A Bazaar Sustaining the Function for 400 Years: Spice Bazaar (Egyptian Bazaar) of Istanbul

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Abstract

The Spice Bazaar constructed in the 17th century, is the arasta of Yeni Mosque complex in Eminönü, in Historical Peninsula. It has surrounded by historical buildings such as a mosque, madrasah, tomb, commercial inns.

The bazaar has always an extremely role in the urban history at all times. By accommodating the city as a spice market, always largely spices or similar herbal products have been sold in the bazaar. Thus, the bazaar has been always a shopping place that people prefer to go on purpose and also being belonged and committed to. Moreover, as a part of daily urban life, the bazaar is a welcoming point in Istanbul. Its large “L” block characterizes the Eminönü square in the view of Galata Bridge.

But nowadays, the bazaar building is threatened by some adverse effects such as new additions closing its main façade, gift shops beginning to take herb and spice sellers’ places and also underground roads that make it only a crossing point. Unfortunately these troubles cause the lack of relation with other historical heritages and the unhealthiness of the historical district. Only if, it would have better conditions on the purpose of use and been increased the environmental life qualities, Egyptian Bazaar could have enriched the urban life. On the other hand, the building’s urban life quality can be increased by noticing the value of the building physically, socially, economically, culturally and architecturally. Therefore, it must be succeeded that bazaar’s and also historical heritage’s sustainability by saving its original function as a spice bazaar.

Keywords: Istanbul, bazaar, cultural and historical heritage, urban sustainability, functional sustainability.
1 Introduction

The Spice Bazaar, the oldest settlement area in Istanbul, is located in one of the most important districts in the Historical Peninsula, known today as Eminönü. Eminönü has been an active trade and port area since the Byzantium period.

The Spice Bazaar, which is one of the most significant commercial buildings in this area, was built as an herb and spice bazaar 400 years ago. The bazaar building, in which mainly medicinal substances, herbs and spices are sold, also functions as a shopping place. Although the bazaar has remained as the unique spice bazaar of the city until the middle of the 20th century, the number of spice shops has decreased by time and the bazaar has lost its original function.

By time, the bazaar has come face to face with certain threats. Firstly, souvenir sales have gained prominence over spice sales. Franchised textile shops and food chains have been opened in the bazaar, the number of jewellery stores has increased and the spice shops were greatly replaced by a number of touristic souvenir shops (see Figure 1). Secondly, the front façades of the bazaar were totally covered with the construction of additional buildings. Lastly, the significance of its architectural characteristics was largely ignored. Thus, the bazaar’s relationship with the nearby buildings was inevitably weakened. The vendor shops, benches and the additional units which are adjacent to the façade of the building disallows for the building to be viewed as a whole. In addition, it also prevents to realize the architectural characteristics and the entrances of the Bazaar which are significant for the building.

Figure 1: The inner space of the Spice Bazaar (authors’ photograph)

In order to be able to introduce the bazaar as a spice bazaar to the new generations, it is necessary that it survives as a historical heritage. The recognition of the bazaar as a physical, economical, cultural and architectural
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asset is in direct relationship with developing the city’s life standards. If the Spice Bazaar manages to serve people under better conditions and the environmental life standards can be developed, the bazaar may be able to enrich life in the city.

Within this context, this paper does not aim at presenting the Spice Bazaar as a glorified object or as a touristic object that is isolated from daily life. On the contrary, the main purpose of the paper is to point out the socializing aspects of the bazaar and to emphasize the fact that the bazaar can be incorporated into daily life only by regaining its original function as an object of cultural heritage.

2 Ottoman Bazaars and the Spice Bazaar

In the classical period Ottoman cities, bazaars were located in busy areas or city centers, on a collection of streets lined by shops on two sides or in city squares. The streets which made up the bazaar could either be open, or covered. While some Ottoman bazaars developed and extended by time just like organisms, some were built once and for all and there was no need for any additional shops (Ceylan, 1989).

The second type of bazaars which are called arasta would thus remain unchanged. These are mainly bazaars which are linear in shape and made up of shops that face each other. In this type of bazaars, the same types of goods are sold in all shops. Since arastas are income generating buildings, usually they are built along with a social complex (külliye). Therefore, the money needed for the maintenance of religious buildings was received from the arastas. Arastas which mainly consisted of shops and open or covered streets were mainly built as massive stone constructions. The shops which are a part of the arastas are thus identical in size and height (Ceylan, 1989).

The Spice Bazaar was built in the same manner as a unit of the New Mosque. The construction of the New Mosque complex was started in the 16th century by Safiye Sultan; however, it was completed by Valide Sultan in mid 17th century. The complex consists of a mosque, public bath, college (madrasah), mausoleum, darülkurra (school for teaching the Koran), pavilion, public fountain and bazaar. What is today known as the Spice Bazaar was built in 1664 as the arasta of the aforementioned complex, along with the two coffee-roasting ovens facing it, with the purpose of financing the mosque (Thys-Şenocak, 2007).

It is believed that the Spice Bazaar was built on a bazaar street named Makron Embolos (Embolos was the arterial road surrounded by arcaded shops in the Byzantium cities) during the Byzantium period (Ağır, 2009). Although the building was firstly called “Valide Bazaar” or “New Bazaar”, starting from the mid 18th century, it was called the “Spice Bazaar” (Thys-Şenocak, 2007). The name Spice Bazaar is related to the fact that the goods sold in the shops of the bazaar were brought to Istanbul from Arabia and India through Egypt. In addition to this, due to the herbal drugs and spices sold in the bazaar, it is known that some European travelers called it “Drugstore” (Demirhan, 1975). For
instance, White who had visited Istanbul in the 19th century calls the Spice Bazaar “Egyptian or Drug Market” (White, 1846).

The L shaped bazaar’s two branches have been allocated for two different professions. The branch which was parallel to the sea belonged to the cotton sellers and the branch that was perpendicular belonged to the herbalists and spice sellers. Three of the six gates of the bazaar (Balıkpazarı, Hasircilar, Ketenciler - Fish, Mat and Linen Seller Gates) were allocated to the herbalists and spice sellers, and the other three (Yeni Cami, Haseki, Çiçekpazarı - New Mosque, Haseki and Flower bazaar) were allocated to the cotton sellers (Baytop, 1984).

The main entrances of the two great branches of the bazaar are arcaded and two storied (see Figure 2). These buildings were formerly used as commercial courts; one of the courts dealt with disputes between the shopkeepers and the other dealt with disputes between the shopkeepers and the public. In the branch called the Ketenciler (Linen sellers) bazaar, there are a total of 46 shops lined on the two sides of the street; in the shorter branch there are 36 shops lined in the same manner. There are 6 shops where these two branches intersect (Ateş, n.d.). On the outer façade of the bazaar, there are 18 more shops which were added as extensions to the original building. Therefore, the bazaar consists of 106 shops.

Figure 2: The main entrance of the Spice Bazaar (authors’ photograph)

The shops consist of two different units. In the front, there is a wooden bench unit used as a sales area and as a storage place for the drug containers. At the back, there is another room used as storage and workshop area. At night, the shops’ wooded shutters would be closed to protect them from intruders (Demirhan Erdimir, 2000).
The building went through two major fires at the end of the 17th century and was partially damaged. The 1894 earthquake also caused major damage. At the end of the 19th century, the shops located in the mosque yard were demolished and the surroundings of the complex were cleaned free of shops. In 1930s, the buildings in front of the mosque and facing the sea were also demolished and a small square was acquired in front of the bazaar and the mosque. In 1940s the complex went through another great fire. As a result, a major repairment had to be done. During the repairment process, although the exterior façade and the main characteristics of the complex were preserved, the inner design was changed. For instance, the wooden benches in the original building were removed and the shops were united. Also, display windows were installed. The arcaded unit which emphasized the building’s main entrance was partially closed and turned into a few shops. However, this caused the separation of the original entrance from the building’s main body and highly decreased the grandiose of the entrance. In addition to this, a road was built between the mosque and the bazaar, thus separating the two from each other. In 1950s, the demolition of the buildings facing the Halic shore caused the Spice Bazaar to be viewed from the sea as well.

Today, in the yard encircled by the L shaped body of the monument, there is a small area with a flower bazaar and little cafes. Outside the L shaped body, there are rambling shops in which street vendors show activity and support the bazaar building (see Figure 3).

Among the elements which emphasize the environmental characteristics of the building, we may mention the balanced unit which emphasizes the square in front of the Galata Bridge which connects Eminönü and Karaköy; its relationship
with the sea and the fact that it can be reached quite easily by boats, ferry boats, trains, trolleys and buses. The Spice Bazaar is surrounded by a touristic and historical area in which there are many mosques, madrasahs, mausoleums and inns.

Within this context, the Spice Bazaar with its functional, environmental, cultural, social and economical characteristics is a great example to sustainability.

3 The Spice Bazaar in Relation to Sustainability Policies

The concept of sustainability which can be defined as a value system aims at preserving the rights and benefits of the present and future generations and also facilitates the usage of ancient monuments. In instances where a particular monument’s usability is not out of the question, but is unable to meet the demands of modern life, the policy of sustainability suggests that the building could be used for new purposes. Buildings that have a commercial and educational function could be categorized as such buildings. However, if a particular building has not lost its function in any way and is able to meet the demands of modern city life, then the sustainability policies suggest that the building continue to be used with its original function. This suggestion mainly involves buildings that are used for religious purposes (Tönik, 2001).

Within this context, while one assumes that the Spice Bazaar could be placed in the first category due to its commercial function, because of its present functional and structural characteristics, it is included in the second category. In addition to this, it suggests a solution in terms of monuments which go through repairment, the preservation of resources and forming livable environments. The bazaar also serves as an example in terms of making old monuments reusable with their original function, decreasing the usage of natural resources and energy.

Although the Spice Bazaar is still Istanbul’s only spice bazaar, in the recent decades it has come face to face with the danger of losing its original purpose. However, the symbolic meaning of the monument’s original purpose is ever present in the minds of the city population. Today, individuals from all parts of the society prefer to visit the bazaar to buy spices and simply to breathe in the historical characteristics of the building. For this reason, if the monument’s original function is emphasized and merged into daily life; shoppers will continue to come to the bazaar to buy spices.

The social and cultural identity of the public and physical identity of the environment are in direct interaction with each other. As Tekeli also argues, a space gains an identity only when people attribute importance and values, grow an attachment to it and start to do certain sacrifices to preserve these values (Birol, 2007). Historical buildings which have been attributed certain meanings and have a place in the daily lives of the inhabitants, building groups and the
urban pattern which is made up of multiple building groups are all significant aspects which help the urban identity to form (Birol, 2007).

Thus, it may be suggested that the Spice Bazaar’s contribution to social and cultural sustainability is related to the sustainability of its function and the monument itself. What is understood from the sustainability of a historical monument is that, it should be evaluated with an attitude that covers the whole of the artifact and that it meets the financial, physiological and symbolic demands of the society with its environmental characteristics. The historical and cultural monument which has witnessed various periods of history should be able to give economical, social and cultural benefits, while transferring historical information as well.

On the other hand, the transfer of cultural information to the future generations is regarded as a requirement for social responsibility and development. The outwear of historical places/buildings due to neglect, failure to meet the demands of modern life, unconsciousness and lack of a preservation plan means that cultural sustainability is also under threat. Refreshing the cultural asset’s value means that history is exposed and made readable, seeable and perceivable. The cultural asset heritage which serves as a bridge between the past and the present is defined as a medium which allows for cultural sustainability to continue and the transfer of cultural values to the future generations is defined as a medium of sustainability.

To be able to understand one’s own environment, it is necessary to grasp the significance of the historical buildings and the social and cultural periods which took place in this environment. Therefore, while the old buildings are made reusable, the exact location of these buildings within the city limits also gains importance. For the building to able to contribute to social life, the building’s function should be in social and physical cohesion with its location. In addition to this, it is necessary that there is a demand for the building socially and its function to be in cohesion with the social structure of its environment (Tönük, 2001). In the light of these reasons, Eminönü district where the Spice Bazaar is located still keeps its characteristics as the city’s commerce and port center just as it was in the Byzantium period. The strategic location of the area, its being surrounded with a network of sea, railroad and highway transportation points out to the fact that, the area which has been an important commercial center for centuries will continue to be so.

However, in such cases prior to suggesting ways to make these buildings reusable, it should be noted whether the building is suitable for restoration. As it is known, every building has an economical life span. The repairments, maintenance work and restorations exercised during various periods all aim at expending the life span of a particular building. Just as keeping old buildings passive is a burden to economy, making old buildings reusable is far from being beneficial to the economy (Tönük, 2001).

During the process of renovating/repairing these buildings, great care should be taken not to change the original structure and characteristics and not to alter
the exterior façade a great deal. It is usually advised to keep the original structural system of the building intact, in order for the building to reflect the characteristics of the period during which it was built. For these reasons, the repairsments are expected to be in line with the original structure and form of the buildings and to keep the buildings’ original functions as much as possible. For instance, if the repairsments or the restorations require to keep the original plan, profile and appearance of the building, its significant characteristics and to use the building along with the additional units, then it is highly advised only to keep the structural system and to firstly demolish the useless units (Tönük, 2001).

Giving importance only to the economic usage value of Spice Bazaar instead of its “asset value” and aiming to raise the economic benefits by the usage of the bazaar have caused to take different or opposite sides for concerned actors such as locals, public or governmental and non-governmental authorities. Moreover, it means that to bring the economic aspects of the cultural and historical heritage in the foreground than the social aspects. But in sustainability policies, although the “economic value” of a historical building is important, it also offers that not to describe the building or the area as sacrifice goods or potentials for high economic benefits. In relation to the history, these cultural assets have to be seen as reference marks about the past and so it has to be considered more carefully.

Within this context, the Spice Bazaar has managed to keep its unique design and general architectural characteristics until today. On the other hand, when the building’s spatial characteristics are taken into consideration; great care should be given that the suggested functions’ renovations or repairsment plans are in line with the characteristics of the present building and that there is sufficient area for the suggested type of function in the building. It can be seen that the Spice Bazaar’s original building and the area which presently consists of 106 shops that the building and its surroundings are suitable for such repairsments and renovations.

Another important point is the harmony between the monuments’ microclimatic characteristics and its function (Tönük, 2001). It has been observed that air conditioning devices are being used to decrease the high temperature caused by the spot lights in the shops that are present in the Spice Bazaar. This situation is related to the fact that today the building is about to lose its original function and that show windows have been installed in the shops to display certain other functions. However, the fact that the building has kept its original height; stone and bricks have been used as construction materials and some architectural details such as the wall thickness are all sufficient elements to easily preserve the spices without the use of spot lights.

A historical building’s sustainability is related to the continuity of the society that has created and made use of it. The main objective in the sustainability of a given historical monument and heritage is to gain the admiration and acclaim of the present generation and to preserve such buildings for the use of future generations. In this light, the efforts to renovate and maintain the sustainability of the Spice Bazaar should be handled with more depth and care. The conflicts
between the attitude that holds tourism only as a source of income and the view that historical heritages should be preserved can also arise in the example of the Spice Bazaar. It can be observed that, although there have been certain repairs in the interior and exterior of the building, the building has not completed its life span both in structural and economical aspects. In 2009, although certain efforts have been spent to renovate the building and reports have been written for this cause, the actual renovation did not start. Such restoration works are only oriented on upgrading the building’s physical conditions. However, by the restoration projects also it has to be considered that the cultural and social sustainability of the building.

Another aspect that should be handled carefully is the significance and the value of the building in daily life and to prepare the plans regarding the sustainability of the bazaar in this light. To prevent the Spice Bazaar from turning into an ordinary shopping place could only be possible by a management that emphasizing it is the oldest and unique herb bazaar in Istanbul. A management plan that is prepared for this purpose has to be put into practice by united politics and collaboration between various groups, also in realistic and right ways.

During this process, main issues such as esthetics, environmental protection issues, and the effects of the renovation to the historical site, its relationship with the other buildings in the area, to raise awareness in the society, financial sources and coordination between related institutions should also be taken into consideration.

The sustainability of historical buildings only becomes meaningful if the buildings can be a part of daily life and can reflect the intensity of daily life in their physical structure. It is highly important how the renovation process affects the daily life of the society. Definitions such as originality and original design of a building are central concepts in the sustainability and preservation of present environments. These definitions are the main indicators of the attitude and the intervention to be conducted towards those buildings and environments. In this view, architecture should not be defined as an object that is produced once and isolated from activities, lives and time.

4 Conclusion

The public areas of a city do not only belong to the city with their physical appearances. They have a defining role in the creation of a daily cultural life. They are also places which allow for different representations of a city, sociability and daily life. In this light, the Spice Bazaar also serves to the city’s sociability as a public area.

Shopping areas should not only be regarded as those places where goods are consumed. They also give references to those social indicators such as class, status, race, ethnicity and gender. The consumers gather in these places to reflect their class, status and place in society and to collect borrowed indicators in order
to rise to the status they wish to attain. However, the Spice Bazaar exists as an opponent of this generalization. The Bazaar exists as a place that embraces all classes of the society and as a place where the individuals can identify and form a relationship with (Aytac, 2007). With the location in the urban space, the Spice Bazaar has a comprehensive significance as one of those public places that all can go for shopping. For this reason, during the upgrading process, it has been also aimed to conceive the needs, requests and expectations of the visitors. Moreover, it might also be achieved that to make them conscious of the historical and cultural values of the building and its location.

These public areas do not only accompany the flow of daily life, but also serve to fill in small gaps in our lives. Bazaar buildings are not simply decors of the urban pattern, but living organisms as well. They not only encourage social communication, but also allow for the continuity of social interaction. The habits, cultural characteristics and profiles of the individuals who share the space play a significant role in the re-functioning process of the building (Aytac, 2007).

As a conclusion, while it is made possible for the Spice Bazaar to continue to function as a spice bazaar, the social, cultural and public characteristics should not be neglected. Therefore, the sustainability of the building should be supported with an application that allows the building to serve tourism and with the use of researches, educational activities and exhibitions it should be presented for the use of the public. This can be made possible through a program that defines a certain strategy for the use of the building by the consumers and visitors; educates the public and protects the bazaar with legal, administrative and financial methods; involves activity plans and provides assistance. Thus, the Spice Bazaar, which is one of Istanbul’s cultural historical and architectural heritages, could be merged into the daily life of the city through an integrated approach.

References


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