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The Metal Lettering of Burdur: Vernacular Typography as a Material Urban Cultural Practice

Erol Çitci / Assoc. Prof. Dr.
Burdur Mehmet Akif Ersoy University, Faculty of Art and Design, Department of Visual Communication Design
ecitci@mehmetakif.edu.tr

Murat Ertürk / Assoc. Prof. Dr.
Sakarya University, Faculty of Art Design and Architecture, Department of Visual Communication Design
merturk@sakarya.edu.tr

Abstract

Although urban lettering has been widely examined through linguistic landscapes and signage systems, the material, spatial, and craft-based dimensions of locally produced vernacular lettering remain insufficiently explored. This study examines vernacular metal lettering integrated into the built environment of Burdur, a medium-sized Anatolian city in Turkey, as a form of urban lettering. Drawing on a conceptual framework that brings together linguistic landscape research, vernacular typography, and material culture, the research investigates the material, spatial, and social functions of these objects within urban space. Using a qualitative, exploratory methodology, 123 examples of metal lettering across Burdur's city center were documented through systematic observation between 2024 and 2026. Data were analyzed using a hybrid thematic approach, yielding four principal themes: spatial marking, identity and belonging, material presence, and temporal stratification and transformation. The findings demonstrate that metal lettering functions beyond informational signage; it operates as a spatially embedded practice through which individual and collective identity are produced and reproduced. The material properties of these objects, including surface texture, craft traces, and environmental wear, constitute layered carriers of urban memory. The study discusses the heritage significance of vernacular metal lettering and highlights its vulnerability to urban renewal and standardized industrial signage. Comparative documentation across Anatolian cities and oral history work with remaining craftspeople are proposed as urgent directions for future research.

Keywords: Vernacular Typography, Metal Lettering, Urban Lettering, Material Culture, Linguistic Landscape.

JEL Codes: Z10, Z11, Z13, R58

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1. Introduction

Urban space is woven through with letters. Shop signage, building or street nameplates, wayfinding signs, and countless small-scale textual elements together form a dense visual environment that shapes how cities are perceived, experienced, and navigated (Scollon & Scollon, 2003). These letters render the city legible while simultaneously constituting the spatial expression of identity, belonging, and cultural values (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Blommaert, 2013). While large-scale signage, corporate identity systems, and billboards have been extensively studied, small-scale, locally produced lettering practices have often remained outside the scope of urban cultural analysis (Blommaert, 2013).

This study examines metal lettering integrated into the built environment of the Turkish city of Burdur as a specific form of everyday urban lettering. These examples do not belong to standardized typographic systems and are not aligned with institutional design traditions. This distinction refers primarily to their modes of design and production rather than to an absence of typographic organization. Unlike much contemporary industrial and institutional signage, which typically relies on pre-existing typefaces, repeatable production processes, and standardized visual systems, these examples are produced through local craft practices and display site-specific variations in letterform, spacing, material treatment, and visible fabrication traces. Their formal differences are therefore approached not as deviations from typographic norms, but as characteristics shaped by material processes, craft knowledge, and the spatial contexts in which they are situated. This mode of production is best understood within the framework of vernacular typography. Vernacular typography refers to forms that are usually concerned with the ordinary rather than the monumental, emerging from local practices, embedded in everyday life, and often produced by individuals without formal academic education in art or design (Baines & Dixon, 2003). Although this concept extends beyond urban environments and can also be observed in rural contexts, its specific manifestation in cities requires a distinct analytical framework due to spatial density, differentiated user groups, and its relationship with the built environment. The concept of the vernacular originates from architectural theory, where it was used to describe anonymous and local building traditions (Rudofsky, 1964; Oliver, 1997), and has since extended into other fields, providing a basis for new spatial readings such as urban lettering. At the same time, this study draws on the framework of linguistic landscape research concerning the presence of lettering in public space (Landry & Bourhis, 1997). Despite its theoretical and practice-based presence, such forms of production are rarely treated as meaningful urban elements in academic discussions. Studies on urban lettering have largely focused on linguistic landscapes, commercial signage systems, or the history of graphic design (Kinross, 2004; Silva Gouveia et al., 2009), while materially grounded, locally produced lettering practices rooted in craftsmanship have often been overlooked. This tendency stems in part from the emphasis in linguistic landscape research on language policy and language choice, particularly in multilingual contexts (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). Questions concerning the material dimension of lettering, including the materials, techniques, and spatial conditions of its production, have largely remained outside this framework.

Metal lettering stands at the center of this analytical gap as one of the most physical manifestations of typographic materiality. It sits outside both industrial typography and the established categories of visual communication. As a result, it often becomes analytically invisible and is dismissed as ordinary, functional, or formally irregular. This invisibility, however, is precisely what makes these objects worthy of analysis. The tendency for everyday objects to go unnoticed due to their ordinariness can lead to certain layers of cultural life being overlooked in scholarly inquiry. Highmore (2002) draws attention to this invisibility of the everyday, emphasizing the significance of ordinary objects in the production of cultural meaning. Objects such as metal lettering, which appear ordinary, can therefore be positioned at the center of efforts to understand how urban life is produced and sustained.

This article reconceptualizes metal lettering as an element of material cultural heritage. These objects are approached as spatially embedded elements that function in everyday life and shape urban experience, rather than as incomplete or flawed typographic outputs. This interdisciplinary framework is central to the research problem. Vernacular typography explains the local and craft-based mode of production of these objects, linguistic landscape situates them within urban space, perspectives on everyday life help account for their analytical invisibility, and material culture and heritage approaches make it possible to understand their physical persistence, transformation, and mnemonic value. Taken together, these perspectives allow metal lettering to be examined not simply as typographic form, but as a material, spatial, and social practice embedded in urban life. Accordingly, the central research question is: What material, spatial, and social functions do vernacular metal lettering practices embedded in the built environment of Burdur city center perform within urban space? To address this question, the study first defines vernacular metal lettering as a distinct category of everyday urban lettering, then situates these objects within material and spatial practices, and finally analyzes their role in the production of identity, belonging, and spatial representation through the case of Burdur. This approach aims to reconceptualize lettering as both a means of com-

munication and a material and cultural component of urban life.

2. Conceptual Framework

Urban lettering extends well beyond official and institutional systems of communication. Small-scale textual elements embedded in everyday life often shape urban experience without attracting attention. Research on linguistic landscapes provides an important point of departure for understanding this experience. Landry and Bourhis (1997) define the linguistic landscape as the visible uses of written language in public space and argue that this domain constitutes a semiotic system that generates knowledge about social structure. They further suggest that signs carry both an informational and a symbolic function, the latter of which also operates on an affective register. Subsequent studies have expanded this framework, developing it into an analytical approach that addresses spatial organization and visual qualities of lettering alongside language choice (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010; Ben-Rafael et al., 2006). Scollon and Scollon (2003) extend this line of inquiry through the concept of geosemiotics, demonstrating that the placement of a sign, the manner of its installation, and the material through which it is produced are as significant as its linguistic content. This perspective enables an understanding of lettering as a spatial practice rather than an abstract text. Within the framework proposed by Scollon and Scollon (2003), the concepts of emplacement, interaction order, and visual design provide systematic tools for analyzing the relationship between written signs and their environments.

However, much linguistic landscape research focuses on the content of writing and language choice. In contrast, questions concerning how writing is produced, which materials are used, and how it relates to space are often treated as secondary. Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), by contrast, approach urban lettering through its visual and physical materiality within the framework of multimodal communication theory and analyze streetscapes as readable texts. In this perspective, the materiality of lettering and its spatial placement play a constitutive role in meaning-making alongside language itself. Pennycook (2010) extends this argument by suggesting that linguistic landscape studies should shift attention from viewing language as something located in space toward examining the ongoing interaction between language and space. Lynch's (1960) concept of urban legibility, together with Keller and Keller's (1993) observations on how everyday practices shape the relationship between cognition and action, also contribute to understanding lettering as a spatial element. However, these approaches leave unresolved the question of physical production, that is, which hands, tools, and forms of technical knowledge bring these objects into physical existence.

This gap is partially addressed within the fields of vernacular typography and visual culture studies. Vernacular typography refers to locally produced, non-standardized, and often anonymous letterforms (Baines & Dixon, 2003). The concept of the vernacular has generated extensive discussion in architectural theory, particularly through Rudofsky's formulation of architecture without architects (Koç & Gür, 2019; Oral & Akıncı, 2024). Oliver (1997) defines vernacular architecture as the building tradition of a particular community and demonstrates how local knowledge, materials, and climatic conditions shape this tradition. Rudofsky's and Oliver's framing of vernacular architecture can be extended to lettering practices through the notion of vernacular typography. Laube and Widrig (2016), in their study of lettering in architecture, examine its functional and aesthetic dimensions and show that the relationship between such lettering practices and the built environment requires an analytical framework that goes beyond standard typographic approaches. Their work demonstrates how letterforms articulate with architectural surfaces and how this articulation shapes the visual character of the urban landscape. Vernacular lettering is characterized by variability, adaptability, and sensitivity to spatial context, operating independently of formal consistency or aesthetic unity. Local aesthetic preferences, visual needs, economic conditions, and available materials collectively shape these modes of production. At the same time, this production cannot be reduced to a practical necessity. If vernacular typography is understood as a mode of spatial production shaped by local knowledge and material conditions, then its formal characteristics inevitably carry social and ideological weight. Kinross (1985) argues that typographic forms are never neutral and that every choice of letterform carries a political, economic, or ideological rhetoric. This perspective is crucial for understanding vernacular lettering as more than an aesthetic phenomenon, situating it instead as a spatial expression of social relations and cultural dynamics.

Studies of vernacular typography render visible the production practices that linguistic landscape research has largely overlooked. However, these studies tend to remain focused on formal and aesthetic dimensions and do not sufficiently examine the spatial presence of lettering or its transformation within social life. Material culture studies constitute a third axis that completes this framework. When letterforms become embedded in physical surfaces, they cease to function solely as an abstract indicator and acquire material presence. This material presence generates weight, depth, texture, and spatial impact. This perspective requires approaching lettering as a physical object, a spatial intervention, and a carrier of meaning. Ingold (2007) argues that the history of writing is the history of the line and that writing is an act that traverses surfaces and leaves traces. In this view, writing is the material trace of a dyna-

mic relationship among material, tool, and surface, rather than the writing of a pre-existing meaning onto an empty ground. When this understanding is transposed onto the domain of urban lettering, metal lettering can be read as lasting traces shaped by the resistance of materials and the texture of surfaces, rather than as transient representations overlaid upon the urban landscape. Miller (2010) emphasizes that everyday objects are more than mere functional tools, suggesting that deeper engagement with them leads to a deeper understanding of human life. Appadurai (1986) conceptualizes the social life of things by demonstrating that objects are not static entities but acquire new meanings through processes of production, circulation, and use. From this perspective, objects carry cultural biographies that unfold through their social trajectories, much as individuals do (Kopytoff, 1986; Tilley, 2006). When considered within this framework, metal lettering can be understood as objects with biographies that extend from production to installation, from use to processes of ageing, evolving from functional signage components into carriers of urban memory. Tilley (2006) introduces the concept of objectification to explain how individuals and communities express themselves through the material world and how such expressions gain social recognition. A nameplate mounted at the entrance to a residential building is more than just a functional and aesthetic purpose in identifying the building and displaying its name; it serves as a spatial expression of ownership, belonging, and social status. Sennett (2008) approaches craft as a practice that develops through the interaction between thinking and making. The production of metal lettering requires complex craft knowledge, including cutting, bending, soldering, and mounting metal onto surfaces. This knowledge is typically transmitted through master-apprentice relationships and corresponds to what Polanyi (1966) defines as tacit knowledge, a form of knowledge that resists full articulation in explicit or codified form.

De Certeau (1984) argues that ordinary users of space are not passive consumers; rather, they are active producers of meaning, operating through improvisational tactics that reshape dominant spatial orders from within. This perspective is directly relevant to vernacular metal lettering. The craftsman who bends a metal rod without a formal drawing, and the resident who commissions a monogram to mark a threshold, are both engaged in acts of spatial production that exceed their purely functional rationale. De Certeau's (1984) framework thus supplements all three theoretical axes of this study by foregrounding the agency embedded in everyday making.

When this conceptual framework is considered as a whole, the analysis of metal lettering emerges at the intersection of three principal theoretical axes. The first axis, linguistic landscape studies, addresses the relationship between writing and space. The second axis, vernacular typography, accounts for local production practices and their independence from institutional systems. The third axis, material culture, explains the social biography of objects and their role in social life. Each axis compensates for the limitations of the others. Linguistic landscape research tends to overlook materiality, vernacular studies often do not trace the social transformation of objects, and material culture approaches do not always foreground the specific spatial logic of urban lettering. When combined, these three perspectives provide analytical depth that encompasses the production, spatial emplacement, and temporal transformation of metal lettering. This tripartite framework provided the theoretical orientation for the analysis. The analysis ultimately resulted in four themes: spatial marking, identity and belonging, material presence, and temporal stratification and transformation.

However, these four analytical themes were not predetermined or directly derived from these theoretical axes. Rather, they were developed iteratively through the coding and categorization of the field data, as described in Section 4.2. The study therefore adopts a hybrid thematic analysis, combining a theoretically informed analytical orientation with data-driven coding and theme development.

The theme of spatial marking is interpreted primarily in relation to the linguistic landscape approach, which shows how placement and material form produce meaning beyond language. The theme of identity and belonging is interpreted through the combined perspectives of all three axes; linguistic landscape emphasizes symbolic function, vernacular typography focuses on locally embedded production, and material culture explains habitus and belonging. The theme of material presence is examined primarily through material culture and vernacular typography; craft knowledge, surface quality, and tactile dimension generate meaning independent of linguistic content. The theme of temporal stratification and transformation is interpreted primarily through material culture; Tim Ingold's (2013) concept of ongoing growth and DeSilvey's (2017) framework of curated decay are central, while vernacular typography explains how objects age outside formal protection. These axes function as interdependent analytical perspectives, each making visible what the others leave implicit.

3. The Urban and Cultural Context of Burdur

The selection of Burdur as the field site for this research is grounded in the city's specific urban and historical conditions. Located in the northwestern part of Turkey's Mediterranean Region, within the geographical area known as the lakes district, Burdur is a medium-sized Anatolian city with a population of approximately 100,000. This demographic scale is significant for the study. Burdur does not exhibit

the rapid transformation dynamics characteristic of large metropolitan centers, and it does not reflect the relative stasis associated with small towns. This intermediate position has enabled a comparatively slow transformation of the city's physical structure and has allowed many elements of the urban fabric to persist into the present.

Throughout its history, Burdur has remained relatively isolated from large-scale industrial investments and rapid waves of urbanization. The city's economy has long been based on agriculture and animal husbandry, while industrial development has remained limited. Its urban form has been shaped by the modernization projects of the Republican period. Planning initiatives implemented from the 1930s onward established a relatively orderly street pattern in the city center. This process of modernization, however, unfolded at a pace that allowed for the continuity of local production practices, rather than producing the rapid, comprehensive transformations observed in larger cities. It reflects the local manifestations of the process described by Balamir (1994) as the acceleration of residential building construction in the city center between the 1950s and the 1980s. Metal lettering appears largely on buildings from this period. The transition from the traditional detached house type to multi-storey buildings brought with it new modes of producing urban identity. Apartment nameplates became one of the primary instruments for identifying this new building type.

The city's craft tradition is critical for understanding the production context of metal lettering. Historically, Burdur has sustained craft practices such as leatherworking, metalworking and copper smithing. The production of metal lettering can be understood as an extension of this craft tradition into urban lettering. Prior to the widespread adoption of standardized industrial production, local blacksmiths, welders, and metalworkers produced these letterforms on a commission basis. This mode of production generated a high degree of variation, making each example distinct, while the commissioning process itself reflected key characteristics of vernacular production. Field observations and informal conversations with local craftspeople and property owners indicate that this mode of production was often grounded in direct communication between client and craftsman. Design decisions were commonly made without formal drawings or plans, relying instead on verbal exchange and the practitioner's professional experience.

In the present, urban transformation and renovation projects in the city center, along with the standardization of building facades and the widespread adoption of industrial signage solutions, appear to have contributed to a substantial decline in local metal-lettering practices. Existing examples can therefore be understood as traces of an earlier phase of urban production whose heritage significance warrants documentation. These conditions position Burdur as both a suitable and an urgent site for the study of vernacular typography.

4. Method

This study is an exploratory and descriptive inquiry situated within the qualitative research paradigm. As noted by Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research based on observation and documentation in natural settings provides the most appropriate methodological framework for understanding everyday life practices. In this study, the research process is likewise grounded in the principle of documenting and analyzing metal lettering within their natural spatial contexts.

4.1. Sampling and Data Collection

Data were collected between 2024 and 2026 through repeated field observations conducted in commercial and residential areas within Burdur city center, as well as in the city cemetery. The fieldwork was not organized around a single predetermined route, a fixed neighborhood boundary, or a neighborhood-based sampling quota. In this study, the city center was treated operationally as Burdur's commercial and residential urban core rather than as a fixed administrative unit. These areas, together with the city cemetery, were revisited repeatedly over the course of the study. Because vernacular metal lettering is dispersed across the urban fabric and some examples became visible only during subsequent visits, the survey was conducted as an iterative rather than exhaustive field survey. Metal objects were included in the dataset if they were accessible, directly integrated into the built environment, and exhibited visible evidence of manual fabrication, such as bending, welding, hammering, surface treatment, or other non-standardized production traces. Examples that could be clearly identified as products of standardized industrial manufacturing were excluded. Because the individual makers or workshops could not be verified for every example, local production was not treated as an independent inclusion criterion.

The sampling strategy was therefore criterion-based and field-dependent rather than proportionally predetermined. The numerical distribution across categories was not established in advance; instead, it reflects the relative occurrence of accessible examples that met the inclusion criteria within the surveyed areas. A total of 123 examples were documented: 80 door monograms (65.0%), 30 grave lettering examples (24.4%), 10 apartment nameplates (8.1%), and 3 examples of commercial signage (2.4%). The limited number of commercial signage examples therefore does not result from a deliberate restriction of this category, but from the number of surviving and ac-

cessible examples that met the study's inclusion criteria during the field surveys.

Each example was photographed in situ, and its spatial location, estimated period of production, material type, mode of installation, state of preservation, and environmental context were recorded simultaneously through a structured observation form. During the fieldwork, informal conversations were also conducted with several local craftspeople and property owners associated with some of the documented examples. These conversations were not treated as a separate interview dataset or subjected to thematic coding; rather, they were used as contextual information concerning production practices, commissioning processes, and the local use of metal lettering. The dataset thus represents the documented corpus of accessible vernacular metal lettering identified within the spatial and temporal limits of the fieldwork, rather than a complete inventory or a statistically proportioned sample of Burdur's urban lettering as a whole.

4.2. Analysis Method and Limitations

The collected data were analyzed through a multi-stage process that drew on the thematic analysis approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The primary unit of analysis was defined as each photographed metal lettering sample together with its associated structured observation notes. In accordance with the hybrid approach outlined in Section 2, coding was conducted inductively on the basis of observable and recurring features in the dataset, while the conceptual framework informed the subsequent interpretation of the themes. Thematic analysis is a flexible method that aims to identify recurring patterns of meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In line with this approach, the data were systematically coded, related codes were grouped into broader categories, and themes were developed iteratively from the relationships identified among these categories.

The analysis was conducted in six stages. The stages of the hybrid thematic analysis followed in this study are summarized in Figure 1.

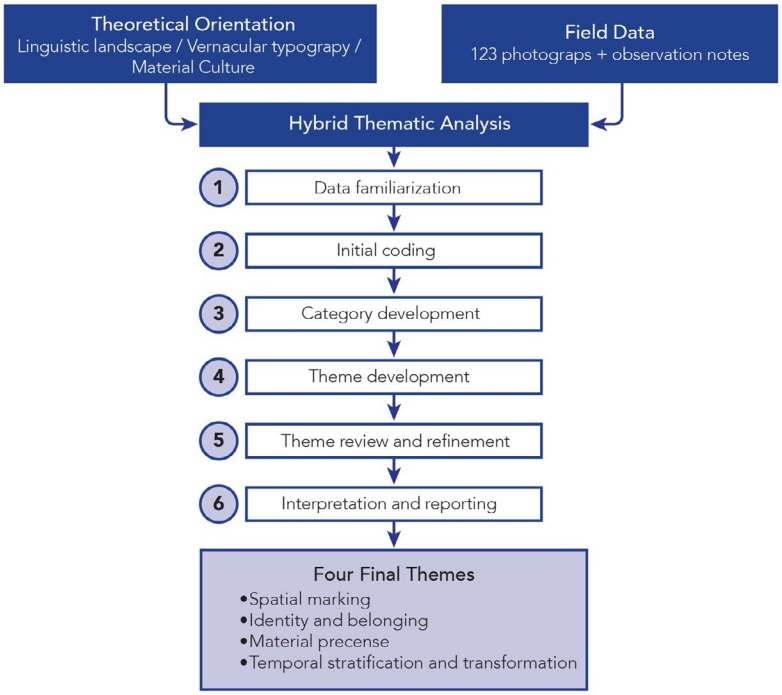


Figure 1. Flowchart of the hybrid thematic analysis process used in the study.

In the first stage, all images and field notes were reviewed repeatedly to ensure familiarity with the data; initial observational notes were generated concerning letterform, material properties, surface condition, spatial placement, and environmental influences. In the second stage, each sample was coded in terms of its formal, spatial, and functional or material characteristics. During this process, concise analytical codes were produced, such as entrance placement, monogram, relief surface, family affiliation, oxidation, integration with vegetation, welding trace, and irregular letter spacing. In the third stage, codes sharing similar semantic domains were brought together to form higher-level categories. These categories were organized under the main headings of spatial positioning, identity representation, material production characteristics, and temporal transformation and environmental interaction. In the fourth stage, relationships among these categories were examined, and more comprehensive themes

explaining the dataset were developed. This process resulted in four main themes: spatial marking, identity and belonging, material presence, and temporal stratification and transformation. In the fifth stage, the themes were reviewed against the entire dataset; attention was given to ensuring internal coherence within each theme and clear distinctions across themes. Potential overlaps, particularly between spatial marking and identity representation, and between material presence and temporal transformation and environmental interaction, were reassessed, and thematic boundaries were clarified. In the final stage, the empirically developed themes were interpreted in relation to the three theoretical axes outlined in the conceptual framework. Linguistic landscape studies, vernacular typography, and material culture were therefore used as interpretive perspectives rather than as a predetermined thematic scheme imposed on the data. Selected examples were then used to demonstrate how each theme operated across different spatial and material contexts. An example of the coding scheme is provided in Table 1.

To assess the reliability of the coding process, a subset of the dataset comprising approximately 25% of the total samples was independently coded by two researchers. The resulting codings were compared, and the reliability formula proposed by Miles and Huberman was applied. Accordingly, reliability was calculated by dividing the number of agreements by the total number of agreements and disagreements (Baltacı, 2017; Kuloğlu, 2022). The calculated coding reliability is 94%. This value exceeds commonly accepted thresholds in qualitative research and indicates consistency in the coding process. Discrepancies identified during coding were discussed between the researchers until agreement was reached, and the coding scheme was revised accordingly.

Table 1. Examples of Code, Category, and Theme Mappings

Code	Category	Theme
Monogram (combined letters)	Identity representation	Identity and belonging
Apartment name	Structural identity	Identity and belonging
Placed at the entrance	Spatial positioning	Spatial marking
Central location (focal point of the entrance)	Spatial positioning	Spatial marking
Embossed surface	Physical production and surface	Material presence
Bent metal form	Physical production and surface	Material presence
Oxidation (surface darkening)	Time and environmental impact	Temporal stratification and transformation
Peeling paint	Time and environmental impact	Temporal stratification and transformation
Integration with vegetation	Time and environmental impact	Temporal stratification and transformation

This analytical framework should be evaluated in light of several limitations. First, the study is based on a single-city case. Burdur was selected because its medium-scale urban structure, relatively gradual transformation, and surviving craft-based lettering practices provide a suitable context for examining vernacular metal lettering in depth, as discussed in Section 3. Nevertheless, this case-specific focus limits the direct transferability of the findings to other Anatolian cities, where urban development, craft traditions, and signage practices may differ. Second, the dataset is restricted to examples that were physically accessible and visually documentable during the field surveys. Since the study relies on in situ observation and photographic documentation, metal lettering located in inaccessible private spaces, removed before the fieldwork, or no longer surviving could not be included. The documented corpus should therefore be understood as representing the accessible surviving examples encountered during the 2024–2026 fieldwork rather than the complete historical population of metal lettering in Burdur. Third, historical information concerning the exact dates of production, individual craftspeople, commissioning processes, and workshop practices is limited. Although estimated production periods and contextual information were recorded where possible, the absence of systematic archival and oral-history data prevents definitive historical attribution. Consequently, interpretations concerning production processes, chronology, and craft networks should be understood as analytically grounded inferences rather than fully verified historical reconstructions. Finally, the dynamic nature of urban change means that some examples may have disappeared prior to documentation or may continue to disappear after the completion of the fieldwork. These limitations have been taken into account in the interpretation

of the findings and also inform the directions proposed for comparative and oral-history research in the conclusion.

5. Findings and Analysis

In this section, the formal, spatial, and functional patterns identified through the fieldwork are presented under four thematic headings and analyzed in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks. Within the scope of the study, a total of 123 examples of metal lettering in Burdur's city center were examined. Selected examples of metal lettering documented during the fieldwork are presented in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Selected examples of vernacular metal lettering documented in Burdur.

The documented corpus comprises four categories: door monograms, apartment nameplates, grave lettering, and commercial signage. However, because only three examples of commercial signage were identified, this category was not included as a separate category in the comparative thematic analysis. The analysis therefore focuses primarily on the three categories with sufficient representation: door monograms, apartment nameplates, and grave lettering. These three categories represent the manifestation of metal lettering practices within distinct spatial and social contexts. The analysis is based on approaching metal lettering as urban practices that vary across contexts while exhibiting shared tendencies, rather than as isolated objects.

Table 2 summarizes the degree of alignment between each data category and the four analytical themes, along with the principal analytical claim at each point of intersection. Strong Relation indicates that a category most strongly exemplifies a given theme; Partial Relation indicates that the category is present within the theme at a secondary level; Limited Relation indicates that its relationship with the relevant analytical theme is weak.

Table 2. Relationship Between Data Set and Analytical Themes.

Analytical Theme	Door Monograms	Apartment Nameplates	Grave Lettering
Spatial marking	Strong relation. Positioned at the center of the entrance surface, the monogram serves as a visual boundary separating the public and private spaces.	Partial relation. The nameplates anchor its identity to the facade. Through naming, the city can be read as a text.	Limited relation. The lettering is placed on boundary elements defining the grave's surroundings; it serves a functional role in demarcating the space but has a weak public signage function.
Identity and belonging	Strong relation. The combined letters transform individual identity into a concentrated symbol; the repetition of the same monogram reveals the collective or craft network dimension.	Strong relation. The naming of a building is the local manifestation of corporate identity production. The choice of a name carries an indicator of social positioning that can be interpreted within the framework of Bourdieu's concept of taste.	Strong relation. Identity transcends the individual level, serving to anchor and preserve collective family identity over time and space.
Material Presence	Strong relation. The linear structure formed by the bending of metal rods, along with solder marks and bends, makes the craft practice directly visible.	Strong relation. Relief surface treatment, brass plate, and hammering techniques reveal the material's presence most strongly in this category; the contrast between the surface and the letters adds a tactile quality.	Partial relation. Since the physical structure is intertwined with environmental interactions, reading the pure traces of production becomes difficult; the material gains meaning through decay.
Temporal stratification and transformation	Partial relation. Rust marks and surface deformation are observable, yet active maintenance traces are also present. The ability to observe transformation and preservation simultaneously opens this category to comparative analysis.	Partial relation. Surface discoloration and paint peeling have been observed; surface alteration and traces of intervention coexist, the transformation process has progressed more slowly than in other categories.	Strong relation. Oxidation, surface deformation, and interaction with vegetation make post-production material transformation particularly visible in this category.

5.1. Lettering as Spatial Marking

It has been observed that metal lettering is predominantly placed at entrances. Building doors, garden entrances, and graves are the areas where lettering is most densely concentrated. Most examples are placed in the central regions of the surfaces; most lettering forms three-dimensional structures that rise from the surface, creating a direct material presence within the space. In grave lettering, it has been observed that the lettering is mostly placed on boundary elements and serves as a frame that defines the grave area.

When considered in relation to Lynch's (1960) concept of the urban image, metal lettering can be evaluated as an element that contributes to the legibility of the city as an image. In his study 'The Image of the City', where Lynch examines how individuals see, perceive, and remember cities, one of the five fundamental components of the urban image is landmarks (Bayazıt, 2025). These landmarks may include effective buildings used for orientation or wayfinding, as well as various structural elements such as fountains, sculptures, trees, and urban furniture that function as points of reference (Vargün, 2022). Although Lynch's concept of landmarks was developed for large-scale urban elements (Lynch, 1960), metal lettering performs similar functions at a micro scale. Similarly, Gottdiener and Lagopoulos (1986) emphasize that all types of designed signs on streets, squares, buildings, and facades contribute to the formation of the urban image. Accordingly, apartment nameplates, door monograms, and grave lettering can be understood as spatial markers that contribute to the city's imagery through design elements.

An examination of the dataset reveals that the spatial marking function of metal lettering operates on several levels. At the first level, lettering directly performs an addressing function. At the second level, it makes the boundary between public and private space visible. In other words, metal lettering serves as a visual instrument that separates personal and familial space from the public realm. This tendency is clear in monogram examples applied to door surfaces. The AÇ (Ali Çelik) monogram shown on the iron door in Figure 3 is centered on the surface, serving as the visual focal point of the entrance and

defining the space. The raised form transforms the lettering from a two-dimensional sign into a spatial object. In high-traffic commercial entrances, the primary function of monograms is orientation and boundary definition, whereas in residential entrances the same form shifts toward identity expression. This contextual shift demonstrates, in line with Scollon and Scollon's (2003) framework of geosemiotics, that the same physical object may function through different meanings depending on its situated placement. Both letters from the monogram were created by bending metal rods of uniform thickness. The structure of the letters is nearly flawless, and they have been combined in a manner consistent with the designer's meticulousness. This suggests that a formal preparatory study or a template was used. The weld points where the metal rods meet bear the marks of a handmade process. Spatial marking should therefore be understood as a context-sensitive and variable practice rather than a fixed function. Similarly, the RÇ (Rafet Çınar), HK and HŞ (Hüseyin Şanlı) monograms in Figure 3 are confined within a geometric frame, centered on the door, and define the entrance's identity through a symbolic sign.



Figure 3. AÇ, RÇ, HK and HŞ door monograms.

When these examples are considered together, monograms employ distinct formal strategies while serving a shared purpose. They function as part of the spatial organization and serve as regulatory elements that define entrances, boundaries, and transitional points. This indicates that lettering is not limited to the transmission of information but also functions as an active component in the construction of spatial order. In this regard, door monograms become integrated into spatial organization as structuring elements that define entrance, boundary, and transition zones.

5.2. Lettering as a Symbol of Identity and Belonging

Metal lettering functions as a medium through which both individual and collective identity are expressed, and this expressive capacity manifests at varying scales across different contexts of use. A name placed within a space constitutes a lasting expression of the relationship that an individual or a family establishes with that space. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984) provides a useful framework for understanding the social dimension of metal lettering practices. The selection, formal qualities, and modes of placement of metal lettering reflect more than aesthetic preference; they operate as indicators of social position, cultural values, and economic resources. This configuration can be interpreted as a spatial manifestation of Bourdieu's concept of taste, since the choice of lettering serves as a powerful indicator that reveals the ideas and beliefs shaping the design process (Bourdieu, 1984; Kinross, 1985). In this regard, Miller's (2010) argument that a deeper engagement with objects enables a deeper understanding of people becomes analytically relevant. Metal lettering operates as an object through which owners express who they are, how they perceive

themselves, and how they seek to exist in the public sphere.

Within this framework, metal lettering can be evaluated as a material indicator that demonstrates how identity is made visible through everyday practices, rather than through naming alone. Examples such as door monograms, nameplates, and grave lettering show that the spatial articulation of identity follows recurring patterns of arrangement, form, and use rather than arbitrary decisions. Metal lettering can therefore be read not merely as a set of signs representing identity, but as a grounded field of practice in which belonging is spatially produced and reproduced. The concept of habitus, an integral component of Bourdieu's sociology (Palabıyık, 2011), provides a useful framework for understanding the social dimension of metal lettering. The selection of metal letters, their formal qualities, and their modes of placement are not simply aesthetic choices; they also function as indicators of social position, cultural values, and economic resources. These indicators can be understood as the spatial manifestation of Bourdieu's notion of habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). Habitus is defined as a set of dispositions shaped by the social and cultural conditions in which individuals and communities are embedded, internalized over time, and guiding practices (Kaplan & Yardımcıoğlu, 2020; Demir & Soncu, 2024). These dispositions operate not through explicit rules, but through patterns of behavior acquired via repeated experiences and often enacted unconsciously. In this context, metal lettering can be interpreted as a material expression that reveals how identity is made visible not only through naming, but also through everyday practices.

The placement of personal and family names in metal lettering reveals their function as sites for the expression of individual and collective identity, gaining visibility at different scales depending on context. In apartment nameplates, where individual belonging becomes publicly visible, the building's identity is fixed to the facade. In the case of a hammered brass nameplate, the embossed letterforms cast visible shadows depending on the angle of light, and the irregular hammered surface introduces a tactile depth that transforms the nameplate from a label into a spatial object. Irregularities in letterforms and variations in surface texture indicate that this production of identity emerges through local craft practices rather than standardized systems. In Figure 4, the Uzun Apartment example demonstrates a simple, functional naming approach. In contrast, in the case of the Mengi Apartment, the repetition of the word 'Mengi' achieves the same function through a denser formal and material configuration. The difference between these two examples demonstrates that identity can be produced through formal richness and surface treatment alongside naming.



Figure 4. The Uzun and Mengi Apartment buildings' nameplates.

Door monograms function as condensed indicators of individual identity. The combination and unification of letterforms transform identity from writing to a form like sign (Figure 5). The repetition of the ŞA (Şefik Arık) monogram on three different shop doors suggests that this object operates beyond the role of an individual name marker and functions instead as a form of visual identity indicator (Çitci & Kara, 2025).

Certain structural recurrences observed in door monograms may, in some cases, lend themselves to alternative interpretations (Figure 6). A shared origin of production is a highly plausible explanation. Monograms produced by the same craftsman may carry traces of that individual's formal repertoire; in such cases, repetition reflects the homogenizing effect of craft practice rather than an explicit assertion of identity. Another strong possibility is imitation or formal borrowing. When prestigious or recognizable forms are replicated in subsequent commissions, this points to the circulation of form within vernacular production. The available field data do not allow for a definitive distinction between these possibilities. However, the conditions under which these explanations remain valid indicate that Bourdieu's (1984) concept of taste in vernacular contexts cannot be reduced to a matter of aesthetic preference alone. It is shaped through the interaction of production networks, economic constraints, and demands for social visibility.



Figure 5. ŞA door monograms.



Figure 6. Hİ and HS door monograms.

Within the cemetery context, identity extends beyond the individual level and assumes a collective form. In the Sağlam and Hüsnü Karagöz families' grave shown in Figure 7, the lettering does more than indicate a name. It spatially delineates and renders visible a family-based identity. In relation to Hallam and Hockey's (2001) work on death and material culture, metal lettering in graves can be interpreted as materialized forms of commemorative practice. These objects sustain the continuity of identity after death, anchoring the individual and the family in space against the passage of time. Appadurai's (1986) con-

cept of the social life of things and Kopytoff's (1986) model of cultural biography become directly observable in this context. A metal lettering placed on a family grave undergoes a transformation of meaning that extends from production to installation, and from everyday use to enduring commemoration.



Figure 7. Metal lettering on the graves of the Sağlam and Hüsnü Karagöz families.

5.3. Lettering as Material Presence

Most of the examined examples have been produced independently of standard typographic systems (Figure 8). Lettering is generally formed through the bending of metal rods or the working of brass sheets, and this mode of production results in noticeable irregularities in letterforms. Monolinear structures and relief letters with variable stroke thickness coexist in the dataset, while spacing and alignment are inconsistent in many cases. The absence of diacritics or the presence of formal deviations is frequently observed, and traces of production, such as bending fractures, weld points, and surface roughness, are directly visible in a significant portion of the examples.



Figure 8. The Yalçın and R. Biçer Apartment nameplate.

Metal lettering can be categorized as a three-dimensional presence rather than a two-dimensional graphic element, given that it rises from the surface, casts shadows, and integrates with architectural components. Pallasmaa (2005) argues that natural materials such as stone, brick, and wood in architecture enable perception to move beyond surfaces and foster a conviction in the reality of matter. His emphasis on the multisensory nature of this experience (Pallasmaa, 2005) suggests that such lettering is perceived through both tactile and visual dimensions. This perspective indicates that writing should be approached as a material object that concretizes meaning, rather than as a purely representational element. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) theory of multimodal communication provides a useful framework in this context. Mode is the fundamental semiotic resource used to produce meaning; in other words, the channel through which meaning is carried and communicated. The meaning-making of metal lettering draws on linguistic content, the material's weight, surface texture, shadows cast by light, and tactile modalities. Each mode embedded in material presence contributes a distinct layer of meaning. This aligns with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) argument that images do not exist in isolation and always gain meaning through interaction with other modes. According to the authors, the vi-

sual is constantly in interaction with speech, movement, writing, three-dimensional objects, and other modes, and is shaped and reshaped through these interactions. Within this framework, metal lettering can be understood as a multimodal structure that produces meaning through layered relations with material, space, and the body, rather than as a purely visual representation. Sennett's (2008) concept of material consciousness deepens this material dimension from the perspective of production. Craft, in his account, is shaped by attention to the material, curiosity, and embodied awareness, and meaningful production processes emerge from this intensive engagement with the material (Sennett, 2008). Accordingly, metal lettering should be considered as material formations shaped by the material's resistance, surface qualities, and production techniques, rather than by formal preferences alone.

Hammered copper nameplates offer some of the most pronounced examples in this regard. The densely worked surfaces of the Mimarkent apartment nameplate and the lettering of Ali İhsan Görüşük's grave render the material presence of writing more evident. The contrast between raised letters and the rough ground transforms writing into a tactile object that exceeds its function as readable content (Figure 9). The legibility of these traces, however, is not uniform. In some cases, production marks are carefully minimized, surfaces are polished, and edges are refined. These examples indicate that craft knowledge involves a conscious negotiation between making visible and rendering invisible. This condition resonates with Sennett's (2008) emphasis on the dialogue between maker and material at the core of craft, and it suggests that interpreting material presence solely as the accumulation of production traces is insufficient. Material presence emerges as a layered condition in which both traces and their erasure coexist.



Figure 9. The Mimarkent Apartment nameplate and the grave lettering of Ali İhsan Görüşük.



Figure 10. The grave lettering of Aşçı Rıza Harputlu and the Erciyes families.

Ingold's (2007) definition of the line as an action that cuts across and leaves a trace finds a concrete counterpart in metal lettering design. The transformation of iron into letterforms through bending is articulated in space as a physical trace that stabilizes the relationship between tool and material, as well as the practical knowledge between the craftsperson's hands and the tool itself. Bending marks, welding points, and surface irregularities render the production process visible and define the lettering as a product of craft. In grave lettering, this material structure acquires a more complex condition th-

rough environmental interaction. In the example of the Aşçı Rıza Harputlu Family Grave (Figure 10), the coexistence of lettering with vegetal growth, and in the Erciyes Family Grave, the presence of paint loss and oxidation traces, transform the object from a purely metallic structure into a component of an environmental system. This condition aligns with Ingold's (2013) concept of growth, which emphasizes the ongoing transformation of objects through their interaction with the environment. Once installed in the built environment, metal lettering is subject to continuous change through the combined effects of environmental processes, maintenance, repair, and non-intervention. It is in constant interaction with its surroundings.

5.4. Lettering as Temporal Stratification and Transformation

In most of the examples, surface wear, paint loss, and traces of oxidation were observed (Figure 11). In door monograms and grave lettering, rust traces, metal erosion, and surface deformation; in apartment nameplates, surface darkening and tonal variation; and in grave lettering, the effect of vegetation cover indicate that these objects are not fixed forms but structures that transform over time. As Pallasmaa (2005) emphasizes, natural materials carry traces of time on their surfaces, and wear adds the experience of time to material perception. Although his discussion primarily concerns natural materials, this emphasis on ageing and surface transformation provides a useful perspective for interpreting the metal lettering examined here. In this context, oxidation, erosion, and other surface changes indicate that metal lettering embodies cumulative material processes that extend beyond the moment of production. These surfaces thus become visible records of temporal transformation.

Ingold (2013) approaches making as a continuous process of growth rather than a completed outcome. His comparison between marble sculpture and natural stalactite formation demonstrates that form is not restricted to the moment of production but unfolds over time through an ongoing process. He also argues that erosion of a sculpture through rain is part of the continuation of form-making. From this perspective, the transformation of metal lettering occurs not only at the production stage but also over a long period, shaped by use, environmental exposure, maintenance, repair, and non-intervention. Metal lettering thus carries material traces of its history of use and environmental exposure.

Across the dataset, metal lettering examples display varying degrees of material alteration as well as evidence of maintenance and repair. These variations indicate that the post-production transformation of metal lettering is shaped by the combined effects of environmental processes and human intervention. Maintenance, repair, and non-intervention therefore become part of the continuing material trajectory of these objects. As DeSilvey (2017, p. 5) notes, "the breaking up of structural integrity does not necessarily lead to the loss of meaning; processes of decay and disintegration can be culturally and ecologically productive, and in certain contexts it is possible to look beyond loss to imagine other ways of understanding and embracing material change." Read together with Ingold's (2013) understanding of form as continuing beyond the moment of production, these observations suggest that the material history of metal lettering does not end when the object is installed. Environmental processes and subsequent human interventions continue to reshape its surface and physical form over time. Temporal stratification, in this sense, refers to the accumulation of these successive material transformations within the post-production life of the object.



Figure 11. Examples of surface abrasions, paint peeling, and oxidation marks.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the examples of metal lettering in the urban landscape of Burdur are not merely functional typographic elements; they can be understood as urban practices shaped by spatial, material, and social relations. In this respect, the findings engage with existing scholarship at several key points while opening new avenues for discussion.

Taken together, the findings show that vernacular metal lettering performs spatial functions by marking entrances, boundaries, and particular places; social functions by making individual, familial, and collective identities and forms of belonging visible; and material functions by embodying craft processes, production traces, and the physical properties of metal. These findings provide a direct answer to the central research question. These functions are further reshaped over time through environmental processes and subsequent human interventions.

First, metal lettering renders visible the material dimension of vernacular typography. Linguistic landscape research has examined urban lettering primarily through the lens of linguistic content and language choice (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Ben-Rafael et al., 2006; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009; Blommaert, 2013; Duranti et al., 2023). As demonstrated particularly by the bent-metal monograms, hammered nameplates, and environmentally transformed grave lettering examined in the findings, the meaning of writing in metal lettering derives from material, production technique, spatial placement, and temporal processes, alongside linguistic content. This finding supports Scollon and Scollon's (2003) geosemiotic approach, which holds that where, how, and with what material a sign is placed is as determining as the linguistic content it carries, while also indicating that this approach requires further expansion through a material culture perspective. Pennycook's (2010) emphasis on the dynamic and interactive nature of the relationship between language and space is confirmed in the analysis of metal lettering.

Second, the findings show that metal lettering operates at the intersection of design, craft, and everyday life. The visible bending, joining, hammering, and surface-working techniques documented in the examples demonstrate that letterforms emerge through direct engagement with material rather than solely through predetermined graphic systems. This aligns with Sennett's (2008) approach to craft as a process grounded in the relationship between thinking, making, and material knowledge. De Certeau's (1984) perspective adds a different dimension by emphasizing that ordinary users are not passive occupants of space, but actively produce meaning through everyday practices of using, marking, and appropriating it. The placement of monograms at thresholds, the naming of apartment facades, and the inscription of family identity within grave spaces can be understood as such small-scale practices through which particular places are differentiated and given social meaning. These everyday practices also operate as forms of identity production, as demonstrated by the personal monograms, apartment names, and family grave lettering examined in the findings.

The identity and belonging theme further demonstrate that these practices operate at different social scales. Door monograms condense personal identity into symbolic forms, apartment nameplates attach named identities to buildings, and grave lettering extends identity into familial and commemorative contexts. These differences support an interpretation of metal lettering as a material practice through which belonging becomes spatially visible. Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of taste and habitus are relevant here because variations in form, placement, material, and degree of elaboration can be understood in relation to socially situated preferences and resources rather than as purely formal choices. In the cemetery context, the persistence of metal lettering, together with the names and family identities it carries, demonstrates how a functional sign may gradually acquire commemorative significance and, in certain cases, heritage value over time.

Third, this study contributes to research on urban memory and visual culture in Turkey. Studies on writing in Turkey have largely focused on the Alphabet Reform and the transition process from Ottoman Turkish to the Latin alphabet (Lewis, 1999; Çolak, 2004; Aytürk, 2008). The material forms of lettering production, their relationship to craft practices, and their role within everyday spatial practices have received comparatively less attention. The examples documented in Burdur provide evidence of how Latin letterforms were locally interpreted through metalworking practices and embedded into buildings, entrances, commercial spaces, and graves. In this respect, the study shifts attention from writing as a primarily linguistic or graphic system toward writing as a materially situated urban practice.

The theme of temporal stratification and transformation further connects these findings to questions of urban memory and heritage. The material alterations documented across the dataset demonstrate that metal lettering continues to change after installation. Vernacular typography can therefore be understood as a material carrier of accumulated temporal layers within the urban environment. These temporal traces can shift the significance of lettering beyond its initial functional role and allow some examples to materialize aspects of the layered structure of urban memory. At the same time, the variations observed across the dataset indicate that temporal transformation does not proceed uniformly, but is shaped by different combinations of environmental processes, maintenance, repair, and non-intervention.

Fourth, these findings also open a discussion about the possible heritage significance of vernacular metal lettering. These objects occupy an ambiguous position outside established forms of heritage recognition and protection. Recent discussions of cultural heritage emphasize that heritage extends beyond monumental or museum-based objects to encompass living practices, knowledge, skills, and forms of cultural expression transmitted across generations (Aktaş Durmuş, 2026). This broader understanding is relevant to vernacular metal lettering, which brings together material objects, craft knowledge, and locally embedded practices. Smith's (2006) concept of authorized heritage discourse (AHD) draws attention to the power relations that determine which objects are recognized as heritage. This discourse "draws attention to aesthetically pleasing material objects, sites, places and/or landscapes that need to be looked after, conserved, and respected in order to pass them on to future generations and to create a sense of collective past-based identity" (Smith, 2006, p. 29). Metal lettering can likewise be understood as an element of everyday material culture that remains outside this dominant discourse while retaining traces of urban life. Drawing on the view that heritage is a socially constructed process (Smith, 2006; Harrison, 2013; DeSilvey, 2017), it can be argued that the heritage significance of these letterforms derives not only from their age or rarity, but also from the meanings they acquire through local craft traditions, everyday practices, urban memory, and spatial experience. As these examples are removed, replaced, or materially transformed, the cultural meanings and local histories embodied in them also risk becoming less visible.

The documented examples suggest that the production of vernacular metal lettering has substantially declined, while standardized industrial signage and digital production technologies have become increasingly prevalent. Urban transformation and the renovation or replacement of older buildings also contribute to the disappearance of the lettering they bear. Although the present study does not provide direct evidence concerning the current state of craft networks or the transmission of metalworking knowledge, the decline of locally produced lettering can be situated within a broader context through Augé's (1995) concept of non-place. Augé defines place through its capacity to generate identity, relations, and history, and conceptualizes spaces that lack these qualities as non-places (Gön, 2017; Koçyiğit, 2018). Indeed, according to Augé, "if a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place" (Augé, 1995, pp. 77–78). Considered within this framework, the weakening of the identity-related, relational, and historical dimensions embodied in locally produced lettering may lead to an increasingly standardized and anonymous urban visual language. The decline of such local production practices may also result in the gradual loss of distinctive visual characteristics and historical layering within urban space.

These findings should be considered in light of the study's limitations. The research is based on a single-city case and on examples that remained accessible and visually documentable during the 2024–2026 fieldwork; the corpus therefore does not represent the complete historical population of metal lettering in Burdur. In addition, limited archival information and the absence of systematic oral-history data restrict definitive conclusions concerning production dates, individual craftspeople, workshop networks, and the transmission of craft knowledge.

The conceptual contribution of this study lies in bringing vernacular typography, linguistic landscape research, and material culture into a shared analytical framework. This framework extends linguistic landscape research beyond its predominant focus on linguistic content by addressing not only what urban lettering says, but also how it is made, what materials it is made from, where it is situated in space, how it relates to its spatial context, and how it changes over time. Future research could extend this study in two directions. Comparative studies across Anatolian cities could reveal regional variations and shared patterns in the use of metal lettering, while oral history research with metalworkers who are still accessible could provide primary data on production processes and the transmission of craft knowledge. Finally, the digital archiving and urban-scale mapping of metal lettering represents an urgent and practical step toward documenting this cultural heritage before it is lost.

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