

Research Article (Araştırma Makalesi)

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Between spatial continuity and everyday life: A relational approach to urban identity in Kemeraltı (İzmir-Türkiye)

Mekânsal süreklilik ve gündelik yaşam arasında:
Kemeraltı'nın (İzmir-Türkiye) kentsel kimliğine
ilişkisel bir yaklaşım

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine the relationship between spatial structure, the physical environment, and everyday social practices in the formation of urban identity. Kemeraltı, a historic commercial center that has undergone multilayered cultural, economic, and spatial transformations over time constitutes an important case study for understanding the multidimensional structure of urban identity.

Materials and Methods: The study focuses on Kemeraltı and employs qualitative research methods, including literature review, historical document analysis, spatial observation, and fieldwork. The analysis evaluates morphological characteristics, spatial continuity, spatial organization, and socio-economic practices, all of which influence the formation and continuity of urban identity.

Results: The findings indicate reveal that urban identity emerges from the interaction between spatial and social layers. Monumental buildings and historic public spaces support the symbolic dimension of identity, while narrow streets, courtyards, and semi-public spaces sustain everyday life, social continuity, and collective memory. The study also highlights the important role of everyday practices in maintaining urban identity.

Conclusion: Urban identity is a dynamic process continually reproduced through spatial continuity and daily life rather than a fixed phenomenon based solely on physical elements. Therefore, planning and conservation approaches in historic urban areas should consider not only physical heritage but also the preservation of everyday life and spatial continuity.

ÖZ

Amaç: Bu çalışma, kentsel kimliğin oluşumunda mekânsal yapı, fiziksel çevre ve gündelik sosyal pratikler arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Tarih boyunca çok katmanlı kültürel, ekonomik ve mekânsal dönüşümler geçirmiş tarihî bir ticaret merkezi olan Kemeraltı, kentsel kimliğin çok boyutlu yapısının anlaşılması açısından önemli bir örnek alan oluşturmaktadır.

Materyal ve Yöntem: Çalışmada Kemeraltı incelenmiş; nitel araştırma yöntemleri kapsamında literatür taraması, tarihî belge incelemesi, mekânsal gözlem ve saha çalışmaları gerçekleştirilmiştir. Analiz sürecinde, kentsel kimliğin oluşumu ve sürekliliğinde etkili olan morfolojik özellikler, mekânsal süreklilik, mekânsal organizasyon ve sosyo-ekonomik pratikler değerlendirilmiştir.

Araştırma Bulguları: Elde edilen bulgular, kentsel kimliğin mekânsal ve toplumsal katmanların etkileşimiyle oluştuğunu göstermektedir. Anıtsal yapılar ve tarihî kamusal alanlar kimliğin simgesel boyutunu desteklerken; dar sokaklar, avlular ve yarı kamusal mekânlar gibi küçük ölçekli unsurlar gündelik yaşamı, toplumsal sürekliliği ve kolektif belleği sürdürmektedir. Ayrıca çalışma, gündelik yaşam pratiklerinin kentsel kimliğin sürekliliğinde önemli bir rol oynadığını ortaya koymaktadır.

Sonuç: Kentsel kimlik, yalnızca fiziksel unsurlara dayanan sabit bir olgu değil; mekânsal süreklilik ve gündelik yaşam aracılığıyla sürekli yeniden üretilen dinamik bir süreçtir. Bu nedenle tarihî kentsel alanlarda planlama ve koruma yaklaşımlarının, yalnızca fiziksel mirası değil, gündelik yaşamın ve mekânsal sürekliliğin korunmasını da dikkate alması gerekmektedir.

INTRODUCTION

Urban identity is a multidimensional construct shaped by the accumulation of spatial, cultural, and social layers over time. It cannot be reduced solely to physical form; rather, it emerges through the interaction between spatial organization, human experiences, meanings, and social practices (Norberg-Schulz, 1980). Beyond the functional role of cities, urban culture plays a significant role in revealing their social integrative capacity, defining their distinctive characteristics, and shaping their unique identities (Güler et al., 2016). In addition to the features that characterize the city as a whole, spatial element that generate symbolic and perceptual meanings for both the urban environment and its inhabitants constitute important components of urban identity (Altuğ Turan & Gülgün, 2016). Accordingly, urban identity can be understood as a dynamic system in which the built environment and social practices interact through cultural values and everyday life (Karadan, 2021). However, studies that simultaneously address the physical, experiential, and social dimensions of urban identity remain limited.

Furthermore, the multidimensional nature of urban identity, encompassing social, cultural, historical, and spatial dimensions, makes it a complex phenomenon to define and evaluate, which has contributed to its limited consideration in applied studies (Mansour et al., 2023). Historic city centers provide important contexts for examining urban identity, as layered spatial, economic, and cultural processes generate spaces of commerce, collective memory, and continuity. In these environments, identity is continuously reproduced through the interaction of spatial morphology, mixed-use patterns, spatial continuity, and everyday practices. Elements such as street networks, parcel structures, building typologies, and public spaces contribute to urban legibility, spatial coherence, and collective experience.

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century, increasing attention has been given to the importance of understanding the historical grain of urban landscapes and its role in interpreting urban development and significance (Whitehand, 2007). Krier (1979) emphasizes that the arrangement of streets and squares shapes public life, while Carmona et al. (2010) highlight spatial quality, accessibility, and coherence as key factors enabling social interaction. Thus, the physical environment functions not only as a spatial structure but also as a framework through which social practices are organized and reproduced.

Urban identity is shaped through the interaction of spatial structure, social behavior, cultural practices, and collective memory (Lynch, 1960; Relph, 1976; Rapoport, 1982; Proshansky et al., 1983; Montgomery, 1998). It is produced not only by physical arrangements but also by everyday practices embedded in them. Lynch's (1960) image theory highlights how spatial legibility and continuity support cognitive attachment. Hillier & Hanson (1984) argue that spatial configuration shapes social relations through accessibility, while Jacobs (1961) emphasizes that vitality depends on mixed use and pedestrian activity. These approaches show that spatial form actively organizes social life.

Phenomenological approaches further emphasize experiential dimensions. Norberg-Schulz (1980) defines identity through the "spirit of place," combining natural setting, history, and meaning. Relph (1976) stresses emotional attachment, warning against "placelessness," while Proshansky et al. (1983) link place identity to self-identity shaped by environmental interaction.

Contemporary perspectives define urban identity as a relational and dynamic process across spatial and temporal layers (Mansour et al., 2023). Tekeli (2011) highlights physical form, perceived quality of life, and urban narratives, while Rapoport (1982) and Geertz (1973) emphasize culture as shared meaning produced through everyday practice. Thus, identity emerges through repeated social actions embedded in space.

Urban identity results from the interaction of physical and social components, including geography, topography, street patterns, built form, public spaces, and symbolic elements, alongside everyday practices, cultural and religious activities, economic relations, and collective memory (Montgomery, 1998; Carmona et al., 2010). These layers form a continuously interacting system.

Within this framework, identity should be understood through use, experience, and reinterpretation rather than static representation. The city becomes a continuously reproduced field of meaning, in which identity emerges from the dialectical relationship between material environment and social practice. Accordingly, this study examines urban identity as a relational process shaped by spatial morphology, environmental conditions, and everyday practices, focusing on Kemeraltı in Izmir. It argues that identity is sustained not only through preservation but also through continuity of use and spatial adaptability.

MATERIALS and METHODS

Materials

The study area covers Kemeraltı and its surroundings in Konak, the historical core of Izmir (Figure 1).

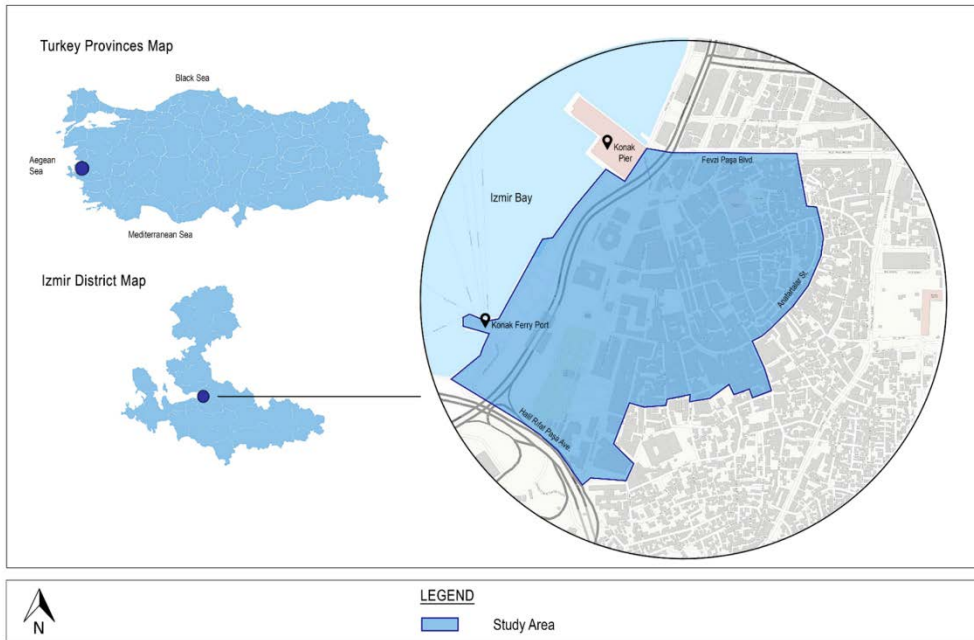


Figure 1. Location of the research area.

Şekil 1. Çalışma alanının konumu.

Kemeraltı encompasses the historic bazaar fabric extending from Mezarlıkbaşı to Konak Square and remains one of Izmir's main commercial centers. Anafartalar Street, the main spine of the bazaar, has a curved form shaped by development around the inner harbor. The silting of the harbor created new settlement and commercial areas that were integrated into the urban fabric, enabling the bazaar's expansion (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2026).

The formation of Kemeraltı is closely linked to Izmir's historical trade networks. Located at the western end of the Silk Road, the port once extended to the Hisar Mosque, with the 12th-century Byzantine Izmir Port Fortress at its entrance. The right bank hosted European merchants, whereas inland caravanserais functioned as redistribution points within Genoese trade networks. In 1402, Timur filled the inner harbor with stones, thereby initiating the transformation of the area into a commercial settlement known as Kemeraltı. Over time, it developed into a multi-layered urban center with inns, baths, and diverse religious structures (Izmir Metropolitan Municipality, 2026). During its early period, the bazaar functioned as a covered market with vaulted streets, arastas, and alleys. The arasta system structured commercial activity, while inns ensured trade continuity. Today, Kemeraltı retains its historical character but has gained functional diversity; although some traditional structures have declined, modern

commercial uses and traditional crafts continue to sustain its vitality (Republic of Turkey Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2026).

Kemeraltı is a bazaar formed on the former inner harbor, sustained by its arasta system, inns, and diverse commercial fabric, and reflecting İzmir's cultural and economic memory beyond its commercial function (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Kemeraltı; (a) Top view (Belge, 2023), (b) Kızlarağası Inn and Hisar Mosque (Sansür, 2025), (c) Anafartalar Street and (d) Havra Street (Haber Ekspres, 2024).

Şekil 2. Kemeraltı; (a) Üstten görünüm (Belge, 2023), (b) Kızlarağası Hanı ve Hisar Camii (Sansür, 2025), (c) Anafartalar Caddesi ve (d) Havra Sokağı (Haber Ekspres, 2024).

Methods

This study uses a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach to examine urban identity in Kemeraltı through spatial structure, environmental features, and everyday practices, enabling a holistic analysis of urban processes (Creswell, 2014).

The research process was carried out in four main stages (Figure 3). The study was conducted in Kemeraltı and its immediate surroundings in İzmir, one of the most significant historic commercial districts in Türkiye. The research area encompasses Konak Square, the main entrances to Kemeraltı, Anafartalar Street, and the interconnected urban fabric that collectively shapes the district's spatial and social character. Data collection, field observations, and spatial analyses were carried out between 2025 and 2026. The methodological framework was designed to investigate the relationship between spatial continuity, everyday practices, and urban identity through a comprehensive approach integrating document analysis, spatial analysis, and systematic, non-participant field observations.

In the first stage, a comprehensive literature review and document analysis were conducted to establish the theoretical framework of the study. National and international studies on urban identity, place identity, historic commercial districts, and urban transformation were examined together with historical maps, planning reports, archival documents, and academic publications related to Kemeraltı.

Based on these analyses, the principal components shaping the spatial development and urban identity of the study area were identified.

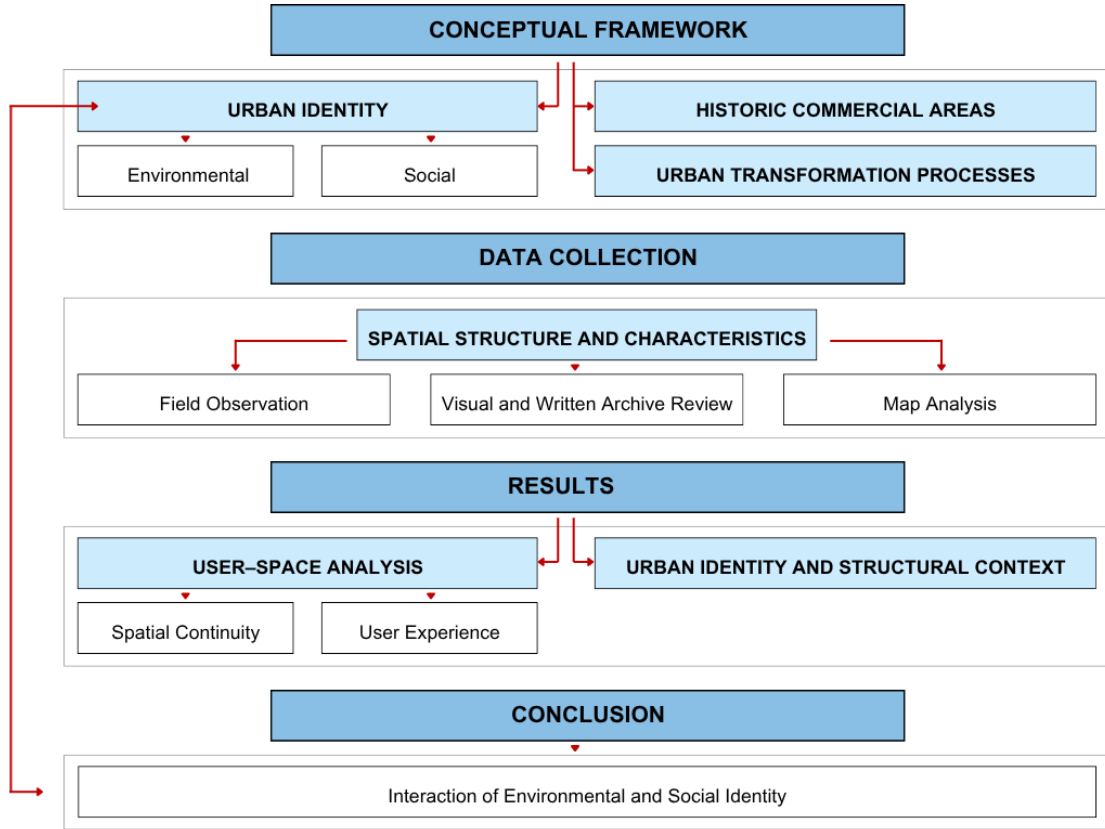


Figure 3. Methodology of research.

Şekil 3. Çalışmanın yöntemi.

Following the theoretical assessment, the spatial structure of the study area was analyzed using morphological and functional approaches. The street network, building typologies, land use, open–built space relationships, and spatial focal points were considered as the primary analytical criteria. Subsequently, the main circulation axes, nodes, and spatial continuities were mapped to reveal the spatial organization of the study area. This analytical process was supported by field observations, map analyses, and visual documentation.

Field observations were conducted directly by the researchers using a systematic, non-participant observation technique. The observation route covered Konak Square, the main entrances to Kemeraltı, and Anafartalar Street. To capture temporal variations in spatial use patterns, observations were carried out between September and January on both weekdays and weekends, at different times of the day. A total of 12 observation sessions were conducted, each lasting approximately 15–20 minutes. The same observation route was revisited at different times to enhance the reliability and consistency of the observations. During the fieldwork, spatial use patterns, pedestrian movement, user density, social interactions, and public space use practices were systematically examined. The collected data were documented through field notes, photographic records, and researcher-generated voice notes. These data constituted the primary empirical basis for the subsequent spatial analyses and urban identity assessments.

Within the scope of the study, spatial elements were evaluated using a five-level qualitative classification consisting of very high, high, medium, low, and very low, based on their visibility, symbolic value, historical and cultural significance, continuity of use, public recognition, and functional role in urban life. However, only spatial elements identified as contributing to the formation of Kemeraltı's urban identity were included in the assessment. Consequently, only the very high, high, and medium categories were represented in the findings, while no spatial elements were classified as low or very low. This classification does not rely on a quantitative scoring system but represents a qualitative assessment based on field observations, spatial analyses, and relevant literature. Accordingly, the very high category includes spatial elements with strong symbolic value, high public recognition, and a decisive role in shaping urban identity. The high category comprises elements that make a significant historical, cultural, functional, or social contribution to urban identity, while the medium category includes elements that support urban identity through spatial continuity, functional diversity, and local character but have comparatively lower symbolic visibility and city-scale influence.

In the final stage, the data obtained from the systematic field observations were integrated with the findings from the previous analyses to evaluate user behavior and social dynamics. Spatial use, pedestrian movement, and social interactions were analyzed in relation to commercial activities and public life. The collected data were interpreted within a three-layer analytical framework consisting of the natural–morphological structure, spatial organization and continuity, and socio-economic practices. The interactions among these layers revealed the spatial and social dynamics shaping Kemeraltı's urban identity, demonstrating that Kemeraltı is a living urban environment continuously produced and transformed through the interaction between spatial structures and everyday practices.

RESULTS

The role of coastal geography in the formation of urban identity

Kemeraltı's location in İzmir's historical center, near the inner gulf shoreline, is a key factor shaping its spatial organization and function. Its coastal position and integration into historical trade routes enabled maritime commerce, supporting storage, distribution, and retail activities. This established the area as a major commercial and social node characterized by high accessibility, frequent daily encounters, and a diverse user base. Although port functions have shifted, its centrality continues to sustain everyday commercial activity.

The district lies on the flat coastal plain of the inner gulf, with Kadifekale forming its elevated backdrop. Developed within a coastal–hinterland transition zone, the area appears visually open to the sea on maps; however, field observations reveal limited visual permeability due to dense urban fabric, infrastructure, and overpasses, producing an inward-oriented spatial perception.

Geologically, the area is part of an active graben system influenced by the İzmir Fault Zone, with young alluvial soils of low bearing capacity and high seismic sensitivity (Kutluca, 2006). These conditions have shaped construction practices and contributed to a fragmented yet adaptive urban form, making geology a key factor in spatial continuity.

Vegetation concentrated along the shoreline and pedestrian routes consists of low-density green areas, plant beds, and rows of trees. While trees provide shade and microscale focal points, species such as Phoenix trees near the Clock Tower also support informal gatherings. Overall, the vegetation reflects a managed urban landscape rather than a natural ecosystem.

Izmir's Mediterranean climate, which benefits from sea breezes, enables year-round outdoor activities; however, dense urbanization increases heat island effects. Narrow streets limit airflow but create shaded pedestrian environments.

Overall, Kemeraltı's identity is shaped less by direct visual access to the coast than by an inward-oriented urban fabric influenced by coastal geography, commercial intensity, and climate. Despite

proximity, limited visibility of the sea becomes a defining condition. Thus, the natural environment functions not as a backdrop but as a structuring element shaping spatial form, economic activity, and social interaction.

Cultural identity interpreted through cultural environment and public spaces

Kemeraltı's built environment presents a multilayered spatial structure where historical continuity and contemporary use are closely intertwined. Ottoman-era inns, religious buildings, and traditional commercial units coexist with modern public buildings and recent commercial interventions, forming a heterogeneous urban fabric shaped by different architectural periods. Traditional structures, generally two stories high and built with stone, brick, and wood, include courtyard-based plans, shaded façades, and ventilation-oriented layouts adapted to local climatic conditions. These buildings have been integrated into contemporary commercial life through adaptive reuse, partial renovation, and functional transformation, ensuring continuity through active use rather than static preservation.

Modern interventions introduce a hybrid morphology defined by layered temporal additions rather than full visual coherence with the historic fabric. However, this fragmented appearance does not indicate a loss of identity; rather, it reflects continuity within a dynamic commercial environment. The coexistence of old and new structures reveals processes of continuity, adaptation, and transformation that shape Kemeraltı's urban character. Within this structure, buildings and open spaces connect public areas, historic elements, green spaces, and the urban core, supporting social interaction, leisure, and public life. Operating at different scales, these spatial components reinforce continuity between past and present through permeability, openness, and potential for gathering (Figure 4 & Table 1).

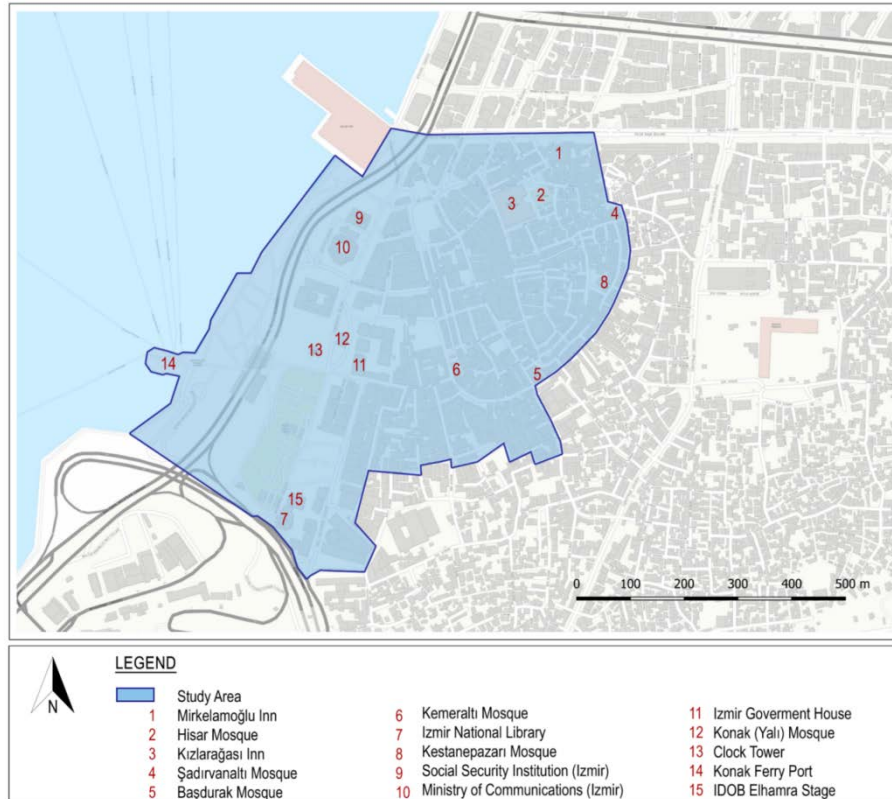


Figure 4. Some key spatial elements in the study area.

Şekil 4. Çalışma alanındaki bazı önemli mekansal unsurlar.

Table 1. The effects of some key spatial elements within the study area on urban identity*Çizelge 1. Çalışma alanındaki bazı önemli mekânsal unsurların kentsel kimlik üzerindeki etkileri*

Spatial Element	Type	Recognizability	Impact on Urban Identity
Konak (Atatürk) Square	Public Open Space	Very High	The square shapes collective memory as a symbolic urban focal point, intensifying social and urban interactions while reinforcing İzmir's identity as a central public space for Kemeraltı and its surroundings.
Konak Historical Park	Public Open Space	Medium	The historical park provides visual and functional continuity between the historic fabric and the coastline, offering green space for leisure and social interaction while enhancing spatial diversity and urban identity.
Konak Ferry Port	Transportation	High	The ferry port enhances urban mobility and accessibility through maritime transport, serving a mainly transit function along the waterfront while contributing modestly to Kemeraltı's daily urban identity.
Izmir Clock Tower	Monumental Structure	Very High	Serving as a key orientation point at the city scale, this structure occupies a central place in collective memory and contributes to urban identity through representation and macro-scale continuity.
Izmir Government House	Historical Administrative Building	High	As an institutional structure, it adds authority and formality to the square, reinforcing the area's institutional character and creating a symbolic backdrop within the urban context..
Ministry of Communications (Izmir)	Administrative Building	Medium	Supporting the institutional and bureaucratic character of the area, this office building reinforces the formality of the space. At the same time, it strengthens the perception of Konak as a central administrative hub.
Social Security Institution (Izmir)	Administrative Building	Medium	As a large bureaucratic structure, its official function supports the continuity of administrative identity and reinforces spatial formality, consolidating the institutional character within the urban fabric.
IDOB Elhamra Stage	Cultural Building	High	This building, by enabling cultural production, makes the area's artistic identity visible. Although it is an important cultural institution, its impact on the daily urban identity is limited.
Izmir National Library	Cultural Building	High	This building, with its cultural and educational significance, represents intellectual and cultural continuity. However, it has limited visibility in the context of daily spatial experience.
Kızlarağası Inn	Historical Commercial Inn	Very High	As an active commercial courtyard, this structure is a key element of Kemeraltı's identity, combining heritage, commerce, and social interaction at a human scale.
Mirkelamoğlu Inn	Historical Commercial Inn	Medium	This structure enhances spatial diversity through inn culture, functioning as a high-activity courtyard that intensifies local economic and social interactions and contributes to urban identity.
Konak (Yalı) Mosque	Religious Building	Very High	Located in Konak Square and actively used, the mosque functions as a landmark, supporting symbolic production through visual prominence and continuous religious activity, reinforcing urban identity in daily life.
Kestanepazarı Mosque	Religious Building	High	As a religious focal point in the bazaar, this structure integrates into daily life, functioning at neighborhood scale and contributing to the social and cultural continuity of urban identity.
Hisar Mosque	Religious Building	High	Within the bazaar, this structure provides strong historical and spatial reference, functioning as a religious focal point whose continuous use and familiarity contribute to urban identity.
Başdurak Mosque	Religious Building	Medium	Situated at one of the bazaar's entrances, this structure forms a spatial focal point and, through its intensive religious use within the market, functions as both a symbolic and social gathering place.
Şadırvanalı Mosque	Religious Building	Medium	Representing historical religious continuity, this structure is recognized as a symbolic place of worship at the neighborhood scale and serves a spatial orientation function.
Kemeraltı Mosque	Religious Building	Medium	Within the bazaar's overall fabric, this structure ensures the continuity of religious function. Its intensive use and well-known location play a central role in shaping Kemeraltı's urban identity.

At the city scale, Konak Square is a key public focal point, functioning as a gathering space, landmark, and symbolic center. Its open form and relation to surrounding structures support collective memory and İzmir's metropolitan identity. Together with the coastal promenade, it links the bazaar, waterfront, and historical layers. The Clock Tower reinforces collective memory (Kılıçaslan & True, 2015).

Kemeraltı's social dynamism is concentrated not in large-scale open spaces but in semi-public and everyday environments. Courtyards such as Kızlarağası Inn function as sheltered nodes where commercial and social activities intertwine, fostering familiarity and informal relations through repeated use. Likewise, the dense network of narrow streets and pedestrian routes constitutes the most active everyday public realm. Although not formally public, these spaces sustain economic vitality, pedestrian flow, and human-scale interactions, making a key contribution to urban identity. This pattern shows that identity emerges not from a single dominant public space but from the interaction of multiple spatial scales. While larger open areas provide symbolic value, semi-public streets and courtyards shape daily experience. As noted by Uysal Üner & Çubuk (2025), İzmir's climatic conditions support shaded, compact, and walkable spaces, reinforcing pedestrian continuity. In Kemeraltı, identity is therefore shaped less by monumentality and more by visibility, continuity of use, and integration with pedestrian flows, where even less prominent buildings gain recognition along active axes.

Urban amenities and small-scale interventions contribute little to identity. Benches, lighting, waste systems, and technical equipment (Figure 5) create fragmentation through variations in material, color, and maintenance, and their irregular placement reduces spatial quality.



Figure 5. Urban amenities.

Sekil 5. Kentsel donatı elemanları.

Sculptures (Figure 6) and other small-scale artistic interventions generally occupy a secondary position in the spatial experience, with only the large-scale elements located near the waterfront serving as interactive reference points for users.



Figure 6. Sculptures.

Şekil 6. Heykeller.

Signs (Figure 7), varying in size, color, and material, create visual disorder while generating a spontaneous character that reflects commercial dynamism.



Figure 7. Signs.

Şekil 7. Tabelalar.

Shading elements (Figure 8) and awnings provide continuity in narrow streets, improve comfort by creating shade, and enhance the bazaar's atmosphere. Their repeated use reflects an intuitive reproduction of local spatial character.



Figure 8. Shading elements.

Şekil 8. Gölgeleme elemanları.

Overall, Kemeraltı's built environment and public space system generate an identity shaped less by monumental elements and more by layered spatial components and the continuity of everyday use. While large public spaces carry symbolic value, narrow streets, courtyards, and semi-public areas sustain daily life. Most small-scale urban furnishings contribute little to the spatial atmosphere, whereas functional elements such as awnings define it. Urban identity emerges through repeated use, human-scale spaces, and everyday social interactions.

Historical continuity and the impact of socio-cultural structure on urban identity

İzmir, strategically located on the Aegean coast, developed as a major trade hub, attracting Muslim, Greek, Armenian, Jewish, and Levantine communities. Their interaction created a multi-layered cultural environment shaping the city's socio-cultural structure through economic networks, spatial use, and everyday practices (Sönmez Türel et al., 2018). In this context, Kemeraltı's identity is shaped by both its physical form and collective life practices.

Located at the western end of the Silk Road, İzmir's inner harbor formed the basis of Kemeraltı's commercial development. After Timur's campaign in 1402 and the silting of the harbor, the area transformed into a new commercial zone. By the 17th century, it had become a major Ottoman trade center organized around caravanserais, with a compact street network that still influences spatial experience. During the 18th and 19th centuries, expanding trade intensified economic activity. The harbor was filled to accommodate warehouses, and caravanserais were adapted for storage and production, demonstrating the adaptive capacity of the urban fabric. Despite disasters such as the 1778 earthquake, commercial continuity was maintained, and social life became increasingly integrated with economic activity. Early 20th century interventions such as Fevzi Paşa Boulevard reorganized the transport system and altered parts of the historic fabric (Sönmez Türel et al., 2018). After the port's relocation to Alsancak, commercial activity shifted toward small-scale retail. Yet, high pedestrian density preserved the continuity of use, showing that identity depends more on function than on preservation alone.

Kemeraltı's socio-cultural identity is thus sustained through everyday practices and long-term relations rather than monuments (Sönmez Türel et al., 2018; Üstol, 2024). Religious, administrative, and economic functions coexist within the fabric, while mosques that are integrated into circulation strengthen spatial belonging.

From a cultural perspective, identity emerges through daily practices rather than formal representation. While Geertz (1973) defines culture as shared meanings, Rapoport (1982) emphasizes environmental behavior patterns, and Relph (1976) highlights "sense of place," in Kemeraltı cultural

identity emerges through daily continuity. Hans, cafés, and bazaars function as continuous cultural environments shaped by movement, trade, and informal encounters.

Religious practices are embedded in this rhythm: mosques distributed throughout the bazaar integrate worship into daily life, and the call to prayer contributes to a shared temporal structure.

Culture is distributed across streets and courtyards, making identity a continually reproduced process. Kemeraltı's urban identity emerges from the interaction among spatial organization, economic activity, and everyday life within a historic trade context.

Economic structure and the spatial reflections of everyday life practices

The socio-economic structure of the Historic Kemeraltı Bazaar extends beyond a purely tourism-oriented consumption space and functions as a vibrant commercial ecosystem based on artisan culture and continuous pedestrian flow. The craftsmen and everyday shopping practices that continue to exist in the area constitute fundamental elements supporting the spatial identity and social continuity of the bazaar (Bakan et al., 2026). Thus, Kemeraltı reflects a model of continuity sustained by everyday use rather than by dependence on tourism.

The economic structure is dominated by family-run and small-scale enterprises operating through informal or semi-formal arrangements. This ensures intergenerational continuity and adaptability but limits capital accumulation and investment capacity. As noted in studies on informal urban economies, such systems are flexible and resilient yet vulnerable to rising costs and market pressures (Portes et al., 1989). Therefore, economic continuity persists, but structural transformation capacity remains limited.

The relocation of port and large-scale commercial activities to Alsancak has reshaped Kemeraltı's economic role. While pedestrian-based vitality continues, the loss of wholesale and logistics functions has shifted the area toward small-scale retail and local services, positioning it as a neighborhood-scale economic center embedded in daily life (Sönmez Türel et al., 2018).

Socio-economic life is closely tied to spatial structure. Narrow streets, ground-floor commercial units, and small parcels encourage face-to-face interaction, turning economic exchange into social encounters. Jacobs (1961) emphasizes, continuous pedestrian flow sustains commercial vitality and reinforces human-scaled urban experience. In Kemeraltı, economic activity simultaneously produces social relations through spatial proximity.

However, integration into Izmir's contemporary service and cultural sectors remains limited. Rising land values, limited adaptability, and weak institutional support have contributed to the decline of traditional crafts, which have been largely replaced by low-value retail uses. This reflects broader trends in historic centers, where continuity persists but diversity and resilience decline (Zukin, 2010).

Kemeraltı's socio-economic structure sustains an urban identity grounded in continuity, everyday labor, and local exchange relations. While this strengthens place attachment and identity stability, it also limits economic transformation. Economic life thus functions both as a mechanism of identity continuity and a structural constraint within the evolving urban economy.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

Kemeraltı's urban identity is a dynamic and multilayered process that cannot be reduced to a single physical element or historical period. It emerges through the interaction of geography, topography, climate, the built environment, historical development, institutional structures, cultural practices, and economic relations. Rather than being a fixed attribute, urban identity is continuously shaped by spatial continuity, everyday practices, and socio-economic dynamics.

Located near Izmir's inner gulf and city center, Kemeraltı has historically functioned as a key node of trade, transport, and social interaction. This strategic location has brought diverse social groups together within a dense urban system, where the compact street network functions not only as a physical framework but also as a social infrastructure supporting everyday encounters. Consequently, a reciprocal relationship has developed between spatial configuration and patterns of use.

The built environment reflects the coexistence of continuity and transformation. Ottoman-era inns, mosques, and traditional commercial buildings coexist with modern interventions, creating a layered urban fabric. Accordingly, urban identity is sustained not merely through the preservation of individual monuments, but through continuity of use and the persistence of spatial memory embedded in everyday life.

Public and semi-public spaces reinforce this process at different spatial scales. While major public spaces serve as symbolic reference points supporting collective memory and urban orientation, bazaar streets, passages, and courtyards facilitate everyday interaction and strengthen the relationship between symbolic representation and lived experience.

The socio-economic structure is closely linked to spatial form. Small-scale trade, family-run businesses, and informal economic relations are supported by narrow streets, continuous ground-floor commercial uses, and high spatial permeability. Continuous commercial activity and daily social interactions reinforce place-based cultural practices and collective memory, strengthening local identity despite limited integration with broader urban economic systems.

The findings indicate that urban identity cannot be understood solely through the preservation of the physical environment or historical structures, but should instead be interpreted as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of spatial continuity, everyday practices, and socio-economic relations. This interpretation is broadly consistent with previous research describing urban identity as a multidimensional phenomenon. However, whereas earlier studies have primarily emphasized architectural heritage, monument conservation, or the physical characteristics of historic urban environments, the present study demonstrates that spatial continuity, everyday use patterns, and socio-economic practices should be considered together to better explain the formation and continuity of urban identity. In this respect, the proposed approach provides a more integrated perspective for evaluating urban identity in historic commercial districts.

Based on these findings, the study proposes a three-layered analytical framework consisting of (i) natural-morphological structure, (ii) spatial organization and built continuity, and (iii) everyday socio-economic practices. Urban identity emerges through the interaction of these layers, and disruption in any one of them weakens both spatial and social continuity. This framework shifts the focus from architectural preservation alone toward the relationship between spatial continuity and social production.

From a planning and conservation perspective, sustaining urban identity requires more than large-scale restoration strategies. It depends on preserving fine-grained spatial structures, supporting flexible and adaptive uses, and maintaining local economic continuity. The case of Kemeraltı demonstrates that historic commercial districts remain dynamic environments where identity is sustained through ongoing use and everyday practices rather than through monuments alone.

However, the study is limited by its reliance on qualitative spatial observations conducted within a restricted time frame, without incorporating seasonal or long-term socio-economic data. The absence of direct user-based methods also limits interpretative depth. Future research could benefit from longitudinal analyses, spatial network modeling, user-centered qualitative approaches, and comparative case studies to further test and refine the proposed framework.

Data Availability

Data will be made available upon reasonable request.

Author Contributions

Conception and design of the study: DK, MK, EMT; sample collection: DK, MK; analysis and interpretation of data: DK, MK, EMT; visualization: DK, MK; writing manuscript: DK, MK.

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest between the authors in this study.

Ethical Statement

We declare that an ethics committee is not required for this study.

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