

Renewal Agenda in Istanbul: Urbanisation vs. Urbicide

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1. Introduction

Urban renewal is among the priorities of urban agenda in Istanbul considering the large amount of squatter areas, disaster-vulnerable existing building stock, and historic building stock due to half a century long uncontrolled rapid urbanisation. Eventhough urban renewal is not a new phenomenon in Turkey, 1999 Marmara Earthquakes have played a major role in the rising awareness on the importance of quality of building stock rather than the quantity, as a way to resolve the urbanisation perception by focusing on what already exists and by legitimising urban renewal. On one hand, new laws and regulations have followed the earthquakes to determine the legal and institutional framework of urban renewal. On the other hand, the private sector has valorised this process through the large-scale property-led renewal schemes in the transformation of squatter areas, historic inner-city neighbourhoods, waterfronts, industrial areas, public spaces and natural protection zones into the giant construction zones of economic rant and land speculation. Infact, the paper claims that the large-scale property-led renewal schemes, which have been employed as an evolving model in resolving the urbanisation problem, are turned into the instruments of “urbicide” in Istanbul as a political “evolving” model of urban destruction. The same process has resulted in the declining of participatory, transparent and sustainable approaches of urban planning. The concerns arising out of this change of emphasis encompass conflicts between comprehensive planning and project-based fragmented interventions, process and action, common interests and private interests, authenticity / diversity and standardization, users and owners. Within this scope, by constructing an urban renewal framework through the exploration of Law on the Protection and the Revitalisation of Deteriorated Historical and Cultural Immovable Assets (2005) and Law on the Transformation of Areas under Disaster Risk (2012), the paper intends to discuss the evolving and declining urbanisation patterns in Istanbul by relating them with up-to-date political, economic, technological and socio-economic inferences. Considerable emphasis is placed on the use of examples to illustrate and critically analyze meanings, inputs, outputs and impacts. The paper concludes by addressing in what ways the planning as a profession can manage these evolving and declining models in resolving contradictions stemming from the dichotomy of urbanisation and urbicide in Istanbul.

2. Rationale for Urban Renewal

Urban renewal is not a new phenomenon in Istanbul, but it is still among the priorities of urban agenda as an action to cope with the haphazard urbanization patterns and large amounts of squatters due to the uncontrolled rapid urbanization since the 1950s, large amounts of disaster-vulnerable existing building stock due to lack of administrative control over construction and building construction technology, and large amounts of historic building stock in need of careful conservation, rehabilitation and continuous maintenance. As outlined in Gunay et al (forthcoming), the building stock in Istanbul is quite young with a percentage of 66 built after 1980; but the building condition analysis based on the last building count of Turkey in 2000 (TUIK, 2000, p. 454) shows that most of the buildings constructed before the 2000s should either be demolished or consolidated. While nearly 60% of the total building stock can be termed unauthorized, the challenges on the urban landscape are coupled with

the deterioration of physical fabric due to aging or poor maintenance; mismatch between contemporary needs and existing functions; changing perceptions and value judgements on the image of buildings or settlements. The overcrowding and gradual shift in the profile of the inhabitants caused by rural-to-urban migration are also effective in urban deprivation. In addition to the quality of building stock and profile of inhabitants, there is an immense market pressure for transformation in the most economically and culturally valuable zones including the waterfronts, old industrial areas, historic neighbourhoods, public spaces and natural protection zones. Inefficient urban management together with the official obsolescence in providing strategic, flexible, responsive and participatory planning instruments, methodologies and organization forms prevents central and local governments to deal effectively with the problems. These rationales make apparent that there is an urgent need for comprehensive and integrated vision and action to resolve the problems associated with fuzzy urbanisation in Istanbul.

3. Responding to the Rationale: Evolution of Renewal Agenda

Regarding these rationales, urban renewal has always been among the priorities of urban agenda in Turkey. A detailed conceptualisation for the evolution of urban renewal in Turkey with reference to mainstream politics can be found in Gunay et al. (forthcoming) and Ataov and Osmay (2007). Before the 1950s, urban renewal was an intervention on its own record rather than a governmental initiative mainly because of fires. After the 1950s, urban renewal was a strategy for the clearance of deprived areas for the opening of new transportation arteries or recovering the silhouette effect of major monuments; and a strategy that helped the transformation of urban landscape by apartment blocks under the name of “modernity project”. Coming to the 1960s, it was conducted via demolition-based activities in squatter areas, which were once encouraged because of their self-help housing character for the shortage of public funds to accommodate the new inhabitants. The globalization and liberalization project of the 1980s again resulted in the increasing focus on new constructions rather than investments in the existing building stock especially through the enactment of Mass Housing Law in 1984 (Law No. 2985, 18344/02.03.1984).

In the 2000s, urban renewal has become the base of urbanisation politics and planning agenda via a growing tendency on neoliberal urbanisation politics based on project-based interventions and public-private partnerships. According to Bartu-Candan and Kulluoglu (2008, p.9), neoliberalism have also paved the way for the social and spatial segregation of the emerging groups of poverty and wealth in urban spaces, or the emergence of the so-called spaces of decay, distressed areas, and privileged spaces. While the institutional and legal regulations had followed the renewal practices before the 2000s (Ataov and Osmay, 2007); one of the most important attempt in this period was the employment of urban renewal – together with large-scale property-led renewal schemes- in the legal and institutional base. According to Tekeli (2011), one of the differences between the former periods and the 2000s is the fact that urban renewal is started to be conducted by the powerful stakeholders, namely the government itself comparative to the unpowerful actors of the former periods such as contractors or squatter dwellers. 1999 Marmara Earthquakes have played a major role in the rising awareness on the importance of quality of building stock rather than the quantity, as a way to resolve the urbanisation perception by focusing on what already exists. However it has also given political “legitimacy” to urban renewal interventions. While there has been a rise of focus on more participatory and inclusive approaches in planning and renewal through the empowerment of local governments as a result of Local Agenda 21 of the UN Habitat Conference held in Istanbul in 1996, the period starting from the election of the Justice and Development Party in 2002 has provided a return to more centralised even over-centralised institutional forms and planning practices.

Between 2002 and 2012 major attempts were being made to prepare the legal format for the employment of neoliberal urban politics including the alteration of Mass Housing Law (Law no. 5162) in 2004; the authorization of Mass Housing Authority (TOKI) to realize, prepare and alter all kinds and scales of development plans in areas determined as the mass housing settlement regions; and enactment of Municipality Law (Law no. 5393) in 2005) to give the municipalities the right of determining renewal process in their own. Considering the empowerment of greater municipalities with respect to centralised governance structures, the share of Greater Municipalities in State and local municipality tax budget has risen respectively from 2.50% to 4.4% and from 5% to 6% in 2008 – while there seen a decrease from 2.85% to 1.40% in local municipality tax shares in municipalities and from %30 to %20 in greater municipalities. On the other hand, the budget of Greater Municipality of Istanbul has risen to €3.5 billion in 2013, while €720 million was allocated to Ministry of Culture and Tourism (1.9%). In 2011, the Ministry of Environment and Urbanism was opened replacing the Ministry of Public Works and Settlements. Erdogan Bayraktar, the former head of TOKI, was ironically promoted as the Minister.

Regarding the evolution of urban renewal policies and practices, it can be stated that each period had used a different package of planning tools in the utilisation of urban renewal; however all of them have focused on market conditions and spontaneous solutions of community (Ataov and Osmay, 2007). Despite different conceptualizations that are being used interchangeably with revitalization, regeneration or transformation, urban renewal has always been associated with physical interventions and destructions; and it has covered the radical transformation interventions that demolishes the old for reconstruction (Tekeli, 2011). On the other hand, the socio-economic aspects of renewal interventions have always been ignored.

4. Large-Scale Area-Based Urban Renewal Framework: The Solution?

There are two fundamental laws defining the legal base of large-scale property-led renewal schemes in Turkey: “Law on the Protection and the Revitalisation of Deteriorated Historical and Cultural Immovable Assets” (Law No.5366, 05.07.2005) and “Law on the Transformation of Areas under Disaster Risk” (Law No.6306, 31.05.2012).

4.1 Law on the Protection and the Revitalisation of Deteriorated Historical and Cultural Immovable Assets

This law propounds renewal sites in order to consolidate the urban structure for earthquake risk mitigation, and regenerate especially the deprived neighbourhoods of historic city centres through the utilisation of mixed-uses. Renewal zone decision is taken by Municipal Assemblies in the settlements having municipalities, and by General Assembly of Provinces in the settlements outside governed by Special Administration of Provinces outside municipal boundaries. The Board of Ministers approve the renewal zone decision. The scale of intervention starts from 5000 square metres. Key implementation instrument is urgent expropriation to overcome postpone; although it can only be utilised in national security/defence issues according to the Expropriation Law (Law no. 2942). There are different implementation and financing authorities and actors; however the projects are generally managed by a public-oriented implementation model. The responsibilities in planning and conservation are shared between Greater Municipalities and local municipalities at local level, and Supreme Board for the Protection of Cultural and Natural Assets under the Ministry of Culture and Tourism at national level. The Law also propounds the establishment of “Boards of Renewal” authorised to approve the renewal projects. This regularisation bypasses “Boards of Protection” which were responsible in the control of conservation status of historic neighbourhoods since the enactment of the Law on the Protection of Cultural and Natural Assets in 1983 (Law no. 2863). TOKI is contradictorily the

most powerful institution in the implementation of the law along with the corporations of municipalities such as KIPTAS - housing agency, KUDEB - Control Bureau for the Conservation of Cultural Assets, and other relevant private sector architecture and construction firms. The owners of historic buildings, which are not demolished, are obliged to carry out their own conservation projects under the assistance of KUDEB, otherwise they are given housing in one of the mass housing areas constructed by TOKI at the periphery of the city. In the latter case, the financial model is based on monthly instalments of long-term credits. It is also possible to transfer funds from the Fund for the Protection of Immovable Cultural Assets to the municipality budgets. However, the implementation and financial models ignores tenants.

4.2 Law on the Transformation of Areas under Disaster Risk

Having issued by the slogan of “making slums history”, this Law covers the areas which could not be covered through the previously mentioned law. By focusing on demolition and reconstruction through the authority of Ministry of Environment and Urbanism, the Law is far from solving the quality problem in housing provision, but rather raises serious debates on environmental and social consequences including the transformation of conservation sites, agriculture and forest areas into reserved housing zones for construction, the demolition of even steady housing stock and the displacement of inhabitants (Gunay et al. forthcoming). It brings forward a definition for risk areas to be transformed as “buildings within or outside risk areas that have completed their economic life, or which are scientifically and technically proven to be at risk of demolition or high damage”. By bringing all authorities that are responsible for planning, development and control under one institution, the Ministry of Environment and Urbanism. Through this newly attained responsibility, the Ministry is authorized to expropriate the immovable or exchange them with others; to transfer immovable property rights and zoning rights to other areas; to divide and to allocate shares forming the immovables; and to establish rights; which means “everything”. The minimum size of transformation areas is 50.000 square metres. According to Law, majority decision of share holders (2/3) is enough for the application for renewal, disregarding the decision of all. A licensed institution by the Ministry is authorised to conduct research to detect whether or not their building is at risk. The licensing of the institutions through the Ministry creates a threat over independency that the majority of the licensed institutions are also the construction firms who will be responsible for the renewal projects. The Law calls for temporary housing or workplace and rent benefits for shareholders, however it is not certain when and where these housing and workplaces will be given. Seen from the current practices that it is a high possibility that these places will be at the periphery of cities. It also launches the renewal fund which will be generated from administrative fines collected under the Environment Law, income from the properties sold under the Forestry Law, and a certain amount of the annual net profit of the Provincial Bank. There is interest rate support to banks, rental support, demolition credit, ministerial construction credit and credit for detection. The regulations also provides opportunities for the transfer of development rights. One of the most important threats through the law is the definition of reserve zones for new settlement, which are not clearly defined and can be and possibly will be applied to natural protection zones and forests.

5. What Does Renewal Meant for the Opportunity Spaces of Istanbul?

5.1 “Making invasion history”

The Law No. 5366 has introduced a major challenge for the **historic landscapes** of Istanbul. 11 historic zones in Istanbul’s Beyoglu, Fatih (in Historic Peninsula), Eyup, Zeytinburnu and Tuzla districts were declared as “renewal sites” between 2006 and 2010. These include 6 historic neighbourhoods in Beyoglu conservation site (such as Tarlabasi, Cezayir Çıkmazi, Tophane, Galata Tower, Municipality Building and environs); and 47 historic neighbourhoods

in the Historic Peninsula (such as Ayvansaray, Sulukule, Suleymaniye, Yenikapı-Yali, Sultanahmet, Kucuk Ayasofya, Grand Bazaar and environs) mostly with urgent expropriation decisions. The buffer zone for the Land Walls World Heritage Site is included in Zeytinburnu renewal area. There is a variety of interventions that are designed both to renovate and upgrade existing older housing and to build new housing through the complete demolition of obsolescent properties. The projects have been based on the theory that the conservation of cultural heritage through the elimination of “invasion” would increase the sense of belonging where different social groups live together; the prevention of decay through the eviction of social elements who do not invest in the maintenance of these; the protection of cultural dynamics and increase social integration with the rest of the city; and the establishment of a participatory process through public meetings (see Gunay, 2011). Regarding the Law No. 5366, the large-scale renewal projects have provided serious discussions on the sustainability of historic environment. Regarding their world heritage sites status, they are threatened to be included in the World Heritage List in Danger due to the lack of effective conservation or overuse of renewal policies and practices (UNESCO/WHC, 2010). Moreover, the projects are criticised as projects of “gentrification” and recommended that a balance must be found between conservation, social needs and identity of the community (UNESCO/WHC, 2008). For instance in Suleymaniye, KIPTAS has bought 101 buildings, most of which were demolished to perform restoration project by 2011. Sulukule and Ayvansaray were nearly totally demolished under the name of protecting the historical identity and improving the building stock which are not safe for earthquake by 2012 (Gunay, 2011). Tarlabasi project consisted of the renewal of 278 buildings, 76% of which were registered (for more information, see Kuyucu and Unsal, 2010). As a results of the renewal projects in historic neighbourhoods, which are described as “source of shame or dirt bag”, nearly 50% of properties has changed ownerships after the destruction decisions and urgent expropriations. Only in Sulukule this meant the replacement of 5000 families (see Gunay, 2012a).

5.2 “Making slums history”

Squatter areas, on the other hand, have always been one of the most important priorities of renewal framework in Turkey since the 1960s. Once they were encouraged as a way of self-help housing in a country of limited financial resources at the edge of industrialisation; after the 2000s, they started to be identified as “invaders” as they provided a boundary for the utilisation of opportunity spaces of Istanbul. One of the first renewal interventions were conducted in Ayazma, a squatter neighbourhood found in the 1980s. The neighbourhood was totally demolished in 2009 because of its increasing land values through the construction of important highways, industrial areas and Olympic Stadium. While the owners were offered dwellings in TOKI’s Bezirganbahçe Mass Housing Area at the periphery, the land emptied from low-income residents and squatters were filled with high-rise upper-income gated sites (see Bartu-Candan and Kolluoglu, 2008). Finally regularised urban renewal based on the Law on the Transformation of Areas under Disaster Risk has started in October 2012 through a live screening in the media. Based on the slogan of “making slums history”, the Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan pushed the button of bomb to start the demolition of 6.5 million building in Turkey (40% of building stock). 35 cities were selected primarily defining the largest renewal project in Turkish history. Only in Istanbul this means the demolition of approximately 1 million buildings. The neighbourhoods of Sumer, Esenler, Maltepe, Bayrampasa, Fikirtepe, and Derbent are among the first project areas to be chosen for renewal with respect to their strategic locations. The private sector has valorised this process of transforming squatter areas and inner-city neighbourhoods into the urban spaces of economic rant and land speculation under the name of “resource development and revenue-sharing projects” (see Gunay, 2012b). While these projects are being encouraged in order to raise financial resources in order to be used in housing projects for lower and middle income groups, the practices show that a considerable portion of the newly constructed buildings by TOKI are sold in the market to upper-income groups. For instance in Derbent neighbourhood, which is along the main financial axis of Istanbul with a

view of Bosphorus strait, the dwellings of gated sites are being sold for a minimum of €435.000. While the project proposes a population of 10.000 replacing the actual population of 7000, only 1000 buildings will be reserved for shareholders. On the other hand, the inhabitants of the 800 squatters will be given housing in the reserved zones for construction at the periphery.

6. Dichotomy of Urbanisation and Urbicide in the Renewal Agenda of Istanbul

The large-scale property-led renewal schemes, which have been employed as an evolving model in resolving the urbanisation problem, are turned into the instruments of “urbicide” in Istanbul as a political “evolving” model of urban destruction.

The current so-called planning practices offer an economic-oriented approach, which results in the interruption of planning process via the prominence of concepts such as “revitalisation”, “transformation”, “renewal” projects. Planning’s intervening and controlling role in entrepreneurial practices undergoes a change via neoliberal policies, thus, private sector-oriented partial projects replace comprehensive planning approaches. Within this process, planners and architects, who are the actors of the planning become agencies led by the private sector. In addition, the basic fundamental of the profession, which is the “public interest”, is replaced by an understanding of “corporate income”. Public authority and public resources are being used not to provide affordable and high-quality urban environments to the lower-income groups, but to open up profitable investment areas either for the state or for certain private developers.

While planning, as a participatory, transparent and sustainable approach, is a declining model of practice in Turkey, there is an emergence of uncontrolled power in the governance of the built environment bypassing planning. Over-centralised structure of urban renewal interventions prevents the dynamics of local governance and limits transparency of process through the elimination of independent control mechanisms through the empowerment of new actors. Ministry of Environment and Urbanism and TOKI have been authorised as real-estate agents, and has turned it into a “dangerously powerful institution directly at the service of the executive branch of the government” (Kuyucu and Unsal, 2010).

Urban renewal interventions, associated with physical interventions and destructions, focus on market conditions and spontaneous solutions of community, while the socio-economic aspects are being ignored. Urban renewal projects lead to the separation of community according to their socio-economic classes, ethnic backgrounds and cultural choices. Urban renewal interventions transforms inner-city into opportunity spaces resulting in the exclusion and eviction of the low-income local community, while destroying the collective memories. They also result in the displacing and replacing of new forms of poverty (Bartu-Candan and Kulluoglu, 2008). The Advisory Group on Forced Evictions (AGFE, 2009) estimates that the number of people that are under the threat of involuntary eviction is approximately one million, most of whom are currently the residents of historic neighbourhoods. In addition, the focus on physical renewal provides serious environmental consequences to the transformation of conservation sites, agriculture and forest areas into reserved zones for new settlement construction.

These remarks show that urban renewal practices in Turkey was proved to be a state-driven destruction and real-estate marketing strategy, rather than being a strategy to respond to historic preservation, disaster risk or urban deprivation. Apart from the mentioned legal frameworks, there are even new schemes being drafted by the government to regularise the process of urban renewal, through a more centralised structure to prevent the participation and to limit the control mechanisms of local municipalities, independent boards of

professions, non-governmental organisations and the community. Renewal projects is not limited only to historic landscapes and squatter areas; the waterfronts, old industrial areas and even public spaces are subject to large-scale urban renewal projects as the new opportunity spaces of Istanbul. Istanbul, as a city of water, has been facing the most challenging threats of its waterfronts through the projects such as Haydarpasaport, Galataport and Halic port. The public spaces including the Gezi Park that has become subject to the most powerful community action starting from May 2013, has been projected to be replaced by a mall complex together with others as Camlica Hill. While the mega projects such as 3rd Bridge, Canal Istanbul and Olympic Village are threatening the natural protection zones of the city, there seen no hesitation to destroy Yenikapi archaeological excavations of 8000 year-old history in order to construct transfer hubs.

Thus, there is an urgent need for change of emphasis in the governmental perception and political culture to employ holistic urban renewal framework through empowering sustainable, participatory, transparent and strategic planning approaches; raising consciousness into the role of community, community organisations and local governance; encouraging reinvestment and improvement rather than demolition; and most importantly preserving and respecting the country's cultural and environmental inheritance. Within the scope of this emerging agenda, there is still a role for planning and planners in managing these evolving and declining models of practice. One of the most important factors is that the "rational" planning approach has no validity anymore; the planning has to be responsive to strategic, flexible, responsive and participatory approaches as an intermediary between all stakeholders including the public and private sector as well as the community. Planning system should be open to change, if it wants to manage change. The planning profession may and should not have the power to change the ongoing political inferences on cities itself, however it may be a powerful instrument to construct the democratic management framework for cities and communities by creating the conditions of coordination, cooperation and negotiation. Because as Newman and Thornley (2002, pp. 23) puts forward the planning lies at the interface of market and politics in the neoliberal era. This is a shift from being the agents of development control towards being the agents of strategic-thinking.

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