



ICCAUA Proceedings Journal

Proceedings of the international conference of contemporary affairs in architecture and urbanism-ICCAUA
Volume 9 (December 2026), 2610562

ICCAUA
Proceedings Journal
<https://journal.iccaua.com/>

Journal homepage: <https://journal.iccaua.com/>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38027/ICCAUA2026EN0562>

Urban Squares as Social Interaction Spaces in Istanbul: The Case of Karaköy–Galataport

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Abstract

Received: 22.04.2026
Revised: 20.06.2026
Accepted: 01.07.2026
Available online: 10.07.2026

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This article has been selected and peer-reviewed for publication in this journal as part of the 9th International Conference of Contemporary Affairs in Architecture and Urbanism, held on 7–8 May 2026 in Istanbul, Türkiye.

City squares have long been an essential part of the lives of the people and the location where one can move around, meet people, observe the world passing by, relax and be generally social. But in modern cities, these areas are transforming significantly, as they are affected by major redevelopment projects, stores and companies, tourist attractions, and regulations concerning their operations. This article will examine Karaköy–Galataport in Istanbul - a city square and waterfront open space - and will examine how its layout, its accessibility, its openness, the number of activities it offers, and how it is managed influence what people do in their daily lives, how they socialize, and how public the space is.

The study employs an in-depth case study where the space is examined, what occurs there, tracking behaviour and capturing photographs. The results indicate that Karaköy–Galataport is well designed and built, with views, short walking paths, accessibility and a beautiful location next to the water, all of which enable people to walk, sit, rest, take photographs, and look at the sea and have informal conversations. But, the research also shows that the ‘public’ feel of the area is affected by the shops, attractions for tourists, and the rules it has. Therefore, even though it appears open, hectic and easily accessible, it cannot entirely accommodate everybody to utilize it freely, impulsively and not being compelled to spend money.

This article argues that we cannot tell how well modern city squares perform simply by how pleasant they appear; we must consider also how inclusive they are of everybody, how easy it is to move about in them, how flexible they are, and how much they genuinely promote actual civic life.

Keywords: urban squares; social interaction; public space; publicness; Istanbul; Karaköy–Galataport; waterfront redevelopment.

1. Introduction

Urban squares are some of the most important parts of a city’s public areas, as they give people a place to come together, move around, meet, observe, and just live their everyday lives. They’re more than just empty spaces in the city; they’re places where public life happens, because different people, different things to do, and different rhythms of activity all exist together. How important they are isn’t just about the design or how easy they are to reach, but whether they encourage people to connect, a sense of being there together, and being open to everyone. Good public spaces, according to urban design experts (Carmona, 2021; Gehl, 2011; Project for Public Spaces [PPS], n.d.-a; UN-Habitat, n.d.-a), are often easily reached, comfortable, have a lot of different things going on, and are sociable.

However, how ‘public’ city squares are in today’s cities is becoming increasingly complicated. In the centre of cities and along the waterfront, major changes to the area are often tied to tourism, creating a brand, investing in culture, a leisure and entertainment industry, and being managed by private companies. While these things may make a place look and work better, they can also create new problems about whether everyone is included, whether people are free to do as they please, and whether a space that appears open really is for the public. A place can be physically open and have a lot going on, yet still be influenced by being watched, having events organised by businesses, being controlled, and certain people being more welcome than others. Due to this, we have to take into consideration not only the design and the activities people perform in the square, but also the rules and the social situation which influence the experience of being there.

These issues can be specially studied in Istanbul. Being a metropolis with a rich and complicated history, a bustling urban rhythm, the tradition of walking, and the dynamic of renewal, it has numerous locations where the ancient life of people collides with the new reconstruction works. Within Istanbul, Karaköy–Galataport is a key example. It’s opened up a 1.2 kilometer stretch of the waterfront that was previously closed off, and turned it into a place with a mix of public access, shops, restaurants, cultural venues and a place for cruise ships. All of this makes Karaköy–Galataport a good place to see how rebuilding the waterfront changes how people spend their day, how they interact, and what we mean by ‘public’ in modern city spaces.

Although urban open space, waterfront rebuilding, and businesses being involved are talked about a lot in urban design, the connection between these things in newly rebuilt squares in Istanbul hasn't been examined in as much detail. Specifically, Karaköy–Galataport hasn't been studied enough as a social and spatial place where public life is both encouraged and restricted. So, this article looks at Karaköy–Galataport as a modern city square and waterfront public space, to find out if it is a genuinely welcoming public area, or one that is controlled and focused on people spending money. It claims that although the project makes an active and visually pleasing place in the city, how ‘public’ it is is still affected by shops, things for tourists and how it's managed.

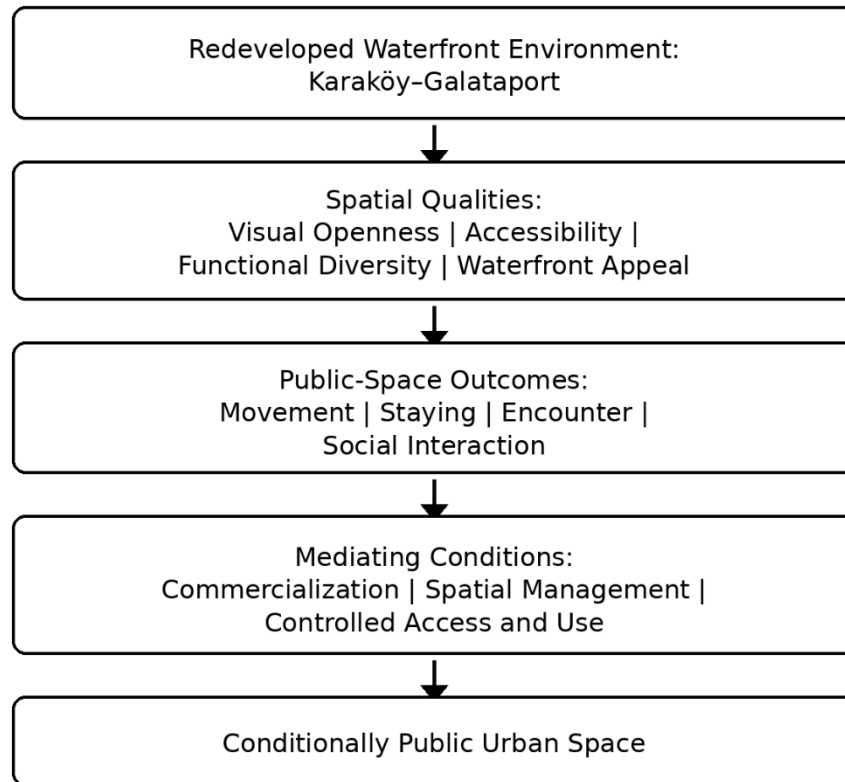


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the study showing the relationship between spatial qualities, daily activities, commercialization, management, and publicness in Karaköy–Galataport.

2. Problem Statement

What has happened in many city rebuilding projects over the last few decades is that promenades, plazas, squares and areas with a mix of uses have been presented as being for the public good. But, how ‘public’ these spaces actually are is often more complicated than how they look. Even though modern public spaces in the city may appear open, attractive and easy to get to, they are often shaped by a particular brand, controlled routes for people to follow, events organised by businesses, security and systems for running things that favour some people and activities over others. The outcome is not only a conflict between the public and the private in the legal sense, but something that appears to be open and is really open to all to use socially. Karaköy–Galataport actually demonstrates how things can be dragged in contrary directions. It is a bustling area at the waterfront and there are many individuals walking around, looking good and there is a big variety of activities that are happening in the daily life, yet it has been designed keeping in consideration tourism, shopping, spending money, and strict management. The question that this article poses, then, is whether the fact that the place appears to be popular with the folks can, in fact, imply that everybody can actually utilize it and develop meaningful relationships with one another.

3. Aim and Objectives

Its primary purpose is to examine Karaköy Galataport as a more recent town square and open waterfront in Istanbul and to wonder how its design, how maneuverable it is, how open it is (how easy it is to pass through), what occurs in it on a daily basis, how people interact with each other, and how it is managed, all of which influence the feeling of welcomingness and publicness.

The research specifically sets out to do these things: analyse the physical characteristics of Karaköy–Galataport as a modern town square and waterfront; look at how people use the space, what they do there, and how they interact; decide how being able to get to it, move through it, having a variety of things to do, affect its use; and assess how the shops and the way it's managed change how public and inclusive the area is.

4. Research Questions

The article tries to answer these questions: How genuinely inclusive is Karaköy–Galataport as a public space? How do the daily happenings, the way people use it, and the social interactions show how much of a ‘public’ place the squares

within Karaköy–Galataport are? And what is the ease of getting about, the openness of it, the stores, and how managed the place, as to the use of it and its publicity?

5. Theoretical Framework

5.1 Urban Squares and Public Space

Historically town squares have played a significant role in the life of the people. They direct the direction that people take, form a perception of what the city is, and are where social life occurs, not only because it has been structured but also because people do things. The success of a square is not only based on its design or appearance, but also its fusion with other streets, its versatility to a wide range of activities, and its accessibility to everyone. Urban design theory states that the urban spaces are complicated, which are shaped by their design, their usage, implications to people, and their management. And pragmatic experience systems tell you that how to arrive and leave a place, whether it is comfortable and what it looks like, what you can do there, and its sociability are central to a successful space. This is of particular significance in large cities today where an area might appear open, yet carry varying degrees of regulations and restriction.

Table 1: Major theoretical concepts and their applicability to the analysis of the concepts of publicness, daily practices, and social interaction in Karaköy–Galataport.

Theoretical concept	Main idea	Relevance to Karaköy–Galataport
Public space	Open, accessible urban realm for shared use	Basis for evaluating true vs managed publicness
Urban square as social space	Space for gathering, circulation, and interaction	Waterfront as contemporary square-like environment
Social interaction	Direct & indirect interaction (seeing, sharing, observing)	Evaluates movement, staying, and everyday public life
Accessibility	Connection to streets, transport, and pedestrian flows	Explains high activity and continuous use
Functional diversity	Mix of uses attracting varied users	Drives vitality and prolonged occupation
Staying and encounter	Ability to pause, meet, and experience space	Assesses support for lingering and social presence
Commercialization	Links space to consumption and branding	Increases activity but shifts toward consumption
Spatial control and management	Shaped by surveillance, design, and regulation	Explains controlled openness and reduced spontaneity
Conditional / managed publicness	Appears public but partly selective and regulated	Supports argument: active yet only partially public

5.2 Social Interaction in Public Space

By social interaction in public space, we do not only refer to the fact that people are talking to one another. It involves mere proximity, looking at each other, observing what happens and being in the same place. Due to this, a square is not only about the ease with which people can walk in it or its busyness, but its capacity to enable people to hang out, to bump in and out of one another, to do what they typically do, and to have many different people present simultaneously. It is these things that bring about a social meaning of the public space and how squares become the places to not only interact, but also to the life of the people in general.

5.3 Contemporary Publicness, Commercialization, and Control

In urban areas much of the public spaces are now determined by reconstruction projects that are both capable of access and appearance open in addition to containing shops, tourist attractions and being well maintained. Consequently, the concept of publicness does not mean that one has a legal right to be at a particular place. It has to do with the amount of time that people can actually use, enjoy and be somewhere freely and to everyone. We should not therefore base our judgments about modern squares on the pleasantness or the number of people in them but also on how the shops, watching, brands and managing influence the spontaneity of things, the variety of the ways that the space can be used and whether it is a public space or not.

6. Methodology

The study is based on a qualitative case study to analyze Karakoygalataport as a contemporary town square and waterfront urban open space in Istanbul. It is founded on observing the physical layout of the space, what occurs in that space, mapping behaviour (where people go and what they do) and making photographs. These techniques enable the investigators to visualize the relationship between the physical features of the location and the way people use it in their everyday life, how they move, where they lodge and how they communicate. To get a good understanding of how things change throughout the day and between weekdays and weekends, I watched the area lots of times. I was observing the way people were walking, where they stood, how they sat, what groups they were doing, the paths they followed along the water, and how the walkway correlated with the shops and businesses looking out of it. In particular, I observed points of people, duration of stay, busiest points and the interaction between people being in a place and passing through it.

I made notes and took photographs to make sense of what I was looking at; the photos depicted how people moved, what the boundaries of the area were, where people congregated, what appeared to be the most visible and how the open spaces interacted with the buildings. I didn't get involved in what was happening, I just watched how the space was used and what it was like.

A 'qualitative' approach is best here because I'm not just interested in how many people are in the space, but in the type of social life it allows. I'm using ideas about public spaces to work out if Karaköy–Galataport encourages everyone to mix and be sociable, or if it is a more restricted sort of public area. This study only looks at Karaköy–Galataport itself, and the analysis is based on my observations. I didn't ask people in interviews or with questionnaires, and I observed at certain times only. Consequently, I may have missed longer-term trends, seasonal patterns and less obvious aspects of public life.

Table 2: Analytical dimensions used to evaluate publicness, daily activities, and spatial performance in Karaköy–Galataport.

Analytical dimension	Focus of evaluation
Spatial configuration	Layout, linear promenade, openness, relation between built edges & public space
Accessibility	Pedestrian access, street connectivity, movement continuity, ease of use
Functional diversity	Mixed uses (retail, dining, leisure, cultural) & contribution to activity
Staying and gathering	Opportunities for sitting, pausing, meeting, and occupying space
Degree of publicness	Inclusiveness & impact of commercialization, management, and control

7. Study Area: Karaköy–Galataport

The area I studied, Karaköy–Galataport, is along the Bosphorus shoreline within an important old part of Istanbul. The project is a very large rebuild and a new cruise port, stretching about 1.2 kilometers along the central waterfront. The official details of the project say it combines facilities for cruise ships, a public route along the waterfront, places for culture, restaurants, shops and repaired historical buildings. Because of where it is, within the wider Karaköy–Galata area, it's in a place that has long been about trade, people moving around and different cultures.



Figure 2. General View of Karaköy Showing Its Dense Urban Fabric and Waterfront Setting along the Bosphorus (Source: Museum of Wander, “How to Spend a Day in Karaköy – Istanbul’s Coolest Neighbourhood”).

This previous context is important as Karaköy was already a dense, significant part of the city before the rebuilding. Its transport links, old buildings, mix of uses and closeness to Beyoğlu, Tophane and the historic centre of Istanbul make it key to the city. However, before the changes, the area being used for the port and the obstructions along the waterfront meant you couldn't easily walk all the way along the coast. Therefore Galataport didn't appear in a deserted or irrelevant location; it brought a new approach to development to a place that was already busy and thriving.



Figure 3. Historical Map of Constantinople Showing the Galata–Karaköy Area within the Historic Urban Context of Istanbul (Source: David Rumsey Map Collection, “Constantinople (Stambool)”).

Before the waterfront was redeveloped, you couldn't really get to the shore because of what the port was used for and physical obstructions. So, changing the area is about more than just how it looks; it's changed how the city and the waterfront relate to each other. Along with this new development comes a new form of urban planning, which is based upon tourism, hotels, cultural events, shops, and a guided (managed) means by which the public can travel. The official descriptions of the project emphasize the cruise terminal being underground and ensuring that the surface is smooth with good sea views, which supports the concept of an open waterfront to all.

Karaköy–Galataport isn't quite like a traditional, fully enclosed city square, but it acts like one. It is the place where people meet, hang, wait, roam, explore and generally socialize within an urban space that is simple to navigate and where the masses can view what is happening. Due to this, in this study, a city square is not merely a certain form but the location where the life of the people is concentrated and can be seen today.

Due to all this, Karaköy-Galataport would be a good place to examine how these square-shaped public spaces are developing in Istanbul today. It's easy to walk around, you can see a lot, it has a history, and has lots of different things happening, and it also shows the carefully planned, image-focused, and commercial nature of many waterfront rebuilds in the twenty-first century.

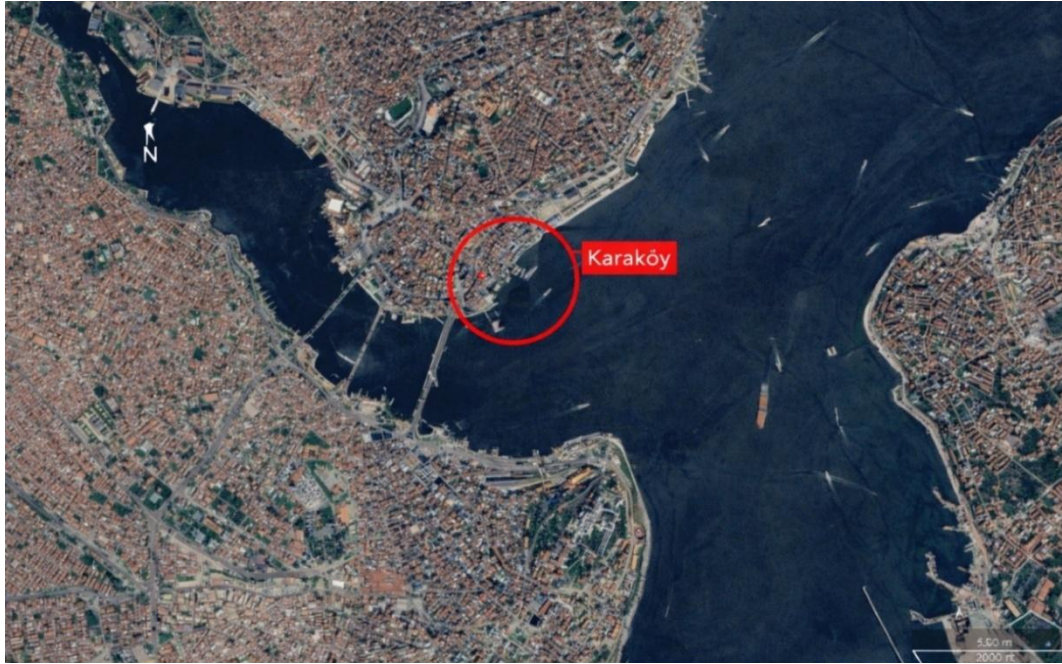


Figure 4. Karaköy-galataport location in the heart of the waterfront in Istanbul (Google Earth by the Author).



Figure 5. Karaköy-Galataport (Urban-context) map that demonstrates the boundary of the study area and its location with respect to the surrounding districts on the central waterfront of Istanbul (Adapted by the Author using Google Earth).



Figure 6. Linear waterfront promenade and the spatial organization of the study area site plan of Karaköy-Galataport (Adapted by the Author according to project materials).

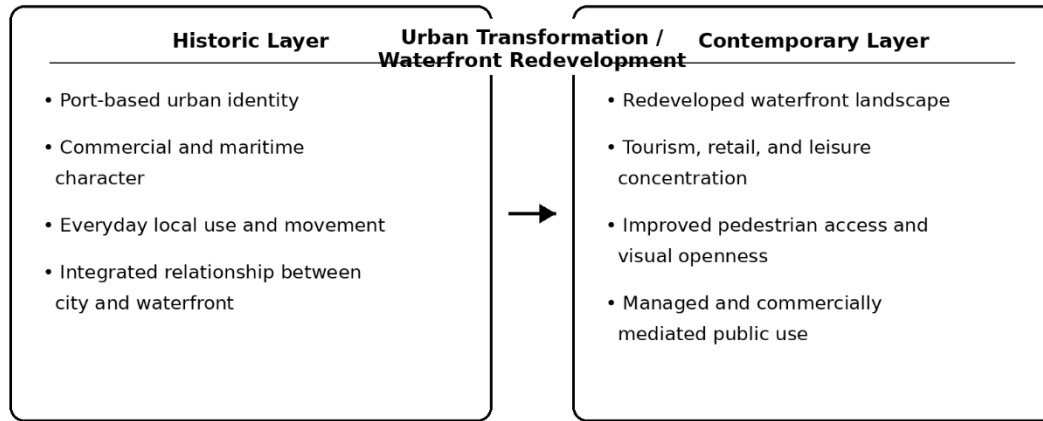


Figure 7. Historic and modern superimposition surrounding Karakoy-Galataport, which demonstrates the change of a historic port-based urban waterfront to a re-developed, open and commercially controlled public space.

8. Findings and Discussion

8.1 Spatial Configuration and Visual Openness

The space in Karaköy–Galataport is open and this is one of the first things which you notice. The broad pathway over the water, the extensive outlooks over the Bosphorus and the simple walks of the pedestrian make it a definite and pleasant place to visit. According to public space professionals, an effective public space must be walkable and visible to see what is going on, and people must know the design. This idea is very obvious in how the walkway is laid out and how the public part of Karaköy–Galataport continues without interruption. The site has long distances you can see, clear lines of sight, and a feeling of being spacious which makes walking, looking around and briefly occupying the space easy.

This openness also helps people to interact with each other, though not directly. Because you can continually see others walking, sitting, meeting up and pausing along the waterfront, it encourages ‘visual sociability’ - experiencing public life by being aware of and sharing the same space as others. The walkway is a shared, visible area where people look at the sea, pass each other, and participate in public life, simply by being there and sometimes by actually talking to each other. Spaces with unimpeded sea views and paths for walking all the way along attract people to stay longer, showing that openness is a benefit for socialising as much as it is for looking at things.



Figure 8. Galataport promenade showing diverse users, active waterfront occupation, and a regulated public environment (Photograph by the Author, 2025).

8.2 Accessibility and Pedestrian Connectivity

Another key to how well the site works socially is how easy it is to get to. Karaköy–Galataport is in the middle of Karaköy and has good connections to surrounding streets and public transport. According to the official project information, the redevelopment is also about the access of the people to the waterfront that was previously inaccessible, once again highlighting the re-accessibility to the sea. Public space, in these regards, is not merely being able to access it, but how well it links to the rest of the transport in the city, and how people with all sorts of needs can easily get into, move around and remain. Of special importance is how easy it is to walk. It is the place to walk to and the means to walk to another place as people may walk along the water and yet also visit places on their way.

Such a dual purpose encourages more individuals to utilize the public space and opens up opportunities to be involved in various types of interactions: premeditated gatherings, random encounters, waiting, and simply watching. When it was being observed, it was not only people passing through the area but also taking a break. Others were rushing towards the end of a larger walk through the city, others sat on benches, observation points, outside restaurants or on attractive areas of the walk. The combination of these breaks and halts enhances the rectangular nature of space. But, there is also a social aspect of accessibility.

A place can be physically open, but still, feel restricted to some individuals due to the ambiance, the stores, or unwritten rules. Thus, it is not so difficult to access Karaköy–Galataport on foot but it is not so obvious that people can spend much time there without spending money..

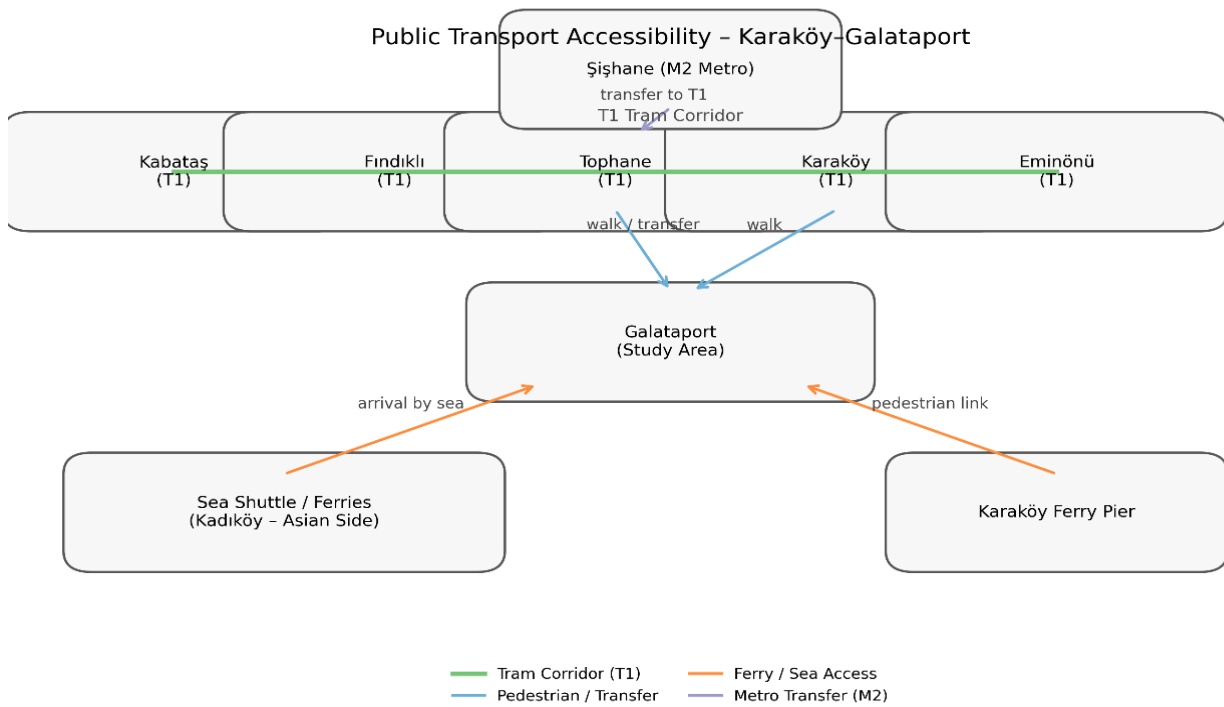


Figure 9. Accessibility of public transport and walking access to Karakoy-Galaport (Prepared by the Author).

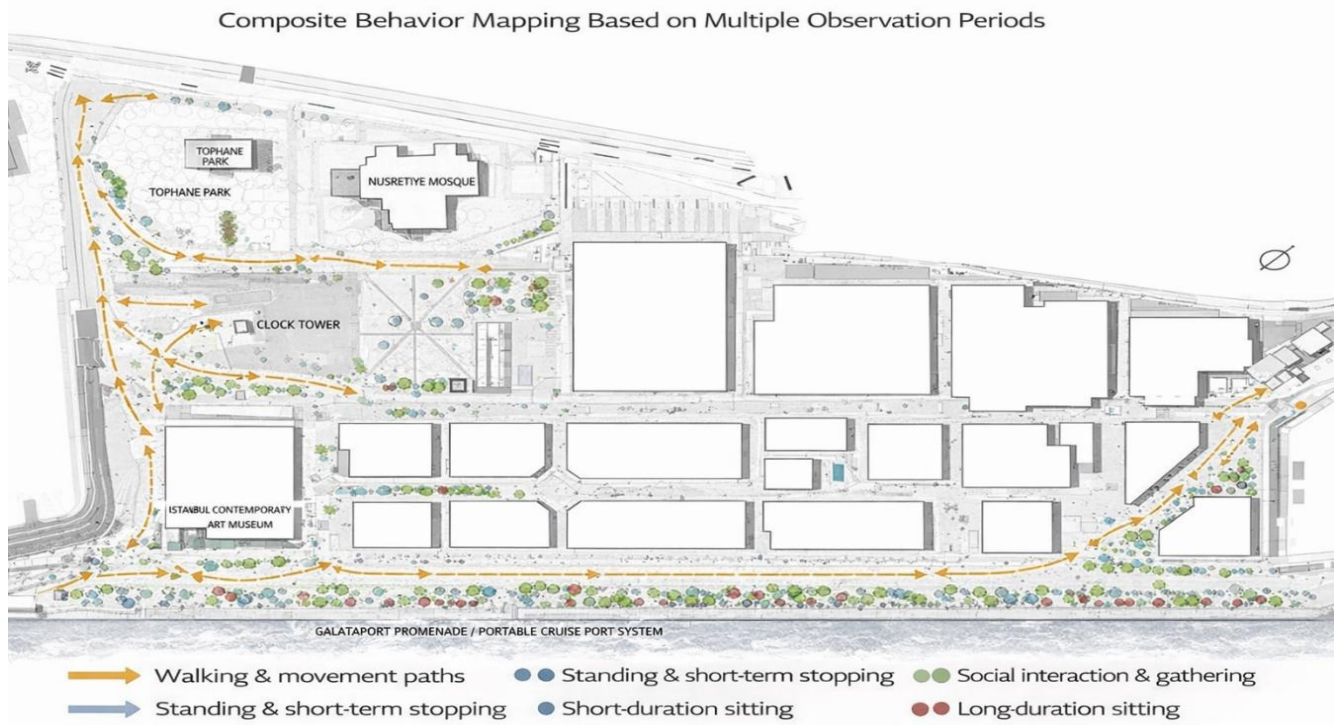


Figure 10. Karakoy-Galataport composite behavior mapping demonstrating the paths of pedestrian movements, pause points, short-term stopping, sitting, and social interaction (Prepared by the Author on the Basis of Field observation).

8.3 Functional Diversity and Public Activity

Among the most evident causes of why Karaköy Galataport is lively and in constant use is the number of different things that occur there. Shopping, eating, walking, sightseeing, taking pictures, being with friends and just passing through all of this all occur in the same area, making it a complex, urban environment. The literature of public space emphasizes that effective places must have multiple uses and activities to be interesting in the long run. All these various things going on in Galataport at the same time makes the site more attractive and it is utilized at various times of the day. The life of the people in this place is not created by a particular event or activity and it is a mixture of what people do daily and what they go there to do.

This diversity also increases the chances of mixing of different people. Tourists, local residents, people walking, the workers, groups of friends all come into one picture, forming a hectic picture of people being seen and being together. As the site was being observed, this was manifested through people walking around to have fun, see people, eat something, to take pictures, sit around the water and to move around between places to experience the culture and to shop. The action was often close to the terraces of the cafes, the shore of the water, and where individuals took slower steps and gazed more about them. This implies that engagement with others is not only promoted by the design of the walkway itself, but also in the presence of attractions and things to do nearby. An effective public space must be able to accommodate not only people in transit, but also people standing and loitering. Karakoe-galataport contains numerous attractions to make people want to spend some time here: wide sidewalks, water views, seating areas, resting spots, a slower life cycle, and a relaxing, observe-all-around environment. The waterfront actually attracts people, they stop and look around, talk or simply be there. And being able to stay transforms the walkway from simply a way to get from place to place into a place for people to be social.

Table 3: The main types of activities which can be noticed at Karakoy-Galataport and how they contribute to the social utilization of the waterfront environment.

Activity type	Typical location	Social character	Contribution to public life
Walking / strolling	Promenade & main paths	Individual & collective movement	Supports continuous presence & active pedestrian environment
Sitting / resting	Seating edges & open areas	Temporary pause / shared presence	Encourages lingering beyond circulation
Meeting / talking	Seating areas & entrances	Face-to-face informal interaction	Supports everyday social exchange
Eating / drinking	Cafés, terraces & seating zones	Leisure & group-based activity	Increases stay duration; adds vitality (consumption-linked)
Viewing / watching	Waterfront edge & open spaces	Passive presence & observation	Enhances experience & indirect interaction
Photography / sightseeing	Viewpoints & open public areas	Tourism & visually driven activity	Attracts diverse users; reinforces identity
Passing through	Main pedestrian routes	Short-term movement	Maintains urban connectivity



Figure 11. Commercial frontage and evening pedestrian activity on the Galataport waterfront prominence which is mixed use. Source: Frommhold, M.

8.4 Staying, Encounter, and Waterfront Experience

When I was observing the area, most people visited the water edge to admire the view, capture pictures, relax, or have a small talk. Some used the seating or edges of things for a bit, others stood out in prominent positions. The most crowded, gregarious place was where you could view the water, people were walking, and things were going on around. Meeting people was not necessarily a face to face interaction, it was also simply being in the same space, knowing one another and just making momentary use of the space. The Bosphorus adds to this feeling, giving the area a particular vibe. So, how ‘public’ Karaköy–Galataport is comes about not just because of how many people are there and how they're moving, but because of the attractiveness of the area and how it invites you to hang around.

However, there are limitations. The official Galataport plans refer to it as a city center, that unites culture, food, shopping, cruise vessels, and access by people. This reveals how very much the life of the people and what is offered to sale are interconnected. Their open spaces are not really open town squares, but rather more planned spaces with a variety of activities to engage in, and their popularity is closely linked to the concept of relaxing, having a holiday, and a well-controlled experience.

8.5 Commercialization and Regulated Publicness

It may be that a place is crowded and you may literally get into it, but it may still indirectly indicate who should be there, what you should be doing and how you should be acting. On the street in KaraköyGalataport, the presence of so many cafes, restaurants and shops on the street, significantly influences the space use. Unless they are making a purchase, people are not actively excluded but the atmosphere of the place is more conducive to some kinds of activity than others. Presence by the public is encouraged, although usually within the context of expectation of the businesses.

The cruise ship neighbourhood and the level of care with which the redevelopment has been planned also contributes to a more monitored type of transparency. The space is well-organized, highly disciplined, and aesthetically planned. This may help it become more comfortable and likable, and can also diminish the spontaneity of things. Karaköy–Galataport doesn't stop people interacting, it just organizes that interaction within the rules of tourism, business, and how the place is run. The outcome is a lively, usable public space that is, in a more fundamental way of looking at things, only partly public.



Figure 12. Commercial frontage and organized public occupation along the Galataport promenade, illustrating the relationship between leisure activity, consumption, and managed publicness (Photograph by the Author).

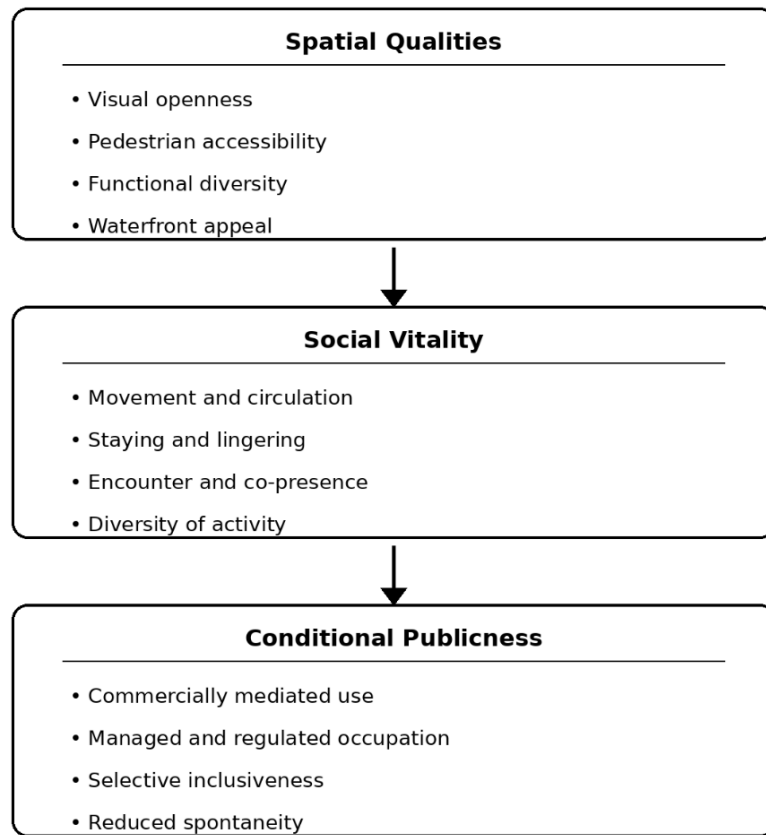


Figure 13. Relationship between spatial qualities, social vitality, and conditional publicness in Karaköy–Galataport.

8.6 Overall Interpretation

So, Karaköy–Galataport is a kind of mixed public space. It's very good in terms of its design, how open it looks, how easily you can walk through it, how many different things are there and how pleasant the surroundings are. It allows people to meet, observe, wait and just be in public, and so it functions as a modern-day version of a town square. At the same time, this openness is limited by business interests and how the public space is managed. This suggests that just being attractive and lively doesn't automatically mean a public space is for everyone. They can happily exist alongside more subtle ways of influencing how public life happens, is experienced and is spread throughout the area.

Table 4: Summary evaluation of Karaköy–Galataport as a social interaction space based on the main analytical dimensions discussed in the study.

Analytical dimension	Strengths observed	Limitations observed	Effect on publicness
Spatial configuration and visual openness	Visually open, legible, attractive; strong views; supports movement and orientation	Shaped by curated redevelopment, not fully spontaneous	Supports accessibility and visibility within a managed framework
Accessibility and pedestrian connectivity	Centrally located; well connected to streets, transport, and pedestrian flows	Social accessibility influenced by commercial character	Increases reach and movement; not fully inclusive
Functional diversity and public activity	Mix of leisure, retail, dining creates lively continuous use	Activities linked to consumption and tourism	Enhances vitality but leans toward consumption-based participation
Staying, encounter, and waterfront experience	Seating and promenade support pausing, viewing, and interaction	Still shaped by commercial and curated setting	Enhances social interaction but limits unstructured use
Commercialization and regulated publicness	Investment and management improve safety and attractiveness	Commercial control reduces spontaneity and comfort for some users	Active but conditionally public; regulated openness

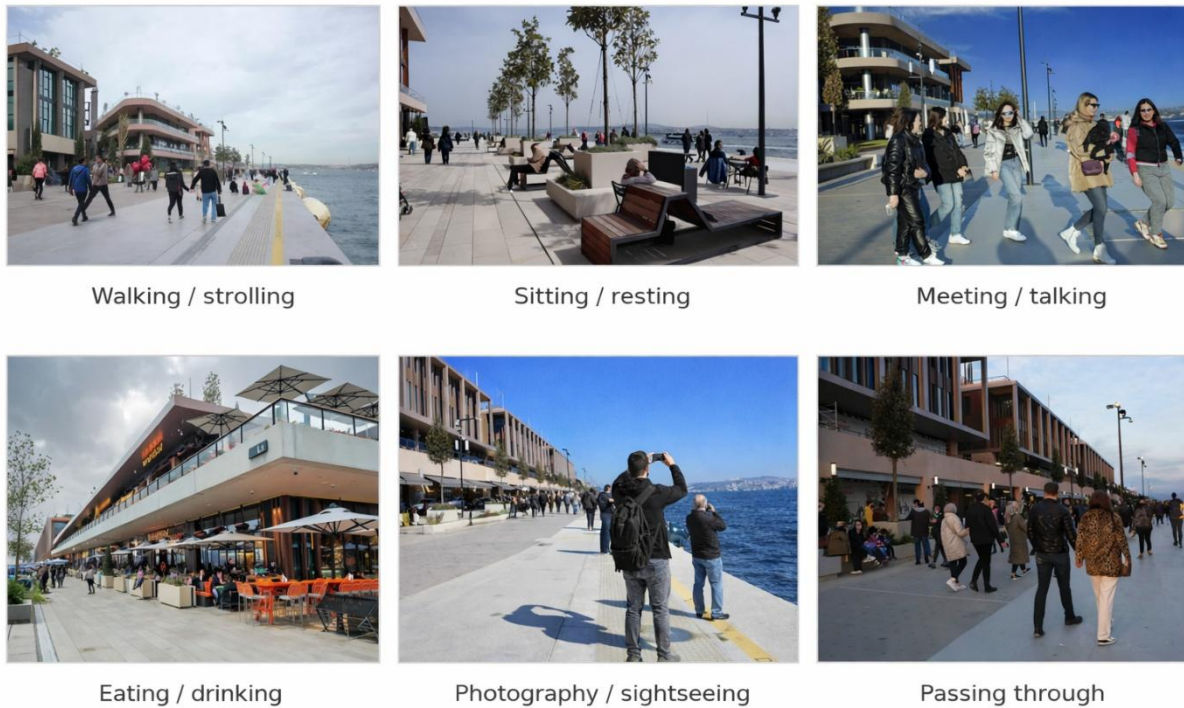


Figure 14. Photos of everyday life activities in Karakoy-Galataport.

9. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper has examined Karakoy-Galataport as a contemporary town square and a socializing place of people within the transformed public spaces in Istanbul. The analysis shows the area has many of the features of a successful public space: it's easy to get to, looks open, is easy to walk through, has a variety of uses and a strong link with the waterfront. These characteristics enable individuals to travel, remain, observe and be generally in the streets and contribute to a vibrant and attractive streetscape.

But the research also shows that how 'public' the area is isn't just down to its physical design, but also to business and how it's managed. Although Karaköy-Galataport is an open place and is open to the people, the social activities in the area are highly influenced by money spending, tourists, and the manner in which the area is managed. It's therefore a 'public' space with conditions, rather than a completely open and socially fair civic space. This case shows that modern town squares shouldn't be judged just on how they look and how busy they are.

We should also consider the extent to which they are inclusive, how much can be used freely and how much they can facilitate the spontaneous, non-business public life. What is important about Karaköy-Galataport is not just that it is an effective destination on the waterfront, but that it is also the expression of the tension between the social and civic realm of the public space conceived of as the prospective business space. This research is also constrained due to the fact that I told what I saw and my overall impressions.

Since it does not involve interviewing individuals on their views, conducting surveys or observing things occurring in a longer time frame (or in different seasons), I was not able to have a complete picture of how people perceive the area and what it is like to use. More detailed studies of what people think, interviews or more in-depth observation of behaviour might provide a more comprehensive picture of how people in fact experience and negotiate modern urban public spaces.

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