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Assessment of the proposal for the Reconstruction of the Old Artillery Barracks by demolishing Gezi Park at Taksim, Istanbul, Turkey

Recently, one of the most discussed urban issues in Istanbul is the demolition of the Gezi Park in order to reconstruct the Old Artillery Barracks from the 19th century. ICOMOS Turkey considers the proposal an act of disrespect against international principles of conservation and feels responsible to express its opinion on the matter:

1. Taksim Gezi Park is one of the most important landmarks in Istanbul and deserves to be preserved both for its greenery and the 20th century design as an urban space. Although it has been neglected over the past decades, it has preserved its integrity and significance . The Park was designed by the renowned French planner, Henri Prost, and is the only public green space in Turkey with a monumental-axial planning. The correct course of action for its future would be to restore the Park and replenish its essential features, setting it in its rightful place among the urban, cultural history of both Istanbul and Turkey.
2. According to international principles governing conservation of monuments and sites, the project aims which to demolish Gezi Park in order to reconstruct the long forgotten Artillery Barracks in its place constitutes an unacceptable proposal.

The first problem is as follows: The reconstruction of a demolished historic building is only legitimate in cases where the loss of the lost building creates an unacceptable void in its surrounding and the reconstruction of the lost monument is essential to regain the architectural, structural and aesthetic qualities and/or the historical meaning of the place. The loss of the Old Artillery Barracks was not accidental; it was removed to create a modern park in the newly developing part of the city. If the building had not been demolished in the 20 th century, today it would be put under legal protection and there would be efforts to preserve it. But the building is not there and its place is occupied by a valuable urban element. The importance of the barracks in the memory of the citizens does not call for a reconstruction.

The second problem is that the proposed reconstruction of the Old Artillery Barracks will result in the creation of a building which will only 'look' like the old one but it will lack authenticity of material and details. The barracks is not a small building; it will occupy a large area in the center of the city. Moreover, its reconstruction will depend on conjecture and thus it not be in conformity with the criteria for it to be considered a historic monument. Although repeatedly claimed otherwise by some members of the Turkish media, the replication of a lost architectural element or urban images can not be classified as historic preservation. As mentioned above, the reconstruction of a lost monument can be accepted only under some special conditions. One needs to have very good surveys and photographic documentation in order to be able to reconstruct the exterior and interior of the lost building. In the case of the Old Artillery Barracks, several exterior photographs are available but there is not much evidence about the interiors. The relevant structural and interior details, even the exact dimensions of the building are not known. Under these circumstances, the reconstruction of the Artillery Barracks is a meaningless effort which will only result in creating a "Disneyland" at the very center of the Taksim Square, a space full of the 20th century memories of the city and the Turkish people .