

Özgün Makale

Museums as Spaces Carrying Social Memory¹

Toplumsal Hafızanın Taşıyıcı Mekânı Olarak Müzeler

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Abstract

The memory of societies has always been built over space and transferred to the next generation. These spaces sometimes appear as monuments, squares, or museums. In addition to their traditional roles in preserving history and historical artifacts, museums have taken on new roles, such as the re-creation of social memory. The aim of this paper is to show how museums shape today's reality by re-presenting the past. The paper consists of three parts. First, discussions on what social memory is and what kinds of functions it has in building space are presented. Second, the phenomenon of social memory taking root in space is explored. The roles of space in creating identity, making history, and inventing tradition are explained. Third, analysis of the role of museums as places of memory in the reproduction of social and cultural norms is undertaken.

Keywords: Museum, Space, Social Memory, Inventing Tradition.

Öz

Toplumların sahip olduğu bellek her daim bir mekân üzerinden inşa edilmiş ve sonraki nesle aktarılmıştır. Bu mekânlar bazen bir anıt, bir meydan olurken, bazen de bir müze olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Müzeler tarihin, tarihî eserlerin korunması gibi geleneksel rollerine ek olarak, günümüzde toplumsal hafızanın yeniden yaratılması gibi yeni roller de üstlenmiştir. Çalışmanın amacı, müzelerin geçmişi yeniden sunarak bugünün gerçekliğini nasıl şekillendirdiğini göstermektir. Bu gayeyle ele alınan bu çalışma üç kısımdan oluşmaktadır. İlk kısımda, toplumsal hafızanın ne olduğu ve mekân inşa etme noktasında ne tür bir işleve sahip olduğu üzerine tartışmalara yer verilmiştir. İkinci kısımda, toplumsal hafızanın kök saldıği mekân olgusu üzerine bir tartışma yapılmıştır. Mekânın kimlik yaratma, tarih oluşturma ve gelenek icat etmedeki yeri açıklanmıştır. Üçüncü kısımda ise hafıza mekânlarından biri olan müzelerin, toplumsal ve kültürel normların yeniden üretilmesindeki rolü üzerine bir inceleme yapılmıştır.

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Anahtar Kelimeler: Müze, Mekân, Toplumsal Hafıza, Geleneğin İcadı.

Introduction

Throughout human history, every society has felt the need to protect its social memory and historical elements with different tools. Social groups make efforts to preserve this memory and transmit it through various spaces. While monuments and sculptures most often serve this purpose, museums can fulfill the task. Museums, which we encounter in almost all city centers, are positioned as the subjects, objects, or stages of transference.

Architecture and space have significant places and functions in constructing, preserving, and transferring memory to the next generation. As John Ruskin stated (2016), it is possible to live without architecture, but it is not possible to remember without it. Therefore, every society has embarked on building architectural structures that carry their own identities and memories. Museums, which ensure that social memory is kept alive, similarly function as spaces that enable the exhibition of historical elements and the transfer of those elements to public space. In this respect, it is possible to read museums as aimed spaces and to see them as showrooms where society's economic, cultural, and historical capital is kept.

Museums are not merely places on their own; they contain different dynamics. Every museum that is built has a meaning that every seer can interpret in a different way beyond the visible. These structures, in which memories and meanings are framed, offer individuals the opportunity of re-reading history as a cultural exhibition space. These urban spaces, built as a necessity, also offer society opportunities to learn about the societies and cultures that preceded it and help the society build its own identity.

Museums appear as symbolic spaces that serve the ideas of societies, individuals, and cities to establish, construct, and reproduce themselves. Museums are carriers of historical elements when they are built, but they can also become city images over time. In this respect, museums assume the role of being both image and image carrier. In this study, prepared from the perspective of social memory, history, and space, we will try to reveal the role of museums in the construction of social memory and the reproduction of culture.

Social Memory as the Art of Remembering

All social changes are recorded through the concepts of memory or history, being mentally and physically stored. People materialize these stored memories through certain images, signs, and symbols. Thus, the past is carried to the present and reproduced. As Sarlo (2012) stated, memories always need the present and the past turns into the present, sometimes spontaneously and sometimes through an intervention. For experiences to be carried to the present, the memory must exist, or the existing memory must be preserved. In this sense, the concept of collective memory has the function of constructing a shared future through a shared past. Connerton (2014) saw the concept of collective memory as a reconstruction of history (p.27), while Halbwachs saw it (2017) as a reconstruction of the past and the future.

Assmann (1995), who stated that social memory is permanent through fixed points and that these fixed points should be called cultural memory, argued that collective memory would be made permanent through figures of memory such as texts, rituals, or monuments because social memory is related to objects and places. Assmann (1995) further pointed out that culture's objectification can be seen in works of high art and posters, postage stamps, costumes, and customs,



underlining that culture has a kind of mnemonic energy in the construction of social memory (p. 129). Connerton (2014) stated that the act of remembering should be considered a cultural activity rather than an individual one and interpreted it as remembering cultural tradition (p. 12). Assmann (1995) who held that this situation creates cultural memory, defined cultural memory as constituting “that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose cultivation serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image.” (p. 132).

Individuals and societies need memory to exist and maintain continuity because, as Nora (1989) underlined, memory is the life itself produced, and this life needs a group or a community. To truly be a member of a community, an individual must embrace and share the community’s values (Doğa and Deligöz, 2017). Each individual creates memory through communication (Assmann, 1995). Such interactions and communications keep memory alive. Tunçel (2017), who argued that every individual or society is a synthesis of the past, emphasized that social memory should also be seen as shaping society’s relationship with the past, rather than memory transferred through pure experience. In order to ensure continuity and transfer it to the next generation, this social memory must be transferred to the world of action and concretized with certain instruments.

The phenomenon of social memory has a functional feature in the sense of belonging to the society, place, and city in which an individual lives. Therefore, it is constantly being rebuilt and reproduced. Halbwachs (2017), who stated that this is only possible with the act of remembering, further argued that the concept of memory is a reconstruction of the past, made with the help of data borrowed from the present (p. 66).

It is also essential to maintain, perpetuate, and transfer social memory to the next generations as much as it is to construct it. Any event that is not conveyed is in danger of being forgotten. Therefore, most societies and communities rely on certain instruments to make memories permanent. There are many instruments through which memory is built and perpetuated: ceremonies, festivals, films, museums, archives, squares, avenues, and streets. The most striking among these instruments are spaces, because space has been used in every historical period to construct culture, identity, and memory.

Space as an Instrument for Reconstructing Social Memory

Space is where a certain moment becomes concrete, and it has always had a special connection with experiences. Space is a product of history and a common ground where time-space planning comes together. Since all social events and relations take place in a certain space, space holds condensed time in “its thousands of honeycombs” (Bachelard, 2014, p. 39). Thus, space unites, separates, limits, directs, and gives identity to society and the individual. Space ensures that all experiences are permanent and it prepares the conditions for their transfer to the next generation. In this respect, for most societies, space is sacred. As long as there is no interference, it maintains its permanence, transcends the present, and acquires a transcendent quality (Özaloğlu, 2017, p. 13). At the same time, it remains remembered and it initiates the formation of collective thought. Due to these characteristics, every society has attached different importance to the space. Societies that can read space position themselves between time and space and build their own social memories. Likewise, it becomes possible to integrate the society’s history with the present and the future. In this way, these spaces carry more than one social process and recreate the historical as a public object.



In order to create social memory, it is essential to build and maintain it, which is only possible with space, images, and symbols. Each constructed image is embodied through architectural or spatial practices (Yalım, 2017) and concentrated in the public sphere. In particular, images and spatial practices created and objectified with historical references invent traditions, as Hobsbawm (2015) says.

Space is always a product of history. Lefebvre (2016) described space as the meeting place of material planning, financial planning, and date and time planning (p. 15). It connects the mental with the cultural and the social with the historical. In this respect, it is not a homogeneous structure. It is dynamic and it contains many cultural, political, ideological, and historical intersections. If there is no suitable space production, changes in life and society will not occur (Lefebvre, 2016, p. 86). Therefore, space is artificial and fluid. According to Nora (1989), “space is simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experience and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration.” (p. 18). The fact that it is simple and readily available also transforms space into a field of individual-individual and individual-society struggles.

Since space is the center of the dialectic between the individual and society, it undergoes constant interference. Because of this feature, space is the center of hegemonic struggle. Explaining that time and space have reciprocal actions in the form of the cyclical and the linear, Lefebvre (2017) argued that time and space always measure each other and gain meaning through cyclical repetitions and linear repetitions (p. 22). Thus, this dialectical relationship between time and space gains both importance and generality.

Space is not a phenomenon where a single individual gives the final shape. Individuals and societies have struggled for generations to control, change, and transform space. What we call history has likewise been the object of constant intervention and has changed. Therefore, every society has felt the need to protect its history and space. In this direction, space has mediated such thoughts and has also undergone transformation. It has taken on the role of the *palladium* of social history and intervened. Therefore, it is possible to see space as a structure that changes, transforms, and reproduces. Every produced space redefines the society in which it is located (Lefebvre, 2016, p. 27). Şentürk (2014), who stated that space has a reality in which the social, the political, the intellectual, and images are absorbed or embodied, alleged that the world of thought and imaginations of time can express themselves through any space, such as monuments, sculptures, public buildings, or museums (p. 89). Thus, cities witness different periods across space and make such features permanent.

Cengiz (2017), who stated that individuals define themselves by their pasts and develop their identities with elements from the past, emphasized that every individual has a protective attitude, and the fear of losing activates the phenomenon of remembering. This is a situation encountered in any society as well as in all individuals because societies or cities establish their own identities based on elements from the past. Therefore, past items must always be preserved.

The most striking defect of human memory is forgetfulness. Forgetting entails an end or annihilation within itself. The only way to combat this is to prevent forgetting and to remember. While all societies try to overcome this by producing different images and symbols, they sometimes also prevent forgetting by building spaces. Nora (1989) defined these built spaces as “sites of memory” making the space functional, also emphasizing that sites of memory are the past’s voice and the future’s transmitter. Nora (1989) further expressed that these sites of memory are



mediators between the raw material of documents and memory loss. Bilik (2020), who stated that space is an important carrier of the heritage of humanity, approached space as concrete constructions of social memory that combine the past and the future. Keskin (2017) described different types of sites of memory and stated that these spaces are full of symbols and patterns of meaning (p. 156). Keskin (2017) underlined that individuals feel themselves to be a part of the society or nation in which they live thanks to these memory areas. Nora (1989) proposed that the primary purpose of sites of memory is to stop time and prevent forgetting, further stating that another purpose of sites of memory is to “immortalize death, to materialize the immaterial.” (p. 19).

Every city can be viewed as a marvelous book of time and history (Harvey, 2012), and every space in a city is a page in that book. Therefore, every place has a task. They protect and preserve the social memory and act as its guardians. Space can also be construed as a jewelry box where social values are stored. From this perspective, Aslan and Kiper (2016) defined spaces as “the places where the society meets, solidarity, resting together, having fun or expressing social opposition” and described them as accumulating memory values (p. 885). Memory transfer and memory retention, such as cultural continuity, often occur through space. Thus, on the one hand, a material space is formed; on the other hand, this space becomes symbolic and gains a future-oriented collection role. In this respect, space is characterized as a memory center loaded with material, symbolic, and functional meanings. Yalın (2017), who explained that space and architecture are forms of representation, emphasized that space activates social memory as a tool equivalent to mnemotechnic approaches.

Everything that has been previously experienced, as Debord (1996) outlined, leaves its place in a representation. This representation is often exhibited through a certain space. Lefebvre (2016) called these display spaces representations of space and argued that such structures are spaces designed by artists, planners, urbanists, and technocrats who both dissolve and organize societal norms. These spaces, built by certain subjects, form their objects by becoming subjects over time. A new object created in this way is the individual or the society itself. Park and Burgess (2015) furthermore concluded that while humans create the city and space, they also create themselves and their history. An individual who builds such a space has to live in and use that space. Harvey (2012) stated that individuals mostly position their identities and values according to space and time (p. 157). These values, which are fixed to certain points of the city across time and space, are designed as only spaces in certain periods

Museums as Sites of Memory

As Myszal (2003) stated, social memory is “primarily concerned with the social aspects of remembering and the results of this social experience - that is, the representation of the past in a whole set of ideas, knowledges, cultural practices, rituals and monuments...” (p. 6). Collective memory is most clearly explained in Nora’s (1989) work on “sites of memory” (*lieux de memorire*).

Sites of memory constitute the ultimate embodiments of memory, barely surviving in the modern era as all that is solid melts into air. Ricoeur (2020) revealed this role of sites of memory when he wrote that “we need others to remember.” We can fit many things into Nora’s definition of “sites of memory.” Archives, treaties, cemeteries, sanctuaries, and festivals are some sites of memory. In the words of Nora (1989), sites of memory “mark the rituals of a society without ritual.” (p. 12). Cultural memory is formed through these rituals. To better understand this point, we



may turn to Assmann and John (1995): “cultural memory comprises that body of reusable texts, images, and rituals specific to each society in each epoch, whose ‘cultivation’ serves to stabilize and convey that society’s self-image.” (p. 132). Cultural memory consists of objectified culture or, in other words, the texts, rites, images, buildings, and monuments designed to recall fateful events in the history of the collective (Kansteiner, 2002, p. 182).

One of the sites of memory creating cultural memory is the museum (Mistzal, 2003; Assmann, 1995; Spillman, 1988).² Museums are often thought of as places that “invited visitors to learn about great works of art, to understand their society, and to know more about the course of history” (Cheney, 1995, p. 144) or as institutions that are “conventionally dedicated to the conservation of valued objects” (Crane, 1997, p. 44). However, when we think sociologically, the main point making museums much more important is that they are one of the primary carriers of cultural memory. Acknowledging that museums “have emerged as arenas that are becoming more and more important for cultural production,” Wallace (1981) also noted this function of museums.³

Museums are a form of cultural memory; they are technologies of memory, not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides so much as objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning (Nissley and Casey, 2002, p. 38). The reconstruction of memory, and particularly cultural memory, finds its existence in museums. Museums serve as guarantors of collective memory. Especially in today’s world, we see that museums, architecture, and other works of art at various levels are used to show a sense of continuity or commitment to the past (Landsberg, 2004, p. 7).

In order to better understand the role of museums in the reconstruction of social memory, it may be helpful to consider museums together with history. The role of history and historians in the construction of social memory is obvious. Historiographic research re-presents the past. Historians can describe the history of historical consciousness and the places and times where the people who cared about the past spoke about it or acted on that caring (Crane, 1997, p. 46). However, as stated by Katriel (1994), “the kind of past the historian can provide cannot adequately respond to the persistent quest for collective memory in a secularized world.” (p. 3). Concrete manifestations need to be created for this; memory-building practices need to emerge. Museums play a significant role here. Museums are imposing stockpiles of the past, of things that were difficult to remember in the past. Museums are dense storage depots and embodiments of collective memory. Museums are also embodiments of social memory. Therefore, museums, wherever they are found, rely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, and the visibility of the image (Katriel, 1994, p. 3). Terdiman (1993) emphasized this concretization, saying that “memory consciousness seems to reside in matter, not in perception.” (p. 34).

Museums are more functional than the type of the past that historians can provide, but that does not overshadow the importance of history vis-à-vis museums. The meaning and texture of museums as sites of memory are shaped by the historical context in which they are embedded. Therefore, museums are full of “historical rhetoric,” as Katriel (1994, p. 6) said. Every museum is actually a combination of history and memory (Nissley and Casey, 2002, p. 38).⁴

² Although museums have much in common with other institutions of memory, their authoritative and legitimizing status and their role as symbols of community mark them as distinctive cultural complexes (Macdonald, 1996).

³ Museums originated in the late eighteenth century as monuments to wealth and civic patrimony, in the form of collections of material objects in courts and churches (Mistzal, 2003, p. 21). In the nineteenth century, the creation of museums was tied to the rise of nationalism and the forced identification of individuals with a civic national character. Museums are political resources where national identities are constructed (Maleuvre, 1999, p. 107).

⁴ There are other views on the relationship between museums and history. Maleuvre (1999, p. 17) said that history in a museum is inauthentic: “it has been stripped of its driving power...” Similarly, Heidegger also described irreversible damage done to culture and art by museification (Maleuvre, 1999, p. 18).



The important point here is that these two come together and rebuild the past. Museums can accordingly provide social contexts that reveal the meaning and fabric of memory and allow explorations of the uses of history and the retrieval of memory as a part of it all (Katriel, 1994). In this case, we can say that museums reflect both memory orientation and history orientation. As Katriel (1994) stated, among the main aspects of museums:

the first is a 'memory orientation' which involves the invocation of the past through ritualized actions designed to create an a-temporal sense of the presence of the past in the present...

The second is a 'historical orientation' which involves a reflective exploration of past events considered along an axis of irreversible, linear temporality, with a view to understanding their situated particularity, their causes and consequences. (p. 1)

Museums, which reflect both memory orientation and historical orientation, invite reflection on the representational and mediated quality of histories and on memory as a complex aesthetic and rhetorical artifice (Andermann and Simine, 2012, p. 4) In museums, individuals not only comprehend a historical narrative but also receive a deeply felt memory of the past that they have not personally lived (Landsberg, 2004, p. 2). This memory that emerges thanks to museums has the ability to shape the subjectivity of the individual and the culture of the society. In this way, museums form the memory of a society (Rowlinson et al., 2010).

In the modern world, "all that is solid melts into air" (Berman, 1988). According to Berman (1988,), "the ever-expanding, drastically fluctuating capitalist world market" has produced "immense demographic upheavals, severing millions of people from their ancestral habitats, hurling them half way across the world into new lives." (p. 16). In a world where all that is solid melts into air and is experienced as transitory, uprooting, and unstable, museums, as sites of memory, reproduce culture by "guaranteeing origin and stability as well as depth of time and of space" (Landsberg, 2004, p. 6). This indicates the power of museums to create meaning. The reproduction of culture with the power of creating meaning is actually a social responsibility of museums. As stated by Sandell (2002), all museums have a social responsibility (p. 4). Social responsibility entails an acknowledgement of the meaning-making potential of the museum and an imperative to utilize that potential to positive social ends (Sandell, 2002, p. 19).

Conclusion

Everything that happens needs the present in order to exist. In the moment of remembering, the past can be the present. This is possible with the formation of social memory because social memory is always a relationship with the past, and more specifically a negotiation with the past. Every dialogue with the past not only conveys the past to us but also offers an idea for re-explaining the world and shaping the reality of the present. Thus, it creates frameworks for how we will build the future. In this sense, the primary role of memory in social life is to be a part of the meaning-making apparatus. In this respect, memory also functions as a source of truth. One of the main places where social memory takes root is space. We encounter these spaces as sites of memory. Sites of memory put us into a dialogue with the past, and they involve us in the process of understanding and making sense of the past. They also contribute to the storage of social memories in the form of monuments, libraries, and archives. Thus, spaces that function as voices of the past also undertake the role of future transmitters.

Museums, among the sites of memory tasked with re-presenting the past and shaping today's reality, essentially form islands of time. Thanks to these islands of time, there is a transfer of



social memory and cultural memory. These islands of time are, in a way, places of “retrospective contemplativeness” in the words of Assmann. What occurs in places of “retrospective contemplativeness” is the reconstruction of social and cultural memory. Museums try to reconstruct and recreate social memory by associating it with current conditions. In this sense, we can say that museums have become one of the major types of cultural institutions that reproduce social and cultural norms. Museums are social institutions that ensure the reproduction and institutional maintenance of social memory by crystallizing it. As social institutions, museums are guardians of social memory, but more importantly, they are also its producers. Therefore, museums are a commodity of the culture industry and have become essential arenas for cultural production.

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