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Data and discourse: an assessment of Taksim urban design competition in terms of populism and participation

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ABSTRACT

This research presents perspectives on urban design competitions from both professionals and the general public by utilizing two sets of data: a review of professional discussions and social media commentaries on the competition. The international urban design competition for Taksim Square, held during the global pandemic lockdowns, generated a substantial record of the process, offering a rare opportunity to revisit existing literature and gain new insights into urban design competitions. The findings are evaluated through the framework of participation and populism.

Introduction

The utilization of design competitions to obtain projects for public buildings and spaces is a widely accepted method (Alexander, Casper, and Witzling 1990). Some city governments have even enacted legislation that requires the use of competitions for public buildings and spaces (Freestone, Davison, and Richard 2018). The use of competitions has several key benefits, such as enhancing public participation (White 2014; Garde 2013; Sjöblom, Laine, and Alatalo 2021) and producing high-quality design proposals (Schluntz 1982; Banerjee and Loukaitou-Sideris 1990). However, there are also some common drawbacks, such as prolonging the design process, being costly for offices (Banerjee and Loukaitou-Sideris 1990) and sometimes ignoring public opinion and leading to an elite-driven aesthetic that supersedes public sentiment and democracy (Nasar 1999).

Despite the widespread use of design competitions for architectural and urban design proposals, there is a scarcity of formal research that presents comprehensive accounts of these processes. This study aims to fill this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of the design competition for Taksim Square in Istanbul (Greater Municipality of Istanbul 2020). The loaded political and historical importance of the square (Batuman 2015; Hammond 2019; Gül, Dee, and Cünük 2014; Whitehead and Bozoğlu 2016) as well as its significance as a significant public space in a city of more than 15 million inhabitants (TUIK 2021) renders the competition a significant political and administrative challenge. Against these challenges, the current administration chose a model where an international competition with three stages was organized alongside a planned public forum, a publication (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality 2020), and an exhibition with its own designed exhibition

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space on the site of the competition (Pasta 2020). Among the more common practices such as; the public forum, exhibitions, or the book, one point of controversy has been the public voting that was held during the third stage of the competition. Opening the three finalist projects to a public vote to determine the winning proposal was criticized as a populist action that overrides expert opinion (Yırtıcı 2020b; Kepekçioğlu 2020).

The purpose of this study is to examine the published commentaries and social media remarks regarding a specific competition, and to trace the evolution of public discourse throughout the competition's different stages. The paper concludes with a critical evaluation of the competition process, with a focus on aspects such as public participation and populism. The findings of this analysis provide valuable insights for the planning and conduct of future competitions.

Recent discussions regarding the Taksim Square

Taksim Square is a crucial urban junction due to its close proximity to the minority neighbourhoods and embassies in the Galata and Beyoğlu areas. Over the course of its existence, the square has experienced numerous gradual transformations, leading to it acquiring numerous historical layers, which contribute to its historical significance (Erbey 2017; Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality 2020).

In recent history, Taksim Square has been the site of numerous politically charged events. Two of the most impactful ones include the 1 May events in 1977 and the Gezi Park Protests in 2013. The square has a contentious status as it is often the scene of political protests and conflicts, where opposing political forces constantly challenge each other through decision-making processes and spatial interventions (Gül, Dee, and Cünük 2014; Batuman 2015; Hammond 2019; Baykan and Hatuka 2010).

Due to its rich social history and significance, any alteration to the square's space can spark political debates and conflicts. The discussion surrounding the construction of a mosque in the square, dating back to 1940, serves as a prime example of such spatial disputes (Büyüksaraç 2005). The recent completion of the mosque and the opening ceremony, which was a significant political event, reinforces this observation ('Taksim Square: Erdogan Inaugurates Controversial Mosque in Istanbul' 2021).

Aside from the political struggles and consecutive attempts to alter the square to signify political power, the square was recently transformed significantly for infrastructural purposes. The pedestrianization project, which was initiated in 2011, foresaw moving the traffic infrastructure to the underground. The controversial project of *Topçu Kışlası*, which led to the Gezi Events, was also a part of the same pedestrianization project. The project was cancelled in 2013 after partial implementation ('Danıştay Taksim Yayalaştırma Projesini Iptal Etti' 2014). In 2014, a second project was undertaken by the municipality to finalize the pedestrian areas that resulted from the infrastructural changes ('Yeni Taksim Meydanı Projesi Onaylandı [The New Project for Taksim Square Is Approved]' 2014). The 2014 project was undertaken through an invited design tender held by the municipality. The project was selected among four projects that attended the tender. The proposal by ON Tasarım and TÜMAŞ partnership was selected for implementation. The project was implemented partially until 2019 and came to a stop.[1]

When the current administration took office in 2019, the implementation of the project initiated by the previous government was partially complete. On 2 March, 2020, the

current administration launched a campaign to redesign Taksim Square. The Taksim competition was organized as a series of events, spaces, and publications, including the construction of a public debate pavilion on site named '*Kavuşma Durağı*' (Reunion Station). Designed by Istanbul-based architecture firm IND (Inter.National.Design), the pavilion was intended to serve as a spatial component of the competition's participatory framework. The first exhibition, 'Taksim the Heart of Istanbul', was hosted in the pavilion and aimed to start public discussions on the history of the square as part of the ongoing competition process. However, the temporary structure had a brief lifespan in Taksim. It opened on 15 February 2020 but was relocated to Bağcılar Square on 9 March 2020 due to a decree by the Second Conservation Board of Istanbul issued on 17 February 2020, just two days after the opening ceremony.

The Taksim Square design competition was announced on 2 March 2020, and the first stage was completed on 24 July of the same year. Out of 146 entries, 20 projects were selected for the second stage by the competition jury. The second stage was concluded on 11 September 2020, and three projects were selected as finalists. From 19 October to 12 November 2020, the public voted to determine the winning proposal, restricted to residents of Istanbul and conducted exclusively online. The three finalists were encouraged to present their proposals publicly during the voting process. Ultimately, the project by Şerif Süveydan, Burcu Sevinç Yılmaz, Rıfat Yılmaz, Süleyman Yıldız, Sezer Bahtiyar, Murat Güvenç, and Herman Salm, was chosen for implementation.

Taksim Square urban design competition in context

A review of existing case studies on urban design competitions reveals that one common topic of previous research is the inclusion of citizen participation in competition processes (White 2014; Garde 2013; Sjöblom, Laine, and Alatalo 2021). Such studies reveal the merits of integrating participatory processes into the competition processes and reveal that the participation method is essential. The previously examined cases of Toronto's Waterfront (White 2014) and Orange County Great Park (Garde 2013) present a standard participation method where public input was incorporated into the processes at the preparation stage of the briefs and the last stage of the competition through public meetings. In the case of and Hiedanranta area in Tampere (Sjöblom, Laine, and Alatalo 2021), public participation workshops were introduced after the competition and before the master planning stage. Among these case study examples, Orange County Great Park case included a public voting system (Garde 2013). Compared to the Taksim Square case, the case of Orange County Great Park diverges in two points. Firstly, the voting system was set not as a mere problem of casting votes, but the general public was informed about the process through several participation stages and media campaigns. Furthermore, secondly, the votes were not directly used to determine the winning proposal. However, they were presented to the jury as a report to inform the second stage of the design competition (Garde 2013).

The cases mentioned above differ from the case of Taksim Square in terms of the qualities of the space in discussion. While the spaces discussed in the cited literature are significant urban spaces, Taksim Square differs as the major urban square of a metropolitan city, which is comparable to the complexity of other urban squares such as Trafalgar and Times Square. There is a shortage of formal research on the design processes in such cases. In comparable situations, a combination of invited design competitions or direct

commissions and a lengthy process of participation meetings with multiple stakeholders, public forums, and exhibitions is typically the standard practice. The recent design of Times Square by Snøhetta ('Start of Temporary Redesign of Times Square' 2010) is one such case where an invited design competition was utilized. In the case of Times Square, a public agency was introduced, and a continuous series of design events were organized as a part of a public participation scheme (Times Square Agency 2022). Earlier cases of redesigning such spaces include the design of Trafalgar Square by Foster and Partners between 1996 and 2003. In the case of Trafalgar, following a direct commission, the firm orchestrated a large-scale consultation process, which included more than 180 separate institutions and thousands of individuals (Foster and Partners 2003).

In the case of Taksim, the impetus to hold urban design competitions for the design of public spaces in Istanbul was a result of the political programme of the current city administration. The programme underlined participation as one primary goal, and open design competitions were seen as a method of transparent governance and participation ('How I Imagine Istanbul' 2021). Beginning with the urban design competition for the waterfront of Haliç in 2020, the city administration held a total of fourteen design competitions till July 2022. The competitions were organized by IPA Competitions (*Konkur Istanbul*), a division of the Istanbul Planning Agency.[2] Two of the competitions were open to international entries. In four of the competitions that were related to the design of public squares; Kadıköy, Bakırköy, Salacak, and Taksim, a public vote method was preferred (IPA 2022). This method was criticized in some of the commentaries regarding the competition and the official colloquium of the Taksim Urban Design Competition (Yırtıcı 2020b; Taşdemir 2020; Konkur Istanbul 2020). These critiques bring forth questions regarding populism and participation in urban design competitions.

Populism and participation

Populism is a concept that is extensively studied in political sciences, and like many similar concepts, it is surrounded by a wide range of different positions and interpretations (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Müller 2016). The existence of populism is not a strictly defined binary condition. The current literature on populism studies defines the concept across a variety of types (Peters and Pierre 2020). Current literature on the concept challenges the conception of populism as a mainly right-wing political practice. It redefines it as a natural outcome of democratic processes, which can take many forms (Müller 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2018). Despite the large scope of the definition of populism, a review of literature on the topic reveals some common defining factors of populism. Populism is inherently anti-elitist (Müller 2016; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). It is nurtured by a political discourse that pictures the people against a corrupt elite. A second common aspect of populist politics is that it addresses emotions and morality (Müller 2016). Populism gains power through shared public sentiment, it addresses the society's fears or aspirations and utilizes a language with vocabulary based on these. Use of social or political labels and use of terms related to identity politics are common signs of such a discourse. The third identifier for populist politics is that it is against pluralism. Populism is nurtured by establishing an image of a unified society. The concept of the general will can represent this image of the unitarian society (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Populist politics claim to defend 'democratic representation of the public's will (Müller 2016).

Given that populism is an inherent by-product of democratic processes, the instrumentalization of participatory processes by populist politics is an expected outcome. One such study that examines the relationship between populism and participation within left-wing politics is by Matthew Rhodes-Purdy (2015). He explains how in Bolivarian Venezuela, seemingly participatory processes were instrumentalized in making local power groups further reinforce the central power. Rhodes-Purdy's research is a crucial cautionary case against the common claim that participatory processes are the antithesis of right-wing populist policies.

The research on planning and urban design processes, participation, and populism underline the importance of understanding local power groups and conflicts. The case study by Camilo Calderon on La Mina, Barcelona, reveals how conflicting local power groups can hinder participatory processes (Calderon 2020; Sager 2019). There exists a series of criteria and different forms of participatory design. As the seminal work of Sherry R. Arnstein displays, participation is not a binary condition, but it has different levels of realization (Arnstein 1969). Arnstein examines forms of participation through how political power is shared with the public. In the lowest tiers of Arnstein's ladder of participation is manipulation through deliberate poorly planned participation events (Arnstein 1969). This definition also coincides with the definition of populist politics where the public is manipulated by ideas about a fabricated threat.

Current literature on participatory design highlights several good practices for participation (Robertson and Simonsen 2012; Luck 2018). Repeating criteria for participation literature underline the importance of; mutual learning, equalization of power relations, and situated action.

Combining the current literature on participation and populism studies, the following list of questions is utilized within this study to assess the quality of participation and existence of populist politics within the case of Taksim.

- Were participatory processes being used to override professional knowledge?
- Was the case, a case of genuine participation that equalized power relations?
- Was the process corrupted by local power groups or external struggles?
- Was the language being used inclusive?
- Were multiple forms of community engagement explored to allow for the inclusion of different groups?

Materials and methods

The research employs both qualitative and quantitative methods. Initially, a set of qualitative data was collected from published commentary on the competition, mainly written or spoken by industry professionals. The second data set, Twitter comments gathered through the Twitter Academic API, represents public opinion on the issue. The study merges these two data sets by extracting discursive patterns from the qualitative research and applying them to the quantitative data to examine the frequency of public response to the discussions. By combining these two sets of data, the research not only provides structure to the otherwise unstructured data stream on social media, but also generates insights into the discrepancies between professional and public opinion. The first data set included the official colloquium held on 7–11 October 2020: personal commentaries on

the project, one collaborative commentary by the chamber of architects, two other collaborative commentaries published online, and a shared declaration by multiple NGOs.

The content of the articles and videos were reviewed through systemic content analysis. The insights gained through the content analysis were used to construct topics for the text mining stage. Eight primary categories were derived from the qualitative research phase; political praise or criticism, political space, demand for more greenery, spatial comments, comments on democracy, and participation. In addition, announcements were defined as a separate category to monitor the administration's publicity attempts.

Twitter data was collected through Twitter Academic API. Queries including the Turkish terms of Taksim Competition ('Taksim Yarışma') and possible Turkish conjugations like 'yarışması, yarışmadan, yarışmanın ... ' were conducted for one year before and after the competition. As a result, 40,777 tweets, including replies and retweets, were collected. The data was pruned by studying the original tweets and pruning all retweets and replies to irrelevant tweets. Irrelevant tweets such as; tweets related to a student design competition for Taksim and a set of tweets related to other competitions such as a beauty contest or music competition were included in the original data set since they shared common keywords like competition or Taksim. Such tweets were removed from the list manually. As a result, the final data set consisted of 20,645 tweets (1083 conversations) on Taksim Urban Design Competition from 17 April 2019 to 26 August 2021.

The data were analysed using Orange text mining (Demšar et al. 2013). A neural network model was trained by manual categorization based on the categories derived from the qualitative research phase. The training set included 1200 tweets. The test scores of the neural network model reached values above %80 for all categories when the training data was tested on itself (Table 1).

In the final stage, the trained model was used on the complete data set of 20,645 tweets to categorize them according to the eight topics. Finally, the results were presented as radial plots for each stage of the competition to allow for comparison.

Content analysis: articles and the colloquium

As part of the qualitative research stage, fourteen commentaries regarding the competition and the official colloquium held on 7 October 2020 were analysed. The main objective was to decode the common discursive positions that were presented.

One of the shared discourses observed was a critical discourse based on the political aspects of urban space. The critique is a spatial-political one that criticizes the competition brief and finalist projects for proposing urban parks instead of public squares. This criticism is rooted in the belief that an urban square should be spatially neutral, which enables it to be used by political groups for mass demonstrations (Pişkin 2020).

A similar critique was presented in an opinion paper by Batu Kepekçioğlu, who expanded the discussion beyond the park-square debate into the planning practices and piecemeal design decisions preceding the competition. He made a provocative comparison, stating that the practices were *'Applying make-up to corpses'* (Kepekçioğlu 2020)

The Chamber of Architects Istanbul Branch made a strong statement about the historical and political significance of the square and the park-square debate, using the

Table 1. The confusion matrix for the neural network model.

		Predicted							
		announcement	comments on projects	democracy and participation	greener city	political space	political critique	political praise	spatial details
Actual	announcement	99.2%	1.3%	0.0%	0.0%	0.3%	0.5%	0.0%	0.0%
	comments on projects	0.0%	92.6%	0.0%	0.8%	0.0%	0.5%	1.8%	0.4%
	democracy and participation	0.0%	0.7%	98.7%	0.6%	0.7%	3.0%	1.2%	0.4%
	greener city	0.0%	1.1%	0.0%	90.8%	0.7%	0.0%	0.9%	1.8%
	political space	0.8%	1.9%	0.3%	2.2%	96.2%	0.0%	1.5%	2.0%
	political critique	0.0%	1.3%	0.0%	2.3%	1.2%	95.5%	4.1%	5.0%
	political praise	0,0%	1.1%	0.0%	1.3%	0.0%	0.5%	88.7%	0.4%
	spatial details	0,0%	0.0%	1.0%	2.1%	0.9%	0.0%	1.8%	89.9%

slogan 'Taksim Cumhuriyet Square is not a park; it is the square of labour, struggle, and democracy' (Mimarlar Odası İstanbul Şubesi 2020) The statement was signed by fifty NGOs, including professional organizations and neighbourhood initiatives. This critical discourse is grounded in the political history of Taksim Square. The critical discourse is rooted in the political history of Taksim Square and argues that in order to preserve its significance as a space of political action, the spatial character of the square should be maintained as an urban square, not transformed into an extension of Gezi Park.

Çalışkan presents a counterargument in his article, addressing the critique on the function of urban squares as political spaces. He explains that the root of this debate lies in the archetype of the Italian Piazza and a tripartite logical scheme embraced by leftist politics. According to Çalışkan, this scheme is based on three assumptions: first, politics is a field of conflict; second, public space is political; and third, public spaces' primary function is political. However, drawing from fundamental theories of urban space and design, Çalışkan proposes an alternative viewpoint that challenges this structure. He suggests that a space can simultaneously provide niches for various activities and serve as a place of protest (Çalışkan 2021). Çalışkan's position is essential as it is one of the few counterarguments to the critique about the competition denouncing the political significance of the square.

An article by Hakkı Yırtıcı defines the competition process as a case of populism and criticizes the participation model. The article repeats the park-urban square discourse and the same critique about the finalist projects for being urban parks instead of spaces of protest. Yırtıcı claims that the selection of the finalists disregards this common position. He claims; that the process is a clear case of populism appealing to the sensibilities of the general public about urban greenery, neglecting the socio-political concerns of the professionals (Yırtıcı 2020a).

Meryem Taşdemir's commentary questions the quality of participation. She criticizes the quality of participation, using Arnstein's Ladder of Participation (Arnstein 1969), and places the competition process in the range of tokenism as the public was given only the right to choose (Taşdemir 2020).

Yalçın's argument focuses on the practical and technical aspects of the competition, rather than the political or social aspects that many of the other commentators were

discussing. He is concerned with the feasibility of the project, rather than the symbolic or ideological meanings of the space. This shows the diversity of perspectives and opinions on the competition and highlights the importance of considering multiple viewpoints in the urban design and planning process (Yalçın 2020). However, this view was not widely shared or repeated by other actors.

One comprehensive opinion article was published in *Mimarlık*, the journal of the Chamber of Architects of Turkey. The article shares the comments of nine distinguished scholars and professionals who have produced substantial research or projects in urban design. The individual points of view share some themes. First is the critique of the participatory processes. Although all authors commenting on the participation aspect of the competition find it to be a positive attempt, the degree of participation and the limitations of the participatory processes were criticized.

Furthermore, the lack of a possible participatory process that would include professional organization was also criticized. Beyond the park-square debate, the organization was criticized for avoiding the political complexity of the context. Batuman describes how the political aspect was neglected in the design brief (Batuman et al. 2020).

Among the collection of discussions, the most comprehensive event is the online colloquium that was held after the second competition stage on 7 July 2020 (Konkur Istanbul 2020). The event lasted four hours and thirty-eight minutes and started with a twenty-minute official introduction by the municipality.[3]

[Municipality 1] underlined the intention of the municipality to enhance diversity and participation in the municipality's attempts at urban design. He explicitly mentioned the importance of public spaces as multi-layered spaces holding traces of all the citizens. He continued to describe the municipality's aim to keep any historical, social traces and layers of public spaces while enhancing spatial quality. [Municipality 1]'s speech during the colloquium also had underlying references to NGO critiques, which mainly focused on collective memory and the political importance of squares. Even though he did not mention the statement by the Chamber of Architects and the other NGOs, he addressed the concerns by explicitly saying that *'public spaces are spaces for political action'*. One other highlight of [Municipality 1]'s speech was participation. He repeatedly underlined the municipality's attempts at participation.

The meeting continued with comments by jury members. [Jury 1] as a jury member underlined the significance of the public voting process. He explained that the main criteria for selection have been the conceptual frameworks of the projects and how they responded to urban history and the multi-layered aspect of the space. He mentioned the significance of Gezi Park and other significant spatial entities. He underlined how the participants have responded to the relationship between the park and the square, and the participant's responses to the recent infrastructural alterations have been the main criteria of choice.

The meeting continued with comments on the projects. One primary topic that was repetitively repeated was the relationship between Gezi Park and Taksim Square. The duality of green space and public square and the jury's position regarding the spatial tension was addressed numerously. [Jury 1] explained that against the critiques, the emphasis on projects that extended the park was not the jury's deliberation, but it was a result of submitted projects.

The second discussion was on the design of the participatory process. One primary critique was on the selection of participation tools. The organization was criticized for

reducing participation in the public voting process. [Municipality 2] explained the administration's position by stating the fact that regarding design competitions, Turkey does not have a socially agreed-upon method. He clearly stated that when faced with a socially loaded design problem, acting with solely technical tools results in unintended results, using the phrase '… *approaching sociological problems with technical tools often results in tyranny*'. He continued by listing the attempts of the municipality to enhance the participation processes, such as the Reunion Station *(Kavuşma Durağı)* and the publication of the Almanac Taksim (Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality 2020).

Another significant pattern in the colloquium discussions was that among the participants, there were members of NGOs related to Taksim and surrounding neighbourhoods. One common aspect of NGOs' comments was that they mentioned spatial details. For example, [NGO 1] from Taksim Collective clearly stated concerns about spatial components such as Maksem, the transportation infrastructure, and the buildings. Another representative of a different NGO, [NGO 2] from Ayaspaşa Foundation, questioned the connection between Taksim and Gümüşsuyu neighbourhood. The observed pattern is that while professionals in the field were more focused on conceptual issues related to urbanism and politics while still being interested in spatial details, the non-designer participants were more interested in spatial details.

Based on the discussions, some significant debates that were shaped around the competition can be defined. Firstly, a discussion on the definition of urban squares was very prominent. Epitomized in the declaration of the Chamber of Architects and NGOs, this discussion was based on a preposition that suggests; urban squares are, by nature, spaces of political demonstrations, and thus they are supposed to be neutral hard paved spaces are open for appropriation through political demonstrations. This view criticized the three finalists for proposing 'park-like' spaces. A second discussion was shaped around the quality of participation. The organization was criticized for reducing participation in the voting process. The comments on the spatial aspects of the problem were expressed mainly by the non-professional participant.

Primary discourses that were shared in commentaries and public discussions were used as a basis for the quantitative stage of the research. Types of discourses were categorized regarding the nature of their focus object. An additional category with the title announcement was added to the categories to distinguish the publicity attempts (Table 2).

Table 2. The main types of discourses.

Spatial	political space	A professional discourse regarding the space's potential for political action.
	Greener city	Comments expressing a wish for a greener city.
	Spatial details	Comments on spatial aspects and details of the design problem.
	Comments on projects	Comments that include the names of the three finalists. Majority of such comments are in form of voting preferences
Non-Spatial	Political praise	Comments aimed at political actors instead of urban space.
	Political criticism	Comments aimed at political actors instead of urban space.
	Democracy and participation	Comments aimed at the voting process and the quality of public participation
	Announcements	Announcements and news advertising the competition.

Social media data

The analysis of the tweet data (Figure 1) provides valuable insights into the competition process and the nature of the discussions surrounding it. The spike in the number of tweets mentioning the competition in early 2019 can be attributed to a tweet by Ekrem İmamoğlu, Mayor of Istanbul, announcing the municipality's intention to open a design competition for Taksim. The other spikes in the data coincide with key stages in the competition calendar.

The peak in the number of tweets on March 20th, 2021, was a result of a decision by the General Directorate of Pious Foundations to change the ownership of Gezi Park from the Istanbul Municipality to an Istanbul-based foundation, which effectively put a stop to the implementation of the winning project.

This analysis provides a glimpse into the public's perception of the competition and its various stages, highlighting the importance of using social media data as a tool for understanding public opinion and engagement with urban design projects.

Another pattern visible in the timeline (Figure 1) is that, while the surges in the breakpoints of the process were mainly retweets and replies, a consistent flow of original tweets happened during the voting process. Again, this signifies the existence of a more genuine discussion.

The tweets prior to the competition were mostly retweets of announcements, spatial detail comments, and political praise. The general public expressed their approval of the competition while also sharing some desires regarding the space. A noteworthy aspect of the pre-competition data is that the political criticism category was the most prevalent after the announcements. This consisted mostly of retweets of a single tweet that criticized the competition politically. The tweet stated that the decision to hold a design competition was a sign of a lack of political authority and the absence of a project plan.
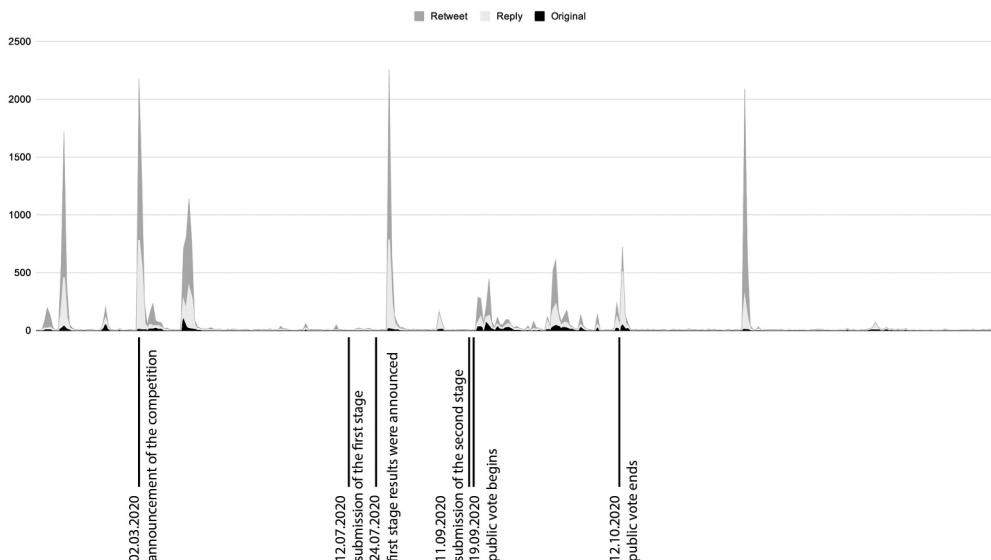

Figure 1. Frequency of tweets.

This shows that the connection between democracy and design competitions is not accepted by right-wing politics and is viewed as an absence of authority (Figure 2).

The comments during the first stage were similar to those before the competition. There was an increase in announcements. There are next to no comments on projects as the projects were not publicized at the time. During the second stage of the competition, the discussions were shaped around the general will of the public for more green spaces, comments on spatial details, and political praise. The discourse on 'political space' started to develop at this stage, together with discussions on democracy and participation. Although these discussions were fewer in number, it was observed that they included more original tweets, again signalling a genuine discussion on the topic (Figure 3).

During the second stage of the competition, a significant increase in comments on projects was observed, as expected. The results of the first stage were discussed publicly. The announcements of the voting process also received positive feedback from the general public (Figure 4).

During the voting stage, a sudden increase in comments on projects was observed, as expected. Contrary to the expectation, the discussion on spatial details did not increase as much. Comments mainly expressed voting preferences (Figure 5).

Following the competition, political praise and comments on the projects were observed as popular categories. There has been an increase in political criticism this time directed at the decision by the General Directorate of Pious Foundations that changed the ownership of Gezi Park from the Istanbul Municipality to an Istanbul-based foundation, thus stopping the possible implication of the winning project (Figure 6).
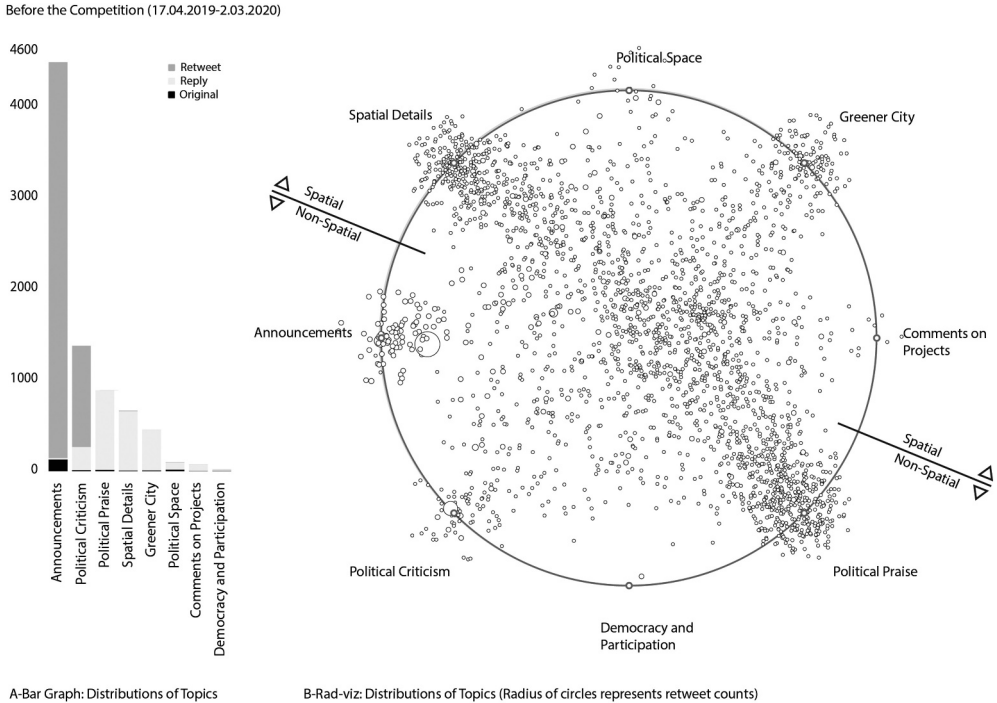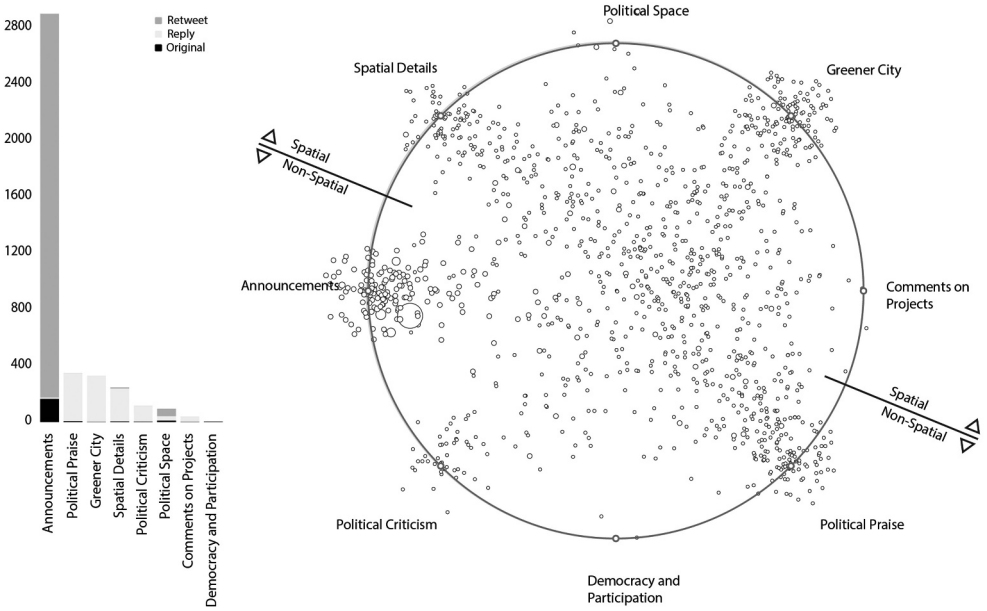

A-Bar Graph: Distributions of Topics   B-Rad-viz: Distributions of Topics (Radius of circles represents retweet counts)

Figure 2. Tweets before the competition.

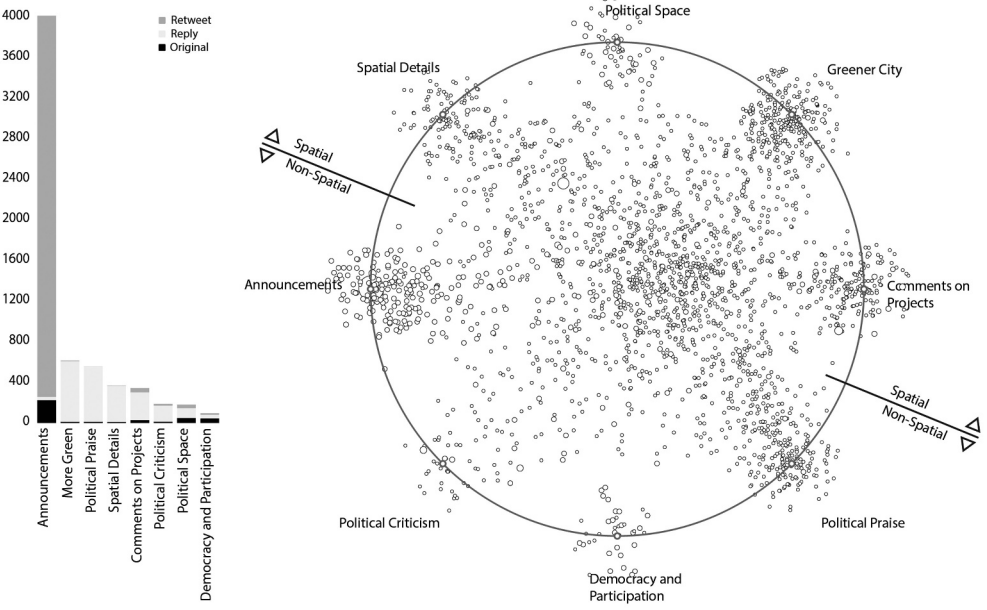First Stage of the Competition (2.03.2020-24.07.2020)

A-Bar Graph: Distributions of Topics   B-Rad-viz: Distributions of Topics (Radius of circles represents retweet counts)

Figure 3. Tweets during the first stage of the competition.

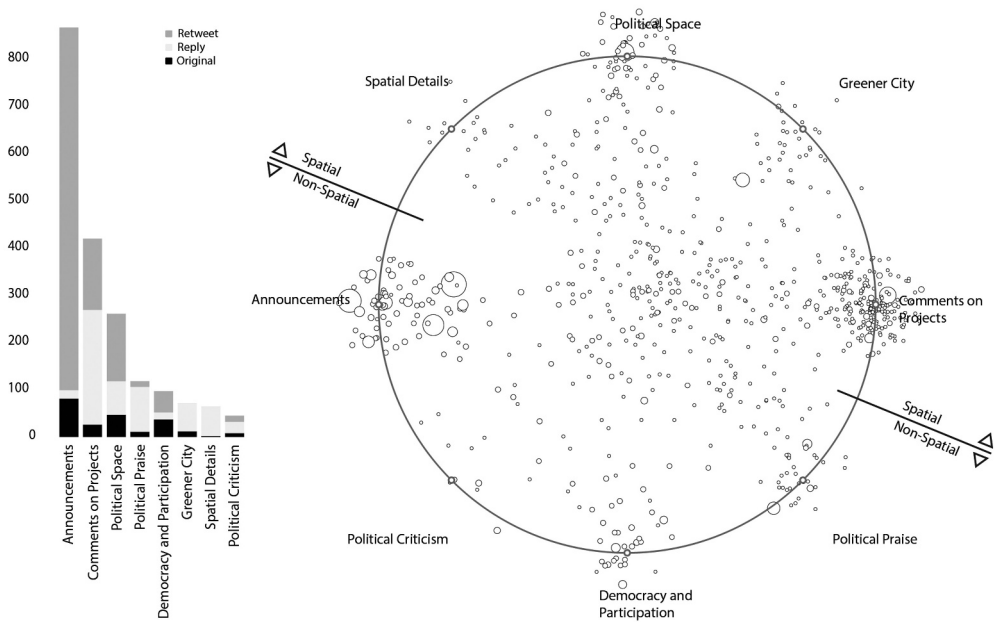Second Stage of the Competition (24.07.2020-11.10.2020)

A-Bar Graph: Distributions of Topics   B-Rad-viz: Distributions of Topics (Radius of circles represents retweet counts)

Figure 4. Tweets during the second stage of the competition.

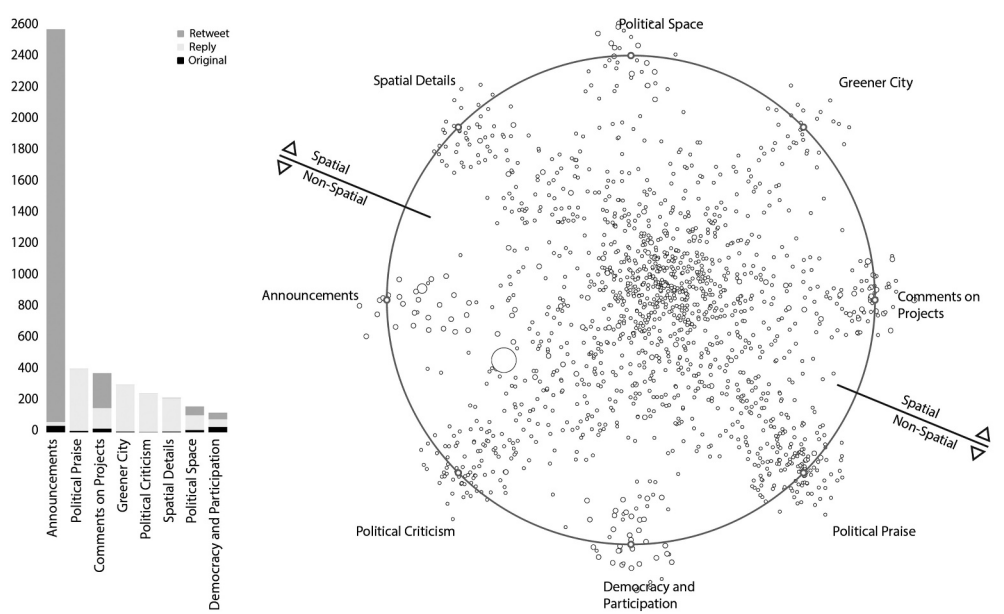Voting Stage of the Competition (11.10.2020-12.11.2020)

A-Bar Graph: Distributions of Topics   B-Rad-viz: Distributions of Topics (Radius of circles represents retweet counts)

Figure 5. Tweets during the voting stage of the competition.

After the Competition (12.11.2020-26.08.2021)

A-Bar Graph: Distributions of Topics   B-Rad-viz: Distributions of Topics (Radius of circles represents retweet counts)

Figure 6. Tweets after the competition.

Discussion

Studying the breakdown of commentaries, colloquium discussions and the social media material provides enough ground to discuss the questions that were defined within this study.

One of the discursive categories that was defined within this study, based on the published commentaries and the professional discussions, is the discourse on political space. When the commentaries and the social media responses are studied in parallel it is evident that this discourse is mainly voiced by academics and design professionals. Based on the social media data it was observed that opening up the competition to public vote resulted in increased discussion on the three finalist projects. The discourse on political space was voiced among academic subjects whereas the general public was more interested in individual projects and supporting their project choices. This condition created a result where academic discourse was overwritten by the distraction created by the voting process.

However, the language of the administration during the colloquium didn't include any signs of discriminatory language against any social group or professional background. A typical populist discourse that builds on the idea of a corrupt elite and trying to mobilize masses towards the politicians' gain was not observed.

Multiple forms of public participation were not enabled in the process. The reasons behind this situation were explained during the colloquium by the organizers. Regardless of the underlying reasons the participatory process was decreased to an online voting process. The administration expressing its previous plans to organize an event series is a sign of intentions towards good practice. On the other-hand the utilization of a direct vote system without varying the participatory processes and the inability further to incorporate voting or public discussions into the process decreased the quality of the participation when checked against Arnstein's ladder of participation (Arnstein 1969). The quality of participation was decreased to the level of consultation.

The social media data on the competition reveals that without multiple events to facilitate a variety of participatory practices such as; public forums, exhibitions, focus group meetings, the discussion is reduced to the level of personal preferences. As the social media data reveals, general public tends to express their voting preferences, instead of engaging in in-depth discussions.

Conclusion

The present study provides a comprehensive analysis of the Taksim Urban Design Competition process. It confirms the importance of previous research on participatory urban design. Through this study, it was noted that an uninformed voting procedure hindered the discussion on the design problem's content and highlighted the necessity of well-designed processes in participatory practices.

This paper offers valuable insights for future design competitions. Although it is a single case study, its findings can be further explored. Although the use of direct public voting in design competitions is uncommon, with the advancement of digital participation tools, it is expected that such practices will become more prevalent. The current study would benefit from additional case studies examining the results of similar competition processes.

Notes

1. Personal interview with Oktan Nalbantoğlu, the 4th of November 2021.
2. Istanbul Planning Agency was founded by the Mayor of Istanbul Ekrem Imamoğlu in 2020. The foundation aims to find rationalistic and persistent solutions to Istanbul's problems.
3. Even though the colloquium was a public event and the recordings were published, to comply with the journal's publication guides, the names of the speakers have been anonymized in the following part. There were six main groups of speakers; the members of the municipality, the members of the competition committee, competition participants, professionals, NGO members and public. Speakers were anonymized according to the group they belong followed by numbers to distinguish different speakers.

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