

ISTANBUL AND THIRD-WAVE COFFEE SHOPS: A MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN?

M. Bengü Uluengin¹

¹ *Bahçeşehir University, Turkey*

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Quipping with gourmet coffee brewer Çağatay Gülbioğlu, one gets the impression that the Ottomans had never gotten it quite right: Istanbul has one of the oldest coffee brewing cultures on earth, but Gülbioğlu finds the local brew lacking in taste. First, he explains, the beans used for Turkish coffee are of inferior quality, and secondly, the way Turkish coffee is brewed “kills the aroma” [1]. Of course, not all would agree.

By most accounts, it was the Ottomans who introduced coffee to Europe [2]. And while coffee consumption has always been a way of life in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, second- and third-wave coffee habits have increased this consumption exponentially [3].

Indeed, things seem to have gone full circle, with Turkey –Istanbul in particular– adopting the now-global, third-wave coffee phenomenon hook, line, and sinker. And while the gustatory qualities of coffee are what its aficionados will undoubtedly focus on, to those involved in the built environment, the eerie similarity in architectural vocabulary used in third-wave coffee shops around the world is equally striking.

It is the latter phenomenon that this article aims to focus on, and to decipher its idiosyncrasies as it pertains to a historic yet progressive neighborhood of Istanbul: Beşiktaş.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative mode of research, where participative observation, ethnographic data collection, and “emic” data interpretation are the preferred modes of inquiry. The study is dear to me at a personal level as well, for the observations made herein pertain to the neighborhood in which I work, and which I lived in until recently. As such I have had the opportunity to observe firsthand the hasty transformation that Beşiktaş's commercial core has undergone.

I have defined Beşiktaş's commercial core as the area bound by the following streets: Beşiktaş, Ortabahçe, İhlamurdere, Muradiye Bostanı, Nüzhetiye, Şair Nedim and Süleyman Seba (Fig. 1). This is not the usual definition of the district's commercial core, but I have deemed it appropriate for this study for it is this area that has come to host an inordinately high number of coffee shops of late.

Indeed, a glance at Yandex Panorama¹ reveals that of the 23 coffee shops under scrutiny, only two existed prior to 2012.

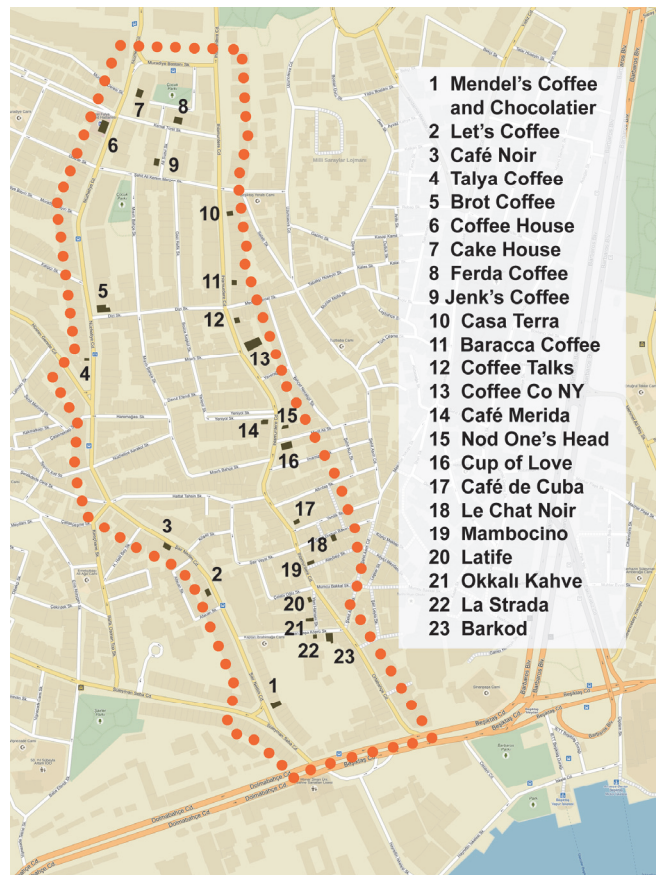


Fig. 1: Coffee shops in Beşiktaş's commercial core (Base map by Yandex)

Hipsters, Crepuscular Chambers, and Hidden Gardens

What has fueled this sudden interest in specialty coffees in Beşiktaş? Granted, the adoption of third wave coffee has been speedy in most parts of the globe, but what renders Istanbul in general—and Beşiktaş in particular—a match made in heaven for third-wave coffee shops?

This is a question with a “layered answer”. At the most obvious level might be the rapport between Turkish coffee tradition and the ritualistic nature of specialty coffee roasting and brewing. As Metin Argan explains, Turkish coffee consumption is already rife with rituals [4]. From its preparation in special copper pots to the way it is served, drinking Turkish coffee is highly ceremonial: one doesn't simply “grab Turkish coffee to go.” The same can be said of third-wave coffee.

But more specifically, third-wave coffee shops provide a sense of identity and belonging. As Cronin et al. demonstrate, the predominantly 'hipster' patrons of these shops establish symbolic bulwarks against untamed consumer culture, multinational coffee shop chains, McDonaldization, or any other '-ism' viewed to be foreign or undesirable [5]. It is here that the formal design vocabulary of third-wave coffee shops enters the limelight, as will be discussed in more detail below.

All of the above factors have played out in perfect harmony to engender an almost standardized coffee shop in Beşiktaş's commercial core, with a few notable exceptions. But before I delve into an analysis of coffee shops' physical details, I would like to ask: Why do most coffee shops in Beşiktaş (or all over Istanbul, for that matter) look as if they could have come off the same interior designer's drawing board?

As noted above, the fact that these shops cater to an almost-homogeneous class of patrons appears to be the most obvious reason, as the visual trappings of 'hipster culture' seem to be relatively stable world over. Indeed, an image-based internet search for 'third-wave coffee shop' turns up visuals that bear striking resemblance. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Istanbul's coffee shops also embody these archetypal design elements.

Equally important, however, is the haste with which these shops typically become operational: to maximize profits, both the design and implementation processes are often 'fast tracked'. Standardized design obviously benefits this aim.

Most of the coffee shops in the area under scrutiny feature dark-hued, almost crepuscular interiors, with jet black being a favorite color for walls and sometimes ceilings. Floors are typically paved with patterned tiles.

Ceilings almost invariably sport some sort of wire mesh dropped ceiling, and sometimes wood. These, too, are generally painted jet black, with wood typically being left untreated. Light fixtures are also standardized, with Edison lamps dominating most coffee shops. These are often affixed on sanitary piping painted, again, jet black.

Yet, as noted above despite the nearly-standardized design vocabulary used in third-wave coffee shops, there are examples that stubbornly refuse to become pastiche.

Take, for example, the Latife and Okkali coffee shops located on Yeni Haman Street. Both of these are 'mid-way' coffee shops which aim to reconcile Turkish coffee tradition with gourmet brewing. They serve Turkish coffee (along with more international brews) and have an interior design scheme that celebrates the local.

Or perhaps more poignantly, there are coffee shops which embody the concept of the 'hidden garden'. Of the 23 coffee shops in the area under investigation, two have back gardens which allow a secluded and lush setting for coffee enjoyers.² Since indoor smoking is not allowed in Turkey, these open-air spaces are a boon to the coffee shop.

Furthermore, in an attempt to create as attractive an atmosphere as possible, these back yards are often adorned with plants and greenery. Thus, several of the coffee-shops in question perfectly recreate the Islamic notion of the 'secret garden': One passes through a dimly-lit, often-noisy space to end up in a daylight filled, green courtyard. Here, patrons are secluded from the hustle and bustle of street life, and can enjoy their specialty coffees in a lush and serene environment.

Conclusion

As is often the case for elaborate social phenomena, the adoption of third-wave coffee in Istanbul has been delightfully complex and multi-faceted. Rather than repeat the suggestion that Turks have forgotten their own, very rich coffee brewing culture, I would like to turn this

assertion on its head and claim that third-wave coffee has been so hastily adopted in Turkey *because* of the country's extremely rich coffee history.

Furthermore, while the design vocabulary of third-wave coffee shops in Beşiktaş (and by extension, Istanbul) often mimic those of well-known international coffee shops, closer scrutiny reveals that there is much localization going on.

First of these is the 'mid-way' coffee shop which aims to accommodate the local within the global, both in terms of design and also the types of coffee offered.

Secondly, the peculiarities of Beşiktaş's urban fabric, restrictive smoking laws, and a deep-rooted longing for nature have created a uniquely local version of the third-wave coffee shop: one which embodies the notion of the 'hidden garden'.

Finally the way in which these shops are used is somewhat different than at least some examples abroad. In many locales, third-wave coffee shops continue the tradition of second-wave coffee locales where many patrons 'sit alone in the crowd' laptops propped open. In contrast, most third-wave coffee shops in Beşiktaş have patrons who prefer to talk and to interact, rather than sit alone staring at a screen.

All of these issues render the adoption of third-wave coffee shops very unique in Beşiktaş and Istanbul. As such, even an issue as global as third-wave coffee is 'bent and transformed' as it is made local.

Notes

1. Yandex Panorama is similar to Google Street View, but operated by Moscow-based information technologies company, Yandex.
2. Two other shops had back gardens, but had to discontinue using them due to noise related complaints from neighbors.

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