

On contemporary urbanization in Turkey

T. GÜL KÖKSAL

Assoc. Prof. in Architecture – Conservation Specialist



Cover photo: Sulukule, which is one of the first urban transformation examples of Istanbul, Roman citizens have been exiled, historical buildings have been demolished and imitation structures have been built in their places. From the UNESCO Counter Forum event archive.
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In a stanza of his poem “Pillage” (“Yağma”) on Istanbul, Ahmet Muhip Dranas writes:

“...Change marks all, our hearts even,
But how is it that a city nourished by centuries
Can melt away into nought so very fast
Faster yet than the span of a human life?...” (1)

It was in the past century that Dranas wrote this poem. Who knows what he would have said about the current speed of urban transformation had he lived in the 21st century?

Not a single day goes by without our witnessing the transformation of houses, streets we grew up in, squares where we used to meet up with friends. The transformation currently taking place in Turkey is similar to the Industrial Revolution, which radically altered traditional urban settlements. This is not only the case in large metropolises such as Istanbul and Ankara, but also in cities like Diyarbakır, Mardin and Antalya. Perhaps the present-day scene is a belated response to the lack of urban transformation as it unfolded in the 19th and 20th centuries in many European countries.

As is known, the 19th century project of capitalist modernity led to a large-scale transformation of cities such as Paris, London and Vienna from their infrastructure to city squares, housing and avenues. David Harvey provides a succinct summary of this process (2); “... From their inception, cities have arisen through geographical and social concentrations of a surplus product. Urbanization has always been, therefore, a class phenomenon. Since urbanization depends on the mobilization of a surplus product, an intimate connection emerges between the development of capitalism and urbanization. Capitalists have to produce a surplus product in order to produce surplus value; this in turn must be reinvested in order to generate

more surplus value. The result of continued reinvestment is the expansion of surplus production at a compound rate, paralleled by the growth path of urbanization under capitalism.”

Hence why Paris was transformed in the hands of Haussmann, arriving to its current urban form (3). What Haussmann did to Paris, Robert Moses then applied to New York following World War 2. The phenomenon of urban transformation starting out in early capitalist countries took hold all over the world, reaching global dimensions in the 21st century. In other words, transformation spread from cities to countries, to then find global appeal.

Ever since the use value of land has been abandoned in favour of its exchange value, the scale of urban transformation has grown exponentially. As its scale has grown, so too has its social impact. It is known that capitalism creates unequal geographies. Cities are becoming increasingly fragmented, with urban tensions and conflict escalating. In Harvey’s words, cities increasingly consist of “gated communities” and privatized public spaces with around-the-clock surveillance (2). City-dwellers are now confronted with ‘microstates’ everywhere and at all times. There are sharp divisions and barriers between wealthy neighbourhoods and the living spaces of the oppressed and exploited such as the poor, the underprivileged, the marginalized, migrants and those excluded from political power. The notion of “creative destruction”, which is the power source of capitalist relations of production, has further crystallized class divisions and the contradiction between labour and capital in urbanization. The situation is no different in Turkey.

The practice of urbanization in Turkey

Global capitalism strengthened its influence from the 1980s onwards with the governments of Margaret Thatcher in England and Ronald Reagan in the U.S., as well as due to world-changing developments such as the dissolution of the Eastern bloc (4). Urban transformation is, essentially, a means of maintaining urbanization efforts that turn natural environments into environments built by the human hand. Within this context, natural environments and resources such as rural areas, rivers, forests and meadows are constantly and consistently zoned for construction through destructive-creative processes. It is a fact that the world’s urban population is on the rise with respect to the rural, with the continuation of rural to urban migration. Cities have by now come to devour rural areas. Under the AKP government, this de facto engulfment has also been equipped with a legal basis. To mention but some of these legislative manoeuvres: for instance, with Metropolitan Law no. 6360 passed in Turkey in 2012, 13 provinces were enlarged to include sur-

rounding districts and villages, thus changing the very scope of these cities (5). The same Law extinguished the legal entity status of villages, including forest villages in Istanbul and Kocaeli, thus rendering them ‘neighbourhoods.’ Another law passed in 2012, numbered 6306, is one on the “Restructuring of Areas Under Disaster Risk” and pertains to the designation of areas/structures under earthquake risk and an assessment of buildings that must be torn down and rebuilt (6). In the wake of the Earthquake of 1999, the expectation was for this law to increase the number of sturdy, reliable structures. In practice, however, even a full survey and identification of buildings at risk in Istanbul, for instance, remains far from complete (7). Though cities contain thousands of damaged buildings, no steps have been taken to provide public housing that accounts for low-income earners that meet their fundamental right to live in safety. Instead of improving structures that are damaged and uninhabitable, a law has been made to grant them legal “amnesty”. None of the various zoning amnesty regulations issued on 14 occasions in Turkey since 1948 have served to put an end to poor-quality constructions in the country; on the contrary, the regulations are creating grounds for their future proliferation (8). With Law no. 7148 on the “Restructuring of Certain Taxes and Other Receivables and Amendments to Certain Laws” passed in 2018, zoning amnesty has taken on the name of “zoning peace”, according to which interventions into the country’s natural, cultural and archaeological areas have been provided with legal trappings, rendering ever more visible the government’s investment in the interest of capital-owners rather than the public good.

The city where urban transformation from public space to private property has been experienced at its most intense, whose example was then followed by Anatolian towns, is Istanbul. As expressed in Dranas’ poem, over the past century Istanbul has undergone physical transformations to an extent that has come to disturb its inhabitants. There are numerous studies on the last 10-15 years of the city’s transformation and counter-struggles (9, 10). A term that draws attention in these studies as an indication of the changing scope of transformation is “mega-projects”. In large cities considered metropolises, surplus capital is produced by way of very large-scale projects in a physical sense called “mega-projects”. Unsurprisingly, this physical impact factor also has influence on the social, economic, cultural, etc. transformations of society. As is clearly seen in the currently updated web page “mega-projects”, these have widely permeated the city (9). It is also possible to examine these projects according to the year on this site. Looking at the “Announcement Date” tab, one may easily observe that all of the grand projects have been carried out in the recent 15-year government period (9). As the locomotive of the country’s construction-based economy, Istanbul serves as a kind of building ground for the AKP government. It is precisely for this reason that failing to win the

city in local elections shall amount to a great loss in economic and administrative terms. This is what lies behind the insistence for the repeat of elections on the 23rd of June 2019.

In a special dossier titled, “Mega-Projects and Istanbul: Istanbul’s Mega Transformation” Mustafa Sönmez lays bare the political-economic relations behind this transformation (10; p.32-35). While elaborating on how public resources are allocated to the private sector by way of Private Public Partnerships (PPPs) championed and rendered widely by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, Sönmez draws attention to the mega problems created by mega projects. These problems, which he has compiled under headings such as “failure of supervision, disconnectedness from macro policies, burdens on public funding sources, favouritism in the choice of partners, environmental destruction and land speculation”, are all reflected in mega-projects.

The AKP Government’s interventions into urban policies in the last 15 years have been multifaceted. While on the one hand inventing legal regulations to hand over the commons that are under constitutional protection to private capital, they have on the other developed a variety of consent mechanisms to extinguish any objections to this, resorting to force when needed. For instance, the privatization that allows public land to be zoned for construction is, as stated by Sönmez, different from classical privatization (10). In such privatization, public shares are sold to private companies, and public ownership thus comes to an end. Whereas in private-public partnerships such as Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) projects, the public entity is not overtaken following the signing of the contract as it would in the previous case. It rather remains within the project and provides a certain economic guarantee. This method has been employed in grand-scale implementations such as bridges, dams, city hospitals and airports. The corporations providing the capital are profit-secured by the state. On the other hand, many countries, including Turkey, have constitutions stating that rivers, mines, water sources, forests, etc. are inalienable public property. Yet PPPs have allowed the usage rights of under- and over-ground resources to be handed over to capital holders (10). The State of Emergency and Statutory Decrees issued in the wake of the 15th of July coup attempt accelerated this process. Efforts to create resources such as the Turkey Wealth Fund (Türkiye Varlık Fonu) arose in order to provide budgets for such projects – as increasing security concerns in the country have negatively affected the influx of foreign capital. The economic crisis is at its height. This crisis is in fact a global phenomenon. The government is thus busy with new regulations in order to attract Gulf capital instead. The relationships between interventions to the city by way of legislation passed after the AKP took municipal control of Istanbul and have been

graphically depicted in the *Mimar.ist* magazine (10; p.60-61, full dossier p. 31-75). Another source provides an inventory of legal amendments regarding the use and management of natural reserves (4, p.17-18). According to this, 32 of 40 changes to legislation that took place from 1956 to 2014 have been under the AKP government.

While mega-project-based construction work has dominated cities in the country's west, its southeast has been the scene of the accumulation of surplus capital by means of the Housing Development Administration's (TOKİ) operations in a setting of post-conflict destruction. Established in 1984 on Turgut Özal's directives, TOKİ undertook the construction of 43,000 housing units up until 2002 (11, 12), while this number reached 600,000 in the first decade of AKP rule (12). The main purpose for TOKİ was, originally, to build healthy urban environments to meet the low-income population's need for affordable housing. Yet it has instead long generated – and this is predominantly what it still does – housing development for the benefit of middle and upper-middle income classes. Constructed identically all over the country without any regard for geographical features, as standardized, high-rise gated communities far from city centres, TOKİ housing has ended up imposing a mandatory lifestyle on its residents. Its legal framework restructured under AKP rule, TOKİ was turned into a corporation exempt from mechanisms of supervisory oversight, by means of PPPs. A variety of coercive measures in legal trappings have also come into effect to this end. For instance, as on the one hand villages are being evacuated on what are termed security concerns and people are being forcefully displaced in urban centres, on the other urgent public confiscations – or expropriations – follow citing the Disaster Risk Law no. 6306 and Statutory Decrees (12, 13). People find themselves confined to TOKİ's long-term instalment payment plans, as they have no other solutions and wish to avoid falling into the clutches of contractors. Living and housing in a decently built environment is a universal right. As per the right to the city, protecting and providing state guarantee to the right to shelter of all urban residents including migrants, regardless of property relations, is a constitutional obligation. The government, however, prefers to provide guarantees to capital accumulation rather than to the public and common good.

All of these transformations have also resulted in social, societal and cultural transformations negatively affecting the city's everyday life. Neighbourhoods inhabited by the poor, where traditional living patterns are maintained as well as neighbourly relations of solidarity cemented over the years, have been torn down. Urban centres have thus been "cleansed" of the poor and offered up to those with middle and upper income levels. This intervention that has come to be known as gentrification is taking place in many parts of the country. For example, according to accounts by inhabitants of Diyarbakır's Suriçi (Inner City) district, which has

been listed as an “urban conservation area” due to its status as a cultural heritage site on the national level since 1988, and later recognized as a World Heritage site in 2015, those living off produce bought from the nearby Hewsel Gardens for low prices or on credit (to pay later) ended up going hungry for extended periods due to curfews imposed (12). They were then pushed out into new residential areas where they were unable to survive, both because this forced them to change their lifestyles and because they lacked the money. The Suriçi and Hewsel Gardens area, where life has flourished uninterruptedly for approximately 7,000 years, was first declared a site under disaster risk, then largely demolished by way of urgent confiscations, depopulated of its residents. This has also greatly endangered the preservation and continuity of cultural heritage. Whereas according to the 1954 Hague “Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict”, to which Turkey is also signatory, these sites should have been protected (13).

Reports on rights violations committed in this period ranging from those regarding cultural heritage to different aspects of life have been compiled on the web page of the Truth Justice Memory Center (14). These clearly demonstrate how the physical transformation of the city has affected its social structure, wreaking irrevocable change on it. In this context, it would not be an exaggeration to say that urban transformation is in fact a political and ideological movement. The transformation taking place in Turkey under the AKP is the manifestation of a particular blend of capitalist relations of production with the ideology of nationalist political Islam. These interventions are not specific to Diyarbakır either. According to data provided by the Union of Chambers of Turkish Engineers and Architects (TMMOB) in reporting on the destruction in the region encompassing Şırnak, Mardin and Nusaybin, 400,000 people have been forcibly displaced in this process (15). The poor, and marginalized, oppressed, exploited peoples are being deprived of their most fundamental right to life all over the country, as seen in the examples of Sulukule, Tarlabası, Fener-Balat, Süleymaniye, etc. Residents displaced from their homes here have lost their social environment, which has also resulted in serious transformation in the physical fabric of the city. Taksim and its environs constitute one of the most striking examples of this in Istanbul. With rent hikes and the transformation of entire blocks, the area has been completely altered both socially and architecturally in the last 10-15 years.

Urban transformation has also turned into some kind of construction terror. Not only do construction vehicles buzzing around on city streets day and night disrupt traffic, but they also at times cost peoples’ lives. As streets have become construction sites, they have turned even more hazardous with increasing dust, noise, asbestos and vehicles that may suddenly jump out of nowhere. The lack of precau-

tionary measures to prevent the release of asbestos dust, whose inhalation poses cancer risk, during the demolition of old structures or facilities may also lead to health problems in the long term.

Struggles are also being waged in Turkey and across the world against these transformations ranging from the public sphere to living spaces. A variety of advocacy groups from professional associations to democratic grassroots organizations, from political parties to civil initiatives have been coming together to oppose this transformation wrought on nature and cities. The short-lived yet highly impactful Gezi Resistance, starting in Istanbul and spreading all over the country is but one such example. Some who spoke up during the Gezi Resistance are now facing trial. This alone shows how much the government is alarmed by the notion of popular initiative.

Other than Gezi, there is a wide range of solidarity movements from the Black Sea region to Anatolia. Alternative and oppositional media sources have been trying to provide coverage of such initiatives as various films and documentaries put them on record. The documentary , “Turkey on the Edge” (“Uçurumun Kıyısında Türkiye”), for instance, details the process of transformation taking place in Turkey from the Gezi Resistance up to the 2017 Referendum in both political terms and urban interventions (16). The film “Ecumenopolis: City Without Limits” (“Ekümenopolis: Ucu Olmayan Şehir”), on the other hand, documents Istanbul’s urban trans-



Demolitions in the city center of Diyarbakır. February 2016
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formation, with particular emphasis on the period of AKP rule (17). The short film “Where in Istanbul are we?” (“İstanbul’un Neresindeyiz?”) prepared for Sendika.org and aired on March 30th 2019, portrays the transformation that Istanbul has undergone, with its impacts on everyday life and struggles against it, by taking its viewers on a route through the city (18). The video, in which activists from the Emek Cinema and Taksim Square struggles, the Istanbul Urban Defence, the Haydarpaşa Solidarity Platform, Haliç (Golden Horn) Solidarity Platform and Beyoğlu Urban Defence group speak, conveying how public spaces are being wrestled away from the people and handed over to capital holders instead.

What I have summarized up until now demonstrates the repercussions of the global phenomenon of urban transformation in Turkey and how it is shaped by this country’s particular governance. This is, in fact, quite a bleak picture. Yet it is also still possible to speak of the existence of urban movements, which cannot be stopped or silenced, despite all of the coercive forces. “Where in Istanbul are we?” is but a brief reflection of this. Dissenting voices are also rising from other towns.

We must keep in mind that as much as global urban interventions know no bounds, neither does resistance to them. It is, therefore, necessary to lend an ear to voices and experiences from other countries as well. This is exactly why Cihan Uzunçarşılı Baysal’s words at the end of “Where in Istanbul are we?” are particularly relevant here: “... Gezi was a counter-city, pitted against the urban vision of neoliberal Islam. The city is chaotic. The moment you come in contact with space, the moment you set it in motion, you also start creating counter-space. It is for this reason that there is always hope in space – or place!”

To sum up, it is impossible to tell where hope will come from – which is why it is so full of surprise and brings joy when it does. History is replete with examples of this ever since the Paris Commune. We cannot know what the near future has in store for us. It is important to always be in attention, ready for action, and keep creating in the meanwhile. Although the city may be changing faster than the span of human life, as Dranas says in his poem, there are still many poems to be written as long as social, urban and class struggles sustained by human dignity and awareness persist.

Sources:

(Date of access for all Web sources: November 2019)

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Heinrich Böll Stiftung

Turkey

W www.tr.boell.org

E info@tr.boell.org