

BERLIN | ISTANBUL FELLOWS
SOURCEBOOK

1998 - 2009

BERLIN ISTANBUL

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The parts of the text printed in BLACK letters are thoughts of Susanne Bosch. The other parts of the text printed in GREY typeface include excerpts from the unpublished Ph.D. thesis “The Misuse Value of Space: Spatial Practices and the Production of Space in Istanbul” by Derya Özkan, completed in the Visual and Cultural Studies Program at the University of Rochester, New York, in 2008. The excerpts are from the chapter titled “Ethnographies of Spatial Authorship” (pp. 156-191), where Özkan discusses cases in which the relation between space and authorship takes so complex forms that cannot be explained by normative discourses on the production of space. The complete text of Özkan’s Ph.D thesis is available online at <https://dspace.lib.rochester.edu/handle/1802/6201>.

In 2003, some incidents drew my attention to the subject of migration in the city. I became aware of A. and his teahouse when I passed by it next to the visa queue at the German Consulate and saw that the entire interior of his self-constructed teahouse is covered with images of Atatürk. Outside he had decorated the hut with images of Anatolian landscapes, cows and sheep on green meadows. His main customers are Turkish people queuing for German visas.

A. Baba'nın Yeri¹ is a single storey annex attached to an unfinished five-star hotel building in a central area of the city where there is lots of foot traffic². It is a makeshift hut that A. has made himself by using scrap materials that he collected “from here and there”.

(Interview, 6 July 2007)

He runs the place as a teahouse. It has seating inside as well as outside. A. decorated the place himself, as well as designing and hand-making the furniture, all out of found materials. ... A. speaks very confidently of his presence here on the street, without the need to own the place or rent it or at least have a license and/or permit to run it as a business. Listening to him, I am tempted to ask how he could talk so comfortably about a place which he occupies illegally³. He also seems to be just pretending, or showing off to convince me that he is a fearless guy. He emphasizes that he is such a well-known and well-respected personality in his surroundings that nobody dares to get him out of the neighborhood. He keeps saying “Benim evallahim yoktur kimseye.”⁴ In other words, he says “I have the power.”

(Interview, 6 July 2007)

Every embassy has a front and a rear, a representative front and a less representative side or back. I discovered this by taking images of people queuing for visas at Embassies and Consulates. The visa office is never at the front side in Istanbul, it is usually at the rear. The German Consulate has its visa office on the right side next to the main entrance. You walk down a street between the representative German Consulate villa on the left and an abandoned, only half finished building, one of the biggest ruins in Istanbul for the last 20 years. At the bottom of the gigantic ruin is the little hut, the teahouse of A. Since 1981 he has been located here. He is one of many constant

1 A. Baba'nın Yeri would translate to English as A. Baba's Place. Indeed, there is a sign on the door that says so. Baba means father in Turkish, but it is also used as a nickname just as in the case of A. Baba. In the latter, baba is an older and respected male.

2 The construction of this five-star hotel was stopped by the City Public Works for violating the building code. Some of the upper floors were torn down and the rest of the building was left unfinished, in concrete skeleton form. In fact, A. is using part of the basement of the hotel building as an extension to his main space.

3 He keeps saying “they know me,” but he does not identify who “they” are. I suspected the possibility of him having



A.s tea house and visa queue, 2003.

All images are taken by Susanne Bosch in 2003 and 2009. The images are taken inside and around A.s teahouse. The teahouse is located next to the German Consulate in Istanbul Gümüssuyu.

businesses around a visa queue: There is a public toilet, copy services, translators; people who help you fill out forms, lawyers. There are also shoe cleaners and all kinds of other mobile services. The corner seemed to me a perfect representative place in Turkey. There was also a mosque and one had a wonderful view towards the Bosphorus. Local homeless people gave the area a village feeling.

A. continues to tell me about the evolution of this place. He says at the very beginning what he had was a tea garden, where he did not have any indoor space. He then enclosed it and turned it into a teahouse with an indoor lounge. He has never had electricity here. At the beginning, he did not have water or heating either. He then started to heat the indoor space with a bottled gas heater. Later on he expanded his lounge space into the basement of the unfinished hotel building: "It is nice and cool in there—perfect for the summer," he thought. Now he still has seating there in the basement, which is accessible through a doorway from the main lounge.

A. must have seen the excitement in my eyes, because he invited me in for a tea. Although he is located next to the German Consulate, not many Germans make it to his place. He does not speak any language that I could speak and so we always needed a translator. His tea house was not bigger than 2 qm² and he opened every day around 1 am in the morning (Since 2007 he has a new teahouse next to the old one which disappeared. It is far bigger now, with a summer terrace and a beautiful view overlooking the Bosphorus). Through spending a lot of my time there, I learned that he is more than a tea maker and seller: He takes care of suitcases, he supplies the guards and the police with tea and sandwiches. For money, he will help people move forward in the queue and he also has some forms to sell. He takes care of the entertainment and the exchange of the waiting crowds. And they wait sometimes for days. At 2 pm he heads home in 4Levent, where a wife and adult children are part of his family life. He had never left Turkey, he absolutely admires Atatürk and he is a convinced Kemalist. He predicts every immigrant to lose their illusions. A. welcomed me every day and I was fascinated by his business and him. For me, he turned out to be a truly free thinker. He recited DADA poems, he decorated his space - for me the most artistic installation I saw in Istanbul - he chatted to the crowds, he made his little businesses.

Then I ask A. about the photographs he has pasted or pinned up on the walls, window sills, all over the surfaces inside the lounge. He has numerous Atatürk portraits, photographs of popular singers, photographs of himself as a young man, photographs of his children, a Turkish flag and a map of Turkey, cheap print reproductions of a few still-life and landscape paintings. I ask him why he has that many Atatürk photographs; he says both his wife and himself love him. I ask why or in what respects they love him. A. continues:

"How was Atatürk's time? How is it now? Compare! Everyone misses him, right?" He shows me the photograph of a popular singer named Edip Akbayram; and he says all these people—including Akbayram—have been here in the past; and he thereby puts up their photos to commemorate them. We then talk about the photograph of a dog, which turns out to be his dog that is actually still alive.

relations with some sort of mafia that may be controlling whatever happens on this street. I know that there are informal organizations like this in some parts of the city, where parking fees are paid not to the police but to the mafia.
4 This expression can be translated as: "I neither bow to anyone nor submit to their rules."



Top: A. in his tea house inside, 2003

Buton: A.s new tea house inside and garden, 2009

In 2004, I made a window installation of A. and his tea house in Berlin (Galerie35). I discovered what I might have guessed before: Nearly every Turk passing by stopped to talk to me, telling me that he / she had spent weeks in that location waiting and hoping for a visa and that of course, they all know A.. In 2003, I spend 2 months in the German visa queue because I wanted to know what Turks expected to be so different and entirely positive in Germany? The country I come from, not recognizing that I may come from a fortunate location on this planet. As a German, I struggle hard with my history and German identity. I learned a lot about my country listening to the Turkish migrants, their experience and their expectations. A., of course, became the counter partner in some of these conversations, stating, that there is no need to leave Turkey to make ones wishes come true. I often wonder how much he knows about biographies, sitting every day here and listening to the life of all these migrating people? He insisted, movement is not necessary.

The practices of everyday space-makers are so intricate and the ways in which they create representational spaces so complex that they cannot be explained by using normative models of the production of space. For instance, how would one tell the story of A.'s teahouse within the limits of normative definitions? A. not only squats on the sidewalk of a street but also poaches on the basement of a five-star hotel construction, which has been half-demolished due to its violation of the building code enforced by zoning. In other words, A. illegally occupies not only private but also public land. That makes him not only a bad citizen but also an ethically dubious person, because he violates capitalist ethics that renders property ownership an ethical right of the individual.

The same A., however, fills the interior walls of his teahouse with posters and photographs of Atatürk in various other forms. A. does not have much of a problem with producing illegitimate representational spaces while at the same time displaying patriotism. Either they are not aware of the contradiction, or they feel the need to repair their disloyalty to the rules foreseen by the state by appropriating some images that represent it as a legitimate frame of reference.



A.s new tea house inside, 2009