

URBAN TRANSFORMATION IN ISTANBUL: AN EXAMPLE ‘SULUKULE’ IS IT CLEANSING OF THE GYPSIES?¹

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Abstract

Istanbul was elected by the European Commission (EU) “European Capital of Culture 2010” in 2006. Istanbul which is the meeting place of different languages, cultures and religions and has housed them together throughout the history is the most symbolical city of the world history with this feature and will share the world culture heritage as the “European Capital of Culture” to the largest extent. Istanbul is an example where the civilizations meet and have lived side by side and in peace for several centuries. In this regard, Istanbul was given the title of “European Capital of Culture.”

Since Istanbul was given the title European Capital of Culture, several urban transformation projects are expected to be implemented in the “Old Town” of the city. Apart from several criteria, it is foreseen that these projects adhere to the criterion of being, “projects which cover the new city planning strategies, observing the architectural heritage and link the heritage with the public”. Apart from the transformation projects developed in the other regions, the target is to link the new projects to be developed with the “city planning” and “urbanization process” of Istanbul.

Examining the urban transformation which will have a deep impact on the vision stretching from past to the future of Istanbul, Being a special city in historical, societal and political term, is the subject of this article.

When examining the urban transformation in the old town, the urban transformation project for Sulukule, one of the oldest settlement areas of the gypsies, and the developments connected with such project will be studied in detail as an example.

The Key Words

European capital of culture, the meeting place of the civilizations, Istanbul, Urban transformation, Sulukule

1. 21. THE POPULATION IN ISTANBUL, THE MEGA CITY OF THE CENTURY

Istanbul field an candidacy application for European Capital of Culture with the “**fire, air, water and soil**” theme and project and was accepted. The features describing Istanbul complement these four elements which comprise the life sources. It possesses a combination of life just like the four elements, a historical, cultural, artistic and architectural history and features which are transformed depending on the changes in time and are worth discovering. These are the advantages that made Istanbul stand out among the others.

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Istanbul is the place where the East meets the West. It combines Europe and Asia. It is located on the crossroads of the water roads combining the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. It is a mega city with its total land area of 5400 square kilometers and its population over 12 million (2007).

In the world, the cities with a population over 10 million are described as mega city. Istanbul was among the 22 mega cities listed by the United Nations in 2000 (HSC Online). Istanbul is, today, (2007) has a bigger population than 20 out of the 29 member states of the European Union (İBB 2006: 9) and 161 out of 229 countries which are the members of the United Nations (UN 2007).

Istanbul with its annual population growth rate at 3.3% is well above the Turkey average at 1.8% and the World average at 1.75% (1950-2005) (State Institute of Statistics 2003, UN 2005, Table -1, Table -2). In the last 50 years, the city population which increased from 1 million to 12 million increases with the addition of around 500.000 per year. The internal migration is responsible for 2/3 of the population increase. The reason for such rise is the fact that majority of the industrial facilities and commercial organizations are located in Istanbul. 38% of the industrial facilities and 55% of the commercial enterprises are located in Istanbul. 40% of the overall tax revenue in Turkey comes from Istanbul. This excessive rise in Istanbul population risks the sustainability of the city based on natural and economic resources.

Table 1: The Population of Turkey and Istanbul Table 2: The Future Population of Istanbul

| Year | Turkey | Istanbul | The Share of Istanbul (%) |
|------|------------|------------|---------------------------|
| 1950 | 20.947.188 | 1.166.477 | 5.6 |
| 1960 | 27.754.820 | 1.882.092 | 6.8 |
| 1970 | 35.605.176 | 3.019.032 | 8.5 |
| 1980 | 44.736.957 | 4.741.890 | 10.6 |
| 1990 | 56.473.035 | 7.195.773 | 12.7 |
| 2000 | 67.803.927 | 10.018.735 | 14.8 |

| Year | Population |
|------|------------|
| 2000 | 10.018735 |
| 2007 | 12 493 193 |
| 2010 | 13 732 719 |
| 2015 | 16 077 864 |
| 2020 | 18 823 491 |
| 2030 | 25 801 432 |
| 2040 | 41 405 617 |
| 2050 | 48 476 480 |

Therefore, it is recommended that the internal migration causing an immense rise in Istanbul population be shifted to the neighboring regions, the natural population rise be slowed down, the old town and its current structure be strengthened, be given a planned and regular form (İBB 2006).

The realization of such recommendations is depends on the making long term strategic decisions, and implementation of modern urban planning principles and city planning principles. It is hoped that this process will be accelerated with Istanbul being European Capital of Culture 2010 and, thus, a urbanization which is habitable, planned and sound will be ensured. In several regions of Istanbul, urban transformation projects are being implemented with this idea in mind. The urban transformation practices in the ‘old town’ and ‘Sulukule’, a part of the old town, are noteworthy and give rise to great reflections both in Turkey and Europe.

2. URBAN TRANSFORMATION IN THE HISTORICAL OLD TOWN OF ISTANBUL

Istanbul was founded in the 7th century B.C. Ever since its foundation, it was besieged for 29 times until 1453 when it was finally conquered by the Turks. In its 2600-year old history, it served the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman Empires as the capital.

In 196 A.D., it was besieged by Roman Emperor Septimus Severus and was conquered. In 313, the city was taken over by the Romans again and was declared the capital of Roman Empire by Roman Emperor Constantinus, I, in 330. After Constantinus I accepted Christianity as a religion, the city became the most important center of cultural, artistic, political and economic center of the Christianity at the same time. During such era, Istanbul was subject to comprehensive public works and development activities. The remainders of such era have survived to our modern day, particularly the historical city walls surrounding the old town. The old town of Istanbul is composed of the area within the said city walls.

From 395 A.D., when the Roman Empire broke up into two separate parts, the city was the capital of Byzantine Empire which is known as Eastern Roman Empire until 1453. Istanbul was conquered in 1453 by Ottoman Sultan Mehmet (Fatih) II, and the capital of the Empire was moved into Istanbul. Today, Istanbul is a city where the concept of multiple cultures came into being with its silhouette drawn with the Byzantine churches and Ottoman mosques.

The old town of Istanbul which was the capital of three empires is today subject of several urban transformation projects. Today, the old town is located within three boroughs (Eminönü, Fatih and Beyoğlu) (Map -1). It is planned that, within the borders of three boroughs, in different regions with various functions, 5300 parcels, 1.500.000 sqm large land, 4.500.000 sqm large structure area be subject of transformation projects in 12 pilot regions in return for an investment in the amount of;

- US\$18.000.000.000 in 7 years (2010)
- US\$28.000.000.000 in 10 years (2010) (Map -2).



Map-1



Map-2

The urban transformation areas in the old town of Istanbul have been planned in twelve areas, namely;

1. Süleymaniye, 2. Kapalıçarşı, 3. Sultanahmet, 4. Zeyrek, 5. Fatih, 6. Aksaray, 7. Tarlabası, 8. Tophane, 9. Kasımpaşa, 10. Beyoğlu, 11. Galata, 12. Sulukule.

The old town of Istanbul which is planned to be subject of several urban transformation projects house some of the most popular sites of history, culture, nature and tourism (Picture -1, 2, 3,).



Picture 1: Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque



Picture 2: Galata Tower



Picture 3: Topkapı Palace

Owing to the urban transformation and improvement efforts, the aim is to turn Istanbul a host city for the international meetings and the decisions that will guide the world as well as increase in its global market effectiveness and its conversion into a metropolitan. With the urban transformation practices, Istanbul is expected to undergo a structural change and stop focusing on the industrial production. When the presumptions are realized, Istanbul will have changed its employment structure seen as 31% industry and 59% service in 2000 for 80-85% service and 15-20% industry (İBB 2006: 88).

On the one hand, it is desired that Istanbul turns into a city of culture, history, tourism, commerce, finance, communication and science , on the other hand, the city is expected to recover its structural inadequacies and get rid of unnecessary encumbrances. Hence, it is recommended that city industry be decentralized to the neighboring areas, the population growth and excessive expansion be controlled, the unregistered settlement areas which are in breach of the zoning plans be legalized through a strategic planning and urban transformation. Thus, it is stated that, while getting prepared for the new global vision, with transfer of the activities outside its vision to the other parts of the area , the city could assume a competitive role in the competing metropolitans system. Otherwise, it is said that excessive expansion of metropolitan, increased production and service costs will risk the global competitiveness of Istanbul and its own existence (İBB 206: 10).

There is need for a urban planning approach with a protection axis which will ensure protection of the natural and historical environment as well as renewal of the unhealthy urban textures. Planning Istanbul where the civilizations meet and the continents get connected is a responsibility of being European Capital of Culture. In this context, several areas have been declared urban transformation areas in the recent years and the projects have been started. These areas the historical old town of Istanbul and “Sulukule”, the oldest Gypsy settlement area of the world, within that area.

3. ‘SULUKULE’, THE OLDEST GYPSY SETTLEMENT AREA OF THE WORLD WITHIN THE HISTORICAL OLD TOWN OF ISTANBUL

According to Marsh (2005), it would not be wrong to say that Sulukule’ is the **“the heart of Gypsy history.”** Sulukule is the oldest known gypsy settlement area. The name *Çingene* (gypsy) was used by the Byzantines to name the people living there.

According to Adrian Marsh of UK, who has been conducting researches about the Gypsies in Turkey for the last four years and gives a lecture called “Gypsy Studies” at İstanbul Bilgi University and Elin Strand Marsh, the Swedish Researcher, the roots of the gypsies in Turkey date back to India. In the 11th century. A group of people composed of various tribes left India and traveled to Istanbul and settled in the area of Istanbul which is now known as Sulukule. Since they engaged with fortune telling and magic, the Byzantine mistaken them for the Egyptians. That’s why the word Gypsy was derived from the word Egyptian (www.zigeunerklange.blogspot.com, www.cingene.org/semp05/tr/adrian.pdf). These people have been living in Sulukule as the oldest Gypsy community since the 11th century. Therefore, their hometown is Istanbul and they spread into Europe from this city. The Gypsies who have always been at the low income group have been considered people who engaged with any job they could find for several centuries. They do a living by performing music, selling flowers, making baskets, forging, fortune telling, horse buying-selling , bear dance etc.

Today, it is hard to determine the number of the Gypsies living on the face of earth. It is stated that the population of the Gypsies in Turkey is around 500.000 according to the official figures, yet this figure goes up to 2 million according to unofficial figures. According to Adrian MARSH, Turkey is the country where the highest population of Gypsies live all around the world (www.cingene.org/semp05/tr/adrian.pdf). Sulukule is an indispensable habitat (www.fatih.bel.tr) Picture 4 and 5).



Picture 4



Picture 5

Known as the oldest Gypsy settlements in the world, Sulukule has a 1000 year-old history (Neslişah and Hatice Sultan Quarters). According to the historical sources, the Gypsies arrived and settled in the area in 1054, well before the Turks (M. Yılmaz, 2007). The Gypsies were an important part of the societal structure in the capital of the Empire.

Following conquest of Istanbul in 1453, Sultan Mehmet (Fatih) II ordered migration of new Gypsy groups into the city in order to revive the city life and trade. During the Republic era, Sulukule remained as the settlement area of the Gypsies. Therefore, Sulukule and the Gypsies are identified with one another.

In the 1960s, part of Sulukule was demolished as part of the expansion efforts of Vatan Avenue and, after the closedown of the music and entertainment houses they had been operating for several years in the 1990s, the region turned into a land of social and economic depression. It has been suggested that, instead of entire demolition of the region, the region could be saved from depression through an appropriate restoration (Güney, 2007).

By contrast, pursuant to the protocol signed by Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, Prime Ministry *Housing Development Administration* Presidency and Fatih Municipality on 08.09.2005, it was resolved that Sulukule be incorporated in the scope of urban transformation project for re-construction of the area according to “**Ottoman Civil Turkish Architecture**” (Picture 6).

It has been stated, with this project, Sulukule falling within the borders of city walls (Neslişah and Hatice Sultan Quarters) will be renewed with sound buildings and infrastructure in harmony with the historical old town, and complying with the urban and architectural heritage of old Istanbul. A new era has started in Sulukule with the signature of the Protocol.

Picture 6. Signature Ceremony of Sulukule Urban Transformation Project Protocol



1. **Kadir TOPBAŞ, Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality Mayor**
2. **Erdoğan BAYRAKTAR, Prime Ministry Housing Development Administration President**
3. **Mustafa DEMİR, Fatih Municipality Mayor**

4. THE LEGAL GROUNDS AND TECHNICAL DATA OF SULUKULE URBAN TRANSFORMATION PROJECT

4.1. The Legal Grounds

In the urban transformation practices of Turkey, a law is enacted for every special case.. The legal grounds of Sulukule urban transformation project are as follows;

1. Municipality Law dated 03.07.2005 and the number 5393 (article: 73),
2. Metropolitan Municipality Law dated 10.07.2004 and the number 5216 (article: 7/e),
3. Law on Renewal and Protection and Revival of the Worn-out Historical and Cultural Immovable Properties dated 16.06.2005 and 5366,
4. Mass Housing Law dated 02.03.1984 and the number 2985,
5. Protocol dated 08.09.2005.

The common point of the above legal grounds is preferring to expropriate the immovable properties instead of agreement with the owners. Besides, pursuant to the “urgent expropriation” decree

numbered 2006/11296 as passed by the Council of Ministers on 13.12.200, the owners of the immovable properties were not given the right of objection and defending their rights and the process has been accelerated.

It has been stated that the beneficiaries in Sulukule will be defined by Housing Development Administration of Turkey (TOKİ), one of the agencies subordinated to the central government. TOKİ will be authorized with regards to the issues such as sale of the houses, method and documents that will be required. The projects for the housing development will be prepared and construction will be carried out by TOKİ in close cooperation with the municipalities.

The legal grounds authorize the central and local management to act unilaterally and without a limit of power with regards to Sulukule. However, if the cities allow the fellow city dwellers to participate in the urban transformation planning and realization to a great extent and the debates do not frighten them, the problems will be discussed with possible solutions. Without meetings based on mutual understanding and conciliation, success in urban transformation is not likely. With projects that will be implemented in collaboration with the people living in Sulukule, the conflicts will decrease and the urban transformation will be more successful. It is seen that an opposite understanding prevails in the issue of Sulukule.

4.2. The Technical Data

The urban transformation project of Sulukule has been prepared based on the protection band for the historical city walls dating back to the Byzantine era;

- The project area is 86 760 sqm.
- There are 12 cadastral areas in the project area.
- The project area is composed of 3 avenues and 10 streets.
- The project area contains 354 parcels, 22 registered works of art. 17 of them are examples of civil architecture and 5 of them are monuments.
- The project will be implemented on a net area of 46091.19 sqm (www.fatih.bel.tr) (Map 3, 4).



Map 3. Aerial photo of Sulukule



Map 4. The borders of the Sulukule Project

Owners reside in 257 of the houses in Sulukule, tenants reside in 303 of them while illegal occupants reside in 11 of them and the 51 buildings are vacant. The urban settlement plans with a scale of 1/1000 have been prepared by Fatih Municipality. The houses contained in the project have been designed as two- or three-storey buildings containing 75 and 95 sqm large apartments. The houses which are said to have been designed according to historical peninsula protection plan will be built in accordance with the Ottoman civil Turkish architecture and the buildings close to the city walls will be two-storey and those away from the city walls will be three-storey. The budget of the project that will be implemented by Housing Development Administration Presidency subordinated to the Central

Government is around TRY 40 trillion (~ US\$25 million). At the beginning, the project is planned to be started with demolition of 465 buildings in September 2006 and be completed within 15 months following demolition (Project 1).

Project 1. Sulukule Project



According to the project;

- The owners or tenants residing in the region will continue to live there with a contribution share.
- The owners will receive expropriation amount to be calculated over the fair market value.
- Those transferring their properties to Housing Development Administration Presidency will settle in other houses built by the central management in other regions.
- The tenants will be given the chance of owning a house in the projects of Housing Development Administration without participating in the lottery.

Fatih Municipality has revised the projects which have been prepared without consulting the residents of the area for 17 times. According to the new project, apartments with varying sizes ranging from 55 sqm to 120 sqm. The officials say that **“this time, the project has been developed in line with the demands of the residents of Sulukule.”** The original options of apartments with the size of 75 and 95 sqm now also include the options of 55 and 120 sqm. The prices of the apartments contained in the project range from TRY 60.000 to TRY 120.000 (~ around US\$45.000-95.000). The property owners in Sulukule will repay the amount remaining after deduction of land price and the amount to be paid for the wreck of the old structure on the land within 15 years.

The price per sqm of the apartments has been determined by Fatih Municipality and the cost of the project has been explained as TRY 100.000.000 (~ around US\$75.000.000).

The seemingly endless revisions of the project indicate that the residents of the area and their specific needs are not taken into consideration. Although there are 645 land registry entries in Sulukule, it has been explained that 620 apartments will be built, yet no clear answer comes from the central and local management as to the question how many people from the quarter will be able to own one of the apartments pertaining to the project.

4.3. The local reactions to the project

The locals of the area are not interested in the options so presented. They do not want to seaveleave their history, culture and quarter. The managers of the NGOs in Sulukule (NGO) (Şükrü Pündük) believes that the final stage of an intimidating policy which has been going on for several years is the decision made for ‘demolition’. The NGO managers believe that the "they try to disconnect the Gypsies from each other and from the place they reside in.”

According to Mayor of Fatih, “this project is the most social project of the world.” By contrast, according to Şükrü Pündük, the Chairman of Society for Development of Sulukule Gypsy Culture and Solidarity, “the actual objective of the Municipality is to take the Gypsies out of Sulukule.”

The people of Sulukule, with the support of Istanbul Chamber of Architects, have instituted an action for a decree to cancel “urgent expropriation”. Several non-governmental organizations have explained their support for such action...

While the trials of the action continue in the court of justice and there is no approved renewal project, Fatih Municipality started demolition of some houses. One of such houses belonged to an owner whose property and title deed the Municipality did not possess. The house was demolished with the households inside without notifying the owner and it was explained that this was a mistake.

The journalists asked Fatih Mayor the following question on TV channel, "The people in Sulukule disagree with your project, they do not want to leave their quarters, and they blame you in this regard. What will you say about this?" and the following noteworthy answer came from the Mayor, with angry tone, 'this problem of Sulukule gives me a big headache. I receive much criticism from Europe. I can withdraw this project if required' (Hallaç 2007).

The new dimension of the developments gave rise to the new processes... the number of people who believe that the urban transformation project should include the views and needs of the people living in Sulukule is on rise. The reactions to the approaches which detach the people from their homes against their freewill and forcing them to go away continually increase.

The need for projects which support multi-cultural structure in Istanbul, and allow the people have their say about their habitat with the involving methods and do not drive them away from their homes is on a constant rise.

4.4. The Deficient Aspects of the Project

Sulukule is a place where people feel happy in its current form. The life is at home, in the street and everywhere. The people in Sulukule are able to show their skills in every place. Their homes are maximum two-storey and, usually, overlook a garden or a courtyard. It is not possible for the people of Sulukule to demonstrate their skills in multi-storey buildings. What makes Sulukule the place it is its people. When you take away the people living there, there will be no such place called Sulukule. Then, the project that needs to be developed here must be a human-oriented project. However, when looking into the current project, the project seems to be profit-oriented, rather than, human-oriented (Kılıç 2007).

The people living in Sulukule say, at every opportunity, that their views have not been taken at the development stage of the project. Involvement means inclusion of the people in the production process from their living places with their freewill. With the Protocol signed between the central and local management on 08.09.2005, it is suggested that the people of the area move out of such area and own apartments outside this area, and instead of persuading those disagreeing with the project, pressure is applied to these people by the means of the central and local management. Instead of improvement of the historical and cultural structure of the area and protection of the original texture, offering the locals employment opportunities, and creating better living conditions, some arrangements aimed at cleansing of the people of the area are proposed.

Instead of integrating the culture of the people living in Sulukule with the multi-cultural structure of the city, the process that will lead dismissal of the Gypsies from the area also ignores the social and economic conditions of the area. The people are faced with a threat of demolition and the deprivation of the Gypsies will even further increase due to the project that will be applied without creating an alternative (Özateşler 2007).

While renewing Sulukule, loss of a culture, disconnection of the people from their habitat and forcing them to migration gave rise to extensive reactions both in Turkey and abroad. In the Turkey Progress Report explained by Olli Rehn, the Member of European Union (EU) Responsible for Expansion, inclusion of the dilemma of Sulukule has already moved the issue to an international platform (www.sabah.com.tr/2007). One of the reasons for the attention paid to Sulukule in Turkey and Europe is the importance and power of the area and its socio-cultural structure. A Gypsy settlement in this

scale and the areas with an original economic structure are rarely found in the world. The current applications and the solutions suggested should have taken into consideration the above features.

The people of the area will be indebted for 15 years due to the housing development that will take place irrespective of the revenues and life forms of the locals of the area, and it has not been thought whether they can repay their debts in the given time.

Although it is described as the “most social project of the world”, results contrary to what is said arise since the residents of Sulukule sell their houses and leave the area.

5. GENERAL EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

Sulukule urban transformation project not only ignores the social texture but also perceives the city as marketable goods. Such rationale will bring along several other problems for Istanbul in the subsequent processes. In the new city areas where the Gypsies will be driven to, new problematic areas will be borne.

The houses to be built in cooperation with the central and local management are not fit for the people of Sulukule in terms of their physical conditions and the payment conditions. If the project is realized, the residents of the quarter will have to leave this area. Since their professions may not be moved to other places, they will lose their jobs. However, it is possible to develop a city planning project with social involvement.

It is seen that the legal grounds have some important deficiencies. A reconciliation was required when creating such grounds. What has happened to date dropped a shadow of profit on the legalization process. The laws enacted for urban transformation and the recent applications in Turkey lack principles such as social justice, public benefit and space integrity. Such case turns the transformation projects into social demolition projects which take away the right to accommodation, the most basis human right and deters the planned city planning (ŞPO 2006).

The areas selected for urban transformation are the areas with problematic architecture which are described as the places with low income level and depression. It is evident that the deprivation striking these areas will not be solved unless the problem is dealt with on a nation-wide scale and a solution is sought. Driving away the locals with low income of such areas with the urban transformation projects with an ennobling axis and converting such areas into places where the people with higher income level will live will cause further problems in the near future.

The projects should not be based on methods which disconnect the people from their habitats and force them to migration. The management should involve the people in decision making process before they make any decisions. The people of the areas where demolition activities took place should be given the right to return to their quarters where they live. The neighboring relations should not be changed. The children should be given the right of education. The adults should be allowed to continue doing their jobs. They should have right to health care. The management should not pursue discriminative approaches. The constitutional rights of the people, the citizenship rights should be the number one principle the management will consider in the first place.

Although the current experience includes several adverse events, today a hopeful position has been reached, because the urban transformation is a social and space requirement and another version of urban transformation is possible. In order to ensure such other form of transformation;

- Urban transformation applications should respect to the accommodation and housing rights of the residents of these areas and should not turn into a social demolition.

- It should be ensured that the people continue to live in the area of transformation. The people living in the areas should not be forced to reside in the places away from their homes as a result of transformation project.
- Throughout the urban transformation process, involvement of people in the preparation of the project should be ensured.
- The rights of the tenants as well as the owners in the areas of transformation should be protected.

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