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## *Sensewalking on Istiklal Street, Istanbul: Exploring Sensory Urban Changes<sup>1</sup>*

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As a result of Turkey's integration into the global capitalist system, major development projects have been undertaken in Istanbul as it raced towards Global City status. Some remarkable socio-spatial and architectural changes have taken place on Istanbul's Istiklal Street, altering some of its intangible qualities. This study looks at Istiklal Street via the method of 'Sensewalking,' an ethnographic research tool to describe and analyse changes in sensory qualities. Although the futures of cities depend on their physical features, their intangible dimensions and sensory qualities, or 'sensescape' are also essential. While mainstream urban studies focus primarily on physical changes, it is argued here that new understandings about transformed places are possible using sensory ethnographic approaches; and, more importantly, that these insights should inform future planning decisions.

**Keywords:** Istiklal Street, intangible dimensions of transformed places, Sensewalking, sensory ethnographic approaches to urban places.

### **Introduction**

'Streets and their sidewalks, the main public places of a city, are its most vital organs. Think of a city and what comes to mind? Its streets...' (Jacobs 1961: 29).

After the 1980s, Turkey became more competitive on the stage of world capitalism. As a result of these global aspirations, it initiated neoliberal urban policies. One outcome was the rapid development of Istanbul (Keyder 2009), where numerous urban improvement campaigns significantly changed conditions in many parts of the city (Keyder 1999). Because the decision-making process for the new urban projects was unclear (Akpınar 2014: 32), Istanbul was negatively affected by some neoliberal economic policies (Türeli and Al 2019). As a consequence, many development projects, plans and processes were soundly criticized by academics, the media, as well as local communities (Güney 2015).

In the case of Istiklal Street, development after the 1990s resulted in the area losing some of its distinctive features. For example, notable landmarks on Istiklal Street have disappeared. Meeting central issues in the current anthropological debate on urban change (Pardo and Prato 2018, Pardo et al. 2020), this transformation process leads us to re-think these issues and investigate, via ethnography, how local people sense, experience and relate to urban places (Krase 2012a, 2012b). Here we need to point out, in terms of urban ethnography, that alterations in the built environment effect not only structural, political, economic and cultural issues but the personal experiences of inhabitants as well. As noted by Degen, physical layouts of urban places are always reflected in sensory regimes (2008: 14), and

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unavoidably, physical changes influence sensory experiences (Degen 2010). Therefore, to understand the transformation effects of this street we must consider the sensory experiences of inhabitants (Degen 2002: 19-35; Zardini 2005; Mattern 2009; Henshaw et al. 2011). This research approaches the case area through ‘a sensory lens’ to create a sensory urban ethnography (Pink 2009: 37). ‘Sensewalking’ is employed to picture, interpret and criticise the sensory experiences of walkers on Istiklal Street. The method requires a phenomenological openness which entails the use of a set of intertwined sensory ethnographic tools.

### The Story of Istiklal Street, Istanbul: Changes and Loss

Istiklal Street has been one of the most important public places in the historic Beyoglu district of Istanbul, Turkey, with its distinctive past, socio-cultural and architectural faces. The street’s local, national and global icons have continuously interacted with each other. The area has been a stage for many types of political, social and cultural activities. During a 24-hour period, one can meet many kinds of people from all over the world there. The diverse art galleries, design studios, vintage stores, religious buildings, architectural styles and eclectic mix of inhabitants reflect the rich, intangible, features of the street (Rodriguez and Azenha 2014, Paramita et al. 2014, Shirazi and Erku 2014). It has also been filled with cheerful crowds, world-famous bookstores, bohemian art galleries, small coffee houses and an abundance of street musicians and street performers from diverse cultural backgrounds. The area also assembled and distributed different flows of people, cars and lifestyles. The street brings together people of all ages, income levels and ethnic groups as it mirrors the broad socio-cultural distribution of inhabitants and visitors. As a result, the area has been a place for multi-layered confrontations, in which a wide variety of simultaneous sensory experiences have taken place (see Figure 1).

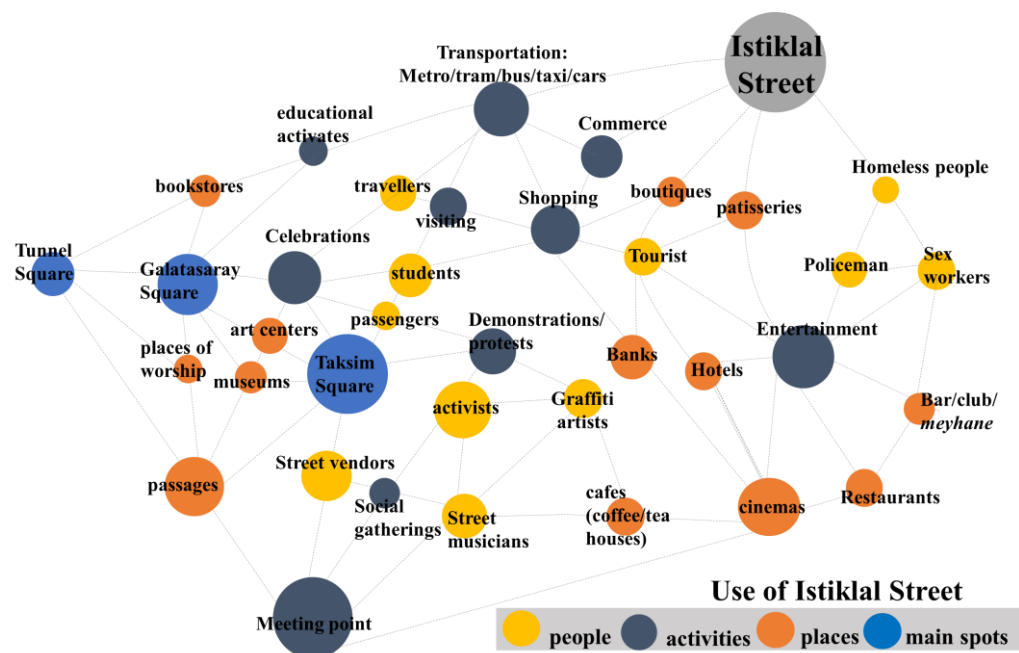


Figure 1. This graph pictures the use of Istiklal Street as an urban assemblage (Source: author).

Istiklal Street has a recognisable visual texture with distinctive building characteristics, as it is filled mostly by late Ottoman era buildings (from the 19th and early 20th centuries). Also, the street has had several ‘First Turkish National Architecture’ style and a few Art Deco style buildings from the early years of the Turkish Republic. The street is also populated with an array of historical and politically significant buildings such as churches, synagogues, mosques, academic institutions, as well as foreign consulates established in the 19th century by various nations. Istiklal Street has witnessed many changes since its inception in the 1850s as the ‘Grande Rue de Péra’. First, the area housed European ex-pats and non-Muslim Ottomans. Historically, Istiklal Street has been a cosmopolitan venue for Greek, Jewish and Armenian minorities, as well as bourgeoisie élites and other migrants of varied origins.

Istiklal Street’s reputation has long been marked by a combination of confusion and controversy (Batur n.d., Dokmeci and Ciraci 1988). However, when nationalist sentiments swept through the country in the 1950s, rioting crowds targeted the businesses on Istiklal and caused an exodus of the area’s minorities. In September 1955, during the Istanbul Riots, the Street was pillaged in one night. It was covered with broken glass, torn clothes, damaged white goods, rolled over and burned automobiles and other debris from the wrecked shops. Then, the street briefly fell from grace again in the 1970s and 1980s, as its old Istanbul inhabitants moved elsewhere and migrants from the countryside moved into the empty homes. At this time, the backstreets of the area were populated by migrants from the rural Anatolia. After a while, the students and artists of Istanbul began to arrive and the area revived to some extent as a focus of arts and culture, which sparked its new urban energy (Dökmeçi 1990, Tsibiridou 2018).

The transformation of Istiklal Street formed the initial research problem as it was related to new urban policies and strategies approved and adopted for the Beyoglu neighbourhood. The area began to be administered and physically restructured as a node in the globalization system after the 1990s. This stage was characterised by a highly authoritarian form of neoliberalism in which several factors promoted aggressive urban entrepreneurialism. This new vision for the street brought in new socio-cultural industries, service sectors and other transformations that aggressively reorganised the area and erased its distinctive characteristics (Erek and Köksal 2014). As a result, spatial hierarchies, magnitudes, usages and compositions of spatial patterns were greatly modified. Diversity in spatial uses have declined, due to the rapid construction, transfers, renovation and restoration projects.

Almost every section of Istiklal Street has been transformed spatially, as the street has been enlarged vertically from top to basement (Tekin and Akgün Gültekin 2017). In this process, the number of major brands stores have increased, while small-scale trades and local brand stores began to disappear because of increasing competition. Along the route, music shops, second-hand dress shops, silversmiths and antique shops inside the famous arcades of Istiklal Street have disappeared (Güney 2015). Neoliberal policies are also expediting the eviction of tenants. More change has resulted from regulations and restrictions that ban outdoor tables and chairs for restaurants and cafés. These changes caused young and upper-middle-class patrons, who once hung out in Beyoglu, to migrate towards Beşiktaş and

Kadıköy. The capital-oriented urbanisation damaged the distinctive composition of the street and it has become like all the other ‘High’ streets around the world (Adanalı, 2011b) after losing its characteristic features and unique fabric (Güney, 2015, Shirazi and Erkut 2014). Many cinemas, theatres and bookstores have also moved, been converted, closed, or demolished. The closure of these iconic places is emblematic of the rapid disintegration of the Street’s unique, hybrid character (Adanalı 2011a). The cosmopolitan heritage of Istiklal Street is now merely a trademark for Istanbul’s global city projects and the accumulation of global capital (Tekin and Akgün Gültekin 2017, Güney 2015). Due to these changes, most intellectuals — including artists, columnists and musicians — agree that Istiklal Street has lost its ‘soul’ and ‘magic.’ These urban development and cultural policies have been criticised and protested by a large segment of the society, especially social scientists, urban planners and architects. Beyond academic discussions, there has also been a great deal of criticism on social media about how Istiklal Street has lost its distinctiveness, linked it to its multicultural past and cultural heritage.

### **An Ethnographic Investigation of the Intangible Dimensions of Istiklal Street Using the Walking Method**

Walking has been an important aspect of artistic, cultural, performative, experiential and sensorial expressions for Baudelaire (1863), Benjamin (1979), Debord (1957) and de Certeau (1984) and is also found in urban and social theorizing (Amin and Thrift 2002, Benjamin 1979, de Certeau 1984, Rossiter and Gibson 2003, Rendell, 2006). To document intangible characteristics of the urban environment, Pink suggested the examination of places through embodied methodologies such as walking (Pink 2009; See also Krase 2014, Shortell and Brown 2014) Bassett emphasized ‘walking as a fundamental activity of human being and way of interacting with the environment...’ (Bassett 2004: 398). Low (2015) also suggested sensory walking practices to define and evaluate urban spaces. Moreover, de Vega argued that sensing and movement cannot be ‘separable features of experience’ (de Vega 2010: 398-399). According to Sheller and Urry, walking is a practice of ‘mobile sensory ethnography’ (Sheller and Urry 2006: 217-218; See also Psarras 2015). The ‘sensewalk’ technique emerged when attention to ecological perception arose in the latter half of the 20th century, as did ‘perceptual geography’, which is a humanistic and phenomenological approach to the sensory and cognitive human experience of the environment. (Henshaw et al. 2009). Adams and Askins describe Sensewalking as a method by which researchers might ‘...investigate and analyse how we understand, experience and utilise space.’ (Adams and Askins 2009) Henshaw called on ethnographers to move beyond the hegemony of visual senses (Henshaw 2014), while Rubidge and Stones (2009) claimed that the walking process helps to answer questions about the sensory experiences of people.

### **Research Methods**

The ‘group Sensewalking sessions’ were conducted during the daylight hours on 20 October 2018, 27 October 2018 and 3 November 2018. Each walk was conducted with a different group of people so that each person participated in only one. In total, 50 adults participated. It

must be noted that the data collected through these sensewalkings was influenced by the weather and other conditions on these dates. As a result, some sensory characteristics of the area might not have been experienced in each walk. In future studies, seasonally specific, sensory features might be better identified. For the same reason, it may be preferable to carry out ‘sensewalking’ studies at different times of a day. The age range of participants in this research was between 18 and 29 years. Although demographic data regarding age and gender of subjects have been recorded, they have been given only on an informative basis and not analysed in this study. It should also be noted, for future research, that a closer analysis of the participants’ age and other variable, distribution might provide a more detailed picture of their sensory thresholds for the area.

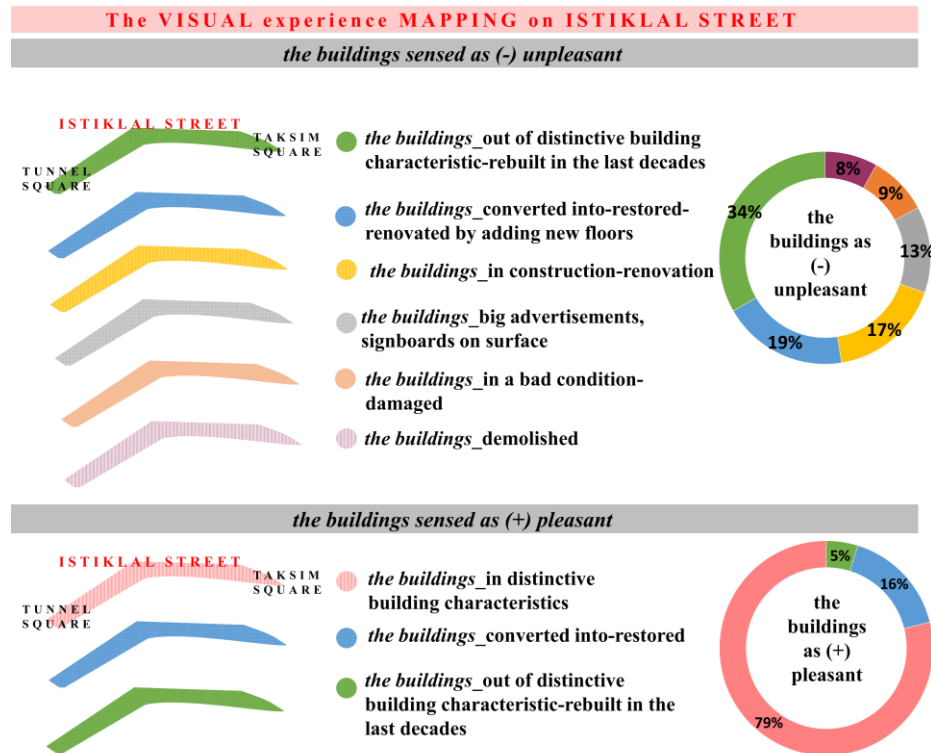
### **Sensewalking Findings**

To investigate how sensory dimensions are experienced and assessed, by local people, three group Sensewalking sessions took place on a walk on Istiklal Street from Taksim Square to Tunnel Square. During the group sessions, fifty participants addressed five thematic questions: 1. ‘visual’; 2. ‘auditory’; 3. ‘haptic’; 4. ‘olfactory’; and 5. ‘taste’. The participants also took photos of the physical structures on the street such as buildings (1<sup>st</sup> question); and noted their texture/material/graphic characteristics (3<sup>rd</sup> question); they also addressed ‘food spots’ (5<sup>th</sup> question) and marked their responses to each of the thematic questions as ‘pleasant,’ or ‘unpleasant’ while walking. For the ‘auditory’ 2<sup>nd</sup> question and ‘olfactory’ (4<sup>th</sup> question) experiences of Istiklal Street, the participants wrote down the sounds they heard and the scents they smelled on a template and marked them in the same way.

The overall findings on visual experiences showed that some of the unique visual characteristics of Istiklal Street persist, although they have been eroded due to the latest development policies and planning procedures. As one of the crucial elements of Istiklal Street, it is recommended that the visual properties be cautiously considered by planners to best preserve the pleasant visual mosaic of the area. Unfortunately, many vital social scenes have disappeared from İstiklal Street amid disruptive construction projects renovation, upscaling and marketing. For example, nearly all the street’s visual urban components, from restored facades to the iconic tramway, have been converted into advertising surfaces. This capital-oriented development has decreased the distinctive visual composition of the street, making it look more like other global high streets (Adanalı 2011b).

In Map 1, we can see the findings of the visual experience for walkers on Istiklal Street that were reported as ‘unpleasant’. Firstly, the newer facades — unlike the prior distinctive facades — of the area were sensed as visually unpleasant, as were the non-historical buildings. Secondly, buildings, such as Demirören Shopping Mall and Narmanlı Han, which were recently converted or restored, were also judged as unpleasant. Thirdly, buildings that were undergoing construction and renovation were defined as unpleasant. Finally, the buildings that had large advertisements, or advertising signage on their surfaces, were also seen as unpleasant. In Map 2 we also see the pleasant sensory findings of the visual experience of Istiklal Street. Three-fourths of the buildings with ‘distinctive building

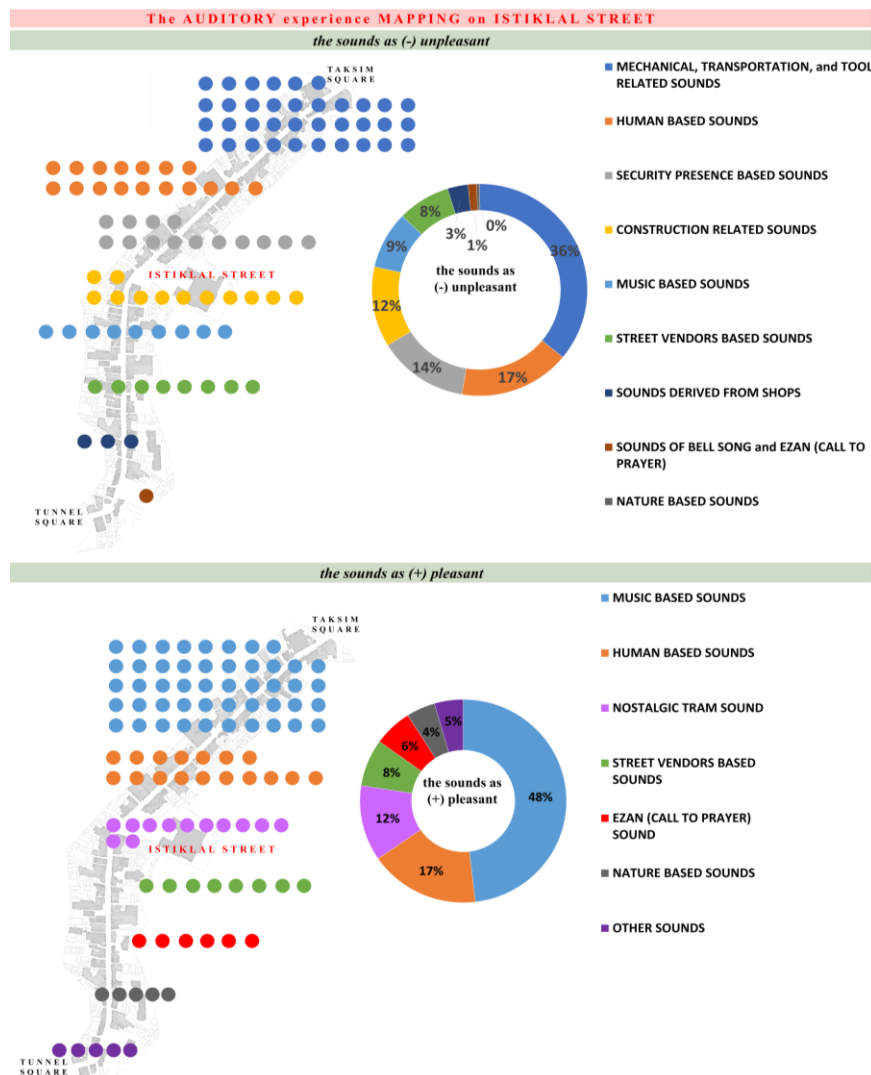
characteristics' were considered as pleasant. This finding confirms the expectation that the historical buildings have shaped the more pleasant visual characteristics of the street. Therefore, it can be argued that these distinctive visual features need to be preserved in order to promote the positive sensory atmosphere of the street.



Map 1. The visual mapping of Istiklal Street based on the buildings sensed as un/pleasant (Source: author).

The overall auditory experience findings of sensewalkers on Istiklal Street confirmed that the area has been covered with unpleasant noises as the consequence of problematic implementations, planning decisions and technology-related issues that required correction. Istiklal Street has been a place of special sounds; some of them inherited from its past. When someone walked down Istiklal Street, s/he could encounter musicians from different parts of the world playing. It was also stage for interesting voices coming from street vendors. All these unique sound elements marked the diversity of the socio-cultural and sensory patterns of the street. In Map 2, we see that the auditory experiences of walkers were rated as disagreeable. These negative evaluations are the result of changes in local technology and infrastructure. Most unpleasant were the mechanical, transportation and traffic sounds. In second rank were 'security presence-based sounds', followed by 'construction-related sounds' as construction activities have expanded in the area.





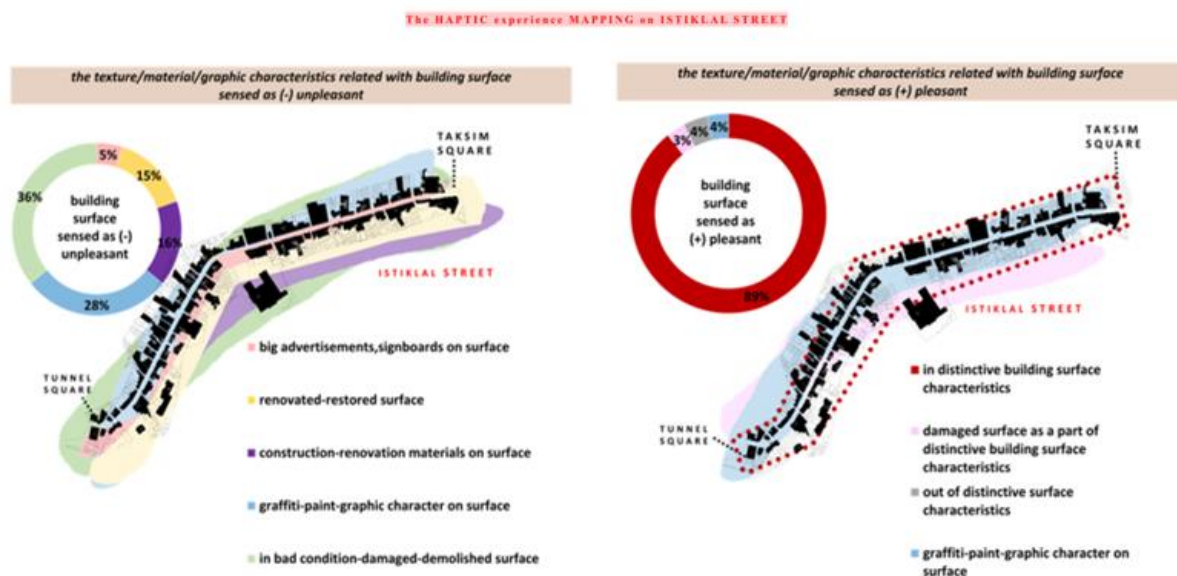
Map 2. The auditory mapping of Istiklal Street is based on the sounds sensed as un/pleasant (Source: author).

Here, we can also see that the positive auditory experience of Istiklal Street depended on its street musicians and performers, whose street music still shapes the pleasant auditory aspect of the area. The ‘human-based sounds,’ such as talking, on Istiklal Street have made it one of the important pedestrian streets of Istanbul. In addition to human sounds, the ‘nostalgic tram sound’ showed that the red tram’s ‘clink’ had been one of the street’s unique sounds.

The overall report on the haptic experiences of Istiklal Street sensewalkers indicate they are distinguishable among other haptic elements of the street. This suggests that haptic characteristics of the street’s unique facades ought to be integrated carefully with other design applications. Other policies and practices should also consider the texture/material/graphic characteristics of the street more efficiently. Related to its haptic characteristics, as a canvas, Istiklal Street has afforded many opportunities for street arts, where people could share their feelings, anger and beliefs (Kıratlı and Sirin 2010). For example, there has been a great deal of graffiti on the walls of the stores in the area. They are part of the texture of the street (Koçak and Koçak 2014) and are seen by pedestrians as they walked along. Now, the outdoor advertisements and giant billboards dominate. As an effect of globalisation and marketing,

advertisers have used every possible wall on every corner, or even store roofs, as branding spaces (Kıratlı and Sirin 2010).

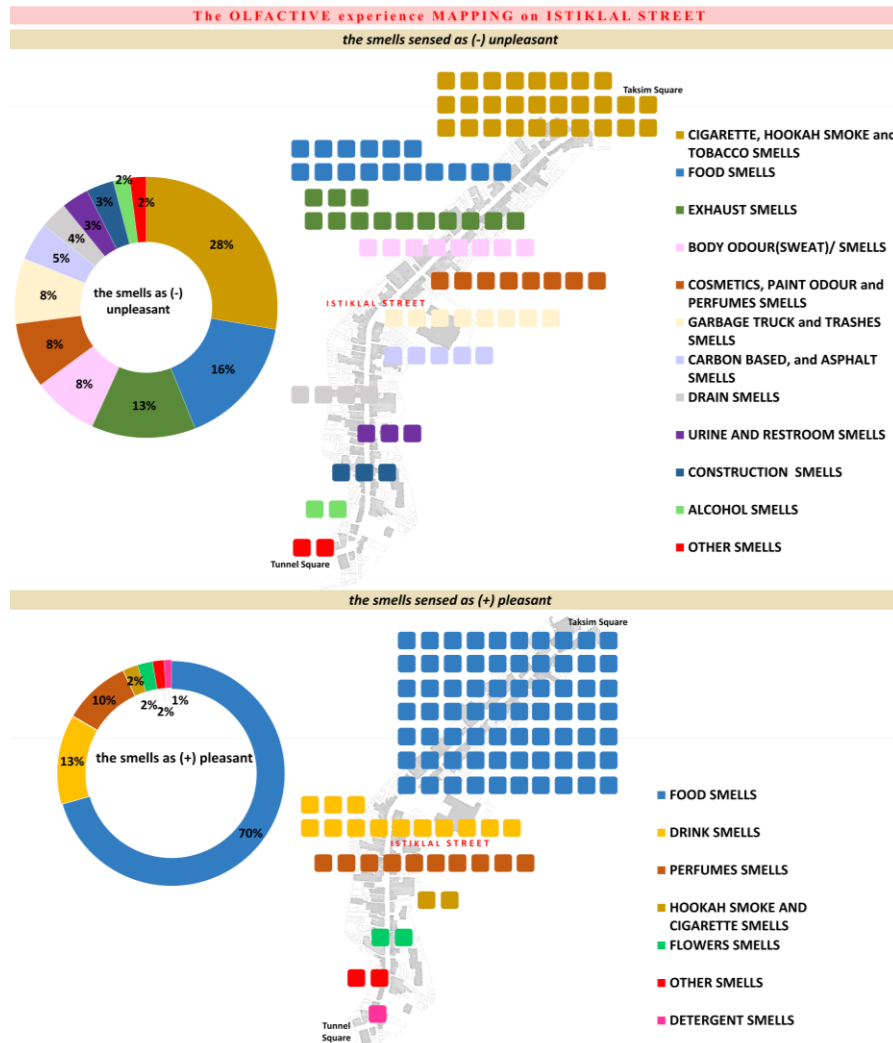
In Map 3, we see the haptic experiences of Istiklal Street are sensed as ‘nasty’. The texture/material/graphic characteristics were sensed as ‘in bad condition-damaged-demolished surface’, as the building facades in the area have been eroded and neglected. Also, sensewalkers found that the ‘construction-renovation materials on the surface were unpleasant, as the possible result of unsightly construction materials and equipment above the buildings’ facades which have been significantly expanded. Moreover, the ‘renovated-restored surfaces’ were also defined as unpleasant. Participants also found the ‘big advertisements, signboards on surfaces’ to be unpleasant. This implies that the effects of globalisation-oriented urbanisation have damaged the haptic feel of the street. In contrast, the haptic experience of older, unique texture/material/graphic characteristics features of Istiklal Street had been sensed positively. It is suggested therefore, that these pleasant features need to be preserved or protected in order not to injure the remaining positive sensory experiences within the area.



Map 3. The haptic mapping of Istiklal Street is based on the texture/material/graphic characteristics related to building surface sensed as un/pleasant (Source: author).

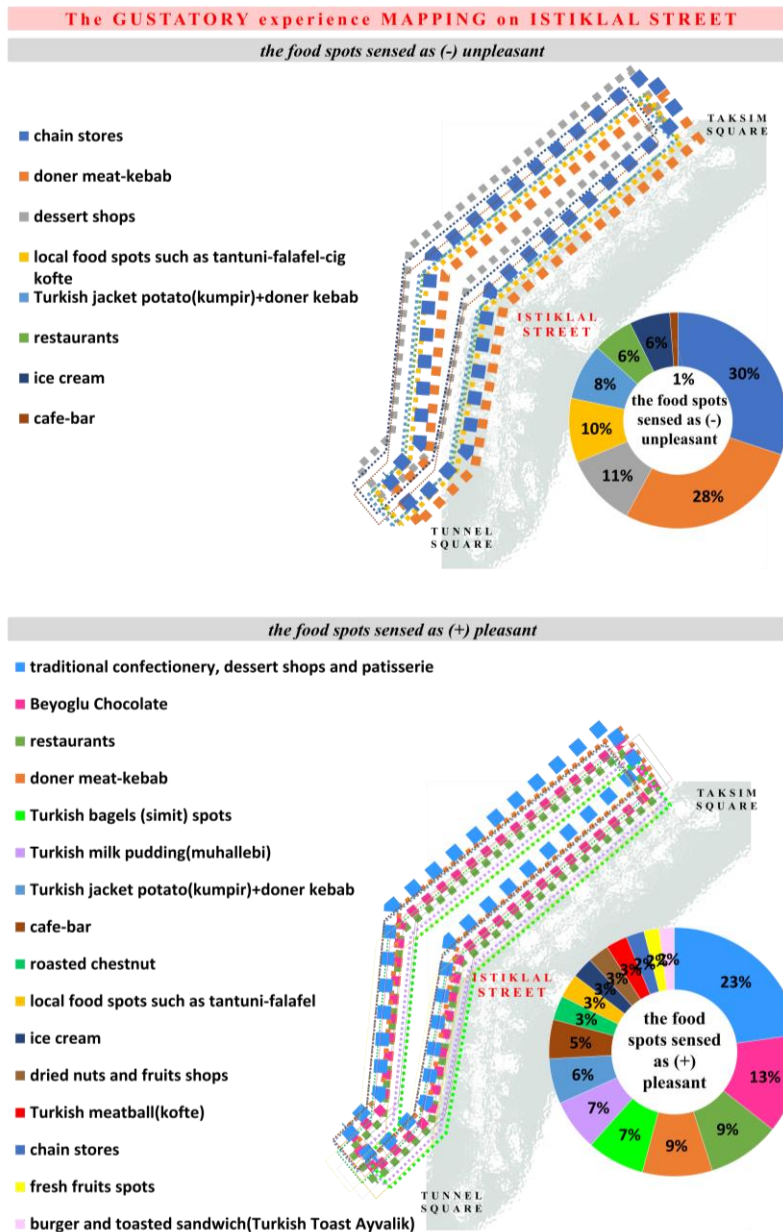
The overall descriptions of smells on Istiklal Street, show that the current olfactory characteristics have mixed the pleasing with the unpleasant olfactory features of the area. In Map 4, we see the olfactory experience of Istiklal Street was sensed as displeasing. This evaluation is possibly the result of the growing number of newly opened hookah smoke (*nargile*) cafes on the backstreets of Istiklal Street that dominate the olfactory characteristics of the area. Responses also show that the food spots have been remarkably expanded and follow the taste preferences of new patrons. Moreover, the unpleasant ‘exhaust smells’ show that transportation-related smells have had adverse effects on the olfactory character of the street. Overall, the more pleasant olfactory experience of Istiklal Street, is the probable result of increasing numbers of food spots of the street, while most of the cultural places (bookstores, cinemas and theatres) have been disappearing.





Map 4. The mapping of Istiklal Street is based on the smells sensed as un/pleasant (Source: author).

Through the typical food spots, the tasting experiences of Istiklal Street, are prominent in the study. One of the best ways to experience Istiklal Street had been through sampling eclectic culinary products offered by diverse types of food places. Although they still have some stores featuring traditional, refined, tasting specialities, these have been diminished along with the traces of cosmopolitan lifestyles. This loss of special food places on Istiklal Street could be the result of globalisation, as food tastes and offerings also become less local. In Map 5, we see that the tasting experiences of Istiklal Street are sensed as distasteful. The area's dominant food spots are now global chains such as 'McDonalds', 'Burger King' and 'Starbucks.' Restaurants offering ubiquitous 'doner meat-kebab' also were sensed as unpleasant. The unpleasant experiences could also indicate the older gustatory specialities are suffering because of the new taste preferences of the area. The traditional food stores were highly sensed as pleasant by sense walkers, demonstrating that users still appreciate the distinctive taste experiences of Istiklal Street, which ought to be given extra attention in future planning processes.



Map 5. The gustatory mapping of Istiklal Street is based on the food spots sensed as un/pleasant (Source: author).

### Brief Summary of Findings

- The visual, auditory, haptic, olfactory and tasting mapping of Istiklal Street demonstrate that the sensory experiences have been adversely affected by the latest changes in the area.
- The findings confirmed that distinctive ethnographical features of the street have been eroded by the latest changings as many landmarks that made Istiklal Street special have been disappearing.
- The Senswalking study showed how both the pleasant and unpleasant sensewalking experiences of buildings, sounds, texture/material/graphic characteristics, smells and food spots on Istiklal Street interacted to create the area's current urban sensescape.
- The findings also pointed out that the positive sensory experiences of the area relied on the mixture tangible and intangible features. However, as the area lost its spirit, diversity

and originality it lost its prior charm and began to look like every other ‘High’ or Main Street in other global cities.

### **Summary Discussion: How Sensewalking can Inform Urban Planning**

As discussed, over the past two decades, the changes in Istanbul’s socio-spatial configurations have resulted from multiple, interrelated, local, national and global economic and political factors (Keyder 2009, 1999; Akpınar 2014; Türeli and Al 2019). Although establishing a single, major cause of these transformations is impossible, as this exploratory study has demonstrated, to describe accurately how, as a consequence, the intangible characteristics have changed the Sensescales in specific locations such as İstiklal Street.

This was accomplished via Sensewalking, an ethnographic method that looks directly at sensory experiences of pedestrians. The research showed that İstiklal Street lost some of its distinctive features as the area’s other intangible qualities and social life were negatively affected. A major finding was that alterations in the built environment affect not only structural, political, economic and cultural issues, but the personal experiences of inhabitants as well as visitors to the street.

As noted by other researchers, physical layouts of urban places always reflect sensory regimes and unavoidably, physical changes influence sensory experiences (Degen 2010, 2002). To understand the transformation effects of this street we highlighted the sensory experiences, values and preferences of users (Degen 2002, Zardini 2005, Mattern 2009, Henshaw et al. 2011), as noted by Howes (2005), Degen and Rose (2012) and Zardini (2005).

As a result of this research, it is strongly suggested that knowledge of the intangible qualities of urban places should inform design guidelines, urban models and development tools. Such new perspectives can be useful for urban planners and urban authorities. In future studies of urban places, prior to development, their ethnographic sensory dimensions should be recorded and decoded as much as possible. Relatedly, positive dimensions of the sensual experiences found in multi-layered urban places, such as İstiklal Street, should be preserved and promoted. Finally, given the small size of subjects for this study, it is recommended that for both the design and implementation of urban and architectural plans, a larger and wider sample be selected for Sensewalking research. A positive future requires promoting the potentials of their sensory dimensions.

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