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Assessing Urban Identity: An Applied Approach to the Case of Ataşehir

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Abstract

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This study explores urban identity through theoretical and practical dimensions to preserve and enhance the unique characteristics of cities. Rapid urbanization, unplanned development, and homogenization threaten urban identity and undermine the sense of belonging. The research examines the elements that influence urban identity and assesses existing literature on identity loss and its implications for urban planning. By integrating theoretical discourse with an applied case study in Ataşehir, this study aims to provide a practical tool for urban planning processes. The research methodology builds on Mansour, Alves, and Costa's comprehensive approach to assessing urban identity, tested in a real-world urban context. Findings will provide concrete insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology while guiding planners in preserving urban identity. The study enhances the literature by bridging theoretical and practical perspectives, emphasizing urban identity as a dynamic and evolving concept.

Keywords: Urban Identity; Identity Loss; Ataşehir; Urbanization Process; Homogenization of City.

1. Introduction

The rapid and often unplanned growth of cities has resulted in monotonous urban environments and the erosion of local identity. Contemporary urban development, driven by population pressures and economic priorities, emphasizes housing over holistic planning. This has led to infrastructure deficits, spatial fragmentation, and uniform building typologies that weaken the relationship between people and their surroundings. As a result, residents may experience a diminished sense of belonging, reducing civic engagement and weakening social cohesion. The standardization of urban form also accelerates the loss of unique local characteristics, further undermining urban identity. Urban planning must adopt interdisciplinary approaches integrating climatic, cultural, economic, and ecological factors to counter these effects. Urban identity—formed through physical space, social dynamics, and cultural memory interaction—is a complex and evolving construct. Therefore, its assessment requires both theoretically informed and contextually grounded methodologies. In this context, Istanbul's Ataşehir district provides a relevant case for examining how contemporary urban regeneration and large-scale developments, such as the Istanbul Financial Center, reshape urban identity.

1.1 Problem Statement and Research Gap

Urban identity studies have predominantly focused on preservation efforts within historical contexts, often remaining theoretical and lacking practical application. This limits their relevance in assessing identity within rapidly transforming urban environments. However, cities are dynamic, multi-layered, and continually evolving, necessitating methodologies that address contemporary urbanization processes. The methodological framework that Mansour et al. developed has been applied only in Damascus. This study tests its applicability at the neighborhood scale in Ataşehir, offering the first identity-based assessment in this context. By exploring historical continuity and present spatial transformations, this research addresses the need for applied, context-sensitive evaluations of urban identity. It aims to contribute a transferable framework for other contemporary urban settings.

1.2 Aim and Hypotheses

Building upon the methodology proposed in “A Comprehensive Methodological Approach for Assessing Urban Identity” by Mansour, Alves, and Costa, this study applies the framework to evaluate both the tangible and intangible dimensions of urban identity in the Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy neighborhoods of Ataşehir. The research aims to enhance spatial awareness and inform forward-looking urban planning. Using Ataşehir as a case study, the work critically examines the methodology’s strengths, contextual adaptability, practical utility, and limitations. The study also underscores the urgency of developing new tools to safeguard distinctive urban identities amid increasing spatial homogenization.

1. The following research questions guide the study: How have the physical and socio-cultural components of urban identity evolved in the Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy neighborhoods?
2. How practical is the Mansour, Alves, and Costa methodology for neighborhood-scale identity assessment?
3. Based on the findings, what strategic planning recommendations can be proposed to support preserving and enhancing neighborhood identity?

Accordingly, this study hypothesizes that assessing urban identity is essential for its preservation and development. The methodology by Mansour, Alves, and Costa is regarded as a practical and adaptable tool for analyzing physical and socio-cultural aspects at the neighborhood level.

1.3 Significance and Structure of the Study

Rapid urbanization, unplanned development, and homogenization increasingly weaken urban identity. This study emphasizes the need for more sensitive and holistic planning approaches by employing a methodology that addresses urban identity's tangible and intangible components. Additionally, it is significant to test the applicability of this methodology within a local context.

The study begins with an introduction outlining the research background and objectives. The methodology section then describes the methods and data collection process used. In the findings section, the urban identity components of the Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy neighborhoods are examined through their historical development. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main findings and offers recommendations for planning practices.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

This section addresses theoretical approaches to urban identity, the role of spatial memory, and semiotic elements in urban identity, and studies focused on its evaluation.

2.1. The Concept of Urban Identity

Cities are dynamic centers of social, economic, and cultural interaction. The Turkish Language Association (TDK, 2024) defines a city as a settlement with over twenty thousand residents, where trade, industry, services, and administration dominate, highlighting population density and economic function as key urban characteristics. Identity, a multifaceted concept explored across disciplines, refers to how individuals and communities define and position themselves (Lalli, 1992). Urban identity similarly resists a singular definition due to its complexity (Jokar et al., 2021), but generally denotes the distinctive physical and socio-cultural characteristics that differentiate one city from another. Yıldız (2014) frames urban identity as a holistic construct shaped by physical, cultural, economic, historical, and morphological dimensions. Urban identity is not solely defined by architecture or infrastructure, but also by residents’ practices, cultural habits, and shared memory. Geographic location, historical trajectory, and socio-economic functions interact with users to produce a unique sense of place. Personal place attachments and meanings—central to place identity (Proshansky, 1978)—accumulate into collective identity through shared memory and emotional bonds (İlgar, 2008; Giuliani, 2003). Mansour, Alves, and da Costa (2023) emphasize that urban identity is dynamic and multi-layered, continuously evolving through socio-cultural and historical processes. Rather than a fixed attribute, it is shaped and reshaped by changing urban conditions.

2.2 Spatial Memory and the Role of Urban Semiotics in the Formation of Urban Identity

Physical structures, symbolic meanings, and collective memory shape urban identity. Spatial memory refers to the emotional and cognitive connections individuals and communities establish with places based on past experiences, fostering belonging and identity (Casey, 2000; Lewicka, 2008). This memory materializes in streets, public spaces, and historical structures, anchoring collective meaning (Hoelscher & Alderman, 2004). Urban semiotics translates these memories into legible signs, such as street names, architectural forms, and public symbols, that reflect deeper cultural and historical narratives (Gottdiener, 1995). These semiotic elements transform urban space into a layered, identity-rich landscape. Rapid transformation can disrupt such elements, weakening place attachment and triggering spatial alienation. Contemporary urban identity research emphasizes the interplay of physical form and socio-cultural context, viewing identity as a dynamic process shaped by tangible and intangible components (Montgomery, 1998).

2.3 Urban Identity Evaluation Approaches

Although the analysis and preservation of urban identity have been examined across multiple disciplines, existing studies often rely on varied methodologies and measurement tools. While these efforts contribute significantly to understanding urban identity, they are frequently criticized for being narrow in scope, static in nature, and neglecting temporal

transformation. As urban environments continue to evolve, there is a growing need for more comprehensive and dynamic evaluation frameworks. The methodology applied in this study distinguishes itself from previous approaches by accounting for both tangible and intangible values and the perspectives of diverse user groups across multiple spatial and temporal scales. Notably, this method was previously implemented in Damascus, which yielded strategic recommendations for preserving urban identity (Mansour et al., 2023).

3. Materials and Methods

This section outlines the research methodology employed to assess the evolving urban identity of two selected neighborhoods in Ataşehir.

3.1 Research Design and Study Area

This study was conducted to evaluate urban identity within the Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy neighborhoods of the Ataşehir district, located in Istanbul, Turkey. It employed a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. The methodology developed by Mansour, Alves, and Costa served as the framework for analyzing urban identity's material and immaterial components at the neighborhood scale.

Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy were selected as the study areas due to their exposure to dynamic urban transformation processes and their diverse socio-cultural composition. These characteristics make them suitable for exploring how urban identity evolves.

Three historical periods reflecting Ataşehir’s spatial and socio-economic transformation were identified:

1. 1960–1980: Rapid and irregular urbanization.
2. 1980–2000: Initial legal regulations and the emergence of mass housing projects.
3. Mid-2000s to present: District formation, urban renewal, and the influence of the Istanbul Finance Center.

3.2 Data Description

- **Qualitative Data:** Archival documents, historical texts, field observations, and interviews. These sources were used to understand the neighborhoods’ social memory and historical context (e.g., archival records, urban planning documents).
- **Quantitative Data:** Measurable data such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) outputs, cadastral maps, population statistics, photographic documentation, and spatial data layers.

3.3 Methodological Framework

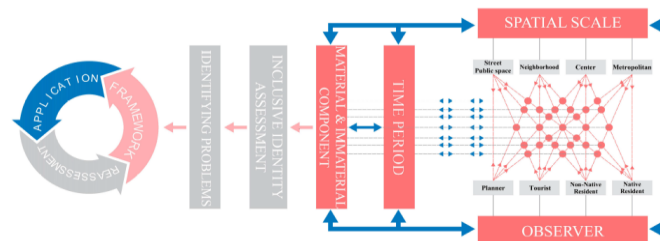


Table 1. Comprehensive Urban Identity Assessment Framework (Mansour et al., 2023).

This framework presents a multidimensional, cyclical methodology for assessing urban identity, integrating both tangible and intangible elements across multiple spatial scales—from street level to metropolitan scale—and considering diverse observers, including planners, residents, and visitors. It emphasizes temporal analysis and advocates an inclusive, iterative process for identity evaluation and strategy refinement.

The research began with an examination of the neighborhoods’ physical and planning histories using historical plans, maps, aerial photos, and archival documents from Istanbul Metropolitan and Ataşehir Municipalities. These sources were contextualized within the legal, economic, and social dynamics of each period to identify drivers of spatial transformation. Field observations assessed street layouts, open space utilization, building types, and social interaction zones, supported by photographic documentation to compare past and present conditions. GIS-based layered mapping analyzed land use, density, and transportation networks. Additionally, local media archives and social media content were reviewed to capture public perceptions and collective memory regarding urban change. This comprehensive approach facilitates an integrated understanding of the spatial and social evolution of urban identity, informing future planning and conservation efforts.

4. Case Study

Ataşehir district, situated on the southern side of Istanbul’s Anatolian Peninsula, holds strategic importance due to its location and transportation infrastructure. It borders Ümraniye to the north, Kadıköy and Maltepe to the south, Üsküdar to the west, and Sancaktepe to the east. Established in 2008, Ataşehir was formed by merging 13 neighborhoods from Kadıköy, Üsküdar, and Kartal, covering 25.84 square kilometers with partially rugged terrain (Ata, 2017). The O-2 highway divides the district into West and East Ataşehir. As of 2023, Ataşehir’s population is 416,529, with a balanced

gender distribution (Ataşehir Municipality, 2023). Since its establishment, the district has undergone rapid urban development in land use, demographics, and physical form. The Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy neighborhoods were chosen for this study due to Ataşehir's complex and multidimensional transformation, from informal settlements to modern housing, commercial centers, and financial institutions, reflecting a diverse socio-economic landscape and evolving public spaces.

4.1 Historical Background of Ataşehir

Ataşehir represents a complex urban fabric shaped by intertwined spatial, economic, and social transformations over time. This section focuses on the historical development of the Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy neighborhoods, highlighting their evolution from rural origins to a financial and residential center.

Rural Origins: Ottoman Period and Early 20th Century: In historical maps such as Kauffer (1786) and Gotzpaşa (1897), the area appears as a rural settlement with agricultural activity centered around the Karaman Farm and the Küçükbakkalköy Creek. The settlement was sparsely populated, with mixed Turkish and Greek rural communities.

1950s – Migration and Informal Settlement: The post-1950 migration waves to Istanbul triggered unplanned urbanization and gecekondu development, significantly altering the natural and rural landscape.

1989—Ataşehir Satellite City Project: This project began planned urban development, especially in the Atatürk neighborhood. It targeted middle—and upper-income housing and initiated systematic urban transformation.

2008—District Establishment and Planned Transformation: Establishing Ataşehir as a district accelerated urban change. The Istanbul Finance Center project led to high-density development, new transportation infrastructure, and the replacement of agricultural lands by the built environment, diminishing the natural character.

2010s to Present: Currently, Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy function as urban centers dominated by high-rise residential buildings, financial institutions, and transport networks. The natural and rural elements that once defined local identity have largely disappeared, replaced by a planned but less ecologically continuous urban fabric.

4.2 Changes in the Material Components of Urban Identity Over Three Periods in Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy Neighborhoods of Ataşehir District

In this section, the material components of urban identity—comprising natural and artificial elements—are examined across three distinct periods in the Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy neighborhoods.

4.2.1 Natural Elements

This section examines the natural features, such as topography, vegetation, water bodies, and climate, that have influenced the urban identity of Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy neighborhoods. Changes in these natural components across different periods reflect the transformation from rural landscapes to urbanized environments.

- Period 1: Acceleration of Irregular Urbanization (1960s – Early 1980s)

Küçükbakkalköy Neighborhood: A rural settlement within Kadıköy district, Küçükbakkalköy maintained low density and natural land characteristics until the 1970s, remaining relatively isolated from urban development. Although the opening of the D100 highway in 1973 increased its strategic significance, its impact was limited during this period. Key natural features include the Küçükbakkalköy Stream and surrounding agricultural lands, with the region's mild Marmara climate supporting the preservation of its rural fabric.

Atatürk Neighborhood: Similarly, Atatürk Neighborhood remained a rural area outside Kadıköy's urban boundaries, with parcelization and small-scale construction becoming visible by the 1980s. Limited transportation access and distance from the city center contributed to sparse settlement patterns and the preservation of rural landscapes. The area largely retained the historical structure of the Karaman Farm.

- Period 2: Rise of the Private Sector (1980 – Early 2000s)

Küçükbakkalköy Neighborhood began losing its rural character, gradually transforming into a mixed-use urban fabric where residential and commercial functions coexist. Proximity to the D100 and TEM highways facilitated easier access and accelerated construction, enhancing the neighborhood's integration into the larger urban context. Unplanned development reduced natural elements, with green spaces and vegetation retreating alongside increasing built-up areas.

Atatürk Neighborhood: The opening of the TEM highway improved accessibility for Atatürk Neighborhood. The 1989 Ataşehir Uydukent Project marked the start of planned urbanization in the area. Controlled and limited construction growth allowed some natural and open spaces to persist, notably landscaped areas within housing complexes, internal gardens, and planned green spaces.

- Period 3: District Formation and Urban Transformation Impact (Mid-2000s – Present)

Küçükbakkalköy Neighborhood is situated between the D100 and TEM highways, providing direct access to Istanbul's primary transportation routes. Recent metro extensions have increased intra-urban connectivity, intensifying development pressure. The Küçükbakkalköy Stream has mainly been diverted, significantly reducing its environmental presence. Natural vegetation has largely disappeared, with green spaces limited to small parks and minimal landscaping.

Atatürk Neighborhood joined the Ataşehir district in 2008 and has since undergone significant urban transformation, driven by the Istanbul Finance Center Project and enhanced highway connectivity. The segment of Küçükbakkalköy Stream at the neighborhood boundary was entirely removed and replaced by road infrastructure. Natural vegetation has been

replaced mainly by planned landscaping, parks, and street trees, which primarily serve aesthetic and regulatory functions with limited ecological value. The Nezahat Gökyiğit Botanical Garden remains a prominent preserved green space.

4.2.2 Human-Made Elements

This section analyzes the human-made elements—including built structures, infrastructure, road networks, and land use patterns—that have shaped the urban identity of Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy neighborhoods.

- Period 1: Accelerated Irregular Urbanization (1960s – Early 1980s)

Küçükbakkalköy Neighborhood, located within the Kadıköy district, Küçükbakkalköy lacked clear administrative boundaries during this period. It was characterized by informal gecekondu settlements and a flexible regional structure shaped by proximity to transportation networks. The opening of the D100 Highway in 1973 increased accessibility, accelerating irregular and unplanned development: scattered building clusters, inadequate infrastructure, and fragmented parcel patterns defined urban morphology. Although no archaeological or monumental structures were present, settlement traces connected to natural water sources were evident.

Atatürk Neighborhood, also part of Kadıköy, Atatürk retained its rural character. The sparse settlement was shaped mainly by parcel sales and new road openings. The area was dominated by agricultural land and open spaces. The transportation infrastructure was weak, and the urban morphology reflected a low-density, peri-urban transition zone. Physical traces of the historical Karaman Farm had essentially disappeared, but the agricultural heritage persisted in the collective memory of the landscape.

- Period 2: Rise of the Private Sector (1980 – Early 2000s)

Küçükbakkalköy Neighborhood became a focal point for private sector investment due to its strategic location between the D100 and TEM highways. This proximity triggered rapid urban expansion, replacing informal housing with mixed-use buildings combining residential and commercial functions. The urban fabric became fragmented and increasingly dense, marked by irregular streets and unplanned multi-storey developments. Rural elements and natural features were largely lost, and the area lacked protected historical or archaeological structures.

Atatürk Neighborhood entered a phase of planned development with the launch of the Ataşehir Satellite City Project in 1989. This process formalized the neighborhood's spatial boundaries and introduced structured parceling. The area evolved into a middle-income residential zone with regular street networks, planned housing complexes, and a more coherent urban form. The historical traces of the Karaman Farm were erased, completing the transition to a fully urbanized and modern settlement.

- Period 3: District Formation and Urban Transformation Impact (Mid-2000s – Present)

Küçükbakkalköy Neighborhood gained formal administrative boundaries after its incorporation into Ataşehir in 2008. Improved accessibility via metro lines (M4, M8) and highway proximity accelerated its transformation into a dense, mixed-use urban area. The urban fabric became defined by high-rise buildings, gated communities, and commercial zones, replacing earlier fragmented plots. Natural and historical elements, including the Küçükbakkalköy Stream, were almost entirely erased during this period.

Atatürk Neighborhood, with the launch of the Istanbul Financial Center, became a strategic urban hub. Enhanced infrastructure and connectivity supported the rapid development of office towers, luxury housing, and commercial facilities. The area adopted a highly planned, vehicle-oriented morphology, with green spaces limited to private landscapes. All traces of the former rural environment, including the Karaman Farm, were eliminated, marking a complete urban transformation.

4.3 The Transformation of Urban Identity in Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy Neighborhoods of Ataşehir District Through Three Periods in Terms of Immaterial Components

This section explores the changes in immaterial components—such as social values, collective memory, cultural practices, and symbolic meanings—that have influenced the urban identity of Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy neighborhoods over three distinct periods.

- Period 1: Accelerated Irregular Urbanization (1960s – Early 1980s)

Küçükbakkalköy Neighborhood exhibited socio-cultural diversity, notably with Romani communities settling in the area. Life was traditional, community-oriented, and family-centered, shaped by informal gecekondu housing. Social and cultural values were organized around neighborhood relationships, local shops, and shared spaces. However, due to inadequate infrastructure and unplanned development, the neighborhood was often perceived externally as “poor” or “dangerous,” negatively affecting its urban identity. Neighborly interactions, street events, and traditional rituals integrated cultural activities into daily life. Economic activities were mainly limited to informal labor, daily jobs, and small-scale trades.

Atatürk Neighborhood remained predominantly rural during this period. Its social structure consisted mainly of local farming communities, with social and cultural values closely tied to the natural environment and traditional production methods. The neighborhood's relative isolation from the city center contributed to its identity being rooted primarily in rural memory.

- Period 2: Rise of the Private Sector (1980 – Early 2000s)

Migrant groups with similar socio-economic backgrounds predominantly inhabited the Küçükbakkalköy Neighborhood. Although social and cultural values within the neighborhood emphasized solidarity, it was often perceived externally as a “dangerous area.” Its urban identity was primarily shaped by the image of a low-income residential zone, weakening residents' sense of community. Cultural activities declined, and traditional neighborly relations led to more individualistic lifestyles. The local economy remained based mainly on low-skilled labor, small-scale trades, and the service sector.

Atatürk Neighborhood began transforming into planned residential areas with the start of the Ataşehir Uydu Kent Project, directly impacting its social structure. Modern lifestyles and increasing individualism have altered social and cultural values, prioritizing the nuclear family over community ties. The neighborhood's urban identity shifted to that of a "new middle-class settlement," gaining a more prestigious reputation. Cultural activities became site-based and confined to private spaces, with socialization in open public areas replaced by site-specific events. Economic structures also started to evolve accordingly.

- Period 3: District Formation and Urban Transformation Impact (Mid-2000s – Present)

Küçükbakkalköy Neighborhood has experienced socio-economic diversification since the district formation in 2008, with multiple income groups and user profiles increasing social stratification. This diversity has fragmented social and cultural values, and the neighborhood has developed a multifunctional identity influenced by a student population (due to Acıbadem University) and service sector workers. Its urban identity is now associated mainly with healthcare, education, and middle-income residential areas. Cultural activities are confined to gated communities and private spaces, with public cultural production nearly ceased. Economic activities have diversified, focusing on trade, education, healthcare, and small service enterprises.

Atatürk Neighborhood has transformed into a central business and residential area for high-income groups and institutional users under the influence of the Istanbul Finance Center. Social and cultural values are shaped by gated communities and security-focused private spaces, prioritizing individualized living over social interaction. The urban identity is characterized by high status, investment value, and a corporate image. Cultural activities are limited to events organized by site management, with minimal public cultural interaction. The economy centers mainly on finance, offices, shopping malls, and service sectors.

5. Results and Discussion

This study examines the urban transformations of Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy neighborhoods in Ataşehir and their impact on urban identity. Using qualitative and quantitative methods, it highlights how physical changes and social dynamics shape neighborhood identity. The findings show that urban identity evolves through material structures and collective memory interaction over time.

Urban Growth Dynamics: Satellite imagery and population data reveal significant growth in neighborhoods with distinct patterns. Küçükbakkalköy grew from 184 residents in 1935 to 29,256 in 2024, expanding rapidly and irregularly around the stream and D100 highway, creating a mixed urban fabric of informal housing, apartments, and gated communities. Atatürk evolved from a sparsely populated rural area to a planned urban zone after 1990 through the Uydu Kent satellite city project. Development progressed in phases with new transport infrastructure, and the Istanbul Finance Center boosted density and gated housing. Its population rose from 22,494 in 2008 to 32,915 in 2024.

Impacts on Natural Elements: Accelerated urban development has dramatically impacted the natural environment. Küçükbakkalköy's early settlement near the stream has lost its natural function as the stream dries up. Once near Karaman Farm, the neighborhood's former rural and green landscape has mostly vanished, replaced by dense buildings and limited green spaces. Atatürk, once rural, lost much of its natural character after the 1990s planned development, though street trees, parks, and landscaped areas remain. The Nezahat Gökyiğit Botanical Garden is a rare natural refuge amid highways and high-rises. The former streambed dividing the neighborhoods is now a street, a physical boundary.



Figure 1. View of Atatürk Neighborhood Uydu Kent Blocks from Nezahat Gökyiğit Botanical Garden (Photo by Nevit Dilmen – uploader's work, licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4049992>).

Architectural and Morphological Change: Küçükbakkalköy was a low-density rural area until the mid-20th century. After 1980, rapid population growth led to informal squatter (gecekondu) housing, creating a fragmented urban fabric with mixed apartment blocks and informal structures. Despite some urban transformation reducing gecekondu density, a heterogeneous mix prevents spatial cohesion with irregular streets and building types. In contrast, Atatürk was planned from the 1990s as a satellite city, featuring high-rise complexes, shopping centers, and wide boulevards in a modernist

style. While initially cohesive, recent density increases from the Istanbul Finance Center project have strained the original plan and transportation infrastructure.

Social Structure: Küçükbakkalköy historically had close-knit social ties, especially among Roma communities in informal settlements. Rapid urbanization and diverse housing types have fragmented these bonds, creating more transient and diverse social relations due to population influx from nearby business centers, universities, and metro access. In contrast, Atatürk's planned development supports a more homogeneous, middle-to-upper-income population living in gated communities, with social interactions mostly confined within private sites. Its shopping centers attract outsiders, reinforcing the neighborhood's modern, upscale identity.

Economic and Demographic Changes: Küçükbakkalköy's access to transport, universities, and business hubs increased demographic diversity, reducing the Roma population and creating a socio-economically mixed community with rising housing prices. In contrast, Atatürk, once a low-density settlement under the UyduKent project, gained regional importance after Ataşehir became a district and the Istanbul Financial Center was announced, leading to higher demand, soaring property prices, and the rise of modern, high-rise gated communities for middle- and upper-income residents.

Semiotic Elements and Spatial Memory: Urban identity emerges from physical structures and the meanings people attach to places, shaped by collective memory. In Küçükbakkalköy, place names hold little significance, and spatial memory is linked to scattered gecekondu remnants and irregular streets. Displacement of Roma communities disrupted cultural memory, while few lasting public spaces weakened semiotic unity. Atatürk's identity centers on modern symbols like the Istanbul Financial Center (prestige) and the Nezahat Gökyiğit Botanical Garden (environmental continuity). Gated communities and high-rises emphasize exclusivity and recent planned development rather than historical roots.

The Impact of State Policies on Urban Identity: State policies have strongly influenced urban identity in Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy. In Küçükbakkalköy, the 1980s legalization of informal settlements led to unplanned densification and, later, the displacement of Roma communities through transformation policies. Improved transport infrastructure accelerated development but reduced open spaces. In contrast, Atatürk was planned in the 1990s under the UyduKent model on public land, forming an orderly gated community. Following Ataşehir's district establishment 2008 and the Istanbul Financial Center project, the area experienced vertical densification and spatial changes.

Thus, while Atatürk reflects a more coherent identity rooted in planned interventions, Küçükbakkalköy represents a fragmented and reactive transformation shaped by belated policy engagement.

Current Urban Identity of Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy Neighborhoods: Analyses reveal that Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy neighborhoods exhibit distinct contemporary urban identities shaped by their historical development dynamics and current spatial structures.

Küçükbakkalköy retains the legacy of informal, unplanned settlement patterns. Its diverse building typologies, asynchronous transformation processes, and fragmented social fabric hinder the emergence of a coherent urban identity. Excessive densification, lack of public open spaces, and loss of green areas exert physical and social pressure on the neighborhood. Thus, Küçükbakkalköy can be characterized by a "fragmented urban identity in transition," indicating an unstable identity caught between old and new. This aligns with the concept of fragmented identity in the literature, which describes places where identity components fail to form a cohesive whole. Indicators such as irregular street morphology, rapid construction pressure, and diminished greenery support this classification.

Atatürk neighborhood presents a more coherent urban identity due to its planned development, defined parcel layout, and gated community typology. However, recent construction pressures, population growth, and infrastructural stress threaten this balance. Large-scale projects like the Istanbul Financial Center drive significant physical and socio-economic changes, positioning the neighborhood as a "stable urban identity in transition." Although its rural past has largely faded, its planned origins provide a more resolute spatial character. This stable identity suggests an established, recognizable urban character (e.g., orderly blocks, centralized planning, consistent neighborhood image) currently undergoing redefinition due to surrounding transformations.

Table 2. Results of the application of the methodological approach.

Period	Architecture & Morphology	Demographic Structure	Spatial Organization	Socio-Political Influences	Neighborhood Identity & Perception
1960–1980	<u>Küçükbakkalköy:</u> Low-density rural village; informal housing emergence.	<u>Küçükbakkalköy:</u> Predominantly local and Roman population.	<u>Küçükbakkalköy:</u> Rural settlement pattern; irregular structures.	<u>Küçükbakkalköy:</u> Land allocation and tolerance of informal settlements.	<u>Küçükbakkalköy:</u> Strong social cohesion; traditional identity.
	<u>Atatürk:</u> Almost no settlement; rural area.	<u>Atatürk:</u> Very low population; rural community.	<u>Atatürk:</u> Dominated by agriculture and vacant land.	<u>Atatürk:</u> State-controlled rural land.	<u>Atatürk:</u> Underdeveloped identity; potential area.
1980–2000	<u>Küçükbakkalköy:</u> Rapid informal housing growth, mixed with apartment buildings.	<u>Küçükbakkalköy:</u> Rapid population increase; migrants.	<u>Küçükbakkalköy:</u> Heterogeneous and irregular urban fabric.	<u>Küçükbakkalköy:</u> Unplanned growth: impact of land allocation policies.	<u>Küçükbakkalköy:</u> Beginning fragmentation of identity.
	<u>Atatürk:</u> Initial development under the satellite city model.	<u>Atatürk:</u> Middle-income planned settlers.	<u>Atatürk:</u> Regular parcels, wide streets.	<u>Atatürk:</u> Emlak Bank leads public housing.	<u>Atatürk:</u> Gated community image; controlled neighborhood.
2000 – Present	<u>Küçükbakkalköy:</u> Transformation of informal housing; dense and morphologically unclear fabric.	<u>Küçükbakkalköy:</u> Heterogeneous population; increased mobility.	<u>Küçükbakkalköy:</u> Physical congestion; lack of green spaces.	<u>Küçükbakkalköy:</u> Metro and transport investments increase attractiveness and social transformation.	<u>Küçükbakkalköy:</u> “Fragmented urban identity.”
	<u>Atatürk:</u> Intensified gated communities and high-rise buildings, modern architecture.	<u>Atatürk:</u> White-collar, middle-upper income groups.	<u>Atatürk:</u> Green spaces within sites are challenged by growing density.	<u>Atatürk:</u> Increased value and investment due to projects like the Istanbul Financial Center.	<u>Atatürk:</u> “Stable urban identity in transition.”

Contribution of the Study

This study provides a multidimensional analysis of the Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy neighborhoods in Ataşehir, showing how urban identity arises from the interaction of physical planning, spatial experience, social belonging, and collective memory. Moving beyond the typical focus on physical changes, it offers a comparative framework integrating both tangible and intangible identity aspects. The differing development paths—Atatürk’s planned suburban model versus Küçükbakkalköy’s fragmented transformation—highlight how planning timing and approach shape spatial coherence, social structures, and identity formation. Key contributions include emphasizing participatory planning at the neighborhood level, highlighting the importance of incorporating residents’ needs, perceptions, and attachments in urban renewal. The findings support identity-focused strategies that preserve memory, social networks, daily practices, and physical improvements. The study also stresses the need for holistic, sustainable interventions that balance social, economic, and environmental factors while maintaining spatial continuity and improving quality of life. Lastly, it demonstrates the value of comparative, data-driven methods in assessing urban identity, providing a practical framework for context-sensitive and socially equitable urban transformation.

6. Conclusion

This study analyzed the urban identity formation of Atatürk and Küçükbakkalköy neighborhoods in Ataşehir by examining their historical evolution and the interplay of physical and socio-cultural factors. Findings indicate that Küçükbakkalköy’s identity has become fragmented due to rapid urbanization since the 1980s. At the same time, Atatürk, developed through planned suburban expansion in the 1990s, exhibits a more stable identity that is now challenged by recent development pressures. In both cases, rural traces have largely disappeared, replaced by dense and homogenized urban forms.

The research underscores that urban transformation is not only a spatial but also an identity-related process. Challenges such as overconstruction, limited green space, and high density jeopardize urban livability and continuity of local identity. Based on the findings, the study recommends neighborhood-scale strategies including integrating urban memory and identity mapping into planning, aligning density regulations with ecological and social needs, incorporating socio-cultural diversity into renewal projects, and reinforcing community belonging through cultural initiatives.

While limited in scope to two neighborhoods and reliant on qualitative data, this study provides a framework for understanding identity transformation under neoliberal urban dynamics. Future research should adopt participatory and data-driven approaches to guide sustainable and inclusive urban policies that preserve local character amid ongoing change.

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