

## Curating urban memories in connecting communities

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### Abstract

There is a worldwide growing attention on user participation in shaping urban environments in recent years. With the involvement of local authorities, civil initiatives and neighborhood organizations, it is possible to observe a similar attention in the formation of urban spaces in Turkey. Driven from this approach, this study examines the bottom-up transformation of a cultural space existing since 1960s in Izmir, Güzelyalı. To reveal the process of how civic empowerment operated, we simulate a remembering process and curate the process in order to make things visible. The process examines an urban installation to reveal narratives behind collective action through reading collective memory. The scope is to re-read the past in the present in order to generate new processes of civic engagement, and thus actions, in urban spaces.

**Keywords:** Urban memory, Collective memory, Curating memory, Civic action

### 1. Introduction

In its simplest form, memory is retaining and recalling recent or far past experiences often coming in oral forms and narratives. It is the act of remembering, recollecting narratives that inevitably are linked to space. It can be thought of as a feature belonging to an individual, nevertheless memory also carries a collective dimension because communities are shaped by the memories of their individuals. Within the context of urban spaces, memory transcends the individual perspective and becomes a collective phenomenon created by society. Hence society and collective memory hold a bilateral relation, the existence of one conditions the other (Halbwachs, 1992). What space evokes along with what time carries, establishes a dialogue verbally and spatially; and through cooperation, it becomes a powerful tool in uniting communities. As Maurice Halbwachs (1992: 33) suggests, collective memories are “selective, socially constructed, contained spatiality — a society’s memory is reconstruction of past.”

Yet, how can urban memory be curated so that it would transgress memory as a passive entity and be a transformative agent instead? In what ways can memory help in empowering civic activities, and triggering collective motives and actions?

And how can the curation of memory be a transformable, playable and mobile performance? This article examines a way of curating memories in a neighborhood located in Izmir, Turkey. The 1960s were the years when cultural experiences engaged the community through open and enclosed movie theatres scattered around the city. Today, most of these spaces are either abandoned or demolished and have been replaced by tall apartment blocks. However, some of them still preserve their cultural values today. This article evolves from this point, and addresses the transformation process of a neighborhood movie theatre into an active cultural center.

To reveal the process of how civic empowerment operated, we simulate a remembering process and curate the process in order to make things visible. We propose an installation to reveal the narratives behind collective action through reading collective memory. In turn, we re-read the past in the present in order to generate new processes of civic action in urban spaces. This article presents the Memory Box project generated around Güzelyalı Cultural Center, located in Izmir. Although the design product has started as a mobile vehicle to collect the stories of the cultural center, formerly known As Movie Theatre, six months of archival research and oral history studies concluded with a short movie which is based

on the stories of transformation reflecting how these stories are attached to place, and how neighborhood residents acted with a collaborative and participatory understanding.

### 1.1 Memory – Collective Memory

Although the subject of memory is widely recognized in the field of psychology, it remains multidisciplinary due to its conceptual relevance with the human. In many fields such as psychology, philosophy, sociology, social sociology, architecture, history, political sciences and educational sciences, memory holds various definitions, approaches, researches and discussions. Memory encompasses such various fields from far past till today, especially by being exposed to transformations each decade since the beginnings of 19<sup>th</sup> century. Draaisma (2007: 101–102) states that, “this image of memory as a flock of pigeons is far removed from the quantifying observations of neuroscience, but it is strikingly lively and accurate nonetheless. It portrays the classic muse, Mnemosyne, in a different guise, demonstrating how erratic, capricious and violent memory can be. Memories are not something we necessarily control: often it’s the memories that control us, and in doing so, determine our self-perception and behavior.” Despite the fact that memory was first exposed to wide attention in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, conceptual discussions around the subject have occurred since the ancient Greeks. Memory has also long been a prevalent issue in the social sciences and humanities. As well, as stated by many authors, memory is especially significant to understand society, in particular how society recollects the past – because individual memories construct a society’s memory when they come together.

Halbwachs (1992: 22) states that “social memory is not a given but it is a constructed notion”. Thus, collective memory features an engagement with the community. It is a process of remembrance, holding ties with the community and forming a communal point of view rather than an individual ceasing to exist on her own and creating individually. What Halbwachs emphasizes about collective memory attributes a greater importance to social groups. According to him:

... It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories. If we enumerate the number of recollections during one day that we have evoked upon the occasion of

our direct and indirect relations with other people, we will see that, most frequently, we appeal to our memory only in order to answer questions which others have asked us, or that we suppose they could have asked us.... (Halbwachs, 1992: 38)

For Halbwachs, in a society or a group, memory is being shaped with other people’s recollections. It is not an individual happening to remember the past events.

Most of the time, when I remember, it is others who spur me on; their memory comes to the aid of mine and mine relies on theirs. There is nothing mysterious about recall of memories in these cases at least. There is no point in seeking where they are preserved in my brain or in some nook of my mind to which I alone have access: for they are recalled to me externally, and the groups of which I am a part at any time give me the means to reconstruct them... (Halbwachs, 1992: 38)

According to scholars of memory, remembering is never an individual notion. Similarly to Halbwachs, Shudson asserts that there is no such a thing as an individual memory. For him, “Memory is social. It is social, because it is primarily located in the institutions; with rules laws, standardized applications with the cultural practices, more than individual human minds.” (1997: 346) According to the vast majority of great thinkers, belonging to a community, building a common ground on the community’s common memories, experiences cease to be features of collective memory. How to remember the past, decipher and comment upon it is a construction that is collectively managed with the people who formed and experienced that particular past. Connerton (1999: 10) suggests that it is by default, an implicit rule among people who manage a life within a community have common memories. If individual memories differ than collective memories and memories in common, then there are neither common experiences nor common assumptions. To accept the common past means accepting to be a member of a community hence be part of its culture, identity, traditions, beliefs, experiences and acceptances forming a common memory that the community holds. Because, belonging to a community means to accept the common norms and behave within these norms.:

Memory is also social because remembering does not take place in a social vacuum. We remember as members of social groups, and this means assuming and internalizing the common traditions and social representation shared by our collectivities. Moreover, collective memory constitutes shared social frameworks of individual recollections as we share our memories with some people and not others, and – in turn- with whom, for what purpose and when we remember, all of which contributes to what we remember.

(Misztal, 2003: 12)

Memory is a dynamic phenomenon having impacts upon the commons, past and present conditions of people belonging to a community. It is always being constructed and reproduced by the form of remembering.

As Nora (2006: 19) explains, “memory is the life itself that is produced by the living groups. For this purpose, memory is on the dialectic of recollection and forgetting, which is always under a development and changing.” Collective memory encompasses individual memories and remembrances. It is a condition that even holds the individual remembrance as collective, based on the fact that individual memories are situated in a community thus collective memory encompasses all forms of memory:

No matter how individual it is, each remembrance has ties with the cluster of thoughts belonging to other individuals; it actualizes with people, places, histories and words, that is all the tangible and intangible components which make us become a part of a society. (Connerton, 1999: 60)

In *The Ethics of Memory* (2002) Avishai Margalit inquires into various forms of memory and distinguishes shared memory and common memory. Margalit explains through various instances about how collective remembrance occurs, and how communication between people effect the process of remembrance:

A common memory, then, is an aggregate notion. It aggregates the memories of all those people who remember a certain episode which each of them experienced individually. If the rate of those

who remember the episode in a given society is above ascertain threshold (say, most of them, an overwhelming majority of them, more than 70 percent, or whatever), then we call the memory of the episode a common memory – all of course relative to the society at hand [...] A shared memory, on the other hand, is not a simple aggregate of individual memories. It requires communication. A shared memory integrates and calibrates the different perspectives of those who remember the episode – for example, the memory of the people who were in the square, each experiencing only a fragment of what happened from their unique angle of events- into one version.... Other people in the community who were not there at the time may then be plugged into the experience of those who were in the square, through channels of description rather than by direct experience. Shared memory is built on a division of mnemonic labor (Margalit, 2002: 52).

There are memories peculiar to each and every space. Scholars of collective memory entity assert that memory is triggered by different happenings, symbols, and statues of places, and that it can be activated spatially. The question of how societies remember – which is also the name of the book written by Paul Connerton – is being answered through various aspects. Social symbols, memorial days, statues, and main squares of cities refer to past happenings and lead to remembering. Based on the assumption that shared memory is disseminated, improved, and reignited through collective communicative realms, this study interrogates the implementation of a process of remembrance attributed to a particular neighborhood, yet not restricted to a particular space. The *Memory Box*, which this text specifically addresses, offers a social platform over an interactive interface in where the urban residents and particularly the target group of neighborhood inhabitants can share their memories at a collective level. Hence, the way to reveal these memories through making them publicly visible and communal is the main focus of this study.

## **2. Culture in memory: As Movie Theatre**

Located in Izmir Turkey, the Güzeyalı neighborhood has been selected as the pilot study area for various reasons: it is located in one of the main districts in the inner city and

has a community coming from various socio-economic backgrounds. Over time, welcoming Levantine communities from west in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and rural immigrants from the eastern part of the country in late 20<sup>th</sup> century, today the neighborhood has a well-mixed population celebrating different cultural backgrounds. Apart from the shifting communities becoming rooted over time, exposure of the neighborhood's physical scene with regards to the transformation in the built environment offers us various cross-sections of collective memory. Particularly, developing the study by focusing on the cultural cross-sections in memory offers us findings referring memories and the ways of remembrance of each individual, as well as mutual memories regarding the neighborhood. Memories of space are through the memories of this particular neighborhood's cultural places. Driven from this claim, the study selects the former 'As Movie Theatre', which is the current 'Güzelyalı Cultural Center', and develops this particular space.

The 1950s were the years when cultural experiences were disseminated through open, semi-open and enclosed movie theatres. During the same years, As Movie Theatre started operating as the first enclosed movie theater of the Güzelyalı neighborhood in Izmir. Ran by a private enterprise, the movie theatre was known for locals lining up in long queues in front of the structure to watch both national and international movies one after another. Those were the times when national Yeşilçam movies were popular, the times of wooden chairs and fizzy drinks.

Beginning in the 1970s, both with the regeneration of buildings and television entering homes, cultural structures as such became either less visited, losing their cultural value, or were demolished and turned into tall apartment blocks. Nevertheless, although As Movie Theatre lost its original function, it resisted becoming a dead space by hosting local cultural and art activities for the neighborhood residents. Despite the fact that the Municipality was the predominant figure in supporting the process of functional transformation, the space was kept alive by the active engagement of neighborhood residents. Being one of the regular attendants from those times, "As (means unique in Turkish) Movie Theatre meant unity for us residents" states Sabri Ozazar; as understood from its name, this uniqueness was rooted in social connections sustained over time.

## 2.1. Transformation of the cultural structure

In 1986, Konak municipality, which is responsible for the neighborhood, expropriated As Movie Theatre and transformed the existing private structure into Güzelyalı Cultural Center to be operated as the first cultural center in the area. Despite the spatial incapacity, cultural activities found life in the old cinema structure that originally had a single meeting hall covered with wooden interior claddings and a balcony which extended through the main stage. The stage was no longer showing any movies, but was hosting ballet classes. The balcony was readjusted with a different spatial organization, and started hosting ceramic and other handcraft ateliers with scattered tables and chairs all around. The building was an urban ruin with pigeons entering through the roof and flying inside, and there was no daylight inside as the structure was originally meant to operate as a movie theatre. Along the hall on the way to the boiler room in the basement, people were attending patchwork classes and rehearsing musical instruments. Despite all the disadvantages the building had, inhabitants had numerous successful annual exhibitions, and it was the activities that were adapted to the space over years, not the space adapting itself to the activities. Sabri Ozazar, as one of the old inhabitants, explains the conditions back then in his own words:

People were yearning things, they were willing to make their children to ballet classes back in those times [meaning 1980s]. Those were the times when opera came to the city, they were plays, and you were able to follow movies on the TV rather than going to the movie theatres... People were eager to make their children getting that cultural background. One again, there were several stage plays prepared by the schools, yet there were no spaces to display. They were asking to display at the stage of this ruined structure, during those times. We were asked to host them for the annual events. Seeing all these happening, and of course with the support of the municipality but mostly by the help of the neighborhood residents, we reconfigured the stage with wooden balustrades and made the space available for ballet classes. This was our beginning.

In the beginning of the 1990s, there were 180 registered people, however today 1800 people are members of the same

space. Since the increase in the contents of the activities, their frequency and the number of people attending, the existing structure became insufficient to host either the activities or its users. Therefore, to overcome the spatial insufficiency, in 2003 the municipality bought the adjacent land and in 2006 the existing structure was demolished and reconstructed with the empty lot next door. Since then, it is not the people who are adapting themselves for what the building's spatial capacity used to allow, rather the space that the new structure allows is adjusting itself regarding the cultural events.

### 3. (Re)minding space

This experimental project is about a public collective memory installation. As Daniel N. Stern (2004: 33) states in his works, here the past holds center stage and all participants (on and off screen) are players.

The brief history mentioned above may seem uninteresting at first glance. However, when the memory of a space is explored and thus revived through its frequent attendants, who are at the same time neighborhood residents, it becomes vital. Civic initiation is integral to both spatial and cultural transformation, and thus we follow a bottom-up process rather than a top-down approach, as the basis of the research generated around this specific cultural center. It is a fact that nowadays in Turkey cultural centers are often operated as wedding halls, or urban residents are not acknowledged in decisions about the existence of these centers in their neighborhood, and even if they are, they barely visit. Throughout our initial research, we have encountered over a hundred neighborhood scale cultural centers in the whole city of Izmir. These centers, which are often called district halls, culture halls, youth centers, training centers, and cultural centers are often run by municipalities and rarely by private initiatives. What makes Güzelyalı Cultural Center unique in this study is that both the space and the activities the space hosts is beyond a service for the neighborhood residents. On the contrary, the contents of the activities, and even their frequency, are organized by the neighborhood residents:

In times when municipalities were not in charge of running public courses, this center organized courses for young and elderly people. We asked for festivals from the municipality. They used to

organize festivals in the city center back than. And we said that we wanted in our neighborhood too. And we managed to achieve running seven festivals over seven years. All these achievements were the step by step achieved results by students and people who devoted their energy for the center.  
(Güven Yatu, Neighborhood Resident)

We started running piano classes by the self-sacrifice of a teacher and a piano we brought here from a local's house. You see, what we see today is because of our small but big self-sacrifices. (Sabri Ozazar, Neighborhood Resident)

"It was financially hard to take private classes those days. Yet, with the opening up of the conservatoires, students who graduated from there came to the center to give classes for free to the locals. They were encouraged by the residents. These were big steps" (Salim Cetin, President of the Cultural Center)

"On the other hand, municipality asking the demands of the people here have always motivated us. Since there were so many demands at all times, the municipality was always feeling a pressure in pursuing our demands." (Güven Yatu, Neighborhood Resident)

Extending over twenty-five years of operation, before and after the physical transformation, we see that the cultural center formed its own community:

Families who used to bring their children back in the old days, nowadays bring their grandchildren."  
(Günes Kiper, Neighborhood Resident)

It is observed that the space does not only become activated during the ongoing events and activities, but also is a meeting hub in everyday life. Apart from the administration units, rooms assigned for courses and the main hall which holds theatrical and musical performances regularly, the main foyer is continuously busy with people sipping their drinks and chatting and the reading room upstairs is constantly occupied by elderly inhabitants who come to read newspapers everyday.

### 3.1 Urban memory carried towards the future as a mobile vehicle

Stories collected through the method of oral history. Comprising the initial phase of this research, stories were videoed and through a digital program they were clipped and reorganized under various titles in sequence such as (1) Güzelyalı neighborhood life, (2) As Movie Theater, (3) The period when As Movie Theatre lost its original function and was left abandoned, (4) a bottom-up demand for cultural activities, (5) spatial insufficiency with the re-functioning of the existing structure, (6) demolition of the old movie theatre and construction of the new cultural space, and (7) current life and ongoing activities in the cultural center. The stories that were stitched together with this sequence were presented at the park next to the cultural center. Instead of screening at the enclosed foyer of the cultural center to its regular attendants, the stories were screened in a public space in

order to reach more people and acknowledge them as well as continue to recollect memories from the volunteer residents.

The screening of the video and the process of recording stories simultaneously took place in the inner and outer facades of a box constructed out of OSB panels. We called this the Memory Box, where a maximum of three people can fit in at the same time. Designed as a mobile installation system, video obtained from the oral history study was projected over an inner surface, whilst in the meantime its outer skins were forming backgrounds to voice record or shoot new stories. Thus, a visitor who approaches the Memory Box through the sounds of the park, enters the box and starts to hear the sounds of the past. The video inside starts with the period of As Movie Theatre and informs the visitors of the box about the transformation period underlined with the themes mentioned above.



Fig. 1. The current view from the Güzelyalı Cultural Center

Source: authors

With the above-mentioned features, the box turns into an object that activates shared memories. People revealed their particular stories regarding the past as well as maintaining a communicative ground which was revived thanks to these stories with the people who gathered around this object.

What makes this project experimental is that the stories which were initially recorded and then decomposed/recomposed did not remain as a mere passive video archive, but we managed to expand the material memory and made the existing memories visible by the joined new memories.

Collecting stories and making them public is both widespread and popular nowadays. Often showcasing through digital platforms, these studies are the publicized notions of oral narratives. Projects based in the United States such as Storycorps which started in 2003 and Humans of New York that has been actively running since 2010 could be given as instances highlighting new approaches to story collection.<sup>1</sup>

1. Storycorps, initiated by radionbroadcaster Dave Isay, succeeded

Unquestionably, these are successful attempts trying to meld together different techniques in both hearing the stories via voice recording, as in the former instance, or getting together the stories and images, as in the latter instance. Yet, these projects are still not relevant to urban memories and remain as stories at an individual scale. Having no specific space target, hence not attaining a particular reading of a space, they do not worry about having references to the built environment.

in collecting around 50.000 video recordings. The operation is as follows: located temporarily in different places over the city, a mobile vehicle which hosts at most two people is recording the voices of those people. Meanwhile a copy of recording is presented to the people participated, other copy becomes the property of Storycorps.

On the other hand, Humans of New York project has a different method. Initiator of the project, Brandon Stanton randomly interviews the people of New York and in the meantime captures their images. Stories are presented on the web site by including short texts directly cited from the interviewee along with their images.



Fig. 2. (a, b, c) Images from the oral history studies

Source: authors



Figs. 3 & 4. Views from the Memory Box during the urban public installation

Source: authors



In this sense, Memory Box may be distinguished from these projects by specifically referencing the urbanscape. Instead of having a passive reading of the transformation of a space, it tries to reveal how citizen initiatives were effective, and through a physical interface it eases the process of reaching people – which is often the challenging part of running oral history stories. Thus, this interface does not become a storage for memory, on the contrary, becomes a landmark by arousing the interest of the people. Sustaining the public life of the Memory Box and carrying on with both reflecting the stories and collecting memories remains essential in keeping the project sustainable.

#### 4. Conclusion and further research

With the recent increase in the number of urban renewal projects ongoing in Turkey, the built environment has been exposed to drastic physical transformations. Visible in urban everyday lives, studies in urban memory remain vital. As mentioned in the first part of this article, scholars assert that social memory is socially constructed and is shaped by different remembering occasions. In this project, the Memory Box has been used as a memory triggering object and it has been a place-space of memory. As Margalit (2002: 52) suggests, there are two categories of memory as common and as shared memory which we can remember; “Other people in the community who were not there at the time may then be plugged into the experience



Fig. 5. An image of Storycorps vehicle  
Source: Jorge Sanchueza – Lyon/Kut News

of those who were in the square, through channels of description rather than by direct experience.” Thereby, the Memory Box becomes the object of shared memory that unites people to remember and share their recollections.

In this sense, the project explained here may look like a standard oral history study at first glance. However, two features make this study particular; first, Güzelyalı Cultural Center has more distinguished memories than the rest of the cultural centers. Reviving those memories and protecting them is essential for urban memory. Secondly, the research brings in new tools and new methods in seeking alternative ways of memory collection on an urban scale.

Overall, through the project two things were experienced: not only were previously collected narratives temporarily made visible but the compiled narratives on site functioned to sustain the process of urban memory collection. Although the project was initially based on the transformation of the movie theatre into a cultural center, during the studies we encountered invisible stories transcending the boundaries of the building towards the scale of the neighborhood. Here, instead of generating a setup evolving around the collective memories experienced around a fixed enclosed space, versatile stories that shrink and expand in and over space by embodying multi-dimensional scale were given place. Thus, although the particular space of study plays a vital role in the project, still being remembered even with the physical transformations, it was exposed, thanks to the memory from past till today becoming a connector, sort of an adhesive merging time.

In order to evoke the memory of the neighborhood, Memory Box was built on the realization of a design product that in return had the capacity to revive collective memory. Meanwhile, by bringing people together, it opened a space of remembrances that had been actually formed for reminding. This was realized via the urban product that was not only designed as a receiver but also as a sender in stimulating and generating a field for further memory collection processes. Furthermore, by being displayed in one of the well-known independent art spaces of Izmir in October 2016, the project extended the actual neighborhood of study and was disseminated among many other Izmir sidlers coming from different parts of the city. In contrast to the memories performed inside the box during the public event in the neighborhood, the memories were intentionally displayed

elsewhere than the box and hence were scattered around the space where the exhibition was held. In this manner, shootings of further memories during the public event were added to the former oral history study and thus transformed into an art product. This did not only show the sustainability of the project but also proved the possibility of repurposing of the Memory Box in various spaces.

In conclusion, we acknowledge that this is a pilot study that offers us an experimental platform for how to stimulate processes of remembrances and read those over an urban public space. Memory Box presents us opportunities in this field in the long run. Paying attention to not only collecting memories but also to disseminating them, we aim at continuing the project by compiling further urban memories. Thereby, this study offered us a new method for performing oral history studies at an urban scale.

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Figs. 6 & 7. Images from the Exhibition  
Source: authors

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