

# From Modern Icon to Memory Fragment: The Transformation of Grand Ephesus Hotel in İzmir

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## Abstract

From Modern Icon to Memory Fragment: The Transformation of Grand Ephesus Hotel in İzmir. This paper examines the transformation of the Grand Ephesus Hotel (1964), a landmark of post-war modernism in İzmir, and its role in shaping and eroding collective urban memory. Designed by Paul Bonatz and Fatih Uran in the rationalist vocabulary of international style, the hotel represented Turkey's mid-century modern turn. It became a symbol of İzmir's modernization, hosting significant cultural, social, and public events. As a modern heritage site, its spatial identity was tied to collective rituals, such as rooftop dinners, weddings, and fair-time gatherings. Through semi-structured interviews with long-time users, the study examines how place-based memory is produced and altered through architectural and programmatic change. After its closure in 2003 and reopening in 2008 as Swissôtel Grand Ephesus under private management, the hotel's social function and symbolic role in the city shifted dramatically. While the building remains physically preserved, its meaning within the collective consciousness has faded. This rupture reflects broader issues in the heritagization of modern architecture, where material continuity often fails to maintain cultural continuity. Using the theoretical frameworks of Maurice Halbwachs and Pierre Nora, and building upon John Punter's concept of place identity, the study demonstrates that memory is not only embedded in form but also enacted through use. The findings suggest that without engaging the everyday practices and emotional geographies tied to modern architecture, preservation risks turning living heritage into inert monuments. The case of the Grand Ephesus Hotel contributes to the discussion on adaptive reuse, symbolic erasure, and the need for more inclusive conservation approaches to 20th-century architectural heritage.

## Keywords

Modernism, Hiltonism, Urban memory, Ephesus Hotel, İzmir.

## Introduction

Considering its socio-cultural history and architectural significance, the Grand Ephesus Hotel occupies a central role in İzmir's urban identity. Since its inauguration in 1964<sup>1</sup>, it has functioned not only as a modern accommodation facility but also as a prominent venue for leisure and social interaction, contributing strongly to the city's collective memory. Memory, understood as the recollection of past experiences shaped by narratives, extends beyond individual experience into the social realm, being influenced by spatial and contextual factors<sup>1</sup>. In urban settings, collective memory is reinforced through shared practices and meanings attached to places, thus turning spaces like the Grand Ephesus into cultural landmarks<sup>2</sup>.

The transformation of this memory is significant: the hotel, closed in 2003, underwent renovation and reopened in 2008<sup>3</sup>. Such shifts highlight how changes in use and ownership affect collective associations. The study explores this

process by combining literature with empirical data, adopting John V. Punter's framework of activities, physical structure, and attributed meanings<sup>4</sup> to interpret the hotel's evolving role.

To capture residents' perspectives, twelve interviews were conducted across different age groups using snowball sampling. Open-ended questions, a common tool in environmental perception research<sup>5</sup>, addressed demographic details, visit purposes, frequency, and personal recollections. Participants reflected on both the original hotel and its transformation into Swissôtel Grand Ephesus<sup>6</sup>, providing insights into how modernization and privatization altered the social perception and collective memory of this iconic building.

### **The Relationship Between Collective Memory And Space**

Memory is closely intertwined with place, as urban spaces such as streets, squares, entertainment venues, and hotels acquire meaning through lived experiences. According to Maurice Halbwachs, collective memory exists within a spatial framework; without the persistence of material surroundings, memories would constantly dissolve<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, Pierre Nora argues that memory is anchored in 'memory spaces', where meaning emerges through narratives, rituals, and symbols<sup>8</sup>. Urban artifacts—such as monuments, squares, or hotels—become enduring carriers of memory, connecting past and present across changing contexts.

The Grand Ephesus Hotel illustrates this relationship between space and memory. Participants often recalled objects and places linked to their experiences: the rooftop restaurant, the 'aquarium bar' at the swimming pool, the Artemis statue, or nearby Alsancak, Kordon, and Cumhuriyet Square. As one noted: «The first features that come to mind when mentioning the Grand Ephesus Hotel are its rooftop restaurant and swimming pool bar... Artemis statue...» (Interview 10). Another emphasised its symbolic role in Alsancak and Kordon: «We particularly enjoyed spending time at the poolside bar. It invariably captivated our interest.» (Interview 10). Others remembered encounters during the Izmir International Fair, including meeting Zeki Müren, associating the hotel with Cumhuriyet Square and the Atatürk Statue.

These accounts highlight the hotel's status as a modern landmark and social hub<sup>9</sup>. Through its architecture, functions, and symbolic associations, the Grand Ephesus Hotel became embedded in the city's collective memory. Yet, as Nora reminds us, memory is not static; its meanings evolve as social practices change. Today, the dispersal of memory has weakened the once-unified associations surrounding the hotel, signalling a transformation in Izmir's collective identity<sup>10</sup>.

### **Grand Ephesus Hotel From Its Establishment Until Today**

The 1950s represented a significant period of transformation both globally and in Turkey. Following World War II, America's political and economic influence expanded, shaping international culture and architecture. In this context, chain hotels designed in the American Modernist idiom of the International Style emerged and spread beyond the United States<sup>11</sup>. In Turkey, the same decade was marked by a political shift to a multi-party system and a growing orientation toward the United States. Tourism became a state policy, seen as a tool to strengthen the country's international visibility and modern identity.

Within this framework, 'Emek Hotels' were commissioned through the collaboration of Emekli Sandığı and Emek İnşaat AŞ, introducing a new era of modern hotel construction. The Istanbul Hilton, completed in 1955, was the first

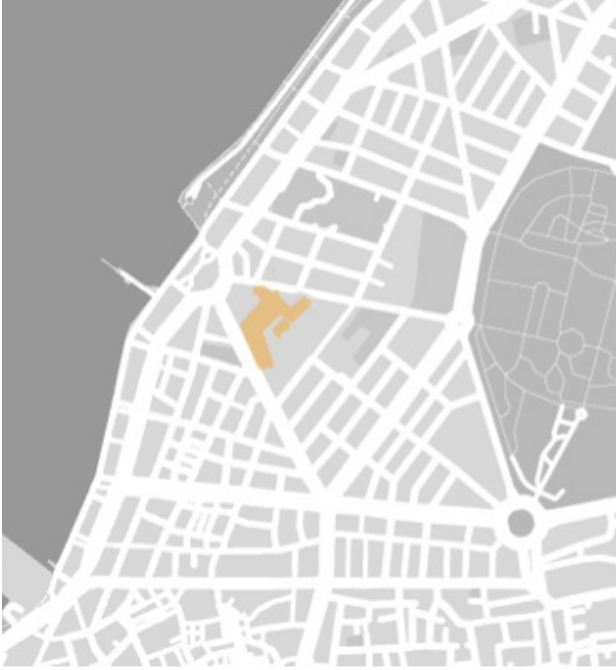


Fig. 1 Location of Grand Ephesus Hotel.



Fig. 2 Photo of Grand Ephesus Hotel (Arkitekt, 1965).

example of these new hospitality projects<sup>12</sup>. Soon after, the Grand Ephesus Hotel was completed in 1964 by Emek İnşaat AŞ for the same institution<sup>13</sup>. With its large scale, modern facilities, and international standards, it quickly became an architectural and cultural landmark. As Turkey's second Emek Hotel, located in the heart of Izmir, it set an important precedent for tourism development and hotel management<sup>14</sup>.

The location of the Grand Ephesus Hotel significantly contributed to its prestige. Positioned near the seashore, the Izmir International Fairgrounds, and the Basmane train station, the building not only provided accommodation for foreign and domestic guests but also became integrated into the city's daily life. Facing one of the city's most prominent squares and the Atatürk Monument, the hotel reinforced the symbolic identity of modern Izmir<sup>15</sup>. The site itself also carried historical significance, as it had been affected by the 1922 Izmir Fire and later hosted the September 9 Fair, the precursor of the Izmir International Fair<sup>16</sup>.

The design was led by German architect Paul Bonatz, with implementation overseen by Fatih Uran. The project represented a significant state investment of 90 million TL, covering a total area of 38,500 m<sup>2</sup><sup>17</sup>. The hotel included 326 rooms, restaurants, a variety of bars and social spaces, extensive service areas, swimming pools, and retail facilities. Its modern equipment and organisation placed it far ahead of other hotels of its time, while its amenities – from conference halls to nightclubs – made it an essential social venue for Izmir. Numerous memories are tied to its spaces, such as one resident recalling: «We discovered that the Cyprus Peace Operation had commenced while we were swimming in the pool of the Büyük Efes Hotel. I was particularly fond of visiting the jewellery store within the hotel, as it was a pleasure to observe the exquisite jewellery.» (Interview 6).

The building's architecture was directly shaped by the climatic conditions of Izmir. Sun-shading devices such as eaves, blinds, and vertical partitions were applied, while the white facade was chosen to reflect the intense sunlight<sup>18</sup>.



Fig. 3 Photo of Grand Ephesus Hotel (Arkitekt, 1965).



Fig. 4 Hiltonian Facade of Grand Ephesus Hotel (Arkitekt, 1965).

Architecturally, the Grand Ephesus shared characteristics with other international hotels of the period: rationality, repetition, and straightforwardness in design. Its honeycomb grid facade, a hallmark of Hilton-style architecture, embodied both modernist aesthetics and social meaning. Although Şevki Vanlı dismissed such buildings as ‘Hiltonism’, considering them mediocre, Sibel Bozdoğan argued that repetition and anonymity also symbolised equality and integration into daily life<sup>19</sup>. The equal design of guest rooms, for instance, could be read as a democratization of comfort.

Placed in contrast to the ‘New Architecture’ of the early Republican period – which represented an ideological modernity imposed through state buildings – Hilton-style hotels reflected a lived modernity embedded in mass culture. They corresponded to the aspirations of an urban middle class and became cultural symbols of the 1950s<sup>20</sup>. Despite its emblematic role, however, the Grand Ephesus was closed in 2003. Although a renovation project was prepared by Has Mimarlık-NBBJ, the building was caught up in the privatisation process of state-owned hotels<sup>21</sup>. By 2005, the Privatization High Council transferred its operations to the Swissôtel Group under a 25-year contract<sup>22</sup>. The hotel continues to operate under this management, but its transformation brought a rupture in the city’s collective memory, altering citizens’ former practices and associations with the building.

### Reminders: Activities

The activities conducted at the site are among the key elements that define its unique identity<sup>23</sup>. At the Grand Ephesus Hotel, space and activity were inseparable, with the pool, ballrooms, pool bar, rooftop restaurant, and nightclub frequently recalled by interviewees. Since its opening, the hotel has served as a symbol of İzmir, supporting both

tourism and social life. Modernisation movements of the Republican period shaped new spatial practices, and the hotel became a meeting point for renowned artists – sometimes as performers, sometimes as guests.

«The hotel served as İzmir's gateway to the west. We frequently dined at the rooftop restaurant. We also attended the nightclub to have a good time... My most cherished memory is the encounter with Zeki Müren.» (Interview 2). Beyond entertainment, the hotel was also a venue for special occasions such as graduations and weddings, reflecting its contribution to urban life and collective memory: «In 1989, we hosted our wedding dinner at the rooftop restaurant. Subsequently, in 2001, we held a circumcision ceremony for my son in the small pool located in the front garden.» (Interview 3). Similar accounts highlight ballroom graduations, weddings, and milestone events (Interviews 4, 8, 12).

With its reopening as Swissôtel Grand Ephesus<sup>24</sup>, the hotel's role shifted. No longer primarily a leisure destination, it became a hub for corporate and association activities. «We utilise the new hotel for our association meetings, which are held biweekly... The decision to select the hotel was influenced by its numerous well-suited meeting rooms.» (Interview 3). Others emphasised corporate events such as iftar dinners and New Year's celebrations (Interview 10), or the use of sports facilities like the gym and tennis courts (Interview 11).

This transformation has altered its place in collective memory, shifting from a vibrant social and cultural landmark to a more functional venue.

### **The Significance and Meaning of Grand Ephesus Hotel**

In addition to the mnemonic items described, insights were gathered from the participants regarding the daily life aspects of the updated version of the hotel. Typically, memories are recounted with enthusiasm and nostalgia, whereas contemporary accounts describe life as more monotonous. It has been noted that the nostalgic significance attributed to the Grand Ephesus Hotel has shifted towards a more critical perspective in the present day.

What significance does the Grand Ephesus Hotel hold for you? How did you feel during your stay at the Grand Ephesus Hotel? What word yourselves associate with the Grand Ephesus Hotel? Such questions were posed.

«The Grand Ephesus Hotel evokes the initial concept of luxury. It stands as a symbol of İzmir and was once a magnificent establishment. My experiences there consistently brought me happiness. Currently, it functions as a luxury hotel once more; however, it does not evoke the same excitement as in the past» (Interview 4).

«A hotel that introduces numerous innovations to İzmir and leads the entertainment industry... With its array of restaurants, bars, and swimming pool, it stands as İzmir's most distinguished venue for leisure... Its patrons consistently perceive that they are esteemed... I generally visit the new hotel for business luncheons and meetings. Each visit assures me of the high quality of service I can expect, leaving me confident and satisfied...» (Interview 12).

«The hotel served as the gateway of İzmir opening to the west. It was an exquisite establishment. My appreciation for it was very evident during my visit. Currently, I seldom utilise the hotel, as it no longer holds significant meaning for me» (Interview 6).

### **Conclusion**

This study aims to identify the factors influencing the formation and alteration of memory. It examines the language used by participants to describe their feelings, memories, and daily experiences regarding the Grand Ephesus Hotel.



Participants discuss their past experiences through nostalgic imitation, criticising contemporary life and comparing it with the past.

The Grand Ephesus Hotel holds a significant place in the memories of the participants. Numerous noteworthy activities conducted at this venue have left a lasting impression. However, the same sentiment does not extend to the newly renovated hotel. The locations and features that most prominently evoke recollections of the original Grand Ephesus Hotel include the roof bar, the pool, and the pool bar, which have become defining elements akin to the sculptures within the hotel. Conversely, participants indicated that the new hotel lacks many notable places or features; they primarily mentioned the restaurant, and the ball and congress halls. It was ultimately concluded that the participants experienced similar levels of quality, satisfaction, and happiness in both establishments.

The site maintains a position within urban memory through the activities and items it encompasses. The significance of a location is continually reconstructed through daily actions. Within the scope of this study, the place and the persistence of activities at the hotel were examined in relation to memory formation. It is the experience, perception, and imagination associated with a location that render it more than merely a physical space. In this context, the Grand Ephesus Hotel holds particular significance.

The research indicates that the users of Grand Ephesus Hotel hold a significant place in their lives and memories, often recounting their experiences with nostalgia when prompted. Conversely, it was observed that Swiss Hotel Grand Ephesus did not occupy a prominent position in the collective memory of the city; rather, it merely evoked memories of the former hotel. This circumstance has diminished the prominence of the Grand Ephesus Hotel within the city's collective consciousness and has impacted the sustainability of collective memory.

<sup>1</sup> PAUL BONATZ, FATİH URAN, T.C. Emekli Sandığı İzmir Büyük Efes Oteli, Arkitekt, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> KEVIN LYNCH, ÇEV. İREM BAŞARAN, *Kent İmgesi*, İstanbul, Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları 2018.

<sup>3</sup> İZZEDDİN ÇALIŞLAR, *Grand Efes Çağdaş Mekânda Sanat*, İstanbul, MV Holding 2010.

<sup>4</sup> JOHN V. PUNTER, *Participation in the Design of Urban Space*, London, Avebury 1991.

<sup>5</sup> KEVIN LYNCH, ÇEV. İREM BAŞARAN, *Kent İmgesi*, İstanbul, Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları 2018; ALI YILDIRIM, HASAN ŞİMŞEK, *Sosyal Bilimlerde Nitel Araştırma Yöntemleri*, Ankara, Seçkin Yayıncılık 2013.

<sup>6</sup> İZZEDDİN ÇALIŞLAR, *Grand Efes Çağdaş Mekânda Sanat*, İstanbul, MV Holding 2010.

<sup>7</sup> MAURICE HALBWACHS, *On Collective Memory*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 1992 (Türkçe çeviri: Toplumsal Bellek, çev. B. Yıldırım, Ankara, Heretik Yayınları 2018).

<sup>8</sup> PIERRE NORA, *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard 2006.

<sup>9</sup> PAUL BONATZ, FATİH URAN, T.C. Emekli Sandığı İzmir Büyük Efes Oteli, Arkitekt 1968.

<sup>10</sup> PAUL BONATZ, FATİH URAN, T.C. Emekli Sandığı İzmir Büyük Efes Oteli, Arkitekt, 1968; PIERRE NORA, *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard 2006.

<sup>11</sup> HANDE ATMACA ÇETİN, ZEYNEP TUNA ULTAV, FUNDA UZ, *Reflections of the İstanbul Hilton Hotel on Mid-Century Hotel*, «Art-Sanat», n. 12, 2019, pp. 57-88.

<sup>12</sup> BURCU KARABAŞ, *Emek Oteller'inin Hazin Öyküsü*, Arkitera, 2008, <<http://v3.arkitera.com/h36932-emek-otellerinin-hazin-oykusu.html>> [erişim: 18 Mayıs 2021].

<sup>13</sup> PAUL BONATZ, FATİH URAN, T.C. Emekli Sandığı İzmir Büyük Efes Oteli, Arkitekt, 1968.

<sup>14</sup> EMEL KAYIN, *İzmir Oteller Tarihi*, İzmir, İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi 2000.

<sup>15</sup> Zeynep Tuna Ultav, Gökçeçek Savaşır, *The Erasure of History in the Remodeling of the Grand Efes Hotel in Izmir*, «Interiors 3», n. 3, 2015, pp. 181-202.

<sup>16</sup> EBRU YILMAZ, ÜLKÜ İNCEKÖSE, *İzmir'de Bir Kentsel İmgenin Dönüşümü: Büyük Efes Oteli, Bir Varmış Bir Yokmuş: Toplumsal Bellek, Mekân ve Kimlik Üzerine Araştırmalar*, der. Tahire Erman, Serpil Özaloğlu, İstanbul, Koç Üniversitesi Yayınları 2017, pp. 61-76.

<sup>17</sup> PAUL BONATZ, FATİH URAN, T.C. Emekli Sandığı İzmir Büyük Efes Oteli, Arkitekt, 1968.

<sup>18</sup> PAUL BONATZ, FATİH URAN, T.C. Emekli Sandığı İzmir Büyük Efes Oteli, Arkitekt, 1968.

<sup>19</sup> SİBEL BOZDOĞAN, *Hiltonculuk*, İnci Aslanoglu Bir Mimarlık Tarihi Dizimi içinde, der. Elvan Altan, Ankara, Sevil Enginsoy 2019; ANNABEL WHARTON, *Building the Cold War: Hilton International Hotels and Modern Architecture*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press 2001.

<sup>20</sup> PIERRE NORA, *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Paris, Gallimard 2006.

<sup>21</sup> *İzmir Büyük Efes Oteli Has Mimarlık: İzmir'de Simge Bir Yapı*, İnşaat Dünyası, <<http://www.insaatdunyasi.com.tr/arsiv/yazi/yzmir-buyuk-efes-oteli-has-mimarlyk-yzmirde-simgebir>> [18 May 2021].

<sup>22</sup> İZZEDDİN ÇALIŞLAR, *Grand Efes Çağdaş Mekânda Sanat*, İstanbul, MV Holding 2010.

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