

Gökcan Demirkazık
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Spaces of Culture

An extraordinary transformation is quietly brewing in the cultural sphere of Turkey, and it is happening far away from the epicenters of Istanbul and Ankara. *Spaces of Culture*, a three city-wide, grassroots project initiated by the Goethe-Institut, is seeking to revitalize the cultural scenes of Diyarbakır, Gaziantep, and Izmir in a way that will have echoes long after its designated period of activity. In cooperation with its privileged partners Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (IKSV), Anadolu Kültür—a local non-profit organization active throughout Turkey since 2002—and international partners including the embassy of the Netherlands and consulate general of Sweden in Istanbul, and Institut français, this platform aims to foster emerging artists and initiatives in-the-making that have not been able to put themselves out in the world due to the lack of a robust network of cultural outlets and other resources. Another critical target is the already existent cultural actors in the field. Long-term sustainability for all of the above has been earmarked as the ultimate goal, not only through financial support, but also through an ambitious program of capacity-building, infrastructure support, mobility grants, and networking opportunities. The myriad related cultural events scheduled to take place in the upcoming months are just the icing on the cake.

Mind you, these three cities are very different from each other and they have distinct cultural priorities. For instance, Gaziantep, a city of 2 million in the southeast, has welcomed more than 500,000 Syrian refugees according to Reuters. An unprecedented influx of this proportion, of course, necessitates additional measures to be taken in order to ensure social cohesion—a crucial goal for both the inhabitants of the city and the stability of its greater geopolitical context. The regional coordinator for *Spaces of Culture* in Gaziantep, Abdulhamid Qabbani, thinks that language—and therefore, lack of communication—can be a barrier

against discovering cultural affinities and engaging in cross-cultural exchange. Referring to cities on both sides of the Turkish-Syrian border, he opines: “Though they may not have institutionalized cultural outlets, culture is very strong and vibrant in these cities. We just need to break stereotypes... and that can be done with as little as as little as a bilingual movie screening.”

To this end, *Spaces of Culture* has teamed up Kırkayak Kültür: a local non-profit organization believing in the necessity of a *cultural* response to the refugee influx in order to empower disadvantaged individuals. With the further support of the municipality of Gaziantep, intriguing projects are being shaped from the bottom-up slowly but thoroughly in any field one can imagine from literature and visual arts to music, cinema, and performing arts. Among them, for example, is a music production project, which would allow practitioners of Turkish and Syrian music to take stock of shared instruments and styles, as well as differences, in a spirit of collaboration and experimentation. More importantly, beyond individual projects, *Spaces of Culture* has concerned itself with empowering organizations to achieve the best of themselves. This transformation will take place through improved infrastructure, training sessions in both Turkey and abroad, and increased contact with Europe and rest of the world. With these assets under their belt, local culture professionals themselves will thus become the purveyors of sustained change in sync with the rest of the world.

In a more stress-free environment thriving on industry and tourism such as Izmir—“the Pearl of the Aegean”—on the westernmost tip of Turkey, *Spaces of Culture* has adapted itself to the conditions on the ground. Recep Tuna, the regional coordinator for the project, notes the presence of a broad range of both established and alternative cultural organizations, but mentions the widespread self-preservationist attitude that stands in the way of cross-pollination—both on a local and international scale. “Differing from the emphasis on the integration of refugees in Gaziantep,” Tuna explains, “our primary goals have been achieving institutionalization and instituting a culture of collaboration.” Therefore, *Spaces of Culture* has gone far and beyond just financially supporting several initiatives such as the newly founded Bergama

Theater Festival or organizing a fortnight of European short films: it has invited Charles Landry, who coined the term “creative city,” for a workshop with Izmir’s culture professionals, and a number of these professionals will be participating in professional training and site visits in parallel to the 4th Istanbul Design Biennial during the month of September. At the moment, negotiations are being held with the metropolitan municipality for opening Kültürpark—Izmir’s iconic modernist fairground from the 1930s—to cultural programming of the project.

Physical space for cultural programming is perhaps an even more pressing concern for Diyarbakır, whose municipalities were largely taken over by the central government during the ongoing state of emergency. The regional coordinator for Diyarbakır, Övgü Yaşa Gökçe of Anadolu Kültür-backed Diyarbakır Arts Center, points out this shift has resulted in the implementation of local cultural policies to be discontinued and the re-allocation of cultural spaces to other purposes. While Diyarbakır Arts Center has been operating without a physical space long before July 15, 2016, a brick-and-mortar base is in the cards again; though, given administrative and technical difficulties, it will take time. Until then, micro-financing of individual projects and educational workshops—still in the allocation and planning phases respectively—will take the lead. It seems like *Spaces of Culture* will never dabble in spectacle and fanfare: it is building itself up one intimate conversation at a time, through face-to-face encounters and a strong will to establish genuine understanding.