

It is Time to Consider Sensory Urban Experiences: Looking into Today's Istiklal Street, Istanbul Through the Thresholds of Auditory Experiences

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In the latest years, the changing socio-cultural structure, economic and political movements, law and city regulations, innovative transportation and communication activities have resulted in a modification of the city of Istanbul. In this process, numerous intangible features of urban places in Istanbul have modified, gone, or changed; and unavoidably the 'sensory urban experiences' of Istiklal Street, which is one of the important urban places of Istanbul, have changed controversially. This study asserts that the 'sensory urban experiences' of Istiklal Street needs to be examined as much as possible to criticize the sensory reflections of the latest modifications in the area. This study focuses on the 'auditory experiences' of Istiklal Street to understand what has been lost and changed in terms of the auditory atmosphere of the area. Therefore, the method of 'Sensewalking', which is an efficient research tool to generate knowledge on the urban experiences beyond visual experiences, is used to catch the auditory experiences of the area. This study says that producing the knowledge on the sensory urban experiences beyond visual features is worthwhile, and this could open new ways for discussing the urban matters especially in the field of architecture, and urban studies.

Keywords: *Istiklal Street, Istanbul, sensory dimensions of places beyond visual, auditory experiences, sensewalking.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Concerning sensorial features of urban experience can be dated back to the beginning of the 20th century in some writers such as sociologist Georg Simmel (1971) and philosopher and cultural critic Walter Benjamin (1979) who emphasised the importance of a sensory approach for understanding the novel experience of life in the rapidly changing environment of the modern city (Degen and Rose, 2012). Architects began to concern sensory dimensions of architectural environments since 1960s thanks to the movement in architectural theory concerning sensory qualities of the material world paying attention to architectural experience and its elements. We might look to the research and activism of the 1970s because the spatial context of senses and sensory dimensions of places begun to be examined and some terms referring to the landscape of senses such as soundscape has been begun to be used. Lynch's metaphor referring the oscillations between physical and experiential dimensions of the city (Lynch, 1960); Henri Lefebvre's (1991), Michel de

Certeau's (1984), and Guy Debord's (2006)[1957] interests on the 'everyday urbanism'; Yi-Fu Tuan's (1974, 1977) work on the environmental perception; Marshall McLuhan's (1962) notion of the 'sense ratio'; and Edward Hall et al.'s idea on the 'proxemics' (1968); all of them have shown the early interests in the sensory aspects of urban experience (Zardini, 2005: 18–19; Howes 2005a; Mattern, 2009). But after the 1980s, thanks to the contributions of sensory revolution and phenomenology, sensory experiences become central to the design of urban built environments (Howes, 2005a; Degen and Rose, 2012). Through examining the links between sensations and urban environments, architectural environments have been begun to be analysed within the contexts in multi-sensory experiences to criticize the assessments of urban environments with only sense of sight (Howes, 2005a). This movement caused to pay attention to how we 'sense' places beyond the visual senses (Adams and Guy, 2007) as Zardini says investigating urban places needs include the matter of hearing, smelling, tasting, or touching (Zardini, 2005).

The case place of this study, Istiklal Street, Istanbul, has witnessed a controversial changing process due to the modifications of socio-cultural structure, economic and political movements, law and city regulations, innovative transportation, and communication activities after the 1990s. Many important figures have left Istiklal Street amid disruptive construction projects, and the cosmopolitan heritage of Istiklal Street has turned into a trademark for Istanbul's global city projects (Tekin and Akgün Gültekin, 2017). So, Istiklal Street has been turning into a space of quick renovation, refinement, and marketing. While all urban components of the street have been changing, and the capital-oriented urbanization has been creating a procedure that damaged the distinctive composition of the street. Istiklal Street has been becoming like all the other high streets around the world (Adanalı, 2011b). Consequently, the street begun to lose its characteristic features (Güney E.,2015) after some principle elements of streetscape have missed (Shirazi and Erkut,2014). For years, the problems could not be solved; the street has been done and redone numerous times; and in the end, the street has been converting into a street with no soul.ⁱTherefore, Istiklal Street nowadays has begun to be looked like a dying pedestrian thoroughfare at central Istanbul.ⁱⁱ It still hopes to bring back the good old days after suffering a series of setbacks and tries to recover from the problematic years.ⁱⁱⁱ

We could say while the characteristic landmarks that made Istiklal Street special disappeared one by one, the transformation has not been only spatial, socio-cultural, economic; also the sensory qualities have transformed arguably, and unavoidably the auditory features which have great importance in terms of intangible qualities of the area have begun to be lost. This approach has been grounded on the idea that the modifications in the built environment and physical layouts display changes in everyday life experiences of inhabitants (Degen and Rose,2012), because, the physical layouts and sensory regimes of an urban environment are interconnected (Degen, 2008).

2. More Than Visual: The Auditory Experiences of Istiklal Street, Istanbul that Already gone

Urban spaces have been studied mostly visually oriented, but the characteristics of urban places as the combination of physical/architectural structures and multisensory experiences of its inhabitants are the key to avoid ocular centric

urban experience examinations (Pallasmaa,2005a; Degen and Rose,2012; Lucas and Romice, 2008; Rubidge and Stones, 2009; Vasilikou, 2016; Henshaw et al., 2011).

'Auditory' experience may surround us to "describe the sensuous experience of sound in the environment and the acoustic properties of that environment and the employment of the auditory perceptual system" (Rodaway 1994, p. 84). Pallasmaa says "we are not aware of the significance of hearing in spatial experience, although sound often provides the temporal continuum in which visual impressions are embedded" (Pallasmaa, 2005a). The ear is the focus of our auditory perceptions and a complex organ devoted to collecting vibrations from the air and converting them into nerve impulses which are interpreted by the brain. Auditory experience, like all the other forms of sensuous experience, involves the whole body (Theart, 2010) which allow us to measure the pattern of sounds (Rodaway, 1994, p.91). Sounds help us to identify our spatial surroundings (Dale, 2010), and provide a feeling, which is how the place can be understood (Trejo, 2011). Rodaway explains this by saying "the wonder of the auditory system is the way it manages to decipher an order, a sense of the world, and of people, places and spatial relationships from this complex mass of sensuous information" (Rodaway, 1994:92). Pallasmaa says the sense of hearing makes the users a part of the experience of space (Pallasmaa, 2005a: 49). Labelle says, in the book 'Acoustic Territories: Sound Culture and Everyday Life', "auditory knowledge is a radical epistemological thrust that unfolds as a Spatio-temporal event: sound opens up a field of interaction, to become a channel, a fluid, a flux of voice and urgency, of play and drama, of mutuality and sharing, to ultimately carve out a micro-geography of the moment, while always already disappearing, as a distributive and sensitive propagation." (Labelle, 2010: xvii). Each place has a unique auditory characteristic that triggers some elements such as familiarity, arousal, tension, comfort, discomfort, warmth, and relaxation. And the combination of sounds can see the auditory manipulations within the auditory environment (Vasilikou, 2016). As "auditory knowledge (...) is based on empathy and divergence, allowing for careful understanding and deep involvement in the present (...)" (Labelle, 2010: xvii). The listener has an active role of "a dynamic system of information exchange" for having "to put the emphasis on how that environment is understood by those living within it - the people who are in fact creating it" (Truax, 2001: 11).

Istiklal Street has been a place where all kind of sounds of the urban dwellers can be heard without difficulty. During the daily sounds of Istiklal Street, while wandering the street, it could be realized that the street has its sound elements which inherited from its past.^{iv} As a pedestrian zone with the highest pedestrian traffic, the continuous flow of crowds has created the auditory energy and complexity of the place. It has hosted different street musicians as the heart and soul of Istanbul.^v Different social and political actors have appropriated the place for their agendas by creating different types of sounds (Baykal, 2000). The street's sounds could come from a coffeehouse or street musicians' or a street vendor' yelled out to attract the attention of people, but each corner has had a unique set of tones like a mixture of complicated sound elements.^{vi} When someone has walked down Istiklal Street, s/he could encounter musicians playing on the street so many times. Some of these musicians have been Turkish, while some have been the travellers, and yet others have been Syrian immigrants who have been in Istanbul due to war in their country.^{vii} On Istiklal the street music has been served for every taste (Kıratlı and Sirin, 2010), it could be heard the distant sound of a guitar, saxophone or drum playing, so street performers have filled the street with different kinds of music.^{viii} Some musicians' repertoire could have been limited to keep the attention of people for more than ten minutes, but the choice of music has been depended on the cultural background and preferences of music performers. Musicians reflected an extended composition for appealing to people's tastes.^{ix} From Turkish folk music to the more experimental traditional bands, there has been plenty of musicians performed on the street.^x In every few hundred meters, it could be seen that crowds of people have stood to watch street musicians. The musicians' sounds interspersed with the excited and playful whisperings of people.^{xi} Here, the musicians have performed to the audience of locals, visitors or dustbin men, with an orchestra of the passing trams, clanging construction noises and a myriad of languages all calling out together. Anyone and everyone who could play an instrument, not just those who have been professional or well-connected enough to get a gig in a bar, has been welcome on Istiklal Street. Romanians with their accordions, Iranian 'santur' players, French opera singers, all are part of the tapestry which have made up the soundtrack to the area.^{xii} Turkish folk music featuring traditional Turkish instruments like the 'bağlama' has been

an important part of street music and the singers have sung traditional songs called 'Türkü'.^{xiii} These songs often have brought various emotions and tones from daily life.^{xiv} With the recent influx of migrants, the music on the street has shown off the city's changing mosaic, the migrant musicians have brought new sounds to Istiklal Street.^{xv} Amongst the bustle of this noisy street, distinctive melodies can be heard from Syrian refugees that currently lived in Istanbul.^{xvi} Their fast-paced music usually has been performed by a larger band.^{xvii} Many groups of men Syria refugees have performed on the street, and they helped the street to be awake all the times of the day in rain or shine. Their music has ranged from Lebanese and Syrian to Egyptian classics and their tunes often have been catchy.^{xviii} Romani music has been amongst the most common forms of music it could be found on the street^{xix} as the sounds of the accordion player has been quite commonplace on the street^{xx} while Kurdish oud players have been lined on the pavement alongside. Some guitarists have covered American pop songs, and some new-age hippies have played the instruments of 'didgeridoo' and 'santur',^{xxi} and they created specific tones. Turkish Black Sea music could be heard almost every night on Istiklal which has included at least one 'kemençe' instrument and often attracted a part of the audience to dance in a circle. Amidst this colourful variety of musicians, the discrete performance of 'aqua drum' has created tranquil tones on Istiklal Street.^{xxii} As a place that is known for its mix of cultures, the sound of the South American pan flute has come as no surprise on Istiklal Street.^{xxiii} South American or native American musicians have been played the pan flute and wore beautiful traditional Native American outfits.^{xxiv} Also, the instrumental covers of favourite songs have been played by the street artists.^{xxv} The recognizable tunes from movies and TV shows have been often played, like the iconic main themes from *The Godfather*; *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*; and *Amélie*, or, more contemporary, the opening track of *Game of Thrones*.^{xxvi} The musicians there have been played the Italian song 'Ciao Bella', and 500 meters away another band has played 'Sweet Child O' Mine'. And at the end of Istiklal Street, at 'Tünel' area, there has been a Jazz concert.^{xxvii} Istiklal Street also has staged specific sounds come from street vendors. For example, the man who has pushed a cart of 'simit' (sesame pastry) and yelled out as 'simitçi, simitçi!' by walking up and down the street

letting people know that ‘simit’ has been fresh and ready. The ice cream vendors in traditional outfits have rung bells^{xxviii} while an ice-cream seller called out to people as he thumped with his long paddle.^{xxix} Because of that, the street has been filled by the places of worship such as churches, synagogues, mosques, it could be heard ‘Ezan’ (call to prayer) from Hüseyin Ağa Mosque from five times a day and bells from various churches on the area. As another specific sound of the street, the nostalgic tramway making its way along steel rails has set a nice metallic repetitive sound as ‘ding-ding-ding’ while the conductor of the tram has warned people to avoid from being in of tram’s road.^{xxx} All these auditory attributes of the area have established upon both natural and man-made sound elements which together could create the distinctive auditory mosaic of the area. But, unfoundedly, while distinctive tangible features have perished, the diversities of urban probabilities in terms of auditory experiences of the area have been penetrated, and the distinctive auditory features of Istiklal Street have been influenced negatively of the process that took place in there.

3. Today’s Auditory Thresholds of Istiklal Street, Istanbul through the ‘Sensewalking’ Practice

For overcoming the problems and shortcomings on recording, capturing, preserving and promoting sensory experiences of an urban place, this study offers to use the method ‘group Sensewalking sessions’ to reach the current sensory thresholds of Istiklal Street in terms of auditory, haptic, olfactory, gustatory, alongside visual experiences. In this paper, only auditory experiences of the street have been discussed.

Walking is a bodily performance to define the lived attributions of the urban environment and is a way of experiencing an urban place that we can generate a sense of (and for) place (Wunderlich, 2008). Sensewalking occurred in the 1960s as one such referring examining aspects of the human experience within the urban environments (Henshaw et al., 2009). Sensewalking which Mags Adams and Kye Askins describe as a varied method by which researchers might ‘...investigate and analyse how we understand, experience and utilise space’ (Adams and Askins, 2009); and focuses upon one or more aspects of the sensory environment to move beyond the hegemony of visual senses (Henshaw, 2014). The method is centred on the multisensory experience of being in a location (Adams and Askins, 2009),

involves a researcher walking alone, or with one or more participants through urban environments (Bruce et al., 2015) and use the walk for enabling participants to define and interpret the mutual link in-between experience a place with their bodies and senses (Adams and Askins, 2009). The ‘sensewalking’ method benefiting from the multisensory experience of being in a defined area, performing the walk to focus on special sensory experiences or activating participants to emit individual bodily interactions with a place (Rubidge and Stones, 2009).

The application of ‘Sensewalking’ of Istiklal Street has aimed to investigate the sensory experiences of the urban environment through ‘a series of multisensory walks’. As the basics of the ‘group ‘Sensewalking’ sessions’, the participants have been required to take walk on selected route (between Taksim Square and Tunnel Square on Istiklal Street) under the guidance of the researcher to concentrate on observing and experiencing the sensory dimensions of Istiklal Street as walking. During group Sensewalking sessions, five thematic questions have been asked which have been related with the auditory, haptic, olfactory, gustatory, alongside visual experiences of the street. The second thematic question has been related to the auditory experience of the street and asked ‘the **unpleasant, neutral and pleasant sounds** as can be heard during walking on Istiklal Street’. According to this question, the participants have written down their auditory experiences on the blank template while walking, then the filled templates have been collected and processed to interpret them.

The **overall results** on the auditory experience of Istiklal Street may confirm the auditory characteristics of the area has been shaped with a higher rate with unpleasant statements and definitions in the sensations of its users. This may say the street has many unpleasant auditory factors because of the dramatical implementations and decisions that need to be fixed as much as possible. As we look at the **unpleasant sensed auditory experience** of Istiklal Street, the sound descriptions have been grouped as ‘mechanical, transportation, traffic based sounds’(36%); ‘human-based sounds’(17%); ‘security presence based sounds’(14%); ‘construction-related sounds’(12%) ‘music based sounds’(9%); ‘street vendors based sounds’(8%); ‘sounds derived from shops’(3%); ‘sounds of bell song and Ezan (call to prayer)’(1%); ‘nature-based sounds’(0.44%)(Table 1). These could say due to the effect of a huge amount of the wrong driven

changes of the technology and infrastructure-related issues on the area, the 'mechanical, transportation, traffic based sounds' has been sensed as unpleasant. And the nervous energy has been more visible in these days and the construction activities have expanded on the area, as we can see 'security presence based sounds' and have been defined as unpleasant. And as 'construction-related sounds' have been sensed unpleasant, the construction activities have expanded on the area. As we look at the **neutral sensed auditory experience** of Istiklal Street, the sound descriptions have been staged as 'human-based sounds'(31%); 'street vendors based sounds'(23%); 'mechanical, transportation, and tool-related sounds'(21%); 'music based sounds'(12%); 'security presence based sounds'(7%); 'bell song and *Ezan* (call to prayer)(4%); 'nature-based sounds'(1%); 'other sounds'(1%) (see Table 2). This could mean as one of the iconic pedestrian areas of Istanbul,

Istiklal Street has been not figured without its huge amount of pedestrian and street vendors voices. As we look at the **pleasant sensed auditory experience** of Istiklal Street, the sound descriptions have been grouped as 'music based sounds'(48%); 'human-based sounds'(17%); 'nostalgic tram sound'(12%); 'street vendors based sounds'(8%); 'Ezan (call to prayer) sound'(6%); 'nature-based sounds'(5%); 'other sounds' (4%) (see Table 3). This result could show Istiklal Street could not be pictured without its street musicians and performers. As 'human-based sounds' could present Istiklal Street has been one of the important pedestrian streets of Istanbul which all kind of human sounds could be heard such as talking, laughing, etc.,....And as 'nostalgic tram sound' could show the red tram' clink has been one of the special sounds of this place; and we can say these pleasant sensed sounds belong to the distinctive sound characteristics of the street.

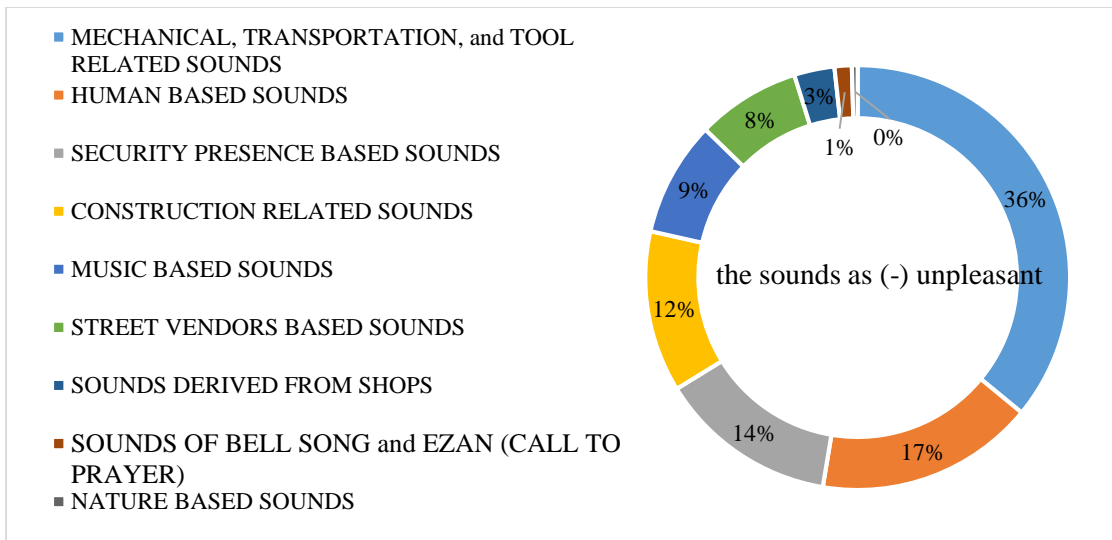


Table 1: The thresholds of the auditory experience of Istiklal Street is based on the sounds sensed as unpleasant by participants. Source: Author.

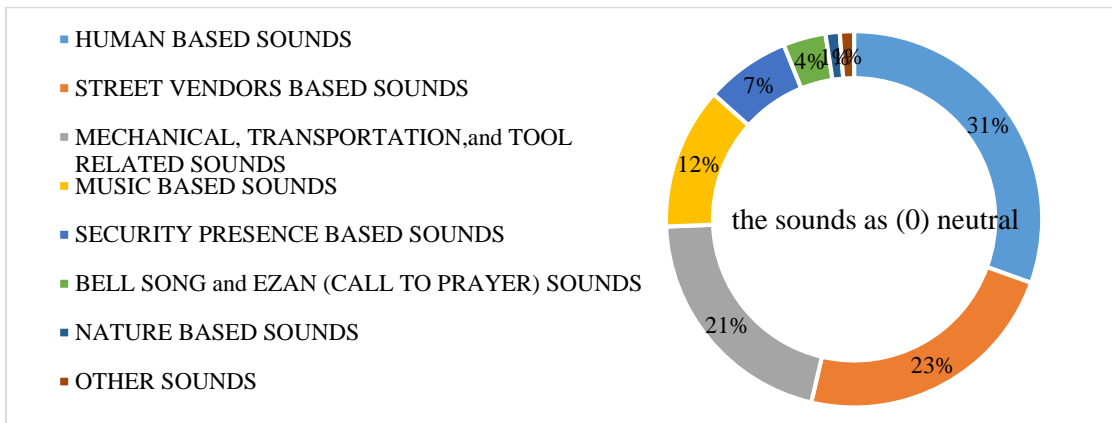


Table 2: The thresholds of the auditory experience of Istiklal Street is based on the sounds sensed as neutral by participants. Source: Author.

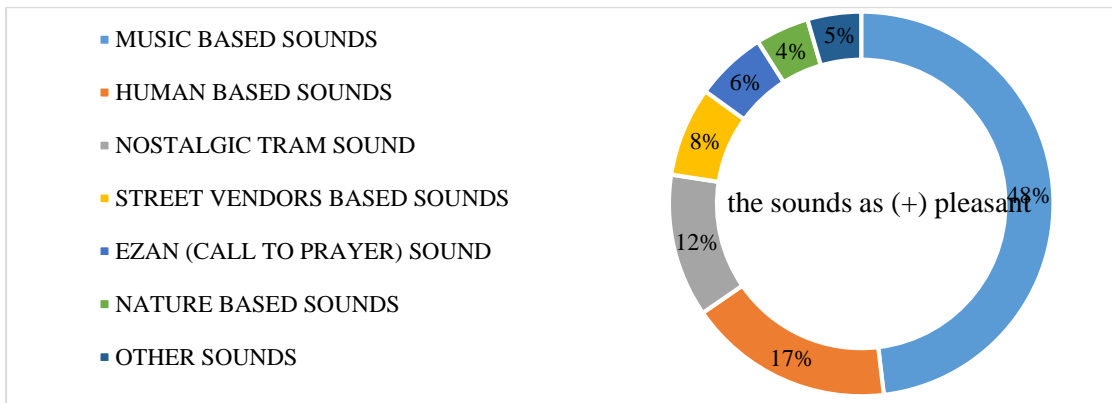


Table 3: The thresholds of the auditory experience of Istiklal Street is based on the sounds sensed as pleasant by participants. Source: Author.

4. CONCLUSION

Understanding places under the perspective of sensory experience has begun thanks to phenomenological approach paying attention to the multi-sensorial interpretation of the world after the beginning of the 20th century, but the 1980s, sensory experiences become central to understand urban environments (Degen and Rose, 2012), as a result of ‘sensory shift’ that contributed to the emergence of sensory revolution focussing on the senses and stressed dynamical, reciprocal, intersensory dimensions of our everyday engagement with the world (Howes, 2005a).

It is clear people experience places by how they look, sound, smell, touch, and taste. In the case of Istiklal Street, the role of sensory experiences beyond vision has been important, especially the auditory environment of Istiklal Street have been needing to be looked closely. The data showed us the current auditory experiences of the area have been correlated with the latest dramatic changes and their current impacts on the sensory attributions. The recognisable auditory aspects of Istiklal Street have begun to be eroded through the recent processes of transforming stages on the area. The modifications on Istiklal Street turned into a partial loss on the auditory dimensions which have great importance in terms of intangible qualities of the area. And, if they will be lost totally, the area can lose its spirit, diversity, originality, and homogenised through looking like any main street located in anywhere of the world. This study underlines that auditory qualities of the urban places are deserved to be considered widely for the further processes to deal with the modifications of auditory qualities, it is worthwhile to increase the awareness about the distinctive sensory dimensions of places within the urban practices. Because the next of the urban places is related to the sustainability of the affordances and probabilities in terms of the sensory dimensions of everyday life beyond visual experiences.

Note: 50 anonymous adults participated in the ‘group sensewalking sessions of Istiklal Street’ on 20 October 2018, 27 October 2018, 3 November 2018. The participants provided informed written consent. Out of 50 participants, 52% of participants are female (26 people) and 48% of participants are male (24 people); and the distribution of participants’ age is between 18 and 29 years.

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