Tophane:
The Closing In of an Istanbul Neighbourhood

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'Urban frontiers' have several meanings. I don't define 'frontiers' as stable borders anymore, but instead as 'divided' or 'segregated spaces' that social consciousness and cultural attachments, coming from living together, sharing a common space (as city) are revealing continuously.

Frontiers exist everywhere in the city, as also in urban consciousness. Standing at a distance from fellow citizens, fearing the 'Other', hesitating to enter defined urban areas, forgetting how to move freely in unfamiliar streets – all this generally defines our urban experience nowadays. According to urban legends about Istanbul's Tophane district, murder and robbery are common, walking around in the evening is unsafe, and prostitution and drugs are unavoidable. The neighborhood where I live is near the main cosmopolitan cultural centers of Taksim and Galata; its residents are mostly Gypsies, Arabs from Anatolia, and Kurds. Tophane thus represents the 'Other' in the urban consciousness of Istanbulians; it is 'uncanny' and insecure, a place to which classic urban clichés and misconceptions of danger and alienation are attached.

We define our relation to local space through those urban myths; and when we transform our relations with and distance from the 'Other' into an architectural environment that reinforces our segregation, we cut away at the particular awareness that connects us and offers a collective identity in public space. As architectural theorist Anthony Vidler (1994) points out regarding the connection between "urban memory" and the city:

> In the traditional city, antique, medieval or Renaissance, urban memory was easy enough to define; it was that image of the city that enabled the citizen to identify with its past and present as a political, cultural and social entity; it was neither the 'reality' of the city nor purely imaginary… the city might be recognized as 'home', as something not foreign, and as constituting a moral and protected environment for actual daily life…[1]

Vidler also offers a questionable definition of the "uncanny" in global cities, asserting that due to ethnic and social diversity and segregation in modern cities, it is difficult to create a collective urban memory with which citizens can identify. Therefore, uncanny conditions and obscure identifications with place lead to urban discourses based on fear

and the entrenched need for safety and security. Urban ghettos, peripheries of city centres, gated communities and other urban spaces whose inhabitants have diverse cultural, economical and social backgrounds are permeated with such discourses, even if these are not based on real facts. Racism, homophobia and other forms of obvious and subtle exclusion often result.

Over the last two centuries, the terms 'city' and 'metropolis' have represented the utopia of cosmopolitanism – diversified communities and the right to participate in public space. In recent decades, however, we have witnessed the failure of urban utopias and the notion of the 'modern citizen'. The phenomenon of gated communities in Istanbul has disrupted urban texture and lifestyles in this growing city. At the same time, over the past ten years particular kinds of suburban areas have developed on the city margins. These are distinct from the *gecekondu* (slum/shanty) areas that manifested through the 1960s to the 1980s, occupied by Anatolian immigrants on the outskirts of the city. The *gecekondu* arose through illegal construction and occupation. After 1995, however, gated communities on the margins of Istanbul have been occupied by upper-middle-class residents.

In simplest terms, gated communities are privatised housing settlements for citizens who seek a safer and higher standard of living than the one afforded by the inner city. "This new social class", explain A. A. Gülümser and T. B. Levent, "pushed developers of large-scale real estate investments to produce gated projects which offer a better standard, quality of life and a way to diminish daily stress"[2]. Land speculation and the development and privatisation of public land were enabled by economic neoliberalism and mass housing legislation.

Terms such as public space, privatisation, urban community, security, identity, and citizenship accrue new meanings within the context of gated communities. Identifying oneself with a city and questioning the sense of 'belonging' through a city is becoming less relevant today. Belonging to a *community* – one marked by shared lifestyles, property ownership and a sense of belonging – has become more important. This is the new, conflicted definition of citizenship in the contemporary global city. On the one hand, the global city comprises several cross-cultural and ethnic communities; on the other, the right to participate in the public sphere and share urban space is at odds with a definition of citizenship based on the form of the nation state.

Since the 1990s, many of Istanbul's eastern and western peripheries have been privatised by local investors. Most of these were joint ventures with American architects' offices; designs and models were often imported from the US, and advertisements for them were often in English. They promise a better lifestyle, in contrast to Istanbul's dystopias – earthquakes, pollution and traffic. "Sinpas Central Life" promises wellness, with a fitness club and no traffic. "Agaoglu My Town" offers nature, security, less traffic. Artist Solmaz Shahbazi augmented the research of sociologists and urban planners on gated communities in two video works, exhibited at the 9th International Istanbul Biennial.[3] She studied the gated communities of Kemer Country, Bahçepehir and Optimum, interviewing residents and non-residents and creating two distinct narratives. One video shows several images of the gated communities and their surroundings, and is accompanied by a

soundtrack of three social scientists discussing urban sprawl. The other shows the interior of a house in one of the communities. An owner speaks about her domestic life, the reasons her family wanted to move, her new daily habits, and her fear of Istanbul's mixed and congested city centre. She mentions her high security bills and talks about golf, her new hobby. Her fear of the city is convincing, as is her assertion that the development offers a "community feeling".

Thus, 'communities' are being redefined by the lifestyle of the inhabitants of gated communities, but simultaneously the "Other" too is being redefined through the eyes of those communities. Various lifestyles within the segregated zones point to competing practices of local modernities in shared contemporary time/space.

Analysis of the links between security, segregation and citizenship reveals how urban discourses are produced and consumed. In the new global city, the notion of citizenship is based on legal rights, on "...norms, practices, meanings and identities"[4]. How do gated communities relate to these discussions, especially in terms of the relationship between spatial organisation and civil rights? Sociologist Bülent Diken (2004) compares gated communities to refugee camps, arguing that contemporary gated communities are panoptic sites in which inhabitants forsake some rights for security, in order to live in the comfort within the assurance of safety and of "being under control"[5]. Yet, this judgment on the security experienced within the camp as against that experienced within gated communities becomes problematic. The dynamic and pragmatic relationships among the 'Other' communities – the poor, refugees, ethnic groups – bypass, negotiate and transgress many norms and public rules, creating their own networks of security without establishing physical boundaries (as is the case in Tophane).

So, 'urban frontiers' do not only exist at the border of the cities or as physical enclaves, but also as smooth spaces where contested territories are under conflict among actors and authorities of the city. Sulukule, for instance, a historical district that has seen the settlement of Gypsy communities since time of the Ottoman empire, is being targeted for urban 'development', and these traditional communities are facing the prospect of displacement. The conservative local municipality has without question adopted the reforms of neo-liberal urban planning, which generally are based on non-participatory, top-down decisions regarding design. In some cases, it can even be claimed that displacement strategies are an 'urbanicide' that systematically fragments the displaced populations. In case of Sulukule, the condition of citizenship, or the right to share the urban space, is under negotiation within the frame of placement/displacement. It may be the first instance where state policies, spatial reorganisation and neo-liberal economic strategies overlap so clearly in the history of one urban location.

In Istanbul, our movements and everyday lives are being determined by inverted strategies of a neoliberal economy, its logic committed to the re-scaling of urban spaces. The planned re-imagination of the urban space is both a physical and an ideological event that acquiesces with or reproduces the state discourse through various modes of spatial production. My neighbourhood, Tophane, is sufficiently representative of many districts

where a slow change is being experienced. The change began when the 'rather ordinary' little house of the *muhtar* (municipal officer responsible for and elected by the neighbourhood) was converted into an Ottoman-style wooden house. The whole process was finalised within a few weeks. The structure is now shining in the middle of Tophane Park, fulfilling the desire for the revitalisation of 'pure' Turkish identity. This would naturally be experienced as completely asynchronous by residents who live in old-style Ottoman Greek apartments on a street dominated by Gypsies who happened to settle near Tophane Park after the Greeks abandoned their houses following the civic disruption of 1953 (violence by ultra-nationalist groups against the Ottoman Greek community, who were forced to leave their homes and jobs). I refer to an area a few hundred metres away from Istanbul's Modern Museum and Antrepo (the main venue of the 10th Istanbul contemporary art biennial), edifices of the cultural industry that are most representative of the modern canon.

How did the state discourse of modernisation became a tool for various kinds of legitimations, including that which not only enabled the siphoning of local spaces into the global capitalist chain, but also enabled the reproduction of the recently asserted state ideology of Ottoman-Islam identity[6] discourse? How do global strategies of the neo-liberal economy associate with this local discourse in not only appropriating the space but also transforming social relations?

While explaining the shift between the neo-liberalism of the 20th and the 21st century,[7] Neil Smith posits a new form of this ideology in which "not the national power but the state power is organised and exercised on a different geographical scale"[8]. Can we apply Smith's definition of 'global' neo-liberalism to the spaces of Istanbul? We know that the 1980s *coup d'etat* in Turkey led to support from the European Monetary Fund, which positioned the country in the production chain of the global economy. From the 1980s onwards, municipalities received specific financial support (along with the changes in policy) from the government for the reconstruction 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 regarding large urban transformations, or gentrification projects.[9] Transforming land from state property to private poverty, legitimising *gecekondu* areas and connecting them into the capitalist production of urban spaces,[10] and expanding the city via enclaves/gated communities all became possible through the profitable manipulation of related urban/planning and economic policies.

This has continued into the first decade of the 21st century. Turkish cities have witnessed the emergence of large-scale urban transformation projects categorised as 'urban renovation/urban development', which legitimise 'demolition' and 'reconstruction' via the more abstract discourses of urban fear, ecology, cultural heritage and natural disasters (i.e., earthquakes). In 2005, with the Urban Transformation and Renewal Policy 5366, which confers upon municipalities full authorisation with regard to urban renovation/development, the legitimisation of such projects proceeded very swiftly. It was decided that the Gypsy settlements in Sulukule would be demolished by state authorities on 13 December 2006.

As a result, a number of architects and participants from different fields initiated the interdisciplinary platform '40 Gün 40 Gece Sulukule', which received the support of various NGOs and universities and launched public events to defend the district and its people.[11] Activities included public talks about the identity and life of Gypsies, the history of their settlement, musical evenings and collaboration with artists, besides contesting the municipal strategies. 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 higher court of ministry, where the state has no option but to deal with an issue directly.

Consequently, the implementation of the policy is on hold. In the past few months, public events around saving Sulukule from demolition, and support from citizens in general, have been so strong that the municipality has agreed to negotiate with the platform and its initiators. On 17 May 2007, a mutual protocol regarding local 'development' was signed between parties who have been involved or interested in the case, including universities, municipalities, NGOs and the platform's initiators. Collaboration and organisation on a neighborhood level is possible especially in the initiation of temporary events and through public participation and the use of local networks, which ensures the inclusion of the settlement's inhabitants in the decision-making process, as well as actors from other social fields. Thus, non-institutional platforms in the domain of 'development' may possibly recalibrate the conceptual relationship between ideology and space.

A few months ago, the architect/writer Korhan Gümü published "Conservatism in Public Architecture", a very precise and clear text that questions the abovementioned activities. "Has modernity in Turkey already transformed into a mode of conservativism without us realising it? Couldn't we realise how modernity too shapes public space, without it being questioned, just because we are embedded in it?"[12] Gümü questions the municipality's construction of Ottoman-style houses in Sultanahmet, supposedly intended to attract tourists. The confusion and the questions we now face are clearly derived from modes of spatial coercion by the municipalities. Or, as claimed by J. Derksen and N. Smith with regard to the ambiguities of the discourse of modernity, its legitimising ideologies and neo-liberal appropriative strategies: "Modernism's utopia of 'impersonal equality' and its colonial legacy is strikingly similar to the utopic neo-liberal 'free market' and its competitive landscape of turba-inequality"[13]. Yet, there must be possibilities of generating local spatial practices and interventions that do *not* correspond to the reality projected by ideologies and neo-liberal economic strategies, or by bureaucracy, government and civil society/Islamist groups.

I believe that the contemporary ethos of mass global urban re-scaling also accommodates the possibility of resisting social marginalisation, economic manipulation and political determinism. Grassroots activism and multidisciplinary professional collaborations can develop a new mode of critical participatory engagement around issues of the new urban space. The different voices constituting this debate can be carried into the public sphere through the media, the internet and art projects, as in the case of the Sulukule Platform. An ethical redesigning of contemporary cities can only be achieved through this mode of sustained collective action.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. Anthony Vidler. *The Architectural Uncanny*: *Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (MIT Press, 1994, Cambridge).

2. Aliye Ahu Gülümser and Tüzin Baycan Levent. "Through the Sky: Vertical Gated Developments in Istanbul". Paper presented at XXII World Congress of Architecture, Istanbul (2005).

3. S. Shahbazi. *Perfectly Suited for You*. Video Installation; 2 videos: 1 projection, 1 TV screen, DV camera (15'30" projection, 13'00" TV). Exhibited at the 9th International Istanbul Biennial (2005).

4. Engin F. Isin. "Democracy, Citizenship and the City". In (ed.) E. F. Işın, *Democracy, Citizenship and the Global City* (Routledge, 2000, London/New York).

5. Bülent Diken. "From Refugee Camps to Gated Communities: Biopolitics and the End of the City". In *Citizenship Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 83-106 (March 2004).

6. Flavoured with the nostalgia of Ottoman Turk identity that affiliates with ultra-nationalist and conservative Islamist ideology.

7. Neil Smith. "New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrification as Global Urban Strategy". In *Antipode*, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 427-50 (2002).

8. In contrast to the 18th-century frame of John Locke and Adam Smith, which emphasised the right to private property combined with the self-interest of the individual, and suggested free market exchange as the ideal vehicle.

9. Pelin Tan. "*Avrupa Kentlerinin Geleceği ve flas Eden Planlama Stratejileri* (The Future of European Cities and the Failure of Planning Strategies)". In *Ankara Mimar k* (Journal of Ankara Architecture Assemble), October-November 2005.

10. As further elaborated by Murat Güvenç and Işık Oğuz: "The newcomers were in most cases deprived of the means to build a multistorey structure for themselves, since the practice of users building their squatter houses was already a thing of the past". See Chapter 10, "A Metropolis at the Crossroads: The Changing Social Geography of Istanbul under the Impact of Globalization", in (eds.) Marcuse, Peter and R. van Kempen, *Book Of States and Cities: Partitioning of Urban Space* (Oxford University Press, 2002, Oxford), p. 212.

11. Aslı Kıyak İngin interviewed by Pelin Tan. Online transcript at www.arkitera.com/soylesi_68_asli-kiyak-ingin.html, http://40gun40gece-sulukule.blogspot.com

12. For online text of "*Kamusal Mimarlıkta Muhafazarlık: Mimarlýk ve İrtica* (Conservatism in Public Architecture: Architecture and İrtica?)" by Korhan Gümüş, see www.arkitera.com/spotlight.php?action=displaySpotlight&ID=60&year=&aID=602. Gümüþ' use of the word *irtica* connotes a mode of social-political reaction. In Turkey its usage has Islamist resonance, and signifies attachment. *Irtica* as used here is a particular conceptualisation of conservatism.

13. Jeff Derksen and Neil Smith. "Making and Breaking Neoliberal Spaces". In (ed.) R. Braun, *Live Like This* (Camera Austria, Kunsthaus, 2005, Graz), p. 110-21.