this process is a flattened historical trajectory that can imagine the birth of Turkish theatre only as a clean break with the past, rather than as a dynamic, contested and richly layered process of cultural synthesis. This collective physical void constitutes the fundamental basis of the 'tabula rasa illusion'. The consequence of this process is the creation of an urban environment that actively forgets, presenting each new generation with a cityscape that appears to be devoid of a deep performative history. This phenomenon engenders a cultural discourse that frequently misidentifies innovation as unprecedented creation, thereby disconnecting contemporary artistic practice from its historical antecedents. It is imperative for the domain of urban and cultural studies to acknowledge that the demolition of heritage represents more than merely an architectural loss; it constitutes an epistemological loss as well. It eliminates the essential, tangible archives, which are the hybrid sites of memory, necessary to comprehend the contested, pluralistic and non-linear pathways to modernity in cities such as Istanbul. This has the effect of impoverishing our understanding of how global cultural flows are locally negotiated and embodied in space.

Conclusion: The Vanished Stage and the Burden of Memory

This study advances a geographical argument concerning the politics of memory and urban erasure, using the case of Istanbul's vanished theatre buildings as an example. By examining these buildings as hybrid sites of memory, which are simultaneously materialised third spaces and critical mnemonic anchors, it has demonstrated how their systematic destruction constitutes a spatial strategy of forgetting.

The tripartite typology of courtly, cosmopolitan and vernacular theatrical geographies illustrates how distinct forms of 'Western-ish' modernity were negotiated in various urban contexts, resulting in unique versions of the modern Ottoman subject. The chronology of erasure (by fire, nationalist demolition and neoliberal redevelopment) reveals how each wave of destruction targeted specific facets of this hybrid legacy, dismantling the spatial anchors of imperial diplomacy, multicultural cosmopolitanism and eclectic popular culture.

Three contributions emerge from this analysis. First, in terms of empirical research, the study provides a detailed historical geography of a vanished urban form, recovering the spatial typology and social life of late Ottoman theatre buildings. Second, in a theoretical sense, the study synthesises memory studies, postcolonial hybridity and spatial theory (Thirdspace and contact zones) into an integrated framework for analysing hybrid heritage. This framework is operationalised through the concept of the 'hybrid site of memory'. Third, in a political context, the study demonstrates how architectural erasure can function as a spatial tool for simplifying complex pasts, fostering national homogeneity and clearing the ground for new political and economic orders.

This 'tabula rasa illusion' has lasting consequences: it severs cultural continuity, impoverishes urban memory and disconnects contemporary practice from historical antecedents. The demolition of heritage is never merely architectural, argues this study; it is an epistemological loss that eliminates the necessary tangible archives for understanding contested pathways to modernity.

This analysis provides a clear recommendation for heritage policy and conservation practice. Urban heritage management must evolve to encompass not only the preservation of intact buildings, but also the recognition and documentation of what has been lost. This requires a systematic approach to 'memory mapping', involving the documentation of erased sites through archival research, digital reconstruction and public interpretation, as well as the recording of their locations, significance and histories. In the case of Istanbul, this would involve overlaying the locations of vanished theatres onto the contemporary cityscape, creating digital archives of their spatial and social histories, and incorporating these into cultural programming, education and

tourism. While this approach would not physically restore the buildings, it would raise awareness of them as 'absent heritage', acknowledging their role in the city's layered past and counteracting the 'tabula rasa illusion' that currently prevails.

In practice, this could take the form of a digital heritage platform or an urban trail connecting the former sites of Istanbul's theatres, complete with interpretive panels, augmented reality reconstructions and educational resources. These initiatives would anchor the memory of these vanished spaces in the contemporary urban landscape and challenge their erasure. More broadly, heritage policy should recognise 'hybrid heritage' as a distinct category requiring special attention, which includes sites that may not conform to nationalist or stylistic orthodoxies, but which document a city's complex encounter with globalisation, migration and cultural exchange. Because of their challenging nature, these sites are often most at risk, and protecting them requires explicit policy recognition and proactive conservation strategies.

Future research should extend this framework to other post-imperial and postcolonial cities, where hybrid heritage has been erased in a similar way. It could also examine how digital humanities approaches, such as augmented reality and geographic information system mapping, might help to recover these vanished sites for public memory. Ultimately, this study highlights the urgent need to recognise and preserve 'hybrid heritage' as a vital archive of urban cosmopolitanism. Recovering these lost spaces through scholarly and public engagement is not an act of nostalgia, but a crucial step in creating a meaningful connection to the spatial richness of the past.

ORCID iD


Sebla Arin Ensarioğlu https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7341-4875

Ethical Considerations

This study does not require ethical approval.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

The data are contained in the article.

References

Akın, N. (1998). *19. Yüzyılın İkinci Yarısında Galata ve Pera* [Galata and Pera in the second half of the 19th century]. Literatür Yayınları.

And, M. (1972). *Tanzimat ve İstibdat Döneminde Türk Tiyatrosu (1839-1908)* [Turkish theater in the Tanzimat and Absolutism periods (1839-1908)]. Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları.

And, M. (1983). *Cumhuriyet Dönemi Türk Tiyatrosu (1923-1983)* [Turkish theater in the Republican era (1923-1983)]. Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları.

And, M. (1989). *Türkiye'de İtalyan Sahnesi, İtalyan Sahnesinde Türkiye* [The Italian stage in Turkey, Turkey on the Italian stage]. Metis Yayınları.

And, M. (1999). *Osmanlı Tiyatrosu* [Ottoman theatre]. Dost Yay.

Arpad, B. (1988). *Yok Edilen İstanbul* [Destroyed Istanbul]. Türkiye Turing ve Otomobil Kurumu Yayınları.

Baydar, E. K. (2011). 19. Yüzyıl Osmanlısında Avrupai Tarzdaki İcra ve Temsil Mekanlarına Dair [On European-style performance and representation venues in 19th century Ottoman Turkey]. *Porte Akademik Müzik ve Dans Araştırmaları Dergisi*, *2*, 149–159.

Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The location of culture*. Routledge.
Bull, A. C., & Hansen, H. L. (2016). On agonistic memory. *Memory Studies*, *9*(4), 390–404.
Büyükünal, F. (2006). *Bir Zaman Tüneli: Beyoğlu* [A time tunnel: Beyoğlu]. Doğan Kitap.
Çelik, Z. (1993). *The remaking of Istanbul*. University of California Press.
Connerton, P. (2008). Seven types of forgetting. *Memory Studies*, *1*(1), 59–71.
Denel, S. (1982). *Batılılaşma Sürecinde İstanbul'da Tasarım ve Dış Mekanlarda Değişim ve Nedenleri* [Changes in design and outdoor spaces in Istanbul during the westernization process and their reasons]. ODTÜ Mimarlık Fakültesi Ara Yayınları.
Durkheim, E. (1982). *The rules of sociological method*. The Free Press. (Original work published 1895)
Durudoğan, S. (1999). *XIX. Yüzyılda Pera/Beyoğlu'nun Ekonomik, Kültürel ve Politik Yapısının Mimariye Etkileri* [The impact of Pera/Beyoğlu's economic, cultural, and political structure on architecture in the 19th century] [Ph.D. Thesis]. İTÜ-FBE.
Gerçek, S. N. (1997). *İstanbul'dan Ben de Geçtim* [I passed through Istanbul too]. Kitabevi Yay.
Goad, C. E. (1905). *Plan d'assurance de Constantinople. Vol. II – Péra & Galata map [Map of contantinople. Vol. II – Pera & Galata map], No: 35-41*. SALT Research Archive. https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/1819
Göçmen, D. (2010). Direklerarası. In C. Kozar & I. Ünal (Eds.), *Hayal-et Yapılar* [Phantasma buildings] (pp. 78–80). PATTU.
Halbwachs, M. (1992). *On collective memory*. University of Chicago Press.
Işın, E. (1999). *İstanbul'da Gündelik Hayat: Tarih, Kültür Ve Mekan Ilişkileri Üzerine Toplumsal Tarih Denemeleri* [Daily life in Istanbul: Social history essays on the relationships between history, culture, and place]. Yapı Kredi Yayınları.
Karaboğa, K. (2011). *Geçmişten Günümüze İstanbul Tiyatroları – I (Suriçi İstanbul'u, Bakırköy ve Çevresi)* [Istanbul theaters from past to present – I (Old city Istanbul, Bakırköy and surroundings)]. Yapı Kredi Yayınları.
Lähdesmäki, T., Čeginskas, V. L. A., Kaasik-Krogerus, S., Mäkinen, K., & Turunen, J. (2020). *Creating and governing cultural heritage in the European union: The European heritage label*. Routledge.
Lähdesmäki, T., Thomas, S., & Zhu, Y. (2019). *Politics of scale: New directions in critical heritage studies*. Berghahn.
Macdonald, S. (2015). Is 'difficult heritage' still 'difficult'? *Museum International*, *67*(1–4), 6–22.
Nora, P. (1989). Between memory and history: Les Lieux de Mémoire. *Representations*, *26*, 7–24.
Osmanoğlu, A. (1960). *Babam Abdülhamid* [My father Abdulhamid]. Güven Yayınevi.
Ozhan Koçak, D. (2011). *19. Yüzyıl İstanbul'unda Kültürel Dönüşümün Sahnesi Osmanlı Tiyatrosu* [The Ottoman theater: The stage for cultural transformation in 19th century Istanbul]. Parşömen Yay.
Pervititch, J. (1935). *Plan d'assurances – Vezneciler map [Insurance map – Vezneciler map]*. SALT Research Archive. https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/126290
Pratt, M. L. (1991). Arts of the contact zone. *Profession*, *1991*, 33–40.
Rossi, A. (1984). *The architecture of the city*. MIT Press.
Sevengil, R. A. (1962). *Saray Tiyatrosu* [The court theatre]. Milli Eğitim Basımevi.
Sezer, S., & Özyalçıner, A. (1995). *İstanbul'un Taşı Toprağı Altın* [Every stone and grain of soil in Istanbul is gold]. Altın Kitaplar Yay.
Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of heritage*. Routledge.
Société Anonyme Ottomane d'études et d'entreprises Urbaines. (1922). *Préfecture de la ville: Plan d'ensemble des quartiers, batiments et chemins principaux de communication de la ville de Constantinople map [City Prefecture: General map of the neighborhoods, buildings, and main thoroughfares of the city of Constantinople]*. SALT Research Archive. https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/119993

Author Biography

Sebla Arin Ensarioğlu, graduated from ITU Faculty of Architecture, has been practicing architecture professionally since 2004 and working as an academic since 2012. Her research areas include architectural design, design education, participatory architecture, theater and architecture, children and architecture, as well as body and space topics. In addition to her academic work, since 2007, she has been involved in architecture and design education for children and youth, designing and conducting various workshops within this framework.