Established in Istanbul in 2011, Herkes için Mimarlık (HiM)\(^1\) is a non-profit organization that enables democratic and collaborative design processes between professionals, decision makers and citizens. Its 95 members include architects, urban planners, designers, engineers, artists, sociologists and psychologists who work as a ‘collective’ in an anti-hierarchical way. The organization engages with economic, political and social dynamics and aims to create sustainable communities through implementation of design projects.

HiM explores different design and research methods using participatory workshops that bring together local communities, professionals, volunteers and students to think about local issues. The main purpose of the participatory process is to reframe the architectural practice. HiM aims to be a platform for social change, and in order to achieve this it focuses on three things: it encourages architects to address social issues and take initiative; it introduces alternative learning methods to design students, including hands-on workshops and community engagement; and it encourages non-architect professionals and volunteers to contribute their experience and knowledge to architectural production.

This ambition of ‘doing together’ utilizes the knowledge, experience, interpretation and labour of all parties involved, and facilitates mutual learning. Whether focused on the activation of an isolated urban park or adaptive reuse of an abandoned rural building, HiM employs various methods of bringing people together to share their ideas. This frequently involves literally inviting them around the table to eat and talk. Collective preparation of meals, sharing recipes and hearing each other’s stories are among the most effective ways of bonding and creating a sense of trust that is essential to this ambition.

The table is an instrument for intimacy that blurs the traditional roles of guest and host. Since realizing the power of this object and the ritual of eating, HiM has become interested in the architectural components that surround it, such as the communal ovens which are still popular in rural parts of Turkey. These structures are usually built in the back yards of houses and used to bake food. Besides their functional properties, they are also a symbol of sharing and collectiveness. HiM started building these ovens in the villages where it operates; if the scope of the project is large, the oven helps by establishing a base that is accessible to all. It also helps navigate the expectations of the community and creates a sense of trust by implementing a physical structure at the beginning of the process. The approach in all HiM’s projects is focused on the constant interplay between the physical and the social.
The politics of public space

In 2012, a year and a half before the Occupy Gezi movement\(^2\), a renewal project for Istanbul’s Taksim Square and Gezi Park was announced. Apart from the project’s impractical design, HiM found it alarming that the citizens who would be affected by this change were never made a part of the decision-making process. It therefore decided to organize workshops to discuss the government’s claims that the square and park did not serve their purpose as public spaces. The workshops gave birth to the weekly Gezi Park Festivals, which proved that, with minor interventions, the unpopular Gezi Park could become a lively public space.

The Gezi Park Festivals were publicized through social media channels. HiM invited musicians, dancers and performance artists, and organized workshops and games that would attract large crowds. Participants were asked to bring food and drink, which were then shared with everyone else at the festival. While only 50 people attended the first festival, the park’s popularity increased rapidly over time; by the fifth festival, numbers had risen to 500. These festivals were a creative way of making a stand against the government’s destructive behaviour, creating a collective vibrancy simply through programming entertainment and food. And when the government insisted on going through with their project, the demonstrators took over the park.

During the protests, HiM continued observing and documenting how the park was being used. It soon became clear that food was often at the forefront of the makeshift structures of the occupation. Communal kitchens run by volunteers displayed the diverse cultural backgrounds of protesters. Street vendors from across the city saw the opportunity and positioned themselves in every vacant space. A ‘Freedom Market’ was created, stocked with donated items to be distributed for free. The most powerful experience in relation to food was the Yeryüzü Sofrası (Earth Table). This was a communal iftar (fast-breaking meal during Ramadan) that took place on one of the busiest streets in Istanbul. As with Occupy Gezi, the protesters who were refused entry into Gezi Park brought and shared their food, using sheets of newspaper as makeshift tablecloths.

The Occupy Gezi experience was unique and transformative for our organization. Following these events, HiM became increasingly interested in ephemeral urban phenomena and continued working on projects which explored the different relationships and meanings of food in public space.
The tabla has affected Adana’s food culture over the years, spreading Eastern traditions of street food and reflecting the complex structure of public space in which informal stalls operate. Vendor carts provide an opportunity for survival for people on a low income, as they require relatively modest, tax-free investment. The tabla can provide a livelihood for a family that has almost no capital. Indeed, it is an immigrant’s last capital.

International vendors usually sell products that originate from their home town, and in most cases this is kebab (a well-known meat dish with Arabian origins). Each kebab is prepared differently, by a chef who also acts as the vendor and usually controls the entire process single-handedly. This gives each kebab its own unique flavour. According to the surveys conducted by HİM, it is this distinction of flavour, as well as the low cost, that attracts customers.

The pattern of customers started with factory workers changing shifts very early in the morning who wanted something to eat. This developed into a ritual, which continues to inform the timing and placement of carts in Adana, each one tending to remain in place until all their food is sold out. Their ephemeral nature has itself become an attraction among food hunters who travel long distances to experience the best street food in Turkey.

A semi-permanent tabla on a street in Adana. 2018.

The HiM workshop also explored the physical aspects of these structures. The tabla is not just a stationary board, but a mobile vehicle that can be moved by human or motor power, and each one has unique attachments designed by the owners. The most important component of the structure is the grill and camping cylinder for cooking. Some have furniture such as a canopy, tables and stools, which expand the cart once the vendor is settled, defining a space for the customers. The adaptive design of the carts allows vendors to respond to two different situations: being on the road and selling kebabs in a specific location, giving them a balance of mobility and permanence.

The legal position of street vendors is often precarious, and the choice of where to sell food appears to relate to this directly. ‘Safe’ areas are identified through the vendor’s network of relatives or acquaintances with a similar cultural background. While they are operational, vendors choose to locate in certain places, sometimes as a step towards owning their own restaurant. These places, the boundaries of which are determined by reciprocal agreements with other street food vendors not to obstruct each other’s businesses, represent an in-between state of intra city mobility. Vendors get attached to the life surrounding them, transforming the spaces that they occupy.

Kebab Chef Hasan’s cart is a good example of the structure of the tabla and its relationship with the city. Chef Hasan transports the cart at the same time every day, from the city’s periphery where he lives. His chosen spot, the same one each day, is on a pavement, under a tree. He assembles a counter for cooking on his bicycle, with another tray that can be placed on the top of the main counter to be carried away easily; this is used to mix spices and prepare vegetables. There is no space for stools around his tabla, so the way in which people gather around to take the food is somewhat chaotic. Hasan stands throughout the day, which transforms his cooking into a performance and a means of interacting and conversing with his customers.

Şırdan, Hacı Emin, on the other hand, sells pre-prepared food every night, starting at 2am. His tabla contains a pot on a camping cylinder surrounded by stools. Şırdan is an offal dish, a piece of cow stomach stuffed with rice and boiled in a saucepan. When his food is finished, Hacı Emin gathers his equipment and leaves the site. The cart itself is immobile, but the components are easy to disassemble and move. His pitch generates a temporary spatiality with people gathered around his table: while Hacı Emin is physically mobile, he is stationary during a specific time period.

Brisket is also found on the same cart. An important reason for choosing and tracking the street food culture is that it cannot be experienced in another time and space, and thus establishes a unique relationship with the urban space. Hacı Emin’s pitch is in front of the closed craftsman ateliers and becomes an anchor point for the people who usually do not interact with that specific corner. The attracting force of street food is so strong here that it creates a spatiality from an ambiguous cloud of customers in a desolate city neighbourhood.
The tablas are tools for dialogue between intranational migrants and the city. Their design is developed to enable food production and mobility. Even though tablas are sometimes fixed in certain places and active in specific periods, it is not guaranteed that they can be accessed at any time. Street food vendors operate as a symbolic and literal contrast to the increasingly legalized, sterile rules of society. Operating unofficially with an efficient, flexible network throughout the city, and resisting the continuous surveillance of the political body, they are viewed by Özkal Yüreğir, an architect from Adana, as significant...‘threat to the system’. This demonstrates how activities related to food may help to transform a place for the people, as street food carts expand the pattern of public space organically, in ways that cannot be planned. This state is beyond political boundaries, ready to include people from different economic and social backgrounds. Vendors are breaking the rules of time and space to grow the social network in a rhizomatic way, at the same time adding to the culture of the city.

Like the street food carts that fill the gaps of Adana, migrants are settling into similar places around the city where economies, infrastructures and social relations within wider urban networks are transitory and interchangeable. As with the transitory nature of migrant experiences, tabla is an in-between tool that offers the possibilities of both settling down and leaving. Its mobile identity echoes the reality of many migrants, even in their desire to create a sense of social belonging. Chef Hasan asserts that ‘after 46 years, I can be considered as a local “now”’. For many years neither he nor his tabla could settle down: he is an urban nomad who keeps moving in the city.

Tabla transform the function of the street as public space, increasing the chance for dialogue. This creates opportunities for migrants to develop relationships with locals and reinforce their new lives. Migrants utilize carts as means of both settling and moving, in the process generating communication channels through their temporary and permanent spatial formations. The tabla acts as a pendulum, swinging between settling down and existing somewhere else, and as a tool for social synergy. Spatial formations around the mobile become a gateway for dialogue.

Documenting the tabla with architectural tools and interpreting the results enable HiM to understand the reasons for the tabla’s emergence, and how it has developed and adapted in response to the needs of the city and of migrant vendors. At the same time, the process helps develop a basis for architectural and designed responses to the city that could work in a more sensitive, responsive manner. This is a way of understanding the spatial dimensions of the city, street food and the broader spatial network in which it exists have significant potential that becomes apparent in the adaptive use of space and reciprocal social interaction. The experience of everyday life can be a useful learning tool for architectural production as well as understanding the physical infrastructure of public demonstrations. To be able to produce flexible designs according to specific requirements instead of complying to fixed and limited demands allows for open interaction. This way of learning and working together would be beneficial to all involved, and is suggestive of a certain kind of solidarity, like the solidarity so clearly demonstrated in the Gezi Park Festivals and protests.