

LEVERAGING THE HERITAGE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CESME IN ISTANBUL TO CREATE A QUALITY URBAN PLACE

Nur Izzati Rosli ¹
Mohd Iqbal Hashim ²

¹ Kolej Pengajian Alam Bina, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Sarawak, Kampus Samarahan, Malaysia, (E-mail: zatiereezie@gmail.com)

² Kolej Pengajian Alam Bina, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Sarawak, Kampus Samarahan, Malaysia, (Email: iqbalhashim@uitm.edu.my)

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Abstract: *Istanbul's public fountain (cesme) has the potential to revitalise urban neighbourhoods following its significance as an Islamic heritage. Nevertheless, more are becoming out of favour since their decline as functional objects. Therefore, it is pertinent to see how we can reuse them as a generator for place-making. Can the cesme be a generator of quality urban neighbourhood revitalisation? Although much research has addressed the cesme's typology and topology, only some address the object from the Islamic city planning perspective. This article is a serious attempt to address its Islamic heritage significance and – new – meaning in the urbanity of Istanbul. The study in this article was carried out by adopting a participatory immersion study. Firstly, the urban experience was recorded and reflected upon to assess its vitality. This is followed by a comparative analysis of the repurposed cesme found during the field study. As an urban object, the cesme still has a strong cultural attachment to Istanbul. By returning them to the public with a repurposed use, a new meaning is appropriated for the cesme. Subsequently, the public place it defined is given new vitality. This new perspective on cesme and its potentiality can add to the approach to heritage-led regeneration. By repurposing the traditional workplace into a third place, its meaning as a social production continues to the current time.*

Keywords: *Cesme, Quality Urban Place Making, Islamic City Planning, Urban Regeneration, Waqf*

Introduction

The public fountain (cesme) is less noticeable as a meaningful urban object in Istanbul. Three seminal volume works by the municipal of Istanbul have recorded an exhaustive list of cesme throughout the city, so the cesme is officially celebrated as one of the city's built heritage. However, it is becoming more frequent to encounter such objects being redundant. Works such as "The Water Supply of Byzantine Constantinople" and "History of Istanbul from Antiquity to XXIst Century" have illustrated that not only is the cesme significant as a historical object dating from the Roman, but they are also the embodiment of the Islamic charitable endowment (waqf), the social status, Islamic city planning, and most importantly the cultural production from the exchange between the city inhabitants (Crow, 2019; Hamadeh, 1999; Tabakoglu, 2019). We shall see in the following sections how this built fabric is a direct response to Islamic law and city planning. Subsequently, we shall see how the city's restructuring caused its decline and what can be done to regenerate the cesme and the place it defines.

The cesme is located at the distribution end as part of the water supply system. Here the water would be distributed to the public through water collecting. It is part of the urban form of Istanbul and serves the public. So it is common to see the cesme materialised with intricate details. As we shall soon see, being a cultural production, the cesme came with many forms and functions. Many works have typified the various cesme materialities, e.g., according to the century it was built and its function. Although an important topic by itself, it is not the purpose of this paper to discuss the typology more than to say that they were the result of the different cultural production of the Islamic city. This is to say that it was the intended use that prompted other kinds of cesme being built.

Perhaps the most widely used cesme type was the one that serves each household in a neighbourhood. This daily need for water led to the creation of a job to collect and distribute the water to each subscribing household. This will be further elaborated on in the next section.

The field study for this article was conducted in the Sultanahmet neighbourhood in Istanbul, Turkey. The area of study is limited to the public spaces along the stretch of Alemdar - Yeniçeriler street, between Gülhane and Beyazıt – Kapalıçarşı tram station. The site was chosen based on its proximity to the historical centre of Istanbul. As posited by Al-Saoud, as Islam is an urban religion, Islamic city planning is different in a way that the creation of the city is heavily based on the socioeconomic exchange of its inhabitants (Al-Saoud, 2001). A mosque complex is the city centre as it provides the space for the city's primary function: religion and education. Secondary economic establishments then grow organically surrounding to support the primary activities. In Istanbul, the primary function also includes the cesme, which provides sustenance and religious needs, and the saka supports them.

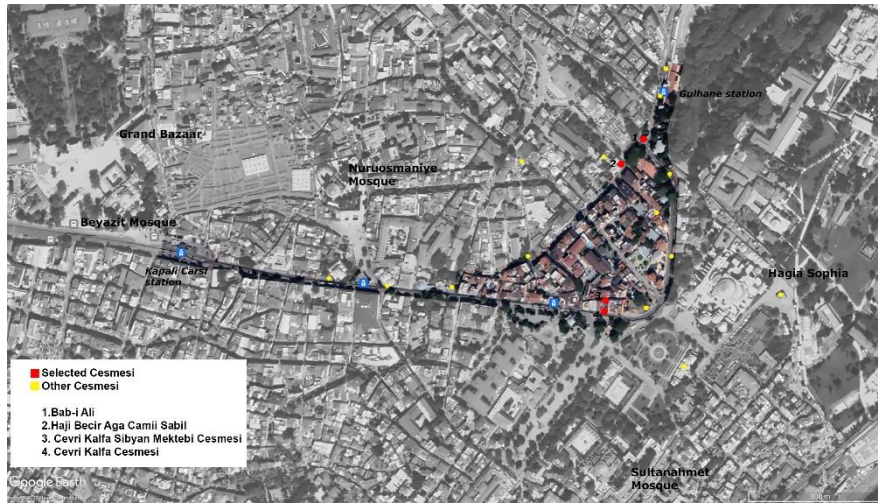


Figure 1: Annotated Google Map Image Showing the Site Extent

(Source: earth.google.com)

The general finding during the field study was that many cesme were identified along the street. But almost all of them were left redundant. The preliminary assessment found that the cultural attachment with the cesme could be more robust where water collecting activities were absent except for occasional use for ablution. Still, it is limited to the cesme near the mosque.

Looking at the cesme as part of the historic built fabric of Istanbul prompts us to explore and extend the existing knowledge on cesme. The new perspective allows us to suggest the implication of using the cesme religious and cultural significance to regenerate its surrounding place. This implies that first, we have to reflect on the cesme as the product of Islamic cultural production, and second, we have to reflect on the cesme as the product of Islamic city planning.

As stated above, cesme are going out of favour as meaningful urban objects, although they are acknowledged as Istanbul's historical objects. More are reduced to becoming urban objects lacking any cultural meaning. This brings us to the nature of the problem inquired in this paper: continuing the cultural attachment to reproduce a place. Consequently, the issue brought us to investigate the problem that warrants this paper. By leveraging cesme cultural significance, can the cesme function as a generator for a quality urban quarter regeneration?

Method

The authors adopted an ethnographic approach of immersion study to carry out the field study. Using this approach, the authors assumed the role of the visitor while conducting an urban assessment along the street via participant observation. This proved beneficial to the study as the interaction between the authors, the neighbourhood, and the inhabitants happened naturally, like any visitor. To achieve this, the authors took the cue from observing the space surrounding the cesme, then joined the observed primary activity within the space. The materiality of the bodies about the space they occupy was recorded following each urban walk's succession. This participation provided an experiential insight into the vitality of the place as defined by Jacobs and Montgomery (Jacobs, 2011; Montgomery, 2007).

The assessment above was then corroborated with literature on the cultural attachment and urbanism of the cesme to reflect their significance in relation to Islamic heritage and the space reproductions in Istanbul. To prevent this reflexive analysis from becoming arbitrary, the assessment was also triangulated with the principle of making a good city by Montgomery,

Jacob, and Gehl and spatialised culture by Low. These reflections will be presented as the first part of the discussion.

As the significance of cultural and urban heritage is established, the analysis moved forward to compare the distinctive features between redundant cesme and repurposed cesme in the Sultanahmet neighbourhood. This comparison made up the second part of the discussion, where the potentiality of the cesme as a generator to revitalise a place is explored.

Part 1: Cesme as a Significant Islamic Heritage and Urban Object in Istanbul

To discuss the cesme significance as an Islamic heritage and urban object, it would be helpful to ground our discourse to the compound productive-consumption and cultural embodiment approach, where an object – in this case, a cesme – is the product of mediation and consumption during the interaction between the builder and user. This is to say that the production of the cesme goes beyond its construction and is only completed as the cesme is appropriated by the user (Kossak, 2008). And this is when the cesme becomes the body of culture.

Besides being the city's sustenance, water is also integral to Islam. In the case of cesme, one of its primary use is for public ablution. This is reflected in one of its typologies: the roof also functioned as a praying terrace. These cesme were often built along the trade route, serving as a respite for the travelling trade caravans (Republic Of Turkiye Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2023). Many cesme also were found to be built in the outer walls of mosques. A pattern of accessibility can be seen to emerge from these two typologies where the cesme are free for public use. This brings us to the next point; the cesme is a form of waqf. Existing works have pointed out that due to the complexity of supplying water, Istanbul preferred to supply water to cesme over to households individually for ease of water management and taxation (Crow, 2019; Crow, 2008). This was crucial in religion and city planning because this condition presented the opportunity for the wealthy patrons to build cesme, tap into the city water supply, and make it available for public use. This works two-fold in the context of Istanbul as an Islamic city. First, the cesme embodied the waqf of the patrons. Secondly, the cesme also embodied the planning of the city.

To effectively serve the public, cesme were often built as the perceived centre of a neighbourhood. We are using the word perceived because in regards to the cesme, the centre can be both locations – therefore a city form- and the centre of activities. The latter will take precedence, as the usage completed the production of the cesme. It firstly generated the centre of activity as the inhabitants flocked to the cesme and took turns collecting the water before carrying it back to their houses. This made the cesme a common space for a primary and meaningful stationary activity, i.e., water collecting – we can now see that the cesme is an effective people attractor. Consequently, the other stationary activities are waiting, people-watching, and chatting. The space surrounding the cesme where these activities materialised became the place of cultural production in the neighbourhood. This production happened as the exchange and mediation of ideas, desires, and information occurred between the inhabitants as they gathered around the cesme (Kossak, 2008). Therefore, the cesme defined the production space surrounding it, and the extent of the production activities, in turn, defined the spatial boundary. The diverse activities turned the space into a place proper as the gathering became communal.

Exchanges were also carried out economically. The centrality allowed for the creation of the water transporter: saka. These transporters provided the services for collecting and distributing

the water from the cesme to the subscribed household. This created another user demographic for the cesme, making it a more diverse place. With the addition of the saka, economic exchange was also thrown into the mix, increasing its vitality as an urban place (Jacobs, 2011). The cultural production surrounding cesme became complex as it involved negotiations among its diverse users. As an embodiment of these mediations, cesme materialised with carved inscriptions decreeing usage limitations to the saka or the public, as recorded in several works (Crow, 2019). This limitation – a form of city planning – was decided by the sponsor of the cesme, whether the state or its wealthy patrons. This created a new cesme typology typified by its allowable use. The decree was seen as an acknowledgement of saka as a proper job and that cesme was a proper workplace. In this point of view, the cesme also became the body of the economic exchange of Istanbul. This approach to city water distribution departed from its Roman predecessor, where small public fountains were less known. Still, there is no doubt that the water supply was adapted from the Roman era and the growth and planning of Istanbul under the Ottoman necessitated the building of more cesme to satisfy the inhabitants' sustenance and religious needs (Crow, 2019; Tabakoglu, 2019).

Islam is an urban religion. Historically, its foundation and growth are directly related to cities (Al-Saoud, 2001). The planning for an Islamic city generally has the mosque complex and markets as their primary attractors; Istanbul has its cesme added to its variety. As previously discussed, the cesme is a centrally located object. Hence, being an object in the city's public space, it also contributed significantly to the urban form of Istanbul. The centrality of the cesme within the public space allowed the cesme to become the node for the people's movement through the city. This broke the visual and walking distances as these nodes separated the spaces into smaller sections, i.e., neighbourhood (Lynch, 1960). This brings us to the next point. Being sponsored by different patrons, the materiality of each cesme was different, making each of them unique. This uniqueness was added to the intricacy of its detail, which contributed to the legibility of each node and immensely helped in reading Istanbul (Rossi, 1982). Here, reflected against the principle of a good city, the various cesme style played an important role that added to the vibrant identity of Ottoman Istanbul (Montgomery, 2003, 2004). And together with their usage, they contributed to the urban vitality as a planned Islamic city.

Another significance brought by the departure of the city water distribution approach is again on the carved inscriptions, this time looking at the cultural point of view. While not an Islamic custom, they were brought by the water distribution shift to the smaller establishment. Many of the inscriptions commemorated an event, but other inscriptions include the names of its patrons and Quranic verses (Hilmi, 1943; Karakus et al., 2006). These inscribed cesme told the story of the endeavour of the patrons, the aspirations of its inhabitants, and the worldview from the verses – all collectively showing the sense of belonging to Istanbul. This is reflected in the predominant naming convention of the cesme, where it was named after its patron.

It is scaled down to a smaller establishment in reflection of its economic scale, allowing for an individually endowed cesme freely used by the public. This is another departure from its Roman predecessor, where the water was distributed from a large state-owned building or reservoir. We have discussed how this type of economic establishment contributed to the diverse and lively place of cultural production. In addition, this small establishment also contributed to the vibrancy of the urban form, where each cesme was built to the specific wishes of its patrons, first for prestige and second for visibility. Both are so that the object is more noticeable; hence, more people will come to use their cesme, functioning as a waqf successfully.

From the discussion above, the cesme significance as heritage is not primarily based on age. But it is due to the Islamic form of piety and social cohesion: waqf. This desire prompted the construction of many cesme around Istanbul sponsored by the state and its wealthy patrons. Located centrally, with intricate details and stories inscribed, the cesme became one of the main urban forms. The communal usage of the cesme completed the cesme and its surrounding as a place of cultural production. So not only is the cesme intrinsically an object of the planned city, but also the cultural tradition of the Islamic city of Istanbul.

Part 2: The Potential of Cesme as the Generator for an Urban Revitalisation in the Sultanahmet Neighbourhood

For the discussion on this second part, we will consider four of the cesme found on site. Bab-i Ali and Chevri Kalfa Cesmesi show the typical redundant cesme. In contrast, Cevri Kalfa Sibyan Mektebi Cesmesi and Haci Besir Aga Camii Sabil show the intervened cesme into a coffeehouse.

The four cesme are all located along the high street of Sultanahmet neighbourhood. This is one of the neighbourhoods in the middle of old Istanbul, where Hagia Sophia, Topkapi, and Sultanahmet mosque are located. Typical for a high street, the public in this neighbourhood is made up of a diverse demographic. Two main ones are the working inhabitant and the visiting tourists. Unfortunately, the redundant cesme are hardly noticeable though they are highly visible from the street if one pauses and reads the neighbourhood carefully. Footfalls only pass the cesme by without pausing to appreciate its entire materiality, i.e., the niche, the basin, and the inscription. Its significant use is far from being continued to the current time, and cultural production is also discontinued.

This is what is addressed in the intervention on the redundant cesme. Both of them are repurposed for a new use which is a coffee house, although with a different approach. Haci Besir Aga Camii Sabil is an eatery, while on the outside, it is informally occupied with low tables and chairs for coffee. This intervention does recreate the place as a workplace. More importantly, this eatery and its overspill revive the cesme as a place for cultural production and stationary activities; now lounging, people watching and drinking coffee. These are the favourite pastimes, especially for the older demographic of Istanbul. So although the cesme still is not in use, its quality as a place for cultural production is revitalised.



Figure 2: Low Table Furniture Occupying Cesme Niche on the Right and Repurposed Sabil on the Left.

(Source: map.google.com)

One of the telltale signs of redundant cesme found on site is the missing spout. This is the case for Cevri Kalfa Cesmesi and Cevri Kalfa Sibyan Mektebi Cesmesi. However, Cevri Kalfa Cesmesi is left redundant. The missing tap took away the cue of it being a cesme, so for the untrained eye, the cesme looks like an ordinary niche on the wall or very similar to the school entrance to its left. Cevri Kalfa Sibyan Mektebi Cesmesi, on the other hand, is repurposed as part of the coffeehouse (kahvehane) aesthetic. This strategy is similar to Besir Aga Camii Sabil, but the approach here is more formal outdoor seating, and the demographic served is towards tourists. Although the spout is also missing, the furniture is arranged to bring out the cesme on the wall. Nonetheless, the cultural attachment of the cesme is continued here; it is still a place for artistic production, just like Besir Aga Camii Sabil.



Figure 3: Missing Spout on the Cevri Kalfa Cesmesi. Note the Untouched Niche.
(Source: map.google.com)



Figure 4: Missing Spout on the Cevri Kalfa Sibyan Mektebi Cesmesi. Note the Appropriated Niche.
(Source: map.google.com)

The authors found that the absence of stationary activities attributed to the cesme is the primary cause for its decline. With meaningful use and exchange, the production of the cesme as a culturally significant object continued. Therefore, the cesme are stripped of all the cultural attachment, leaving it as an urban node at best. This was the case for Bab-i Ali. Although it was built as part of a historic building with a significant story behind it, it needed more vitality to make that place lively. The presence of armed security at the portal further contributes to the unwelcoming perception of that space.



Figure 5: Two Cesme at Bab-i Ali. People Walking Gave a Wide Berth to the Two Armed Officers Guarding the Portal.

(Source: map.google.com)

From the field study, the authors found that being in a public space and on a high foot-traffic street does not make a cesme lively again. An intervention to revive the cesme as a cultural production place is needed, whether economically or not. Its scale must be small enough to accommodate the size of the cesme. Cevri Kalfa Sibyan Mektebi Cemesi's seatings are so dense that they almost dwarf the cesme that initially defined the place. In other words, the intention to revive the cesme is killing it because there is a mismatch in the scale.



Figure 6: Formal Occupancy of Cesme. The Arrangement Dwarfed the Niche, Which is at Midground to the Left.

(Source: map.google.com)

Conclusion

This paper proposes an alternative perspective to reevaluate the significance of a heritage fabric, which urges the reader to view it as an embodiment of culture. We can safely argue that the cesme is a significant Islamic heritage that is very much attached to the culture of Istanbul. Although historical evidence and existing works on the subject have pointed out that water distributions were a significant project from the Roman predecessor and that the Ottomans built onto the existing structures, it is no doubt that the planning of Istanbul as an Islamic city and waqf in Islam help build the foundation to the cesme found all over Istanbul today.

Cities, including Istanbul, will always undergo growth and development. During the process, it cannot escape from discarding components deemed obsolete, one of which, unfortunately, is the cesme. This paper has outlined that the cesme started to be out of use as fewer people depended on it for their water supply. This is directly related to the restructuring of city water distributions which is more efficient in supply and management. So, now that the cultural production at the cesme ceased, the heritage significance of the cesme is at risk of being lost in time. Since we have established that the quality of being a site for cultural production completes the cesme, can we apply the same approach to revive it? Can we use the significance of cesme as an Islamic cultural and urban heritage?

Since the city's demographic has changed to include a significant number of tourists, the primary attractor of the city also has changed to a more touristic establishment. Repurposed cesme have shown that the area surrounding the cesme is revitalised when they introduce coffee drinking activities to occupy the redundant cesme space. This works in the case of Istanbul because coffee drinking is first synonymous with Turkey, and it is a cultural attraction by itself. Second, coffee drinking and water collecting are stationary activities; the latter offered continuity of this logical use for the cesme. Third, coffee-drinking activities also encourage cultural production as it is one of the social pastimes of the inhabitant and a new experience for the tourists.

A well-managed heritage is needed for a robust heritage conservation programme. A rigorous investigation of the implicated redundant heritage object is the first objective to be met. For such a culturally attached object like cesme, it is crucial to add the perspective on cultural production to its appraisal so that humanity and culture are not lost on the heritage object. The approach presented in this paper is not limited to cesme but can be replicated to other heritage objects. Future explorations by merging with public engagement could further develop the empirical assessment of the public space and public life within the context of urban heritage objects.

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