

Photographic counter-memory as urban resilience: Evaluating Murat Germen's photographic practice in Istanbul's urban transformation since 2000

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Abstract

In the post-2000 period, Istanbul has become one of the most intense cases of neoliberal spatial restructuring in the developing world, driven by state-market alliances that systematically opened non-commodified spaces to real estate capital. This article argues that such transformations operate not only in economic terms but also as mnemonic policies: the erasure of collective memory is a structural mechanism through which hegemonic power generates docile space and undermines counter-hegemonic potentials. The article distinguishes two modalities of erasure across two cases of urban transformation. The first is aggressive erasure, exemplified by Fikirtepe, where the accelerated application of Law on the Transformation of Areas Under Disaster Risk outpaced community resistance and made the continuity of embodied and collective memory impossible. The second is aesthetic recoding, operating in the transformation of Bağdat Avenue in Kadıköy, where the gradual replacement of neighbourhood-based social life by luxury apartments and commercial consumption spaces enacts what Neil Leach calls 'aesthetic anaesthesia'. Against this backdrop, the article treats the photographic practice of Murat Germen - a photographer and academic who holds the most extensive archive of Istanbul's contemporary transformation - as its primary object. Drawing on the counter-archive - the photographic refusal of the terms of official representation - the article examines Germen's counter-memorial narratives across both sites and their public resonance. His Fikirtepe documentation captures the threshold at which anamnesis remains possible; his Bağdat Avenue work reveals the gap between spatial promise and eroded identity. Employing Gillian Rose's qualitative visual methodology alongside an analysis of Germen's reception across institutional contexts, the article finds that photographic counter-memory constitutes a meaningful but constrained form of 'urban resilience' - understood not in its technocratic sense of 'bouncing back', but as the social capacity of communities to sustain contested memory under conditions of imposed transformation - a formulation that draws on critical resilience scholarship. The article's primary theoretical contribution is a distinction between two functions of photographic counter-memory, whose efficacy is conditioned by the modality of erasure each confronts. A testimonial function - the preservation of evidence for future challenge - operates robustly across both erasure modalities, while a mobilizing function - the generation of counter-hegemonic solidarity - depends on the legibility of loss that each modality of mnemonic erasure permits. Photographic counter-memory does not reverse physical transformation, but it sustains the social capacity to recognize, archive, and contest ongoing erasure.

Keywords: mnemonic policy, neoliberal urbanism, photographic counter-memory, urban resilience, visual methodology

1. Introduction

Since 2000, Istanbul's urban landscape has undergone transformation at a pace and scale exceeding that of almost any comparable city of such historical density. Entire historical neighbourhoods like Sulukule and Tarlabası were cleared of their residents and rebuilt under a legislative framework specifically designed in 2005 to accelerate demolition and shorten the time

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Article history: Received 26 May 2026, Revised 22 July 2026, Accepted 12 August 2026, Published 30 August 2026

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available for legal challenge, collective organization, or documentation via Law No. 5366. While Law No. 5366¹ had already established the template, its reach was limited to designated heritage areas. Law No. 6306 (the Law on the Transformation of Areas Under Disaster Risk, 2012) extended this instrument across the entire city; neighbourhoods like Tozkoparan, Okmeydanı and Fikirtepe were legally designated as risk zones (Figure 1). This reduced the gap between the declaration of a structure as 'risky' and its physical demolition to a point at which resistance was blocked before it could begin: by the time communities could mobilize, the bulldozers had already moved in. The regulatory framework effectively compressed the time available for legal challenge, collective organization, and documentation.

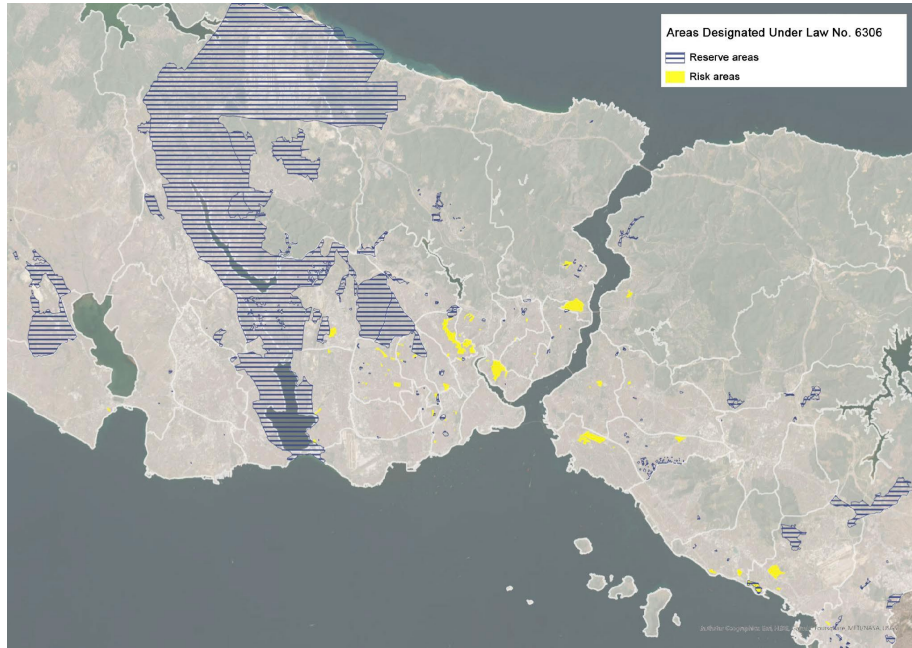


Figure 1 Risk Areas and Reserve Areas Designated Under Law No. 6306 (İstanbul Planlama Ajansı, 2024)

The systematic erasure of urban memory is not unique to Istanbul. Shao's (2013) account of Shanghai documents how large-scale redevelopment between 1990 and 2010 displaced millions of residents through a process deliberately paced to outrun collective mourning - what Shao calls 'everyday domicile', the normalization of home destruction under the banner of modernization. A different but related dynamic characterizes Dubai: Elsheshtawy (2010) shows how a built environment engineered for prestige and global investment appeal systematically crowds out the social spaces that fall outside the spectacle. Bağdat Avenue - the prestigious commercial axis of Istanbul's Kadıköy district and the second case this article examines - offers a direct parallel. What sets Istanbul apart is not the logic itself, but its configuration: the simultaneous operation of aggressive coercion and gradual aestheticization within the same metropolitan governance area, producing two distinct erasure modalities that the following analysis examines in parallel.

Türkiye's post-2000 urban policy provides the institutional framework through which this configuration takes specific form. Çavuşoğlu and Strutz (2014) trace how successive governments made the construction sector the visible material expression of its hegemonic project. The legislative infrastructure assembled to sustain this project, above all Law No. 6306, handed central government the power to declare areas 'risky', acquire property by compulsion, and proceed to demolition without local authority approval or meaningful community engagement. Kuyucu (2014) shows that the law's strategic ambiguity was not a legislative imprecision but an instrument, designed to foreclose judicial review while leaving TOKİ with effective discretion over entire

¹ Law on Conservation by Renovation and Use by Revitalization of the Deteriorated Historical and Cultural Immovable Property <https://kvmgm.ktb.gov.tr/TR-43250/law-on-conservation-by-renovation-and-use-by-revitalization-of-the-deteriorated-historical-and-cultural-immovable-property-5366.html>

neighbourhoods. [Saraçoğlu and Demirtaş-Milz \(2014\)](#) name this as disaster ideology: the reframing of political expropriation as technical necessity. As [Batuman \(2025\)](#) puts it, “there is a hidden relationship between slowness and remembering, and between speed and forgetting” - a formulation that connects the temporal design of urban law directly to the organized production of amnesia. The cumulative result, as [Aksoy \(2012\)](#) captures it, is a city that “ceases to be a real city” (p. 93): not uneven modernization, but the deliberate conversion of layered urban space into a surface without historical depth.

This article proposes that the systematic speed of Istanbul's post-2000 urban transformation cannot be adequately theorized as economic policy alone. Alongside [Harvey's \(2003\)](#) widely cited framework of accumulation by dispossession, post-2000 Istanbul's transformation operates simultaneously as what this article terms a mnemonic policy, a process that can be interpreted as producing systematic mnemonic erasure held within urban space. Urban demolition, in this reading, does not only destroy the neighbourhood incidentally while pursuing rent extraction. It also destroys the mnemonic infrastructure embedded in it - the physical framework of *cadres sociaux* ([Halbwachs, 1980](#)), bodily practice ([Connerton, 1989](#)), and anamnetic attachment ([Leach, 1999](#)) through which communities maintain collective subjectivity and the capacity for counter-hegemonic identification.

This article identifies two distinct modalities through which this mnemonic erasure operates. The first - aggressive erasure - is exemplified by Fikirtepe, where concentrated application of Law No. 6306 created conditions in which community resistance, documentation, and collective grieving were made impossible before they could begin. The second - aesthetic recoding - operates in the Bağdat Avenue periphery, where no demolition order was ever declared and yet the silent replacement of neighbourhood-scale social life by commercial consumption and accumulation structures has produced what [Leach \(1999\)](#) calls ‘aesthetic anaesthesia’: an environment in which sensory pleasure neutralizes critical consciousness and dissolves the affective bonds sustaining mnemonic attachment to place. Fikirtepe and Bağdat Avenue at Kadıköy represent the two faces of a single hegemonic memory policy - one that erases through dispossession and speed, the other through aestheticization and gradual erosion.

Against this backdrop, the article evaluates critical photographic practice as a prospect of urban resilience. The concept of photographic counter-memory designates not only the documentary recording of what is lost but the active challenge to the terms on which certain realities are made visible, documented, and shared. The primary object of analysis is the photographic work of Murat Germen, a leading photographer (and academic) in Türkiye whose practice spans both sites under examination. What makes Germen's photography critically important is his intellectual positioning while documenting the erasure processes.

The article addresses three related questions: in what specific ways does post-2000 Istanbul's transformation constitute a mnemonic policy and how do the two cases illuminate its structurally distinct modalities? Through what visual and discursive strategies does photographic practice construct counter-memorial narratives, and does the same practice operate differently when confronting two structurally distinct erasure modalities? What are the real limits of photographic counter-memory as a mechanism of urban resilience? These questions are addressed through a qualitative visual methodology grounded in [Rose's \(2016\)](#) tripartite framework of production, image, and audiencing, combined with interpretive close reading of Germen's work.

This article makes three interconnected contributions to the existing literature. Theoretically, it introduces and develops the concept of mnemonic policy as a necessary supplement to economic accounts of urban transformation - a framework that connects Harvey's accumulation by dispossession with the organized erasure of collective memory. Empirically, it distinguishes two structurally distinct modalities of mnemonic erasure - aggressive erasure and aesthetic recoding - and traces their differential consequences for photographic counter-memory. Analytically, it proposes a distinction between the testimonial and mobilizing functions of photographic counter-

memory as a tool for evaluating counter-memorial efficacy under different conditions of urban transformation. These contributions build on existing work on photography and urban displacement (Shao, 2013; Elsheshtawy, 2010), critical resilience studies (Davoudi, 2012), and visual urbanism (Rose, 2016).

2. Theoretical Framework

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The theoretical framework operates across three tiers: a primary tier supplying its core explanatory architecture (Harvey's accumulation by dispossession, Gramsci's theory of hegemony, and Leach's account of mnemonic infrastructure and aesthetic anaesthesia); a secondary tier grounding the analysis of what urban transformation destroys (Halbwachs's collective memory, Connerton's bodily memory, Nora's distinction between living and institutionalized memory, and Huyssen's urban palimpsest); and a third tier evaluating photographic practice as counter-hegemonic response (Sekula's counter-archive, Tagg's critique of photographic authority, Azoulay's civil contract, and Tello's counter-memory aesthetics). Urban resilience, the article's evaluative horizon, is addressed separately at the end of this framework.

Neoliberal Urbanism, Hegemony, and Memory Erasure

The analytical foundation rests on a shared premise across critical urban theory and political economy: that urban transformation under neoliberalism is not a neutral modernization process but a spatial strategy of capital accumulation. David Harvey's concept of accumulation by dispossession - the capture of previously non-commodified spaces, commons, and use values for market exploitation - provides the foundational economic logic of post-2000 Istanbul's transformation. As Kuyucu and Ünsal (2010) show, Istanbul's transformation operates specifically as state-led property transfer: the state is not merely a facilitator but an active agent of capital redistribution.

This spatial logic is given its most compact theoretical formulation by Lefebvre (1991), for whom space is simultaneously the product and the instrument of power: *"(Social) space is a (social) product [...] in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power"* (p. 26). Yet 'accumulation by dispossession' alone is insufficient to account for the full scope of what is at stake. Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony introduces the dimension that Harvey's economic model risks overlooking: the production of consent. In Türkiye's post-2000 context, Çavuşoğlu and Strutz (2014) reveal how, by identifying construction with development, progress, and modernization, the ruling Party produced social consent for dispossession across social classes. Türkün (2011) further identifies the governing coalition through which this hegemony functions: central state, TOKİ², private capital, and media together normalize demolition as opportunity, with *"gecekondu"* (squatter's house) and *"riskli yapı"* (risky building) functioning as discursive instruments that degrade the urban image of targeted neighbourhoods before a single wall is touched.

Batuman (2018) extends this analysis by showing how urban space functions not merely as the scene of hegemonic politics but as its productive apparatus claiming that the ruling Party has built its hegemony through its success in urban politics and the new kind of Islamic urbanism it generated. This spatial production of ideology is what makes mnemonic erasure not a byproduct but a requirement: the new built environment must overwrite the old one not only physically but semiotically, replacing its memory-bearing surfaces with surfaces that carry the ruling hegemony's own signification.

Batuman (2022a) draws on this dual analytical horizon in reflecting that urban transformation is simultaneously an economic and a mnemonic-cultural operation - neither dimension reducible to

² TOKİ - Toplu Konut İdaresi Başkanlığı - Türkiye's Mass Housing Administration, established 1984 and significantly expanded after 2002. It operates as the state's primary instrument for urban redevelopment, controlling land allocation and construction contracts across transformation zones.

the other. Aksoy (2014) confirms: “In Türkiye, the government uses the city not only as a growth machine, but also as the site of a socio-political transformation project” (p. 27). It is at this intersection that Neil Leach's contribution becomes decisive. Leach (1999) proposes that the built environment functions as a mnemonic infrastructure. Its architectural forms do not merely shelter activity; they actively trigger memory, identity, and affective attachment - a process Leach terms ‘anamnesis’ - the capacity of space to evoke buried memories and sustain collective subjectivity. When this infrastructure is demolished, what is lost is not only physical shelter but the cognitive and emotional anchoring of the community. Leach terms the inverse process ‘aesthetic anaesthesia’: sensory pleasure, in this condition, neutralizes critical consciousness and dissolves the affective bonds that sustain counter-hegemonic identification.

Collective Memory, Urban Space, and Bodily Memory

For Halbwachs (1980), memory is not a private archive stored in individual minds but a fundamentally social construct maintained by group practices and material environments. Space and memory are mutually constitutive: communities shape space in their own image, and space in turn inscribes itself into the thought and memory of communities. When that space is destroyed, the *cadres sociaux* - the social frameworks within which memory operates - collapse, and what is lost cannot be recovered by any act of individual recollection alone. Nora's (1989) distinction between ‘*lieux de mémoire*’ and ‘*milieu de mémoire*’ sharpens this analysis: Istanbul's accelerated transformation converts living memory environments into sites of either erasure or institutionalized commemoration - both of which, paradoxically, mark the death of living memory rather than its continuity.

Huyssen's (2003) account of urban palimpsests provides the spatial concept that best names what hegemonic memory policy destroys. Cities are best understood as palimpsests: stratified spatial texts in which multiple temporal layers coexist within the same material environment. This temporal thickness is what large-scale urban redevelopment irreversibly breaks down.

Connerton (1989) adds a dimension crucial to evaluating both the consequences of displacement and the limits of photographic counter-memory. The most durable form of social memory resides not in texts or images but in bodily practices - the habituated rhythms through which communities inhabit space. When a community is displaced, this bodily archive is irreversibly severed. This is where photography reaches its defining limit: it can preserve visual traces of demolished environments, but it cannot recover the embodied, lived dimensions of the social life they once sustained.

Photography as Counter-Hegemonic Practice

Tagg (1988) provides the necessary caution: photography carries no inherent guarantee of truthful documentation. Its evidentiary authority is not a product of any direct relationship to reality but of the institutional frameworks that confer it. Sekula (1984, 1986) translates this into an explicit politics: the counter-archive is a practice that refuses the terms on which official representation operates, insisting on the politics of seeing. In Murat Germen's own critical characterization, the photograph functions as evidence of what he describes as a ‘crime scene’ (Germen, 2019a).

Tello's (2019) critical genealogy adds an aesthetic dimension to Sekula's approach, arguing that counter-memory is most productively understood as a non-dialectical practice of accumulation - the ‘and-and formula’ - in which multiple heterogeneous histories are held in productive tension rather than resolved into a singular counter-narrative. Its aesthetic form is montage, and in its most extreme form, hoarder montage (the layered accumulation of fragments), producing a temporal web in which “*the past is not yet passed*” (Tello, 2019, p. 397).

Azoulay (2008) adds an ethical dimension: photography constitutes a civil contract between photographer, photographed subject, and viewer - one that generates political claims exceeding the intentions of any single participant and creates a form of civic space capable of persisting even under conditions of political closure. Germen articulates this as personal commitment: “*I genuinely*

feel responsibility. The reason I want to continue photographing the different events I have had the chance to witness here is that I am able to use this struggle as an example in national and international events" (Germen, 2020a).

Urban Resilience as Social Capacity

Urban resilience has moved a long way from its origins. What began as an ecological metaphor of 'bouncing back' (Holling, 1973) has become a set of socially differentiated accounts of adaptive capacity under stress (Davoudi, 2012; Meerow et al., 2016), and critical scholarship has pressed harder still, asking of any resilience claim: resilience of what, for whom, and against what forces (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2013; Cretney, 2014). This article takes the term in its most socially grounded sense - the capacity of communities to sustain collective memory, social networks, and the grounds for political contestation under rapid, externally imposed transformation. Photographic counter-memory is one such practice, though a partial one. It does not preserve the physical fabric of neighbourhoods, and it cannot restore the bodily archive of displaced communities (Connerton, 1989). What it sustains is the social capacity to recognize, archive, and contest ongoing erasure - and that capacity is what the article assesses as the resilience potential of the photographic counter-archive.

3. Methodology

This article employs a qualitative visual methodology adapted from Rose's (2016) model for the critical analysis of visual materials. Rose proposes that photographic meaning is not located in the image alone but distributed across three distinct sites: the site of production (the conditions under which an image is made); the site of the image itself (its content, composition, and formal properties); and the site of audiencing (the contexts in which images are encountered, circulated, and interpreted). Applying the method to the question of urban resilience requires specifying, in the context of Murat Germen's counter-archival practice across Fikirtepe and Bağdat Avenue, what each site contributes to the central question: can photography constitute a meaningful form of resistance to mnemonic erasure?

Visual Corpus and Selection Criteria

The visual corpus for this study comprises 10 photographs drawn from four of Murat Germen's documentary series: *'Sanctity and Despotism of Progress'* (Fikirtepe, 2012-2015), *'98 Windows'* (Fikirtepe, 2013-2014), *'Transformal'* (Bağdat Avenue and wider Istanbul, 2007-ongoing), and *'İnşa'* (Construct) (broader Istanbul construction culture, with selected images from sites of aesthetic recoding, 2014-ongoing). Images were selected according to three criteria: (1) direct relevance to one of the two erasure modalities under analysis; (2) availability of documented institutional reception - exhibition, press coverage, or academic citation - sufficient to permit audiencing analysis; and (3) visual distinctiveness, specifically the capacity to illustrate a discrete photographic strategy rather than repeating an already-represented approach within the corpus. Images known to have circulated across both activist/journalistic and arts/architecture institutional contexts were prioritized, as their dual circulation provides the most direct evidence for the reception asymmetry that is the article's central empirical finding. The two cases are made comparable by controlling for photographer, city context, and time period, isolating the modality of erasure as the central axis of comparison between them. Table 1 lists these images by series, date, case context, and role in the analysis.

Table 1 Analyzed Images from Murat Germen's Photographic Corpus, by Series, Date, Case/Context, and Role in the Analysis

Image	Series	Date	Case / Context	Role in the Analysis
Fig. 2 'Çivi' (Nail)	Sanctity and Despotism of Progress	2014	Fikirtepe - aggressive erasure	Threshold image: a single standing dwelling amid a cleared lot; visual testimony to imminent demolition.
Fig. 3 '98 Windows'	98 Windows (installation)	2013-2014	Fikirtepe - aggressive erasure	Assembled window fragments materialize the gap between the erased mnemonic infrastructure and the towers replacing it.
Fig. 4 Drone view	Erasing Memory (unpublished)	2014	Fikirtepe - aggressive erasure	Aerial 'apocalyptic dystopian landscape'; exposes the totality of demolition beyond the ground-level frame.
Figs. 6–7 Rendering vs. built form	Transformatal	2014-ongoing	Bağdat Avenue - aesthetic recoding	Juxtaposes architectural promise with delivered environment; documents the gap central to the second case.
Fig. 8 'Rupture'	Sarmal (Helix)	2017	Bağdat Avenue / Istanbul - institutional reception	Evidence for the audiencing analysis: circulation within an art/architecture exhibition context.

Source: Author, based on Germen's published and exhibited photographic series (See references and [İstanbul Planlama Ajansı \(2024\)](#) to [Germen \(2017\)](#))

Visual Analysis Procedure

Analysis at the site of the image proceeded through a structured set of compositional and semantic categories. The first four draw on [Rose's \(2016\)](#) compositional interpretation framework, which identifies spatial organisation - including perspective, angle, framing, scale, and the visual arrangement of figures - as the primary locus of an image's effects ([Rose, 2016, pp. 62–83](#)): (1) framing and perspective - the spatial boundaries of the image, camera distance, and angle of approach and elevation; (2) spatial extent and distance - the width, depth, interval and distance between forms within the image, and the effects of apparent closeness or remoteness between pictured elements and the spectator ([Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006](#), as cited in [Rose, 2016, p.70](#)); (3) content and human presence - what the image actually shows and the logic of focalisation, specifically who is represented, how, and from whose vantage ([Bal, 1991, pp. as cited in Rose, 2016, p. 71](#)); (4) visual temporality - the juxtaposition of temporal states within or across images, understood here through [Tello's \(2019, p. 397\)](#) account of montage as a practice in which "the past is not yet passed." Two further categories were developed by the author in response to the specific visual conditions of the corpus: (5) visual promise and delivery - an analytical category specific to Germen's 'Transformatal' series, tracing the gap between the rendered architectural representations on construction barriers and the built outcomes documented subsequently; and (6) spatial legibility - the degree to which demolished, transitional, or newly constructed environments retain the "codes of recognition" ([Bryson, 1991, p. 65](#), as cited in [Rose, 2016, p. 57](#)) through which a space can be read as a carrier of social memory.

Interpretive Analysis of Photographic Reception

The site of audiencing is explored through interpretive analysis of the written and institutional contexts in which Germen's work has circulated: press interviews, exhibition texts, critical essays, and international academic platforms. The reception corpus comprises 15 sources gathered through systematic documentation: 5 press interviews (Turkish and international, 2013-2025), 4 exhibition catalogue texts and curatorial statements, 4 critical essays in architecture and design publications, and 2 academic citations. Sources were collected through Germen's documented bibliography, institutional archives of exhibiting venues ([Alan İstanbul](#), [Yapı Kredi Culture Center](#), [Collect Gallery](#)), and database searches ([Google Scholar](#), [JSTOR](#)). The interpretive approach treats these materials not as transparent testimony to viewer response but as discursive formations - evidence of the institutional channels and interpretive communities through which photographic

meaning is socially constructed. This approach reveals an asymmetry that is itself a finding: the significantly different reception profiles of Germen's Fikirtepe and Bağdat Avenue work show that the two modalities of erasure do not generate equivalent counter-memorial visibility, even when documented by the same photographer.

Case Selection

The selection of Murat Germen as the primary object of analysis rests on three criteria: breadth, since Germen holds the most extensive archive on the contemporary transformation of Istanbul (Küper-Büsch, 2019); positioning, since his dual identity as practitioner - a trained architect and urban designer who turned to photography as critical practice - and as academic situates his work within the counter-archival tradition (Sekula, 1984), making the relationship between photographic strategy and theoretical intent unusually transparent; and circulation, since his work has generated substantial and varied discursive response across national and international platforms, making audiencing empirically well-documented as well as theoretically important.

4. Two Modalities of Mnemonic Erasure in Istanbul: Fikirtepe and Bağdat Avenue

Fikirtepe and Bağdat Avenue are not random samples of Istanbul's transformation but comparative cases chosen because they instantiate the same mnemonic policy through diametrically opposed means. In Fikirtepe, the mechanism is aggressive erasure: state-backed demolition, legislatively accelerated, that moved faster than community resistance could organize or collective mourning consolidate. In Bağdat Avenue, it is aesthetic recoding: a market-driven replacement of neighbourhood-scale social life in which desire, rather than decree, secures consent. Both sites are extensively documented in Murat Germen's photographic archive, which controls for photographer, city context, and political period and isolates the spatial logic of erasure itself.

4.1. Fikirtepe: Aggressive Erasure and the Organized Erasure of Memory

Fikirtepe, a *gecekondu* neighbourhood on Istanbul's Anatolian side, was declared a risky area under Law No. 6306 and designated as the first pilot zone for its application. Ünver and Suri (2020) documented the legal and physical dimensions of this acceleration: the law empowered the central government to designate structures as risky, initiate land acquisition, and proceed to demolition without requiring local authority approval, bypassing the planning frameworks that might otherwise have introduced delay. A UN-supported investigation estimated that displacement pressure across just eight neighbourhoods in the zone reached 80,000 people (Lovering & Türkmen, 2011, as cited in Çavuşoğlu & Strutz, 2014). The municipality initially designated tenants as rights-holders, before quietly excluding them as the process advanced. In practice, forced evictions occurred before legal challenges could reach a court ruling - with tenants receiving no compensation and TOKİ social housing allocated overwhelmingly to market-rate buyers rather than displaced residents (Türkün, 2014).

The social and political legitimization of this process operated through the social mix argument: the claim that redevelopment would produce socially diverse, integrated communities. Bülbül Akın and Türkün (2019) examine this claim closely, finding that the social mix rationale functioned primarily as a discursive instrument of consent production: the actual outcome was the spatial dispersal of low-income residents, the dissolution of their social networks, and the replacement of their dwellings with units oriented toward higher-income demand. In Gramscian terms, this naturalized dispossession as opportunity. Batuman (2022a) captures this mnemonic cost: "*Whether it was a 'gecekondu' neighbourhood or a 'varoş' (slum/squatter settlement), in both cases the price of this relocation was the loss of the neighbourhood as a social space... 'The 'gecekondu' neighbourhood is still kept alive in the memories of the recently departed, and the 'varoş' in which former 'gecekondu' dwellers were still actively engaged.'*" (p.94) This formulation maps Connerton's (1989) distinction between cognitive and habitual memory onto the specific topography of

Fikirtepe's forced relocations: what is lost is not only shelter, but the embodied spatial practice through which the neighbourhood constitutes its inhabitants as a remembering community.

Murat Germen's photographic documentation of Fikirtepe, which began in 2012³ and was first exhibited in 2013 at Alan İstanbul under the title *'Sanctity and Despotism of Progress'*⁴, operates at the threshold where anamnesis is still possible but already threatened. His images focus not on completed destruction but on its intermediate states: half-demolished walls through which interior spaces remain legible; the 2014 dated *'Çivi'* (nail)⁵ (Figure 2) photograph in which a single house stands intact in the middle of a cleared lot⁶. His *'98 Windows'* installation - 98 framed window photographs assembled into a vertical structure referencing the tower blocks that would replace them - materializes the gap between the mnemonic infrastructure being destroyed and the architecturally inert environment being built in its place (Figure 3). The use of drones and specialist lenses to produce large-scale 'apocalyptic dystopian landscapes' (Küper-Büsch, 2019) exposes the totality of destruction that ground-level photography, like ground-level experience, cannot hold in a single frame (Figure 4).



Figure 2 *'Çivi'* (Nail), exhibited at the *'Şehir Nerede'* exhibition at Yunt Gallery, 2023 (Germen, 2023a)

The *'Çivi'* (Nail) photograph (Figure 2, 2014) turns on a single compositional asymmetry: one standing dwelling, framed frontally with its domestic windows still intact, occupies the centre-left, while the lot around it has been cleared to all four edges of the frame. The disparity in scale between the surviving structure and the emptied terrain amplifies the dwelling's isolation without tipping into pathos; it reads, in Germen's own formulation, as testimony to a crime scene. No one appears in the image - no residents, no construction workers, no witnesses. That absence does specific work, stripping individual narrative from the frame and leaving the dwelling standing as evidence rather than as story, while the emptiness produces a visual stillness that sits oddly against the violence of the demolition that made it. Germen shoots from ground level, which preserves the dwelling's domestic scale and refuses the aerial view that would turn the scene into a spectacle of ruin instead of a record of habitation. The threshold moment, in other words, is made visible as a structural condition - not asserted, but built into the composition.

³ Germen, 2020a

⁴ *'İlerlemenin Kutsallığı ve Zorbalığı'* <https://alanistanbul.com/portfolio/ilerlemenin-kutsalligi-ve-zorbaligi/>

⁵ a.k.a *'Babil Kulesi'* (the Tower of Babel)

⁶ During the demolitions, there stood a single house in the middle of a large lot, still standing like the Tower of Babel (Germen, 2019b).



Figure 3 '98 Windows' (Germen, 2013)

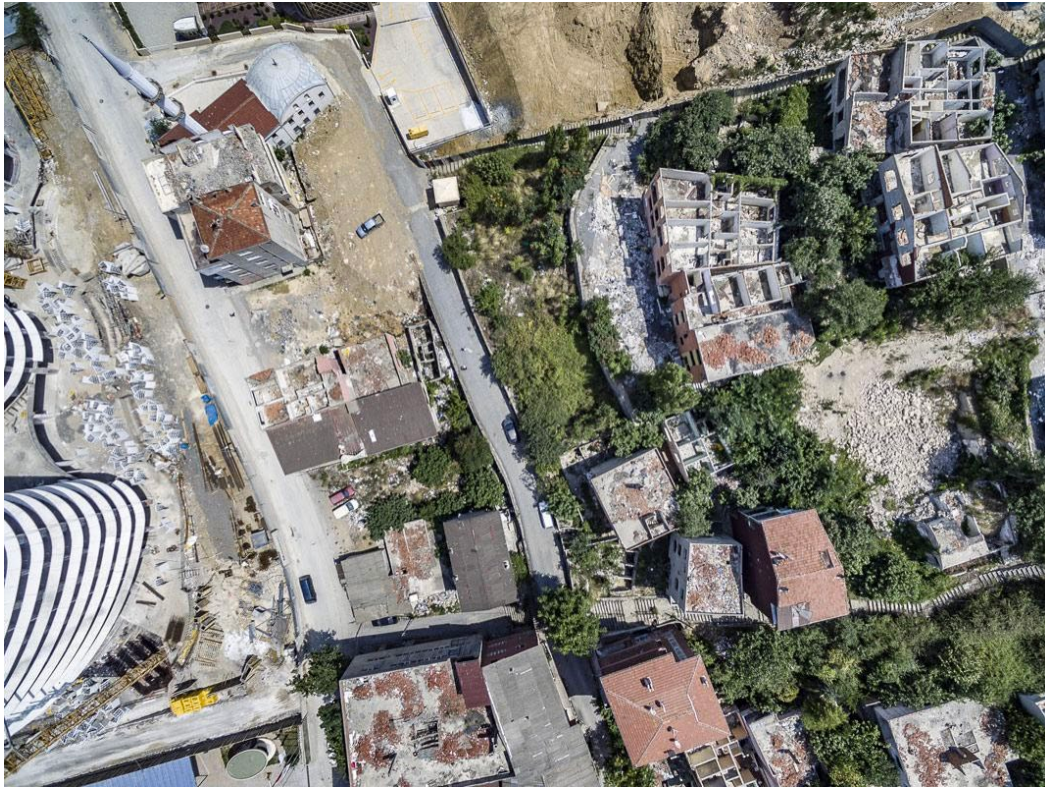


Figure 4 Fikirtepe transformation via drone view, from unpublished 'Erasing Memory' series (Germen, 2014a)

4.2. Bağdat Avenue: Aesthetic Recoding and the Attrition of the Familiar

The transformation of the Bağdat Avenue periphery presents a spatial logic so different from Fikirtepe's that the term 'urban transformation' can obscure rather than illuminate the difference. Neither was any area formally declared risky under Law No. 6306, nor was any community legally displaced by decree. And yet, as [Koylan's \(2018\)](#) extensive sociological study documents, the neighbourhood has undergone continuous demolition and reconstruction since 2012 - driven not by legal force but by something arguably more durable: the desire of property owners themselves. In Koylan's analysis, urban transformation in Bağdat Avenue functions as a 'desiring machine' - a mechanism that does not impose transformation from above but generates and circulates desires that make residents willing participants in their own neighbourhood's erasure. This desire is not innocent - it is the precise mechanism through which hegemonic consent operates at the level of mnemonic policy.

[Çoban Çınar and Özkan Töre \(2023\)](#) document the material form of this dissolution: parcel-by-parcel demolition and reconstruction driven by rent extraction, in which individual property owners negotiate with developers for maximum floor-area ratios, producing buildings that are taller, denser, and architecturally uniform while the street-level fabric is progressively replaced by luxury residences and global chains. This process generates no identifiable moment of loss because it proceeds through the aggregation of individually rational, consented decisions. The result is what [Leach \(1999\)](#) terms 'aesthetic anaesthesia' (defined in Section 2): desire and consumption perform the work that coercion performs in Fikirtepe, leaving the neighbourhood mnemonically empty without a visible moment of rupture.

[Batuman's \(2022b\)](#) diagnosis extends to Bağdat Avenue's mode of erasure - one operating through aestheticization rather than demolition: *"Both the erasure of public spaces from the urban fabric and collective memory, and the fervour of construction activity, produce flattened spaces."* The "flattening" Batuman identifies resonates directly with [Huyssen's \(2003\)](#) palimpsest metaphor: what is produced is a depthless surface from which the sedimented layers of collective memory have been suppressed - a city that is legible as image while remaining opaque as history.

Koylan (2018) captures this condition through the concept of *"birikememe tarihi (a history of inability to accumulate)"* (p.2) - a history in which the logic of constant renewal prevents anything from aging into meaning. One of Koylan's participants remarked: *"I came to understand that demolition resembles a kind of memory loss that a person slowly gets used to"* (p. 201).

Germen's photographic response to Bağdat Avenue - developed in part through his 'İnşa' (Construct) series (Germen 2007) - operates through a visual strategy structurally different from his Fikirtepe work (Figure 5). Where Fikirtepe demanded the capture of threshold moments before demolition was complete, Bağdat Avenue demands the uncovering of a gap that is inherently invisible. His signature strategy begins before construction is complete: he systematically photographs the 3D computer-rendering prints displayed on the metal or wooden barriers surrounding construction sites - images of a life promised to future residents - in order to return later and document whether that promise was kept.

The 'Transformal' images (Figures 6, 7) ask to be read differently - not for what has been destroyed but for what is promised and withheld. The photographs in this series share a compositional structure: a rendering, digitally produced and lit to evoke warmth, sociability, and architectural prestige, is mounted on a construction barrier and shot in situ, hemmed in by the site it conceals. The rendered figures are relaxed, affluent, spatially expansive; behind and around them sit raw concrete, scaffolding, and fencing. The dissonance is there in the frame, though it takes a knowing eye to catch. What neither the renders nor the barrier photographs contain, at any point, is an existing neighbourhood resident - the social life the renderings advertise bears no relation to the social life of the street behind the barrier. Counter-memory here operates on the future rather than the past, documenting not what was but what was pledged.

Fikirtepe and Bağdat Avenue do not represent two different urban policies. They represent the same mnemonic policy operating through two structurally distinct spatial forms - one that erases through coercion and speed, the other through desire and gradual erosion.

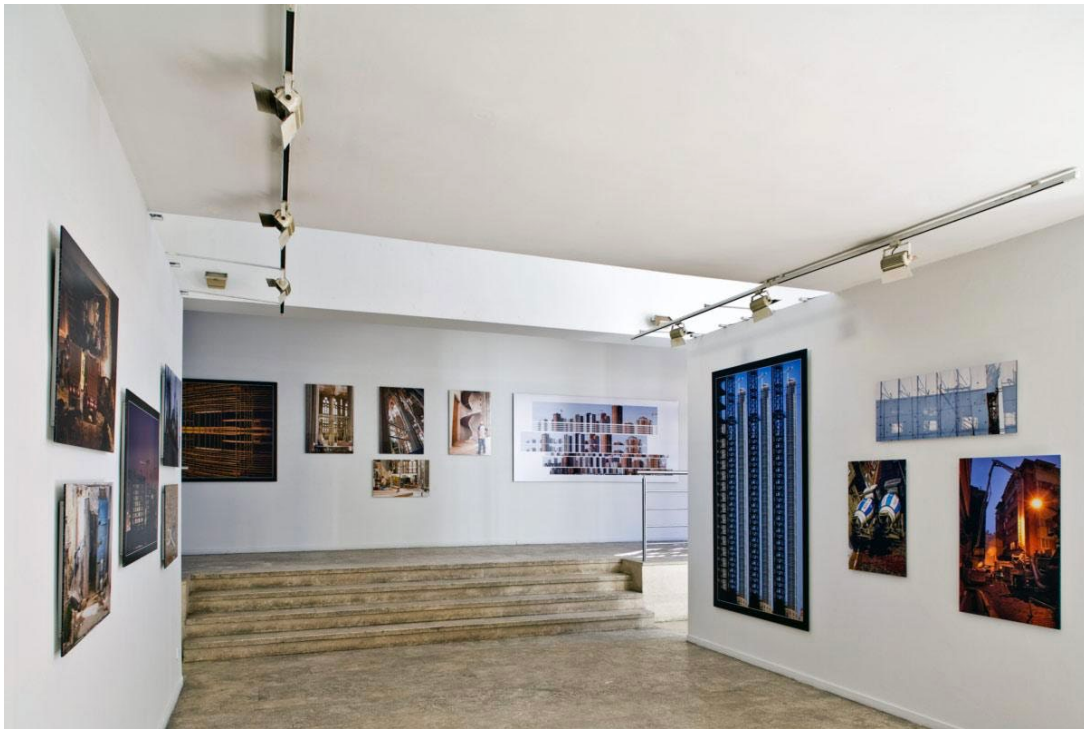


Figure 5 'İnşa'(Construct) series, exhibited at French Cultural Institute in Istanbul (Germen, 2006-2007)



Figure 6, 7 'Transformal' series, exhibited at Diyarbakır Photo Days in 2014 (Germen, 2014b, 2014c)

5. Findings: Germen's Counter-Archival Practice at Three Sites

Production Site: The Counter-Archival Practitioner

The theoretical framework proposed that photography's potential for counter-hegemonic use must be earned from, not assumed against, its prior operation as an apparatus of power (Tagg, 1988). Germen's self-positioning reflects this awareness directly. As quoted earlier, he mentions what he is doing as "producing evidence against crime" (Germen, 2019a). This positioning maps directly onto Sekula's (1984, 1986) conceptualization of the counter-archive: a practice that refuses the terms of official representation by contesting the criteria through which certain realities are exposed and others structurally suppressed.

This is not only an ethical position but a strategic one: photography, Germen argues, is specifically suited to dissent in ways that architecture is not: "*While developing a dissident, critical attitude in architecture can lead to bankruptcy, sustaining opposition through photography is possible*" (Germen, 2023b).

Germen's documentary path - beginning with Fikirtepe in 2012 - situates the practice from its inception as a response to a process of organized invisibilization. The archive is not merely a collection of images; it is a sustained act of civic witness, aimed - in Germen's own formulation - at "*being able to build a strategy for how and what to fight, and to warn others against possible dangers*" (Germen, 2023b).

Image Site: Two Sites, Two Visual Strategies

The comparative examination of Germen's Fikirtepe and Bağdat Avenue work confirms the analytical model's central proposition. The analysis finds that the same photographer, working with the same political commitment, produces structurally different visual strategies in response to structurally different modalities of mnemonic erasure. In Fikirtepe, Germen's strategy is organized around the concept of the threshold - the moment at which anamnesis is still possible but already threatened by imminent destruction. In Bağdat Avenue, the photographic problem is different: aesthetic recoding operates by ensuring that there is no catastrophic moment to photograph. The visual strategy of the 'Transformal' series (2014–ongoing) responds by redirecting attention from the built environment itself to the representations circulating before and around it.

These two strategies are stages of a single practice. Drawing on Tello's (2019) 'and-and' formula, Germen's ongoing documentation functions as an archive gathering fragments of demolished neighbourhoods, construction sites, and their lived residues in proximity, placing incompatible time periods side by side in ways hegemonic memory is designed to prevent.

What separates the two sites at the level of the image is therefore not the intensity of the response but its temporal structure. Aggressive erasure yields a datable rupture that a single frame can hold; aesthetic recoding distributes its losses across a duration too diffuse for any single frame to register, so that the critical content of the image has to be assembled by the viewer across time. Whether that assembly actually takes place is a question the image site cannot answer on its own, and it is to the conditions of reception that the analysis now turns.

Audiencing Site: Circulation, Discourse, and the Asymmetry of Visibility

The analysis at the audiencing site draws on 7 documented reception contexts: the initial exhibition at Alan İstanbul (2013); 'Sarmal' (Helix) mixed exhibition at Yapı Kredi Culture Center (2017) (Figure 8); 'Fikirtepe: A Black Dot in Istanbul's History of Urbanization' (Germen et al., 2021); the photo-essay 'Şimdilerde Şehir: Hayal Kırıklığı' (Germen, 2020b); 'Zemin-siz İstanbul' at Collect Gallery (2025–2026); and Germen's published interviews (coverage by ARTE and Ahvalnews alongside Turkish press).



Figure 8 Work titled "Rupture" on display at the collection exhibition 'Sarmal' (Helix) at Yapı Kredi Bank Arts & Culture, curated by Necmi Sönmez, 2017 (Germen, 2017)

The discourse yields a finding that an image-centred approach alone would miss: the two bodies of work generate significantly asymmetric discursive profiles. Germen's Fikirtepe documentation circulates most densely in contexts of urban activism, political opposition, and journalistic criticism. His work on Bağdat Avenue, by contrast, finds its primary reception in architecture journals, design criticism, and art press. This asymmetry is not a failure of Germen's practice: it is a structural reflection of the two erasure modalities he documents. Aggressive erasure tends to produce resistance and therefore a counter-discourse; aesthetic recoding produces desire, and desire tends to read itself as freedom rather than as loss. (cf. Leach (1999), on the anaesthetic function of aesthetic pleasure; Bourdieu (1984), on the misrecognition inherent in taste).

In conditions of constrained political pluralism, Germen characterizes the political conditions of the period in explicitly critical terms: *"If you try to oppose hardness with hardness, you will lose in the end; those who can deploy force - ignoring existing laws or adapting them to violence - are stronger than you. In times like these, one must use the methods they do not know: peaceful,*

creative, productive, warm-faced, unifying ones” (Germen, 2019b). This is not apolitical accommodation; it is a calculated strategy of counter-hegemonic practice - one that deploys the very aesthetic and civic legitimacy of photography against a hegemonic order that would prefer to remain invisible.

Strasser's (2020) Deptford is Changing project shows that a counter-archive can reach and mobilize the affected community. But this mobilizing function was possible because Strasser's practice targeted aggressive, event-centred displacement: residents knew they were losing something, could identify institutional actors responsible for, implementing, or benefiting from the transformation, and had clear stakes in the outcome. There are partial parallels with Germen's Fikirtepe work: his images circulated within activist and opposition networks during the period of peak displacement pressure (2012–2015), and their presence in local media and urban rights campaigns suggests some degree of mobilizing function - even if the speed of demolition limited the time available for counter-memory to consolidate. Aesthetic recoding does not create this kind of clearly affected community. In Bağdat Avenue, what is erased is the kind of harm that Leach's aesthetic anaesthesia renders imperceptible to those whose sensory pleasure the new environment is designed to sustain.

Table 2 sets the three sites side by side, comparing Fikirtepe and Bağdat Avenue across five categories: the legal and temporal mode of transformation, the relationship to collective memory each produces, Germen's visual response, the discursive circuits the resulting images travel, and the resilience potential each configuration sustains. Taken together, the rows show that the two sites differ in kind rather than degree, and that this difference carries through from the legal mechanism of transformation to the audiences the images are finally able to reach. Both bodies of work testify. What does not travel equally is their capacity to mobilize, and it is that asymmetry the next section takes up as a question of counter-memorial efficacy.

Table 2 Comparative Analysis of Two Modalities of Mnemonic Erasure in Post-2000 Istanbul, Evaluated Across Five Analytical Categories at the Sites of Production, Image, and Audienicing

Analytical Category	Fikirtepe (Aggressive Erasure)	Bağdat Avenue (Aesthetic Recoding)
(1) Mode of Transformation	Legally declared risk-zone designation and compulsory acquisition - visible, concentrated, and temporally bounded.	Incremental parcel-by-parcel redevelopment driven by market incentives - gradual, dispersed, and legally unchallenged.
(2) Relationship to Collective Memory	Abrupt erasure producing identifiable moments of mnemonic rupture; communities lose neighbourhood as social space overnight.	Gradual erasure producing what Koylan (2018) calls “ <i>birikememe tarihi</i> ”
(3) Visual Strategy (Germen)	Threshold images: half-demolished walls, lone standing structures, aerial dystopian landscapes - mnemonic rupture rendered visible at a single glance.	Gap between representation and reality: construction-site renders juxtaposed with built outcomes - requires temporal and comparative reading to activate critical content.
(4) Audience Reception	Circulates primarily in activist, journalistic, and political opposition contexts.	Circulates primarily in architecture journals, design criticism, and art press.
(5) Resilience Potential	Testimonial function: robust. Mobilizing function: stronger - confrontational structure creates identifiable communities of shared experience and recognizable perpetrators.	Testimonial function: robust. Mobilizing function: weakened - aesthetic recoding dissolves the felt sense of dispossession before counter-memory can take hold.

Source: Author, drawing on Rose (2016), Koylan (2018), and Land (2023)

6. Discussion: Photography, Memory, and the Resilience Potential of the Counter-Archive

The comparative analysis yields a finding with consequences beyond the Istanbul case: the counter-memorial efficacy of photographic counter-archive is not a fixed property of photographic practice but depends on the relationship between the spatial logic of mnemonic erasure and the social conditions in which visual meaning is made. Photographs alone do not produce counter-memory; what matters is the fit between a photographic approach and the specific form of erasure it confronts.

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In Fikirtepe, aggressive erasure produced a legible confrontational structure: a state-backed process of demolition confronting a community capable of resistance. This structure is photographable - it generates threshold moments, visible losses, identifiable institutional actors responsible for, implementing, or benefiting from the transformation, and communities whose collective suffering can be rendered as testimony. Rose's tripartite model shows that the counter-memorial function is realized - imperfectly, but demonstrably - because the modality of erasure generates the social conditions necessary for its own challenge. The coercive effects of transformation become spatially and socially legible, and legibility is the precondition of counter-memory.

In Bağdat Avenue, aesthetic recoding systematically destroys the preconditions of this legibility. The counter-archive circulates most densely in art, architecture and design publications because it documents a process that, by its nature, addresses itself to aesthetic sensibility. The critical content of the images reaches its primary audience in a discursive context that absorbs rather than activates counter-memorial potential.

Counter-Memory Without a Target: Aesthetic Recoding and the Limits of Legibility

This asymmetry has direct implications for the two functions of photographic counter-memory introduced above. The analysis shows that the testimonial function - the evidential record - remains robust across both sites. The mobilizing function - the activation of counter-hegemonic solidarity - is structurally conditioned by the modality of erasure each site instantiates.

The mobilizing function is most effectively realized where communities still experience their loss as loss - which aggressive erasure threatens but does not necessarily prevent. Aesthetic recoding undermines this more subtly: by making the very transformation pleasurable, it dissolves the felt sense of dispossession before any counter-memory can take hold.

Land (2023) provides the theoretical grounding: counter-memory, by its nature, requires an opponent - a hegemonic narrative already fixed and institutionally legible. Aggressive erasure supplies this in abundance; aesthetic recoding withholds the target. Where mnemonic infrastructure erodes through desire rather than decree, there is no moment to contest and no perpetrator to name - what Land calls a structured absence.

Price's (2023) analysis identifies the museumification risk: images of communities undergoing transformation, when received by audiences whose relationship to the photographed environment is primarily aesthetic rather than lived, tend to generate melancholic contemplation rather than political mobilization. This risk is particularly acute in the Bağdat Avenue case: the audiences that engage most consistently with Germen's 'İnşa' and 'Transformat' work are, by and large, the same professional and upper-middle classes whose aesthetic investments drive the very process of recoding that these images document. The testimonial function, however, operates on a different temporal register and is not diminished by these constraints. Land's (2023) account reframes what it achieves in the longer run: Germen's archive lays the groundwork for a future in which hegemonic memory consolidates, so that the counter-memorial record already exists, ready to be deployed - not a failed mobilization but a deposit made for a contestation that has not yet arrived.

Conditions of Efficacy: Erasure Modality and Counter-Memorial Efficacy

The comparative analysis suggests a provisional schema. Where erasure operates through coercion and speed - producing legible confrontational structures and identifiable moments of loss - photographic counter-memory has its strongest claim to mobilizing function. Where it operates through desire and gradual erosion, with no such legible structure, counter-memory faces a challenge no degree of photographic sophistication fully resolves: its testimonial function and analytical contribution remain significant, but its mobilizing function is weakened by the very success of the erasure it contests. This schema is not binary - actual transformations combine elements of both modalities - but it offers a tool for identifying which dimension of counter-memorial practice, testimonial or mobilizing, a given photographic strategy can claim to activate, and for which audiences.

7. Conclusion

This article has advanced three interconnected arguments. The first is theoretical: that mnemonic erasure is not a secondary side effect of urban transformation but one of its primary mechanisms - a deliberate dissolution of the social frameworks through which collective memory operates. The concept of hegemonic memory policy, developed through the intersection of Harvey, Gramsci, and Leach, names this dissolution as a political project rather than an unfortunate byproduct of development, and thereby reframes the question of urban resilience: what is at stake in urban transformation is not only the physical fabric of neighbourhoods or the economic security of their residents, but the capability of communities to narrate their own experience, transmit it to future generations, and mobilize it for political contestation.

The second argument is empirical: hegemonic memory policy takes at least two distinct forms - aggressive erasure (Fikirtepe) and aesthetic recoding (Bağdat Avenue) - which achieve the same mnemonic outcome through opposite means. Aggressive erasure deploys speed, coercion, and physical demolition to prevent the social processes of memory formation before they can consolidate; aesthetic recoding uses desire, pleasure, and market rationality to make the dissolution of mnemonic infrastructure not only tolerable but actively sought. These findings acquire additional weight when situated within a longer genealogy of mnemonic erasure in Turkish urban space.

Kolluoğlu Kırli's (2002) analysis of Smyrna/İzmir's rebuilding after the 1922 fire, and the Republican-era reordering of Ankara and Taksim Square to produce a new national subject (Akpınar, 2014), show that the political rewriting of urban space has deep roots in Turkish modernity. Post-2000 Istanbul is not a rupture but the sharpest contemporary expression of this structural tendency.

A third and methodological thread runs through both cases: Rose's (2016) tripartite framework, applied to Murat Germen's work across both cases, reveals that the resilience value of photographic counter-memory is not a property of images but a relational achievement, one that takes shape in the interaction between the conditions of photographic production, the visual strategies through which counter-memorial narratives are constructed, and the social constitution of their meaning in reception. The asymmetric discursive profiles of Germen's two bodies of work - activist and political in the Fikirtepe case, aesthetic and critical in the Bağdat Avenue case - are not a failure of photographic practice but a structural reflection of the different erasure modalities they document.

The findings carry practical implications in three areas. In heritage conservation, documentation must be calibrated to the transformation's temporal logic: rapid coercive displacement calls for urgent threshold photography, while gradual aesthetic recoding calls for longitudinal, comparative work tracking the gap between promise and outcome. Community archiving and participatory planning benefit most where the affected community still holds a shared sense of loss, which policy frameworks for community archives can help sustain. In memory-sensitive urban design, the

concept of mnemonic infrastructure argues for impact assessments that weigh the loss of the spatial conditions through which collective memory forms, not only physical displacement.

The framework itself, distinguishing modalities of mnemonic erasure from functions of photographic counter-memory, is not specific to Istanbul. Shanghai (Shao, 2013) and Dubai (Elsheshtawy, 2010) suggest that aggressive erasure and aesthetic recoding are structural tendencies, surfacing wherever neoliberal urban development combines direct state coercion with market-driven aestheticization. Germen's practice finds counterparts elsewhere in the Global South, where photographic and artistic resistance similarly contests demolition-led amnesia: in urban China, collage, rephotography, and documentary work recover fleeting urban memory against hyper-accelerated redevelopment (Sterling, 2016; Mugica & Whyke, 2024; Pawlik, 2024; Li, 2025); in South Africa, artistic documentation, oral history, and public intervention make forced removals and apartheid spatial afterlives visible (Siegenthaler, 2021; Anderson & Daya, 2022; Roux, 2018; Makhubu & Ruiters, 2020); and across Latin America, archival and participatory image-making reactivate suppressed histories of dictatorship and displacement (Corrigan, 2022; Guerra, 2025; Gamboa-Morales, 2025; Trujillo-Losada et al., 2025). As with Germen's counter-archive, this global pattern rarely restores a stable past; rather, it uses visual practice to expose contested space and reopen political claims on places being overwritten (Huyssen, 2025).

Several lines of future research follow: a comparative study of multiple photographers, including community-based practitioners, to test these modality-specific visual strategies against a broader corpus; work on audience and community response, rather than institutional reception, to reach the mobilizing function more directly; and, most promisingly, participatory photography, in which affected communities produce their own documentation and combine testimonial and mobilizing functions in ways a single-author counter-archive cannot. Within Istanbul, the framework could extend to Republican-era urban areas that are now under increasing development pressure.

The article's contribution to urban resilience research is a distinction, not a verdict. The testimonial and mobilizing functions of counter-archival practice can be told apart, and telling them apart stops documentation from being counted as resistance by default. It also makes it possible to specify the conditions under which a photographic counter-archive can claim counter-memorial efficacy, and those conditions begin with the legal structure that authorises erasure in the first place. Germen's archive, read this way, is less a visual chronicle of Istanbul's transformation than a political act - the systematic production of visibility for processes having the effect of reducing or eliminating the visible traces of the displaced urban environment of what they displace. It exists, it circulates, and it keeps generating discursive contestation. In the terms developed throughout this article, that is already a form of urban resilience: imperfect, incomplete, but irreplaceable.

CRedit Authorship Contribution Statement

Sena Özfiliz: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Resources, Analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization, Data visualization. İpek Akpınar: Writing – review & editing, Methodology, Supervision.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data Availability

Data will be made available on request.

Ethics Committee Approval

This study is based on publicly available photographs, published interviews, exhibition materials, academic publications, and institutional documents. No interviews, surveys, or other forms of research involving human participants were conducted, and no personal or sensitive data were collected. Therefore, institutional ethics committee approval was not required. Written permission was obtained from the copyright holder for the reproduction of the photographic works included in the article.

Notes

This article was produced from a doctoral dissertation, currently in progress. Graduate School, Istanbul Technical University.

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Resume

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