

Neighborhood Resistances and Possibilities of Counter- Cultural Urban Spaces in Istanbul

*"...spaces can never succeed to be fully capitalized. Therefore they possess the capacity to become something else."*¹ J.K.Gibson-Graham

1. Urban Transformation

In 28 August 2008, early in the morning; the bulldozers of municipality began to destroy the barracks of seasonal migrant Gypsies from the city of Adana. With the forces of the police forces, they proceeded to move towards the houses of the habitants of Sulukule district. The habitants of several districts of Istanbul and the local municipalities are in a process of debate and conflict since last few years. Many district like Sulukule, which are economically disadvantaged and ethnically marked, are under the focus of the local municipalities for urban transformation. Here, the urban transformation means not to upgrade the physical environment of a certain rundown district and its social condition; but to replace the habitants and apply projects that are valuable for urban market. Since last three years, the districts of neighbourhoods are uniting for solidarity to defend their rights of dwelling. With the collaboration of several academicians, independent researchers, artists and others; the association of neighbourhoods is looking to create counter-cultural urban spaces that are not only representative spaces of discussion for the rights of dwelling but also reconstructing a social-collective everyday life.

TOKI and local municipalities are the main actors of urban transformation projects in Turkey that present a localized version of neo-liberal urban condition and rescaling. TOKI² is a state department called "Housing Development Administration of Turkey" aiming to build social housings complex for poor people. However TOKI acts as a collaborator of municipalities and as a private company in urban clearance projects in order to replace poor, ethnically marked communities. As well the

company KİPTAŞ³ is another actor in Istanbul initiated by the greater municipality of Istanbul that takes part in building and selling housings with the methods of mortgage system⁴. All the actors that are involved in the building activity are another local version of a neo-liberal activity that David Harvey describes as neo-liberalism⁵: “...generate a complex reconstitution of state-economy relation in which state institutions are actively mobilized to promote market-based regulatory arrangements”. Introducing urban policies that allow displacing inhabitants, by shifting their ownership and property rights, using Istanbul’s image as a marketing tool for local and foreign investors and manipulating urban fears (terrorism, earthquake, safety) are all components of urban clearance and rescaling.

How do global strategies of neo-liberal economy associate with the local discourse⁶ in capitalizing not only the space but also the social relations that re-scale the urban space? While explaining the shift from the neo-liberalism of the 20th to the 21st century, Neil Smith talks about a new form of neo-liberalism in which “not the national power but the state power is organized and exercised at different geographical scale”⁷. So, how can we apply Smith’s definition of ‘new’ neo-liberalism to spaces of Istanbul? We know that the 1980s coup d’etat in Turkey led to the support of the International Monetary Fund, which positioned the country in the chains of global economy. From 1980s and on, municipalities received certain financial support (along with the changes in policy) from the government for the reconstruction of urban spaces. Within this context, Local Economic Development (LED) refers to a joint-venture between municipalities, local developers and global capital initiators who determine and have a say over large urban transformations, or gentrification projects. Transforming the land from state property to private poverty; legitimizing “gecekondu” areas and integrating them into the capitalist production of urban spaces⁸, or expanding the city with “enclaves/gated communities” all became possible by the manipulation of related urban and economic policies. Along the same lines, the 2000s have witnessed the emergence of large-scale urban transformation projects under the titles of “urban renovation / urban development” which legitimize

‘demolishment’ and ‘reconstruction’ via abstract discourses of urban fear, ecology, cultural heritage and natural disasters (i.e. earthquake).

In 2005, with the Urban Transformation and Renewal policy of 5366⁹, which allows for the full authorization of municipalities for urban renovation/development, the legitimization of the recent urban transformation projects, in Istanbul was speeded up. The policy allows municipalities to designate any place (mostly places that are under governmental protection), district as an urban transformation area in Istanbul, where they can control the property rights, urban planning and architectural projects applied.

2. Different Neighbourhoods, Different Cases

According to the collaboration of the actors and new urban policies, the local municipalities are applying the same process of urban clearance to the neighbourhoods that their target. However, those neighbourhoods do have diverse geographical situations, social structures, identities of communities and different results of suffering during the process. The diverse features of the neighbourhoods need localized urban policies but also specific organizations and notions of solidarity. To exemplify this, I would like to explain few diverse examples and their process. For example, **Tarlabası** district is consisting of few neighbourhoods that are in Taksim-Beyoğlu (*geographically one of the main centers of İstanbul that connects the business district to Mecidiyeköy – Maslak*). The population of the district consists immigrants from Anatolia which is the outcome of forced migration taking place because of civil war between Kurdish and Turkish in 1990s in east and south-east Anatolia¹⁰. Moreover, illegal migrants and asylum-seekers also settled in Tarlabası which was an outcome of border politics and civil wars in Africa, Middle East¹¹. In the past, Tarlabası’s inhabitants were mostly non-Muslim communities of Ottoman Empire. Since last years, the district is marked as physically run-down; because its heterogeneous poor community (*ethically marked, transsexuals...*) is socially not accepted. Eventually, all the urban clichés are attached that describe this place as insecure and not safe. The population is mostly employed in the informal service

sectors, presumably, in Taksim-Beyoğlu. Beyoğlu Municipality collaborates with TOKİ and the construction firm GAP in order to transform this district for upper-class. The municipality justifies its transform the district is mainly developing a renewal and renovation plan. When the municipality began to precede the process with the force legislation of the article 5366, they got in contact with the owners in order to buy their buildings and flats for lower prices¹². However, the inhabitants are informed later when the construction firm joined to the joint venture and signed the agreement in 4 April 2007. In order to find out their dwelling rights and act against the process forced by the municipality; the owners established an association that protects and defends the rights of ownerships and the rights of the tenants in Tarlabası. The association stopped the agreement process between the municipality and owners unless the Municipality and GAP take into account the rights of the inhabitants. Tarlabası is one example of a rundown, ethnically marked “ghetto” area where, the municipality wants to improve not only the physical condition of the built environment by rebuilding facades and flats for upper-classes but also wants to replace the current inhabitants with an expected homogeneous rich class.

Last spring, Istanbul did witness street resistance of inhabitants that were mostly women and mothers in **Başbüyük** district¹³. It was the first time housewives went to their street to resist police, who was waiting with gas bombs to attack the inhabitants. Başbüyük is a former “gecekondu” district over a hill with a view of the Bosphorus in Maltepe (east site of Istanbul), which is used to be at the periphery of the city in the past. %73 of the population of Başbüyük voted for the recent party AKP, which means that the political tendency is not left, but probably conservative right. The political identity of this district differs when compared with other neighbourhoods that can't be simply defined as an ethnically marked leftist minority neighbourhood. This “gecekondu” area got legitimized through the establishment of infrastructure (electricity, water, gas) that have been slowly proceeded by the local municipalities in each election since 1984. Like in other neighbourhoods, which under the threat of urban transformation, TOKI and Maltepe Municipality collaborated for a project in order to build luxury villas in Başbüyük. However the interesting point here is; TOKI wants to build social housings in an empty land in Başbüyük to transfer the 6500 families there by buying their houses for a very low price and force them to sign a mortgage agreement for the new social housings. This simply means that the owners

will get less money for their properties but will pay higher to TOKI for the apartment flat called “social housing” built by TOKI. The inhabitants didn’t accept the agreement; so the street conflict and resistance against the municipality, polices continued for months.

An opposite example to Başbüyük is **Ayazma** explains critical journalist Ayşe Çavdar¹⁴ that the inhabitants of Başbüyük fear to face the same fate of Ayazma people. Ayazma is a strongly ethnical marked neighbourhood and an outcome of forced-migration near the Olympic Stadium, which was constructed in 2001. Almost all families are forced to leave the area and the municipality is destroying houses since 1 February 2007, 880 houses¹⁵ are destroyed in the neighbourhood that was established in 1980. 650 families are forced to move to another district that the inhabitants are supposed to live in “social housings”, which most of them could not afford to pay. Some families moved back to their homelands, some of them moved near their relatives in Istanbul and others still try to survive in the tents in Ayazma.

Gülsüyü Gülensu neighbourhood could be mentioned as a successful example of resistance against the local municipality. Again as a former “gecekondu” area in eastern side of Istanbul, the district was included among the urban transformation projects of the municipality. Until the inhabitants received an official letter about it from the municipality they were not aware of anything. As soon as they received the letter the inhabitants collected 7000 signatures and opened 32 court cases¹⁶ to say “no” to urban transformation. Furthermore, the inhabitants established Gülsüyü-Gülensu neighbourhood association along with the Platform of Istanbul Neighbourhoods Association (neighbourhoods that are under threat of state-led urban transformation). As migrant families moved in the 1970s, the current generation of the inhabitants are strongly united as a leftist political community.

Another distinct example is **Sulukule**, which is more often in the media of Turkey because of its ongoing dwelling rights campaign. Sulukule, the district where a majority of the Gypsy community in Istanbul settled since the Ottoman Era on the historical peninsula, is now facing the force of displacement of its inhabitants. With the policy of 5366, it was decided that the settlement in the district would be demolished on 13th

December 2006 by the state authorities. TOKI did offer social housings in Taşoluk, which is a new district outside of city center, near north-east of İstanbul built by TOKI. Both owners and tenants are trying to find ways to remain in their neighbourhood not only for living in their own houses and streets but also to sustain their economic conditions.

In all of these cases, the inhabitants of neighbourhoods (also the communities in general) are facing social segregation between ethnically marked communities, poor people and the rest of the urban society. Furthermore, they are faced with instability about their future of dwelling and enclaving their living places (ghetto). Moreover, “double poverty” is a concrete outcome of this process because the inhabitants are connected mostly with informal service sector and presenting flexible labour to the urban economy. When the communities are replaced to the far outside of the city, they consequently lose their jobs and also spend more money for transportation that they cannot afford anymore.

3. Counter-cultural Spaces, Soft-activism?

All of the examples mentioned above represent different outcomes and resistance types according to the background of the district and inhabitants. However, in each case, the collaboration between local municipalities that have full authorization of the urban policy 5366 and TOKI continues, by applying urban renewal and transformation projects as urban clearance and replacement projects. A lot of campaigns and collaborations with academics, NGOs, independent activists, journalists and artists are going on since three years. Cultural events, artistic intervention, research projects and campaigns try both to create public awareness and also give the right information to the public about what is going on in the neighbourhoods in İstanbul.

My main focus is; how cultural interventions and gestures in urban context can stimulate counter-cultural spaces? How institutional critique could have a role in this counter-cultural discourse? How and where the activists and habitants create the participation and the common ground, for representing the neighbourhoods? In a conversation with Toni Negri¹⁷, he discussed “soft forms” of activism and urban projects that create collectivities on micro, neighbourhood levels. He argues that “soft” implies that the political diagonal could exist outside of the biopolitical diagram” and biopolitical diagram “is the space in which the reproduction of organised life (social, political) in all its dimensions is controlled, captured and exploited”. Here, political diagonal is a kind of distribution of power relations. The conversation gives examples from different urban struggles and collectives that participate in urban activism with their own practices and power. Soft forms of activism in urban neighbourhoods could be a description of what is going on in Istanbul as urban oppositional movements.

Some neighbourhoods are resisting with the support of several groups from different fields in Başbüyük, Gülsüyü-Gülensu and Sulukule. With a background of political-civil past, the neighbourhood Gülsüyü-Gülensu collaborated with Dayanışmacı Atölye (solidarity stüdyo) that consist of urban planning students, academics from Mimar Sinan University of Istanbul; in order to create a plan, which represents a participatory design practices. In the meanwhile, inhabitants of Gülsüyü-Gülensu are setting up a concept called “urban garden”, “urban ecology” to resist against state-led urban transformation by planting vegetables in empty lands, in backyards, and gardens in the district. Moreover, in 2004, they established İstanbul Neighbourhoods Association Platform¹⁸ that unites nearly 15 neighbourhoods, which are under the threat of urban transformation. The platform organized several meetings like one in 3 June 2007 (Neighbourhoods Are Speaking) and participated in several workshops¹⁹, conferences. The platform is planning to set up a documentary screening of oppositional urban videos from all around world to screen in each neighbourhood with the collaboration of artists, filmmakers, curators and writers. The director of Gülsüyü-Gülensu neighbourhood association explains that they are not focusing on left or right wing, neither on ethnic and religious identity; they want to get organized in order to defend their dwelling rights which is a basic human right in the world²⁰.

However, are ongoing urban struggles and discussions enough to prevent activities of TOKI, local municipalities and police control in urban space? Poverty, low-level of education (for example many Kurdish people cannot read and write Turkish, most inhabitants cannot write and they don't understand any official paper received from Municipalities) and several other reasons are still preventing to creation of solidarity among oppositional urban activism. In his article²¹, the Istanbul based urban researcher/geographer Prof. Jean François Perouse questions the reasons for the weakness of oppositional civil movements in the urban sphere in general and in the neighbourhoods against state-led urban transformation projects. Giving the example of Ayazma, he mentions several reasons for the failure of oppositional urban struggles²²: the instability of the local population (because of forced migration), the low profile employment (informal flexible labour), far -distance to city centers, the complexity of the ownership and the lack of a communal identity.

Sulukule is the best known example that cultural and artistic intervention has been used, which are initiated by Sulukule Platform²³ (a non-hierarchic body of interdisciplinary people and inhabitants). Number of architects and participants from different fields initiated the interdisciplinary platform "40 Gün 40 Gece Sulukule" (40 Days 40 Nights Sulukule) which received the support of various NGOs and universities and launched public activities to defend the district and its people²⁴. The platform also collaborated with the lawyers of the Istanbul Chamber of Architects to prevent the activation of the policy by taking the case to the court. On the 17th May 2007, a mutual protocol was signed between parties who have been involved, or interested in the case including universities, municipalities, NGOs and the fellow initiators. Collaboration and organization at a neighbourhood level is possible especially in the initiation of temporary events and the use of local networks, which do not only help *the settlements* to participate, but also actors from different fields. Furthermore, media activism, using blogs and digital communication, inviting several citizens from different fields through cultural/artistic events in the neighbourhoods are the main civil organizations that are going on. For example, since Tarlabası Association discontinued their communication with Beyoğlu Municipality and rejected their unreliable proposals about their ownership, the association collaborates with urban

researchers and academics proceeding public awareness in media. Also, the ongoing activities of the neighbourhoods might influence some institutional discussion of what “culture”, “social identity” is in a segregated urban sphere. In general, academies, cultural institutions (museums, art institutions) or 2010 Istanbul European Cultural Capital projects have often a hygienic, normalized urban culture, which they discards heterogeneous elements of the society and are generally against any kind of oppositional political agenda in favour of representational multiculturalism. In that case, local urban collectives, independent researchers and academics and artists are the most effective actors that the neighbourhood platform prefers to collaborate.

As George Yudice²⁵ points out, grassroots local movements that could be more effective than NGOs or civil organization supported by social democratic political strategies could be more effective in oppositional movements. As urban spaces and micro-collectives, neighbourhoods have the potentials of creating soft forms of activism.

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¹ “Mekan tabanlı küreselleşme”: Devrim için yeni bir tahayyül (“Space based globalization”: A new imaginary for a Revolution”), p.52- 55, Birikim, 205-206, May-June 2006, Istanbul

² www.toki.gov.tr/english

³ www.kiptas.com.tr

⁴ Further info about TOKI, KİPTAŞ and their relation to Turkish Government and minister Tayyip Erdoğan: Ayşe Çavdar, “Tayyip Usûlü Kamulaştırma”, p.22, Express (social-political magazine), June-July, 2008.

⁵ David Harvey, p.102, *Spaces of Global Capitalism : A Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*, Verso, 2006, New York

⁶ flavoured with the nostalgia of Ottoman-Turk identity that tries support ultra-nationalist and conservative, Islam background ideology,.

⁷ Neil Smith, p.429, *New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy*, Antipode, 2002, Blackwell, US.

⁸ Further info in Murat Güvenç&Oğuz Işık: “The newcomers were in most cases deprived of the means to build a multi-storey structure for themselves, since the practice of users building their squatter houses was already a thing of the past.”, p.212, chapter 10, *A Metropolis at the Crossroads: The Changing Social Geography of Istanbul under the Impact of Globalization*, in book *Of States and Cities, Partitioning of Urban Space*, Ed.P.Marcuse&R.van Kempen,Oxford University Press, 2002.

⁹ Article 5366: www.tbmm.gov.tr/kanunlar/k5366.html

¹⁰ %60 of the population is Kurdish, the rest is mostly Turks from Black Sea region.

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- ¹¹ Pelin Tan, *Grenzpolitiken und Stadt-Betrachtungen*, Self-Service City: Istanbul”, ed.: Stephan Lanz/Orhan Esen, metroZones 4, B-Books, Berlin, 2004
- ¹² by offering lower value than its recent value of the property
- ¹³ Pınar Ögünç, *Baybüyük’ün derdi büyük kadınlar*, Radikal Newspaper, İstanbul, 17.05.2008
www.radikal.com.tr/Default.aspx?aType=HaberDetay&ArticleID=878045&Date=21.05.2008&CategoryID=41
- ¹⁴ Ayşe Çavdar, *Başbüyük’ün derdi de büyük*, Aktüel Magazine, İstanbul, 29.05.2008
- ¹⁵ Jean Francois Perouse, *Kentsel Düşler*, Radikal Newspaper, İstanbul, 24.06.2007
- ¹⁶ Müjgan Halis, *Üniversiteler Gülsuyu mahallesinde* Sabah Newspaper, İstanbul, 17.03.2007
<http://arsiv.sabah.com.tr/2007/03/17/cpsabah/hob103-20070311-102.html>
- ¹⁷ Toni Negri, Constantin Petcou, Doina Petrescu, Anne Querrien, “What makes a biopolitical space?”, (Paris, 17 september, 2007), www.eurozine.com/articles/2008-01-21-negri-en.html
- ¹⁸ www.imdp.blogcu.com
- ¹⁹ November, 2006, Urban Transformation conference, Ankara.
9-10 June, 2008, Dwelling Rights Workshop, Ankara
11-13 July, 2008, Social-economical Impacts of Urban Transformation, with Neil Brenner, academics, activists, urban researchers. İstanbul, organized by Pelin Tan/Osman Kavala.
- ²⁰ Conversation with İstanbul Neighbourhoods Platform, Erdogan Yıldız, Express, May, 2008
- ²¹ Jean Francois Perouse, *Kentsel Dönüşüme karşı Ayazma’da neden yerel bir muhalefet oluşamadı ?*, İstanbul Magazine, April, 2008
- ²² ibid.
- ²³ www.sulukuleplatform.blogspot.com
- ²⁴ Interview with Aslı Kıyak İngin (activist architect, co-founder of Sulukule Platform) by Pelin Tan
www.arkitera.com/soylesi_68_asli-kiyak-ingin.html, <http://40gun40gece-sulukule.blogspot.com>
- ²⁵ George Yudice, p.82-108, *The Globalization of Culture and the New Civil Society*, The Expediency of Culture uses of culture in the Global Era, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2003