

## 13

**URBAN ACUPUNCTURE IN TAKSİM GEZI PARK:  
IMPROVING SOCIAL LIFE FOR COMMUNITIES**

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**ABSTRACT**

Urban acupuncture provides an adaptive framework for the design and regeneration of neglected public spaces (urban voids, lost places) to strengthen the social infrastructure of a city. Urban acupuncture believes urban design and regeneration should occur through a bottom-up, democratic, pluralistic, inclusive, innovative and interdisciplinary approach. Small-scale, low-cost, fast implementable, innovative and problem-solving idea projects are developed using this new planning approach to produce fast and punctual solutions to urgent needs against the slow traditional planning processes and create exceptional places by making small touches in the urban landscape. This study aims to improve the social life of communities in Taksim Gezi Park in Istanbul, Türkiye, developed through an urban acupuncture idea project. This paper introduces urban acupuncture and the explanation of the study area. Data were collected by case study and observation methods and analysed using document analysis, visual material analysis and SWOT analysis methods. The paper introduces the urban acupuncture approach and then the information of the case study -Taksim Gezi Park. A SWOT analysis of Gezi Park based on fieldwork and observation is presented. From spatial analyses, the site-specific urban acupuncture idea projects were developed to improve Taksim Gezi Park to be more comfortable and beneficial for social communities, including plants and animals.

**Keywords:** *Urban Acupuncture, Quality of Life, Taksim, Gezi Park, Istanbul*

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**INTRODUCTION**

This study aims to improve the social life of communities in Taksim Gezi Park of Istanbul, Türkiye, through an urban acupuncture ideas project. The paper first introduces the urban acupuncture approach and then the Taksim Gezi Park as the case study. A SWOT analysis of Gezi Park based on fieldwork and observation reveals the strengths and weaknesses of Taksim Gezi Park and the opportunities and threats that the park harbours for the social life of the communities. In the light of the spatial analyses, site-specific urban acupuncture idea projects have been developed to make Taksim Gezi Park a more comfortable and beneficial place for people, animals and plants. A collage is displayed to visualise how the proposed urban design solutions would be implemented in real life. The intervention will improve Taksim Gezi Park and the social life of people and animals.

**CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT FOR DESIGN**

Concept development means identifying a particular idea or set of ideas and refining it to give it clarity, coherence and structure. During concept development, designers take an abstract idea and turn it into a well-formed design using critical thinking skills, research and analysis. By defining and clarifying ideas and researching their pros and cons, designers can create a workable design that meets the needs of their users (Synectic, 2023). In the study, a design concept was developed for Taksim Gezi Park and its surroundings (Figure 1). This concept makes open and green spaces around Taksim Gezi Park suitable for people, animals, and plants. This concept builds a lively ecosystem in and around the park, revitalises social life, and makes the area safe and comfortable for all live users.

**METHODOLOGY / PROCEDURE**

The perspective offered by the urban acupuncture approach was adopted in developing idea projects to improve the social life in Taksim Gezi Park (Figure 1). At the beginning of the study, all written materials belonging to Taksim Gezi Park and its surroundings were analysed by scanning as the document analysis method. The visual material analysis method was used for all Taksim Square's maps, plans, projects and design schemes. A SWOT analysis for Gezi Park was also conducted based on on-site investigations using the case study method. Problem determinations of the people, animals and plants using the Taksim Gezi Park were conducted with a random observation method. The relationship of Taksim Gezi Park with its surroundings was examined through Google Earth and Yandex Maps, following a historical and contemporary approach. Urban acupuncture ideas developed for Taksim Gezi Park and its surroundings were visualised with the help of Adobe Photoshop program using the collage method. In this process, mapping and layout organisation could be planned and designed with the help of the Canva software.



Figure 1: Taksim Gezi Park (Source: Daily Sabah, 2014)

## UNDERSTANDING URBAN ACUPUNCTURE

Urban acupuncture is a method of revitalising cities through spatial planning and urban design. Urban acupuncture aims to activate, improve, and make a city or place more beneficial and meaningful. *Urban Acupuncture* is an approach that focuses on small, subtle and light design interventions that use community energy to heal the voids in urban areas for the benefit of society and nature (Lerner, 2014).

Urban acupuncture is a socio-technical intervention developed on a small scale, creating a surge for large-scale urban transformations. The primary purpose of this approach is to provide meaningful improvements in the citizens' quality of life with punctual touches. Urban acupuncture points are points of contact with local knowledge. Urban acupuncture is a bio-urban healing and development process that connects humans to nature (Casagrande, 2020).

Urban acupuncture provides an adaptive framework for the design and regeneration of neglected public spaces (i.e. urban voids and lost places) to strengthen the social infrastructure of a city (Nassar, 2021). Urban acupuncture believes urban design and regeneration should occur through a bottom-up, democratic, pluralistic, inclusive, innovative and interdisciplinary approach. Small-scale, low-cost, fast implementable, innovative and problem-solving idea projects are developed in this approach. This concept refers to a new planning approach that aims to produce fast and punctual solutions to urgent needs against the slow traditional planning processes and create exceptional places by making small touches in the urban landscape (Murray et al., 2010).

The most crucial role in the popularisation of the urban acupuncture method, both as a concept and as a practice, belongs to Brazilian architect, planner and politician Jamie Lerner. Lerner was the mayor of Curitiba for three terms, during which time he gained worldwide fame with many successful applications that can be called urban acupuncture. The secret of urban acupuncture is its punctuality and speed. In cities, light, water, natural sounds, planting, monumental elements, and old and historical buildings are the basic elements of acupuncture interventions (Lerner, 2014).

Urban acupuncture utilises traditional Chinese acupuncture theory. It considers cities as the human body, a multidimensional sensitive energy, and a living entity and organism. The meridian system of a city is made up of physical structures such as buildings, public spaces, and streets, and the acupuncture points of a city are some small but vital urban areas (Leone et al., 2023).

High speed and flexibility are the most important advantages of urban acupuncture compared to the usual planning process. With urban acupuncture, simple and focused interventions in the urban area can unlock the area's possibilities and create new energy for the whole city. Especially in developing countries, urban acupuncture is recognised as an effective implementation method for meeting urgent social needs, as it involves point-based, rapid interventions instead of large-scale projects (Stokes et al., 2015).

In order for any urban practice to be defined as urban acupuncture, low-energy points should be selected; an interdisciplinary approach should be applied; it should be small-scale, low-cost and rapidly applicable; it should be replicable and create a domino effect (Tomitsch & Haeusler, 2015) (Figure 2).

## URBAN ACUPUNCTURE PRINCIPLES



## URBAN ACUPUNCTURE STRATEGIES



Figure 2: Urban Acupuncture Principles and Strategies  
(Source: Nassar, 2021)

## THE BACKGROUND OF TAKSİM GEZİ PARK

Gezi Park is a city park in Taksim Square in the Beyoğlu district of Istanbul. It is one of the first parks of the Republican era and one of the smallest parks in Istanbul. The park, which is publicly open to everyone, is home to a wide variety of animals and plants. The park has a rectangular plan, with a large fountain in the middle (Gülersoy, 1994). Atatürk Cultural Center and The Marmara Taksim Hotel are located in the south of the park, and InterContinental Istanbul, Grand Hyatt Istanbul and Istanbul Technical University Faculty of Architecture (Taşkıışla) are located in the north of the park (Figure 3).

Taksim Square has political, physical, cultural and historical considerations that play a dynamic role in people's lives. The appearance of Taksim Gezi Park has changed and been modified many times in the last 30 years. Taksim Square is a scene of important social and political events and can gather thousands of people.

Taksim Square and its immediate surroundings include many cultural, entertainment, commercial, recreational and artistic functions. Tourism, socio-cultural and commercial areas are concentrated around the Taksim monument. The floor heights of religious buildings, educational buildings, consulates and Taksim Mausoleum have remained the same. The six-storey buildings are on İstiklal Street, Talimhane District, Atatürk Cultural Centre, and its vicinity. Buildings of 6 storeys are concentrated in the area where İstiklal Street connects to the square and Talimhane section (Acarlı et al., 2019).

## HISTORY OF GEZİ PARK

A military barracks was built on the site of Gezi Park in 1806. The building, called Halil Pasha Artillery Barracks (Turkish: Halil Paşa Topçu Kışlası), was a large structure designed in Ottoman, Russian and Indian architectural styles. However, the barracks were severely damaged in the 1909 event. Despite being damaged, the inner courtyard of the barracks was rearranged and used as Taksim Stadium for a while. The Turkish national football team played its first official international match against the German team in this stadium on October 26, 1923, and drew 2-2.

In 1936, French architect and city planner Henri Prost (1874-1959) came to Türkiye at the invitation of President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Prost prepared city plans for Istanbul in the period that continued until 1951, and these plans were implemented. In line with Prost's Istanbul city plan, the damaged Halil Pasha Artillery Barracks was demolished in 1940 by the governor and mayor Lütfi Kırdar (in office 1938-1949).

Prost's city plan, enacted in 1939, proposed a large park between Taksim, Nişantaşı and Maçka, including Dolmahçe Valley, in a 30-hectare (74-acre) valley stretching to the Bosphorus. This large park with open green space was aimed at meeting the recreational needs of Istanbulites. The construction of the park was completed in 1943, and it was opened under the name of "İnönü Park" by Lütfi Kırdar in honour of the second president İsmet İnönü (1938-1950). In the following years, large hotels were built piecemeal in the region, which caused the area of the large park to shrink. Despite this, Taksim Gezi Park remained a vital recreation area in the centre of Istanbul. The general appearance of the park has changed frequently due to the periodic restorations and landscaping (Akıncı, 2023).

## GEZİ PARK TIMELINE

- 1806 ➤ A military barracks was constructed on the site of Gezi Park in 1806.
- 1939 ➤ Prost's Istanbul city plan, which came into force in 1939, offered a large continuous green park, called Park No. 2, covering an area of 30 ha (74 acres) between Taksim, Nişantaşı and Maçka, extending to Bosphorus, including the Dolmabahçe Valley.
- 1940 ➤ The internal courtyard of the barracks was rearranged and used as the Taksim Stadium for a while. In accordance with Prost's plan, the barracks building was eventually demolished in 1940.
- 1943 ➤ The park was completed in 1943, and it was opened under the name "Inonu Park" in honour of President İsmet İnönü.
- 1960 ➤ Large hotels were built inside Gezi Park, and shops/indoor spaces were also built around the park.
- 2013 ➤ As part of the Taksim Pedestrianization Project, many shops and indoor spaces in the park were demolished. The park and its surroundings have been largely freed from vehicles and turned into a pedestrian-dominated recreation area.

## CASE STUDY



Figure 3: Taksim Gezi Park (Source: IBB, 2023)



## SWOT ANALYSIS

### STRENGTHS

- ❑ The presence of Taksim Metro station and bus stops in the study area makes the area accessible to all visitors.
- ❑ Taksim Gezi Park is one of the few parks with children's playgrounds, open green areas and recreational areas that support the sustainability of the green zone in Beyoğlu.
- ❑ It includes wide and spacious walking pathways suitable for bicycle and scooter use.
- ❑ Taksim Gezi Park, with its past and future, has a historical significance for Istanbul.
- ❑ It is located close to Taksim Istiklal Street, which is one of the most frequently visited areas by tourists in Istanbul. The place is easily accessible for everyone to socialise.
- ❑ The park contains different types of broadleaf trees planted many years ago. The presence of ornamental pools and magnificent views give added beauty to the park.

### WEAKNESSES

- ❑ The park does not have sports, entertainment and activity areas that appeal to all age groups.
- ❑ The park is not disabled-friendly.
- ❑ The number and capacity of playgrounds designed for children in the park are insufficient.
- ❑ Insufficient lighting, seating elements and children's play materials in the park. The lack of sufficient light source in the park at night plus the low number of security guards and CCTV cameras, create vulnerabilities.
- ❑ The park's monochrome theme is considered dull and lifeless for users.
- ❑ The park has many shortcomings in terms of design and aesthetics.

### OPPORTUNITIES

- ❑ The fact that the park is close to Taksim Square and the area where commercial activities are intense creates an economic opportunity.
- ❑ Its proximity to Istanbul Technical University Taşkışla and Gümüşsuyu Campuses attracts university students and young people who reach school by subway or bus stop spend their time in the park almost every day.
- ❑ Many tourists visiting Taksim Square definitely stop by the park, creating positive social and economic activity there.
- ❑ Since it is one of the few open green areas of Beyoğlu, many people living in the district visit the park for airing, resting and walking.

### THREATS

- ❑ As in most parks, homeless people often spend time in and around Taksim Gezi Park and even stay overnight in the park. This can be distracting and uncomfortable for visitors to the park at night.
- ❑ There are bad odours occur from time to time, coming from certain parts of the park and its surroundings. The source of the bad odour differs in time and place in the park and bothers the visitors who come to the park in the hope of getting fresh air.
- ❑ From time to time, there are both crime and police events in the park and its surroundings.
- ❑ Huge buildings surround the park. This phenomenon limits the park's growth and expansion possibilities.

## THE URBAN ACUPUNCTURE STRATEGY

- ❑ There is a playground for children only in Taksim Gezi Park. However, there are no social and sports activity areas for young people, adults, the elderly and people with disabilities. For this reason, different but integrated activity areas in the park were especially designed for young people, adults, the elderly, and disabled individuals.
- ❑ In order to make Taksim Gezi Park integrated and connected with its surroundings, easy-to-access bicycle and scooter routes were created, and routes were re-designed.
- ❑ The fact that the park's floor is entirely grey dampened its attractiveness. However, by innovating the design of the street lamps in the park in different colours and shapes with the lighting elements on the floor, the park offers visitors a visual feast of light in a safe environment at night.
- ❑ Yellow bands and practical walking paths have been designed in the park for disabled individuals.
- ❑ Instead of the classical wooden benches in almost every part of Istanbul and its parks, more modern, fun, comfortable and colourful seating areas have been designed for everyone.
- ❑ Instead of the dull-looking stairs in grey tones, common in the park, colourful and differently designed stairs were designed. At the same time, inspired by the piano steps, a ladder design that changes notes according to the steps has been adopted to create unique key points that trigger people's senses of hearing and touch.
- ❑ Houses for cats, dogs and birds are designed in the park. Recreational areas intertwined with nature were designed to increase the number of animals, plants, and biodiversity in the park.
- ❑ The strategy of utilising environmentally friendly, sustainable and renewable materials was complied with in all material selections for the park (Figure 4).



Figure 4: Taksim Gezi Park Collage Work (Source: Authors, 2023)

## URBAN ACUPUNCTURE IDEA PROJECTS

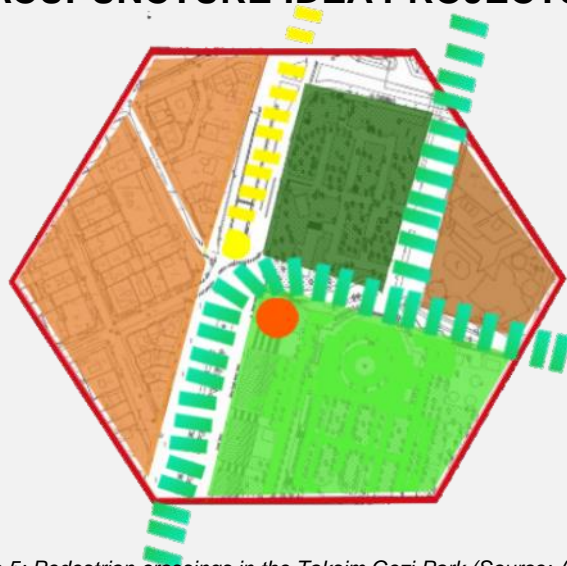


Figure 5: Pedestrian crossings in the Taksim Gezi Park (Source: Authors, 2023)

- Due to the large number of birds in the area, bird feeders and birdhouses were designed to feed the birds and attract different bird species to the Taksim Gezi Park. These birdhouses and feeders are located where birds roam, and water is plentiful. The main purpose of building here in the park is to increase the number and diversity of birds and other creatures as well as to revive the bird routes and ecosystem in the park (Figure 5 and Figure 6).



Figure 6: Bird Feeders on the existing trees of the Taksim Gezi Park (Source: Cute Pet Bonding, 2023)

- The park's environmental quality was improved to include the needs of disabled people. Yellow bands that guide disabled individuals to accessible areas were created to make the park more comfortable and safe (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Barrier free paths and yellow bands in the Taksim Gezi Park (Source: Macrovector Studio, 2021)

- By adding LEDs to the materials used at the pedestrian paths in the park, the area has been made more exciting, and the night view of the park has been enhanced (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Pedestrian paths illuminated with LED lights and special materials in the Gezi Park (Source: Artofit, 2023)

- Fun and musical stairs were designed to take people away from the monotony and boringness of the day while they walked on the paths of the park and went up and down the subway. The auditory and tactile skills of the people who come to the park with the stairs playing the piano are activated. Thanks to the steps that play different notes at each step, the use of stairs in the park is encouraged, regardless of age (Figure 9).

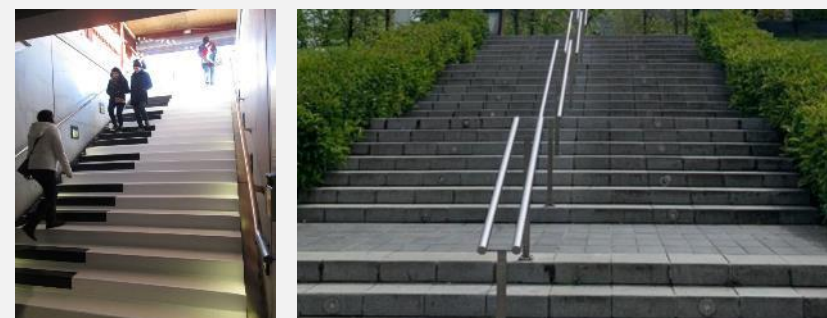


Figure 9: Piano stairs playing music in the Taksim Gezi Park (Source: Cmuse, 2020)



- ❑ Street scenes were choreographed to enable street musicians to make music more freely and to keep Taksim Gezi Park lively. Although street musicians often do not get enough attention, they are the hidden heroes who keep the streets lively, joyful, and pulsating (Figure 10).



Figure 10: Street scenes for Street musicians in the Taksim Gezi Park (Source: Faustino, 2015)

- ❑ Instead of the ordinary wooden benches and trash cans that can be found and seen almost everywhere, innovative seating elements made of recycled and sustainable materials were proposed in Taksim Gezi Park. The seating elements provide the opportunity and time that allow people to socialise in the park in a more comfortable and friendly environment. In the selection of urban furniture, vibrant colours and sustainable materials that do not threaten nature and are resistant to long-term use by people are preferred. The sitting areas in the park have been designed and chosen in a way that will not disturb the harmony between people and strengthen communication. Sitting areas are supported by lighting elements, children's playgrounds, water elements and urban furniture, making them compatible with their surroundings (Figure 11).



Figure 11: Innovative seating areas in the Taksim Gezi Park (Source: Scale, 2016)

- ❑ There was a proposal to improve children's playgrounds and renew playground equipment in the park. In order to diversify children's activities and make a difference in the park, extraordinary children's playgrounds were created by going beyond the ordinary. Recyclable and environmentally friendly materials were used when designing these playgrounds. Children's health and safety were considered during the materials' selection and design stages. In Taksim Gezi Park, earlier playgrounds served the purpose of playing games during the day. The playground turned into a place of crime and vandalism-producing areas at night. Therefore, the proposed innovative children's playgrounds are designed to be used both day and night with safety and security elements. Security cameras, security cabins, and an increased number of lighting elements in the park were in place, along with fewer blind spots (Figure 12).

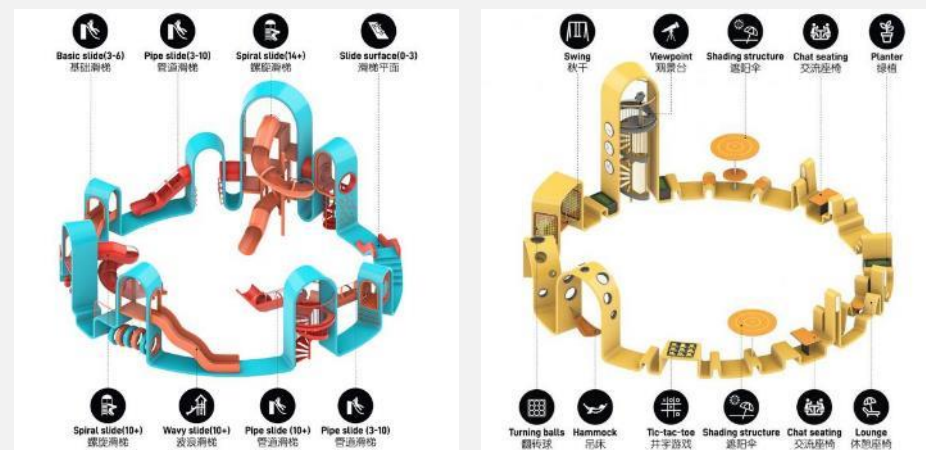


Figure 12: New children playgrounds in the Taksim Gezi Park (Source: Zhang, 2021)

- ❑ Signages with unique themes to promote Taksim Gezi Park increase its popularity and guide tourists and local people into the park. In addition, selfies or instagrammable points were created to increase circulation in the park, thus creating more quality photoshooting environments (Figure 13).



Figure 13: Innovative signs and selfie points in the Taksim Gezi Park  
(Source: Louise and Louise, 2019)

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