

Discussion

“Blind Pickaxe”: How Meaningful Is It to Read City Histories Reverse?

Ömer İskender TULUK 

Department of Architecture, Karadeniz Technical University, Trabzon, Türkiye, otuluk@ktu.edu.tr

Received: 25.05.2024, Received in Revised Form: 10.07.2024, Accepted: 19.07.2024.

“Zoning is possible by demolishing. If there is no demolition in a country, there is no zoning. If we don’t undermine this city, we can’t do anything”,

Şevki Savaşçı, 1939.

For the question that interrogates how possible and meaningful it is to read city histories in terms of “blind pickaxe”, in other words, in the context of “destructions”, the words of the councillor, Şevki Savaşçı, at the Trabzon Municipal Council session in 1939 indicate a remarkable mental background. It is because, in the histories of urbanism in Türkiye, there are many actions that strengthen the perception that almost the only condition for “building” is “demolishing”, and another striking example of this is about to happen in Trabzon.¹

The main topic of the session is the Cinema Building (Pilosyan Cinema), which must be demolished urgently according to the Lambert plan, according to which an Atatürk statue was proposed to be placed in the park known as the “National Garden” in those years, and, as in many places, the surroundings of the monument need to be opened. According to the zoning plan preliminary project and Lambert’s report, the work was to start from this square, one side of which was found the Cinema Building (Figure 1).²

*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: otuluk@ktu.edu.tr (KTU).

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Cite this article;

Tuluk, Ö. İ. (2024). “Blind pickaxe”: How meaningful is it to read city histories reverse? *LivenARCH+ Journal*, 1(2): 135-140. <https://doi.org/xxxxx>

¹ For detailed evaluations on this issue please see: Ö. İ. Tuluk, “İmâret-i Hatuniye’den Atapark’a: Trabzon’da Kamusal Alan Dönüşümüne Erken Bir Tanıklık” and “Harap Şehrin Kayıp Mekânları: 20. Yüzyılın İlk Çeyreğinde Trabzon’un Tarihsel Topoğrafyası”; Ö. İ. Tuluk & D. Bayrak, “Yıkarak İnşa Etmek: Trabzon Şehrinin Fiziksel Gelişimi Üzerine Bir Tersten Okuma Denemesi”.

² Trabzon Municipal Council Minutes, Session on April 12, 1939.

Bahri Doğanay, the vice president of the period, was in favour of the immediate demolition of the building, including its outbuildings, regardless of cost. In fact, he was of the opinion that even 3000 Liras of rental income could be given up. Tevfik Yunusoğlu,³ on the other hand, was not of the same mind as the municipality, which was already in financial difficulty, on giving up this income with a hasty decision and thought that the final zoning plan should be waited. Burhan Oğuzlu⁴ had the same opinions. However, Şevki Savaşçı's following words, which contain a search for legitimacy in the demolition of Cinema Building through the spiritual existence of Atatürk, removed the issue from its main topic and moved it to another ground: "A person emerged who saved this country. He was alone. Twenty people joined him. They saved the country. It doesn't matter that the municipality loses 3000 Liras for a statue of him that we will place here".⁵

The minutes revealed that the main issue in the discussions was authority. However, for a group including Savaşçı, placing the Atatürk statue as soon as possible was a matter of honour, and there was no tolerance for any situation that would prevent this. It is clear that the core of the discussion lies in an effort regarding the zoning of the city. However, it is also clear that this issue is not only a simple zoning application. The influence of ideological atmosphere during this period cannot be ignored.

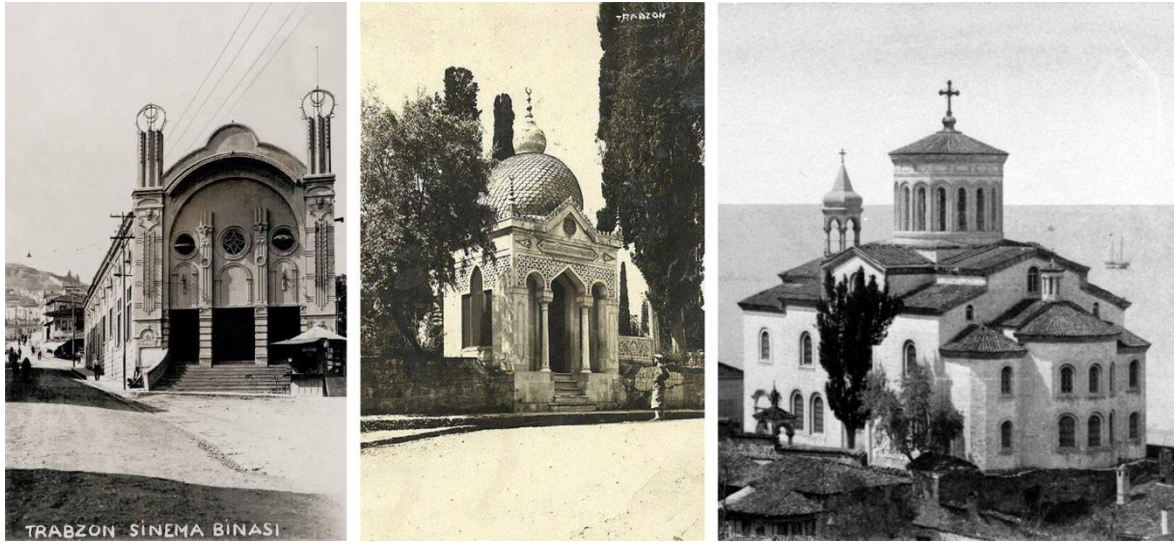


Figure 1. Cinema Building, Hamdi Pasha Tomb and St. Gregoire Greek Cathedral (Detail from Yıldız Album Ö. İ. Tuluk Private Collection).

On the other hand, it is also understood that the Cinema Building, which has a remarkable architectural language and host many ensembles including Darülbedayi, is already insufficient to meet the needs shortly after its construction.⁶ The first complaints about this were from 1925 onwards (Fevzi, 1925, p.1). The first discussions on its demolition, which were reflected in the minutes of the Municipal Council after a series of renovation attempts, date back to 1939.⁷ This was also the session in which Şevki Savaşçı uttered the motto "building the city by undermining

³ Municipal councillor of the period and mayor of Trabzon between 1946-1950.

⁴ Municipal councillor of the period.

⁵ Trabzon Municipal Council Minutes, Session on April 12, 1939.

⁶ For detailed evaluations on this issue please see: V. Usta & Ö. İ. Tuluk, "Başlangıçtan Halkevleri'ne Trabzon'da Tiyatro" and Ö. İ. Tuluk, "Spectacle in Trabzon During the Late Ottoman and Early Republican Period: Kostaki Theatre and Pilyosyan Cinema".

⁷ Trabzon Municipal Council Minutes, Session on April 12, 1939.

it” in response to the opposition to the demolition of the building. On the other hand, the minutes of the Municipal Council and local newspapers of the period prove that this not only reflects Savaşçı’s personal view of the issue, but also proves that it was a widespread “mental pattern” for the period. It clearly reveals that in those years, the act of “demolishing” was imagined as the basic condition for “building”.

Another story of a demolished building that has left deep traces in the memory of the city is related to the İmaret Cemetery (today Atapark), which is the treasury of the city’s prince complex İmâret-i Hatuniye. By 1938, the ancient cemetery, where the gentry and governors of the last period were buried, had completely disappeared, except for its mosque and mausoleum (Tuluk, 2010, p.125). In those days, according to the law enacted in 1931, which enabled the transfer of abandoned cemeteries to municipalities, and the Regulation on Cemeteries, the cemetery was on the agenda to be moved out of the city. This process gained momentum with Atatürk’s last visit to the city in 1937. With the special interest of General Inspector Tahsin Uzer, it was moved to the new cemetery in Sülüklü district in a short time. The three tombs of the governors in the cemetery were demolished at this time (Tuluk, 2010, p.132-138).

However, some documents and newspapers of the period also reveal that this cemetery, which was imagined as a relic of ancestors by at least a part of the society, was not treated sensitively enough and was seen as “bones” that needed to be disposed of as soon as possible for the sake of the city and its inhabitants. Moreover, Tahsin Uzer’s reckoning with Abdülhamid II and the mentality of that period by having the Kadri and Hamdi Pasha Tombs in the cemetery demolished is also interesting in terms of showing that ideological reactions as well as legal obligations were effective in the transformation of the cemetery into a park (Tuluk&Bayrak, p.785) (Figure 1).

For some churches, too, nothing has changed. The fate was the same. However, for them, the process leading to the inevitable end was more traumatic. For example, what is written and drawn about the Armenian Church, which is referred to as “the big church on Maraş Street” in the minutes of the Assembly and in local newspapers, and which today occupies the site of the Ziraat Bank building, and the “big church in Kemer kaya” (St. Gregoire Greek Cathedral) are interesting in terms of expressing the socio-psychological dilemmas of the city residents who did not yet overcome the trauma of occupation and betrayal, under the influence of the ideological atmosphere of the period (Figure 1).

Abandoned churches began to be reported in local newspapers in the early periods. However, it is only in 1939 that we came across an article in which the discomfort with their existence and views on their urgent demolition were expressed in such a sharp style. In a corner post titled “Destruction is also sometimes a work” in *Yeniyol Newspaper* dated July 29, 1939, the author mentioned the church in Kemer kaya, destroying the traces left behind by the minorities to the duties of the People’s Houses (Halkevi). The language he used to do so is remarkable. In the article, the intolerant presence of the church, which is described as a “dirt” and “stain” on the city’s forehead, and which competes with minarets, is clearly expressed (Çınar, 1939, p.1).

In the column post titled “Are churches entrusted or are they the property of the city of Trabzon?” in the *Yeniyol Newspaper* dated March 13, 1937, the author expressed his concerns about the possible negative effects of the church on Turkish youth on Maraş Street, directly opposite the People’s House, which was probably already being used or envisaged to be used for another purpose (Gündoğdu, 1937, p. 2). Compared to the text targeting the church in Kemer kaya, the language of the text surprisingly complies with the rules of courtesy. The reason for this is understood only six days later in another opinion piece, which is a reply to this one. In the article titled “Trabzon’s theatre and cinema building should only and only be the big church in front of the People’s House” in the newspaper column “Opinions and Hearings” on March 19, 1937, the author tried to prevent the pressure for the demolition of the church by reminding the new function proposed by Atatürk, whose signs were considered as an important command, for this church building during his first visit to the city. According to the story, Atatürk pointed to the big church in front of the People’s House and said, “Here is Trabzon’s cinema, theatre, and conference place.” (Alap, 1937, p. 1).

However, the reminder served no purpose other than delaying the end. Eleven years later, in the May 5, 1949 issue of *Yeniyol Newspaper*, the news of the ongoing demolition of the church, which was sold to Ziraat Bank, was announced as “The last sledgehammers are being raised and lowered. There is not much time left for it to be razed to the ground.” (Sa-Uğ., 1949, p. 1). Finally, a few months later, on July 25, 1949, it was announced that the foundation of the new building of the Ziraat Bank was laid “after the demolition of unnecessary buildings for some time”, also referring to the church (Anonymous, 1949, p. 1).

Despite everything, there are those who oppose “blind pickaxes”, so to speak. The article titled “Let’s not waste historical treasures” in the June 24, 1942 issue of *Yeniyol Newspaper* is like a message not only for those days but also for the future, even though it will not be of much use: “It is not necessary to demolish definitely in order to build. Even so, it will not be the historical buildings that will be demolished because they are the property of history and humanity.” (Çulha, 1942, p.4).

Undoubtedly, the ambition of “creating a modern city” through “blind pickaxes” is not limited to Trabzon. The most striking and dramatic examples of “demolition” as a means of “reconstruction” within the framework of expropriationist policies can be found in Istanbul of the 1930s, 40s and 50s, as well as in many Anatolian cities, and, although there are some characteristics specific to the place where the action takes place, these examples are the local footprints of the birth of modernity, which comes into existence by destroying the old (Tanyeli, 1998, p.109-110). Such urban interventions also contain an important potential for tracing these traces and analysing the codes of modernism and postmodernism regarding demolition and reconstruction.⁸ On the other hand, Trabzon Municipality Assembly minutes and period newspapers, which are full of striking dialogues, heated debates and sometimes slang-like

⁸ The following studies, which make various evaluations on this issue in the context of Istanbul, are noteworthy: İ. Akpınar, “Menderes İmar Hareketleri Türkleştirme Politikalarının Bir Parçası mıydı?”; in the file “Yıkarak Yapmak” edited by İ. Yada Akpınar: C. Bilsel, “İmparatorluk’tan Cumhuriyet’e İstanbul’u Modernleştirme Projesi ve Prost Planı”; B. Boysan, “Genişliğin Azameti, Sağlamlığın Heybeti, Hennesenin Güzelliği, Trafikğin Hâkimiyeti”; F. Uz Sönmez, “Kentin Genetik Şifresinde Kırık Bir Kod/Fragman: İstanbul Seksenler”; Ö. Ünsal, “(Yıkılarak) Yeniden Kurulan Kent: 2000’li Yılların İstanbul’u”; in the book “Üç Kuşak Cumhuriyet” U. Tanyeli, “Yıkarak Yapmak” and prepared as a master thesis P. Çetken, “Kent’in Hafızasında Bir Travma: Sulukule Yıkımı”.

expressions, draw attention to much more data in terms of revealing what lies behind the expropriationist zoning policies. This also means that city histories can be read not only through “constructions” but also through “demolitions” (Tuluk & Bayrak, 2020, p.784-786), and in terms of understanding, decoding and tracing the periodic mentality behind the idea of creating a modern city, it can even be easily claimed that there is a much more functional and rich material related to "destruction" rather than "construction", provided that it is considered in the context of ideologies specific to modernism such as secularism and nationalism.

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