

Curating Urban Identity in Space: The Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery

Nazlı Taraz Varışlıaslan^{1*}

¹Department of Architecture, Bursa Technical University, Bursa, Türkiye (nazli.taraz@btu.edu.tr)
*corresponding author

Abstract – This study proposes a multi-layered reading of the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery by handling the building as a cultural heritage of the Republican period, symbolizing the government's modernization reforms in the late 1950s. This period corresponds to the first decade of a critical rupture in the Republican policy that was realized by passing to the multi-party system in the late 1940s. Thus, during the re-idealization process of the Republican development, art and art spaces were prevalently used as ideological mediums to refresh the modern and progressive mindset of the state. Accordingly, the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery carves a special niche as a distinctive art space by reviving the ideals of the Republic, both by its architectural characteristics and urban scale symbolization in Bursa. To compose a multi-layered reading on the Gallery, architectural research and field observation are used besides the discourse analysis on the cultural heritage and the urban identity discourses. Hence, this study revealed that the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery has gained a special place in the city as an authentic representation of the Republican ideals after the 1950s and houses the reformist attempts of the state as a unique art and cultural heritage in Bursa.

Keywords – The Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery, Cultural heritage, Art spaces, Urban identity, Republican period

I. INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the 19th century, Anatolian lands transformed into the homeland of the Turkish Republic, causing a grandiose rupture in policy with the establishment of the new state. This change concretized in the country's built environment, symbolizing the Republic's modern and progressive mindset. Primarily, İstanbul, as the former capital city of the Ottoman Empire, and Ankara, as the new capital city of the Turkish Republic, were reconstructed in accordance with the new ideals of the government. Following that, Bursa is amongst the privileged cities in the country, with its centuries-old Ottoman heritage and its uniqueness as the former capital city of the Empire in the 14th century.

The Republican initiations in Bursa's built environment were realized in urban and building-scale reconstructions. The modern and functional perspective of the Republic was symbolized in the urban reforms of the city, with the opening of wide boulevards, public areas, and collectively used spaces in the built environment. On the other hand, governmental institutions and public buildings were constructed in Bursa to spread the new mindset of the state that was institutionalized in daily life practices and their spaces.

The early Republican constructions were rapidly continued in the first decade of the new state and then consolidated until the mid-1940s. At that time, a grand change in policy occurred with the beginning of the state's multi-party system. Then, the Turkish government entered a fluctuating process in the governmental structures, and that change afflicted the public opinion, which had been obtained steadily with the one-party regime from the 1920s. In order to refresh the trust in the government, the Turkish Republic ideologically moved and accelerated the construction activities of the new Republican edifices. In this way, Bursa's built environment and public spaces were reconsidered, emphasizing the Republican

symbolization as the other cities of Türkiye. From this perspective, establishing the Bursa Fine Arts Gallery is valued in this study as a strategic initiation in Bursa to refresh and revitalize the Republican trust in the 1950s.

II. MATERIALS AND METHOD

Urban identity and the Republican architecture discourses are analyzed within the methodological frameworks of discourse analysis to understand how the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery has revitalized Republican ideals from the 1950s until today. Additionally, architectural research and field observations are conducted to interpret the building's contemporary stance in the urban context of Bursa as an active cultural venue.

In this way, the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery is placed into a tripod perspective, with special emphasis on the city's centuries-old Ottoman identity, its early Republican era, and its contemporary stance in the urban context as a significant cultural heritage. Thus, the Gallery's authentic participation is analyzed as a living cultural venue in the city to understand how art and art spaces gained a special niche in the representation and development of Bursa's cultural identity with its functional significance and architectural characteristics.

III. READING BURSA AS A CENTURIES-OLD HERITAGE

Bursa proposes a centuries-old cultural heritage as the former capital city of the Ottoman Empire. The first settlement was established in Hisar when the city was conquered in 1326. The city was rapidly enlarged by constructing mosques, khans, and bazaars in various regions [1]. In the 15th and 16th centuries, a grandiose development occurred in Bursa due to its strategic location on the Silk Road [2]. Until the 19th century, the city was continually enlarged on a longitudinal axis while the traditional Ottoman urbanism has remained

unchanged with the narrow streets and courtyarded Khans Area at the city centre [3].

Critically, the 19th century resulted in a grand transformation in the urban structures of the city as a result of the new reformist ideals of the Ottoman Empire. Accordingly, city planning initiatives and the reconstruction of historical buildings became significant issues in the Empire [4]. Then, the establishment of the Turkish Republic in the 19th century accelerated those urbanism activities, and the built environment of Bursa passed a comprehensive transformation period. Amongst the urban scale initiations, Bursa city plan proposals of C. C. Lörcher, H. Prost and L. Piccinato have a special role in the contemporary urban structure of the city [5]. In the building scale, many Republican edifices were built as the symbols of the new and reformist state.

Accordingly, Bursa has an authentic urban identity as a long-lived city of the Ottoman Empire and a prominent city of the Republic. Amongst Republican construction activities in the built environment, the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery is located on Atatürk Street, one of the city's main arteries, connecting the historical Khans Area on the west with Heykel Square on the east. In addition to the Gallery, the main axis houses the Ahmet Vefik Pasha State Theater and the Tayyare Cultural Centre, significant cultural venues from the city's late Ottoman and early Republican periods. Accordingly, the location of the building points out a special meaning in the urban context by symbolizing the late Ottoman and Republican ideals with its immediate vicinity participating in the urban life by housing cultural modernization steps of Bursa.

On the other hand, the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery represents the functional and pure architectural style in its building tectonics. The Gallery's high ceiling provides an extensive exhibition area and generates an uninterrupted visiting experience, completely serving the functional priorities of Republican architecture (Fig-1).



Fig. 1: View of the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery (Author's personal archive, 2025)

Specifically, an elevated platform proposes a special exhibition area in the Gallery with its two-staged rise. Light-coloured marble is used in the floors to underline the functional attitude of the era. Additionally, glass bricks are paved near the stairs to increase the basement's lighting and create a semi-visible accessibility between the stairs (Fig-2).



Fig. 2: Stairs and the glass bricks in the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery (Author's personal archive, 2025)

Strikingly, the Gallery includes an elevated central cell with a stairway used as the administrative office and a special room for the artist. The structural load-bearing columns of this central area create a specialized space on the ground floor, which is actively used as a meeting area in the Gallery. On the ceiling, geometrical lighting elements enhance the modernist architectural style of the building (Fig-3).



Fig. 3: View of the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery (Author's personal archive, 2025)

Thus, the building-scale analysis of the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery reveals a modern and purist architectural attitude, which parallels the government's projected aims at that time. The gallery's functional space directly exhibits interior art pieces, which are another significant symbol of the progressive and civilized approach of the Republic, with a special emphasis on the appreciation of art.

In this way, the state ideologically used the active power of art and art spaces to educate and develop the citizenship consciousness of the visitors by integrating cultural activities into daily life practices. By generating an empirical visiting experience with its authentic stance at the city's heart, the Bursa State Fine Art Gallery operates as a transformative agent to strengthen and consolidate the cultural identities of the citizens (Fig-4).



Fig. 4: View of the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery
(Author's personal archive, 2025)

As Castells noted, cultural identity and urban development are influenced by the time's prevailing power dynamics and ideologies [11]. Thus, cities are not merely geographic locations or constructed environments; the ruling class's power relations, ideologies, and values also shape them. Consequently, a city encompasses complex relationships among society, administrators, and various governmental and non-governmental institutions [12]. Furthermore, a city's historical context and cultural foundation play an ongoing role in its evolution. This continuous interplay affects the urban form and identity of the city over time [13].

IV. DISCUSSION

Considering theoretical discussions on urban identity and Republican architecture, the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery carves a special niche as a living art venue in the city's urban context. Accordingly, this research values the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery in various ways.

Firstly, the Gallery occupies an important place in Bursa's art memory. The building represents the special importance given to art in the Republican era, which is concretized in the urban context until today. Hence, the Gallery could be discussed as a special edifice emphasizing the transition to the modern art attitude in Bursa's traditional art heritage.

Secondly, the building's architectural stance is valued as a representation of the modernist and functional attitude of the Republican era. The Gallery's modern design principles symbolize the state's clear, consolidated, and reformist mindset. Importantly, the Bursa State Fine Arts gallery shares the building of the Ahmet Vefik Pasha Theater, which was designed by Münevver Belen, one of the first female architects in the Turkish Republic.

Thirdly, the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery brings together the public and the art at the heart of the city centre. In this way, the understanding that art is addressed to the upper class, the Gallery makes artistic exhibitions accessible for everyone. In a parallel vein, the public accessibility of art in the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery is critical in educating the masses by conveying modern artistic experience in the new Republican identities integrated into daily life practices.

Fourthly, the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery provides cultural permanence in the urban context by perpetuating the cultural transmission of Bursa's centuries-old history. In this respect, the Gallery is valued as a physical representation of cultural sustainability by housing continual exhibitions contemporaneously.

V. CONCLUSION

This study revealed that the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery has a special place in Bursa as an exhibition centre and memory storage, which transfers cultural sustainability by integrating art into daily life practices. On the other hand, the architectural tectonics of the Galley could be read within the ideologies of the early Republican period by glorifying art within the architectural space of the modernist and reformist attitude of the state. The Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery is also valued as an emphasis that art is not an end product but also a public process that is continually fed from the public participation grounded on commonly shared values and urban identity. In this way, the Gallery becomes a living art venue in the urban context of Bursa, which is constantly changing in accordance with the urban contexts and the ongoing agenda of the era.

As Neill proposes, identities need continuity, and the cultural context constructs a firm foundation for constructing cultural identities [6]. Accordingly, identities emerge as continually constructed notions in accordance with certain historical, social, political, and institutional contexts [7]. Thus, the conversion of the Ottoman Empire's heterogeneity into the Turkish Republic's homogenous nation revealed a rupture in the cultural continuity of the country [8]. Here, *the institutional order* became the major organization tool the Republican state used to structure "established patterns of practice" [9]. The construction of governmental buildings, squares, libraries, museums, theatres, and art spaces could be valued as those institutions that organize and teach the new, modern, and Republican practices into daily life. In this way, the state generates spaces, symbols, and communities that reciprocally interact with each other [10]. Thus, the organization of daily life practices is regulated and systematized in a given order [9].

From this perspective, a multi-layered reading is conducted on the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery in architectural perspectives and discursive analysis. Accordingly, it is stated that the Gallery represents the concrete representation of the reformist mindset of the Turkish Republic from the 1950s by proposing established patterns and curated architectural spaces in the urban context. In this way, the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery emerged as a living symbol of the use of art and art spaces in the Republic as ideological mediums to convey modernist paces of the state. Contemporarily, the Bursa State Fine Arts Gallery is located at the heart of the urban context of Bursa, with its modernist stance, which combines centuries-old Bursa tradition with the hundred-year-old Republican city as a cultural venue.

REFERENCES

- [1] Z. Dörtok Abacı, "Bursa'nın Kent Dokusundaki Değişim (18.-19. Yüzyıl)", in *Bursa'nın Kentsel ve Mimari Gelişimi*. Cafer Çiftçi (ed.). Bursa: Osmangazi Belediyesi Yayınları, 2007.
- [2] S.S. Eray, and İ. Kutlu, "Anadolu'da Selçuklu ve Osmanlı Kent Yapısında Çarşının Konumu ve Maksal Kurgusu Üzerine Bir İnceleme" (An Analysis on the Position and Spatial Organization of the Bazaar in the Seljuk and Ottoman Urban Structure in Anatolia), in *Kent Akademisi* (vol:14, no:2), 506-517. DOI: [10.35674/kent.847196](https://doi.org/10.35674/kent.847196)

- [3] M. Cerasi, M. *Osmanlı Kenti: Osmanlı İmparatorluğunda 18. ve 19. Yüzyıllarda Kent Uygarlığı ve Kent Mimarisi* (çev., A. Ataöv), İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 1999.
- [4] Z.M. Enlil, “19. Yüzyıl İstanbul’unda Konut Yapı Gelenekleri ve Kent Kültürü”, in *Osmanlı Mimarlığının 7 Yüzyılı: Uluslararası Bir Miras*. İstanbul: YEM Yayınları, 1999.
- [5] S. Sağlam, “1923-1950 Yılları Arasında Türkiye’de Kent ve Kentleşme Olgusu”, in *Sosyoloji Konferansları* (no:53), 2016, pp. 257-274. DOI: 10.18368/TU/sk.09525
- [6] W. J. V. Neill, *Urban Planning and Cultural Identity*. London and New York: Routledge, 2004.
- [7] S. Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs Identity”, in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (eds., Hall, S. and Du Gay, P.), London : SAGE Publications, 2003, pp: 1-18.
- [8] K. Robins, “Interrupting Identities: Turkey / Europe”, in *Questions of Cultural Identity* (eds., Hall, S. and Du Gay, P.), London : SAGE Publications, 2003, pp: 61-87.
- [9] R. Jenkins, *Social Identity*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004.
- [10] A. P. Cohen, *Symbolic Construction of Community*, London and New York: Routledge, 1985.
- [11] M. Castells, *The Power of Identity*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997.
- [12] C. İlhan, & Ö. Ediz, “Kent Dokusu Morfolojik Değişiminin Fraktal Geometri Aracılığıyla Hesaplanması: Bursa Örneği”, in *Journal of Architecture and Life* (vol:4, no:1), 2019, pp: 117–140. OI:10.26835/my.546927
- [13] C. Ulusoy, “İdeoloji ve Mekan İlişkisi Bağlamında Bursa Tahayyüleri”, in *International Journal of Social Inquiry* (vol:11, no:2), 2018, pp: 349-374.