Urban transformation in Istanbul: potentials for a better city

Arda INCEOGLU and Ipek YÜREKLI
Istanbul Technical University Faculty of Architecture, Taskisla, Taksim Istanbul 34433
e-mail: inceogl4@itu.edu.tr

Abstract

Istanbul has lived through two major growth spurts during 20th century that have determined its urban shape. The first one coincides with the beginning of industrialization of Turkey during 1950’s and 1960’s. The second major growth period is in the beginning of 1980’s, related with the liberalization of Turkish economy. In the last decade, Istanbul has experienced another major growth period, this time propelled by the integration of Turkish economy to the global markets. Most of the existing buildings as well as urban textures are not suitable anymore for a city and its inhabitants that have experienced a major economic revival. Thus, there are plans beginning to be implemented that are focusing on the transformation of the existing building stock. This paper presents and discusses strategies that are currently employed in Istanbul that are dealing with the transformation of the urban structure en masse.

Introduction

Istanbul has lived through two major growth spurts during 20th century that have determined its urban shape. Until 1950 Turkish economy was mostly based on agriculture. Industry was small, local and limited in scope. At the 1950 census Istanbul had a population of 983,000, showing a drop of 7% from its population at the 1897 census, when the city was a regional center for commerce, trade and banking. The city had lost that quality as a result of drastic changes in the region after the wars as well as closing up to the outside world economically and ideologically.

Figure 1. Population of Istanbul - Census numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>year</th>
<th>1860</th>
<th>1885</th>
<th>1890</th>
<th>1897</th>
<th>1901</th>
<th>1914</th>
<th>1927</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>population</td>
<td>715,000</td>
<td>873,570</td>
<td>874,000</td>
<td>1,059,000</td>
<td>942,900</td>
<td>909,978</td>
<td>680,857</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>population</td>
<td>741,148</td>
<td>793,949</td>
<td>860,558</td>
<td>983,041</td>
<td>1,268,771</td>
<td>1,466,535</td>
<td>1,742,978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>population</td>
<td>2,132,407</td>
<td>2,547,364</td>
<td>2,772,708</td>
<td>5,475,982</td>
<td>6,629,431</td>
<td>8,803,468</td>
<td>13,120,596</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
First growth period 1950 - 1960

After the first open multi-party elections at 1950 the government has changed hands and liberal Democrat Party came to office. Liberal reforms are introduced immediately opening up Turkish economy to the global markets. Also new international collaborations such as becoming a member to NATO at 1952 is an indicator of the ideological change that is occurring. A new wave of industrialization started, also with the aid of foreign investments and credits. Istanbul was the first city that to require higher numbers of labor in close vicinity to the new industrial areas. Thus, squatter settlements (gecekondu in Turkish refers to the mode of construction, not the act of squatting) grew as a new phenomenon for the city that are to define Istanbul’s demographics and urban landscape for the coming years (For a detailed analysis of the early squatter settlements in Istanbul focusing on their spatial, social and cultural aspects refer to: Özsoy 1994; Karpat 2009, Keleş 2010). These first generations of squatter buildings were built on occupied publicly owned land. They are also quickly transformed from single story simple structures into multiple story masonry or reinforced concrete structures, becoming established neighborhoods. In retrospective, it can be speculated that squatter areas have been simple and efficient solutions to the enormous housing problem occurring as a result of industrialization. Public has spent only on infrastructure to accompany huge numbers of new citizens. Zeytinburnu and Gültepe are examples of early squatter areas that come into existence to supply workforce to the industrial areas in their vicinity. Owners in these areas have transformed the settlements through private sector mechanisms. These transformations have been enabled by partial or full legitimization of their legal status, public has granted ownership of the land to their occupants. These early squatter neighborhoods are well established today and are vibrant parts of the city. Also the demographics of these areas have changed. Inhabitants of these areas mostly work in the service sectors today (Güvenç 2010). The main problem in such areas today is twofold: quality of buildings and quality of the urban pattern. The quality of buildings in these areas is very low, both in terms of their structures and the quality of construction. They do not comply with the existing codes about structures of buildings, making them very vulnerable in the expected Istanbul earthquake. They also do not comply with new standards of thermal insulation, resulting in very high carbon emissions. Due to unplanned and incremental growth, urban qualities are also very low. These areas, once at the fringes of Istanbul, find themselves today at or near the new financial and recreational centers of the city through current developments. These areas are becoming strong targets for urban transformation.

Second growth period 1980 - 1985

The second phase of industrialization in Turkey began around 1980's. After 1983 elections a liberal party has come to power and started another wave of economic and political reforms. Existing preservationist monitory system is replaced by a liberal economic system. State-directed economic system was opened up to to the outside world, leading up to the signing of a customs union with European Union in 1996. Bureaucratic barriers upon local and foreign investments were removed. Also a series of privatizations of state-run industries followed. As a result, Turkish economy started to grow. This very striking development can be seen in the population growth of Istanbul, the city is doubled in size within 5 years: at the 1980 census the population is 2.7 millions reaching 5.4 millions at the 1985 census.

The enormous demand for low-cost housing in Istanbul is dealt with by the private sector. This time partly due to the lack of potential areas for squatter settlement owned by the state, the new settlements developed in a different fashion to previous squatter settlements. This time, private owners of agricultural land around the fringes of the city divided their land into subdivisions and sold them to people to build their own houses. Due to the lack of finances, the plots in these subdivisions were very narrow and small. The buildings that are built from the beginning on have been multi-story houses that fill up almost the whole area of the plot. Thus, a very dense urban structure has been created. Within a few years, these areas have been legitimized through political pressures. These new informal housing
areas, generally referred to as semi-squatter neighborhoods, are different in comparison to earlier informal housing developments. The buildings are more substantial from the beginning on and in most cases they do not grow incrementally. Their inhabitants are involved in a number of different sectors of the economy. Finally, from the beginning on these developments are at least partially aimed at making profit through land speculation (For a detailed analysis of spatial characteristics of semi-squatter buildings refer to: Turgut et al, 1996).

**Third growth period 2000 - 2005**

The most recent economic boom in Turkey has occurred between 2000 and 2009. The growth of Istanbul this time around has been much more planned and mostly through formal housing settlements developed by both the public and private sectors en masse. The population increase is as substantial as the previous ones, within ten years the city has grown from 8.8 million to 13 million. This period also marks the full integration of Turkish economy to global markets. Income per capita has continued to increase. At the same time, there have been substantial improvements in the substructure and systems of the city. This economic boom partially led by the construction industry almost necessitated an improvement of earlier squatter areas of all periods as well as in-city slum areas. The constant threat of a major earthquake to hit the city is also another pressure element that makes the transformation of the existing urban structure a necessity. Thus, there are a number of urban transformation projects in Istanbul as well as other parts of Turkey being implemented or planned.

**Figure 2. Change of GDP at purchasing power parity per capita in Turkey**

|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|

Urban transformation projects will be discussed in two categories: projects about transformation of urban slums and projects about transformation of semi-squatter areas.

**Figure 3. Transformation project areas that are discussed and their relative locations in Istanbul**
Transformation of inner-city slums

Deterioration of inner city areas occurs in many parts of the world, although their reasons may differ. In the last half century a number of inner city areas in Istanbul that were once established middle class neighborhoods have come fallen into disrepair. Once this deterioration of structures and urban systems begins, a downward spiral of urban quality occurs: with time poorer and poorer inhabitants move in these areas who cannot spend to improve building conditions and there is more deterioration (Güvenç, 2009. In Istanbul there are a number of inner city slum areas that have experiencing different fates. We will look at four areas that are undergoing urban transformation processes.

Galata

Once a fashionable neighborhood very close to the financial and banking center of 19th century Istanbul, Galata has fallen into disrepair because of a number of reasons. At the beginning of 1990's its building stock was falling down. The area was dominated by small scale production workshops creating congestion, and leaving the area deserted at nights. Its inhabitants were mostly marginal and very poor (Saglamer et al, 1995). With a growing interest in inner-city historic areas by the young and new professionals as well as the European inhabitants of the city, houses and buildings in Galata started to change hands at the beginning of 1990's. Due to the extremely low property prices at the time, people who dared to live in such a problematic neighborhood were able to buy flats or even buildings and transformation of buildings by owners had started. At this stage there were few entrepeneurs or companies that came into the market for investment purposes. This was a slow process, however on a piecemeal basis, a large number of buildings have been transformed within ten years.

At the beginning of 2000 partially connected with Istanbul becoming a very popular destination of international tourism, new cafes, clubs and hotels were opened in the area together with an explosion of property prices. In the last decade small developers as well as international investors have transformed many buildings in the area (For an example of foreign investment in Galata see Kamondo Apartments, Tugay, Tugay 2007). Currently large parts have been transformed and a new population inhabits the area. The transformation of Galata is not complete, since the area is rather large, so we are
looking into an unfinished process. It seems as a typical example of urban gentrification, which has occurred without large-scale public or private intervention. However, there are parts of Galata that are inhabited by lower-middle class families having family ties to each other and keeping their neighborhood spirit. On the positive side, since mostly individual owners transformed the buildings over a longer period, the area preserves a heterogeneous character. In most cases the buildings are renovated by preserving the spatial characteristics of the original architecture. The area that was once a center for small-scale production has been restored to its original residential use.

Tarlabasi

After the opening of Tarlabasi Boulevard at 1986, the area has been disconnected from its natural context. At that time the area was already run down and was housing lower-middle class families. The area was very quickly marginalized and became a habitat for the very low-income people who at times live in extremely crowded spaces. The area also started to be associated with crime so overall deterioration accelerated.

Figure 5. Demolitions to open up Tarlabasi Boulevard, 1985

Many illegal immigrants working on informal and marginal sectors live in the area. On the other hand, at the same time Beyoglu area was going through a process of renewal by becoming a center for nightlife. Currently Beyoglu has clubs, cafes restaurants that supply entertainment of all sorts and levels. Property prices have risen significantly in the area. However, all that renewal and revitalization of Beyoglu did not change much for Tarlabasi, the extreme conditions of urban poverty and physical deterioration continued. On the other hand, the proximity of the area to Beyoglu creates a large potential, thus the environment for a large-scale intervention existed. At the meantime, a law specifically designed to regulate transformation of larger scale urban areas has passed in 2005 and established the legal background. Istanbul Municipality and Beyoglu Municipality initiated the intervention in Tarlabasi, but since the area in question is vast, it is difficult for the public to finance the process of renewing hundreds of buildings. Thus, private sector was invited to transform a total of 9 building blocks and preliminary projects are designed. Once this project is executed, it is believed that private owners in the vicinity will have the economic motivation to renew individual buildings. The main principle of the transformation is to increase the overall quality of the area by a large-scale transformation that is based on renewing building blocks not individual buildings. The original buildings will be demolished and the facades of historical ones will be rebuilt. The original buildings are rather narrow, so in the new projects the spatial characteristics and organization of originals are not preserved in order to enable larger units.
The economic model is based on value-increase. According to the deal between Istanbul Municipality and the developing company, the owners will be given 55% of the area they own prior to transformation. The current and projected values of the properties are calculated; the owners are presented with a priority to buy into the project if they can afford to pay the difference amount. The project has attracted major public criticism and resistance mainly because of concerns over the close relationship of the developer company with the government. Chamber of Architects insists that there is no public benefit in the project and should be stopped. Public criticism also stresses that the project will result in a complete gentrification of the area. There is also criticism about the architecture and urban design, based on the principles of joining plots, demolishing of original buildings and building replica facades. On the other hand it is hard to imagine another method of transformation in this area given the marginal conditions of buildings as well as its inhabitants without major public investment. The implementation is about to begin and major protests are expected to occur.
Figure 7. A redesigned building block and unification of smaller plots to create larger living units

Figure 8. 
Existing street in Tarlabasi  
Same street after transformation as presented by the designers

Fener - Balat – Ayvansaray

A transformation project similar to Tarlabasi is proceeding in Fener – Balat and Ayvansaray areas. These areas are three interconnected neighborhoods along the southern shore of the Golden Horn. They have experienced demographic changes similar to Galata and Tarlabasi over the years, middle-class inhabitants leaving and poorer families immigrating to Istanbul moving in. However, unlike Galata and Tarlabasi the area never lost its neighborhood and community qualities inspite of the declining urban conditions. As it has been the case in Galata over the last two decades, there has been individual renewal and restoration projects by individual investors. Since the area hosts the seat of the
Greek Orthodox Patriarch, it has always been a tourist destination. Thus there were buildings in the area renovated as hotels as well. In the area a renovation program supported by UNESCO started in 1999 and invested a total of 7 million € until 2010.

Figure 9. Extent of Fener – Balat – Ayvansaray urban transformation project

The same firm that is undertaking Tarlabasi transformation is responsible for Fener - Balat and Ayvansaray project, so the project follows similar mechanisms. In this case the difference is the buildings that have already being renovated by individuals or by the UNESCO program are to be kept as they are. The project has raised more criticism and protest from the community since it is already a vibrant urban area with strong ties. The major concern of the inhabitants is based on possible gentrification and loss of the neighborhood character. After the announcement of the project, property prices in the area started to increase, building up higher expectations for profit. The inhabitants have formed an NGO to protect their rights and struggle with the Fatih Municipality to stop the project.

Figure 10. Typical Balat street and protesting poster against transformation
Sulukule

Sulukule is the most controversial of all urban transformation projects in Istanbul. A Romani (Anatolian Gypsies) community inhabited the area located just near to a part of the city walls of Istanbul. It is believed that Romani people have lived in this area since Byzantine times (Porter, 2009). The buildings in the area were less (unlike Galata and Tarlabasi areas) substantial with some temporary structures. The area was famous for its underground and marginal nightlife, attracting visitors from Istanbul as well as other cities. The area has great touristic and commercial potential because of its proximity to major historic landmarks. The project was initiated and financed by Fatih Municipality, with the aim of creating an ‘Ottoman Style’ neighborhood. The area has been cleared off from its inhabitants and all buildings are demolished in spite of the protests during 2010. The original inhabitants who were mostly squatters in the area are re-located into fringe locations in the outskirts of Istanbul. The project has drawn major criticism from the public. Main reason for criticism was the complete gentrification of the area. The opponents of the project claim that the project is undertaken not only as a gentrification project but also as an urban cleansing based on ethnicity and social-economic status, since the inhabitants of the area were exclusively of Romani backgrounds. The architectural design consists of repetitive blocks, completely ignoring an inner city urban pattern. Fatih Municipality is not very open concerning the design, there is very little information available. On the other hand, the area had social problems related with poverty. The municipality presents problems such as crime, drug trafficking, and under-age prostitution as justifications for undertaking the project (Porter, 2007).

Figure 11. Sulukule at 1966 and 2010

Figure 12. Sulukule being demolished at 2010 and as it will look after transformation as presented by designers
Transformation of previous squatter areas

‘Support’ initiative – Esenler case

Today Esenler is a large city district with a population of 460,000. Esenler has been transformed from a small village to a large city district during 1980’s. The construction of the Trans-European Highway through the area initiated a large scale development. The development of the area is fed by the enormous immigration process into Istanbul during 1980’s. From the beginning on, the inhabitants of the area are partially working class and mostly lower-middle class families. The ownership was about 50% in the area in a 1994 survey (Sağlamet al, 1994). The major urban problem from the beginning is the lack of open spaces within the district as well as individual building blocks. Building blocks are very narrow, back sides of many buildings are only a few meters away. Thus there is not enough space to allow air flow and light. Densities are also rather high; the area has an average of 4.0 – 4.5 floor area ratio. The quality of construction is another major problem in the area. The structures of buildings are exclusively reinforced concrete of a poor quality, a number of them built incrementally over the years. The current conditions of the buildings are poor as a result of a lack of maintenance over the years combined with lower quality materials. Esenler is one of the areas expected to be hit hardly by a future Istanbul earthquake. On the other hand, the economic means of the inhabitants of the area improved during the economic boom period of 2000-2010, resulting in a demand of better urban standards, increasing the need for transformation.

Figure 13. Change of population of Esenler Municipality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>population</td>
<td>6,000</td>
<td>8,500</td>
<td>32,000</td>
<td>80,000</td>
<td>135,000</td>
<td>223,000</td>
<td>394,000</td>
<td>459,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An urban transformation project in Esenler is being discussed as part of a transformation program initiative, ‘Support’ led by planner Faruk Göksu. The program aims to develop a model to be implemented in various areas that have similar densities, problems and demographic profiles and are in need of transformation. Esenler urban transformation concept project developed by the authors is part of this initiative. There are two main challenges for this the initiative: economic and spatial. The owners of buildings in Esenler do not have the economic resources required to demolish their buildings and rebuild with higher standards. Even if they could, the problem of lack of adequate public spaces and lack of light and air as a result of high densities cannot be solved within the given urban pattern. Thus, the main purpose of the initiative is to create solutions to address both economic and spatial issues.

Figure 14. Esenler at 1982 and 2010
The model is based on giving bonuses to people who are willing to take part in the project and transforming larger areas through private sector dynamics. There are bonuses for a number of design decisions that are beneficial for the public: creating wider setbacks, opening public spaces within the building blocks, providing parking spaces all have a certain bonus. Thus, the provision of public spaces and creating a better urban pattern benefiting everybody in the area becomes beneficial for the private developer. If the design provides these urban benefits, floor area ratio will be increased by the relevant bonus. The model is being developed in a number of locations by a number of designers and will be presented to the public at the end of 2011. The model is innovative and presents an opportunity to transform large areas of the town. The model is based on agreement and mutual benefit. Through a
number of steps, the inhabitants of the area are explained the principles of the project and then brought together with local authorities and potential developers. It is a long process with no guarantee of success or implementation; however public support is certain because of the participatory nature of the model. The drawback of the model is that urban densities that are already very high in the areas and they will be increased.

Figure 17. Esenler ‘Support’ project, conceptual phases: 1: clean slate; 2: regular building blocks, 3: opening up public space, 4: relating to irregular heights in the area

**Evaluation**

In Istanbul, the word ‘urban transformation’ is becoming quickly synonymous with gentrification and political corruption in the eyes of the public. The projects that have already started are only the tip of the iceberg, in the coming decade the number and extent of those projects will increase, mainly because a number of reasons:

After the extensive building period between 2000-2010 empty land that is economically viable to be developed is decreasing;

Areas such as Esenler that were at the outskirts of the city once have become strategic locations due to the expansion of Istanbul they have the potential for growth. However their urban and building standards are very low, thus are in urgent need of transformation.

The expected earthquake of Istanbul will hit areas such as Esenler very hard due to the lower quality of construction.

Inner city areas that have been neglected over the second half of 20th century have become fashionable again and are under great pressure for redevelopment. Larger developers and municipalities have common interests in large-scale transformation projects, economic for developers and political for the latter.
Istanbul is becoming a regional center of economy and also is connected to the world property markets more and more. The local and national government are willing to turn this positive change into projects that will reshape the city.

There are problems that arise from implementation of en-masse urban transformation projects. However their solutions are to be discovered in Istanbul.

**Possible gentrification.** Two modes of urban transformation that has been exemplified here, individual developers’ incremental projects as in Galata and en-masse transformation such as in Sulukule are both resulting in gentrification, however of different degrees. Without careful public interference, private initiatives as well as government led projects both lead to a complete change of inhabitants as well as urban character. In a city such as Istanbul that are benefiting from enormous economic boom periods after decades of stagnation and relative poverty, gentrification may be seen as a lesser evil in the eyes of the public (Kennedy, Leonard 2001). Thus it can be justified by local or national authorities by the higher quality urban environments that are created. Even protests against projects may damper through the great economic values that are generated.

**Homogenous Architecture.** Even handled with best intentions and professional care, larger areas designed by single designers or groups of designers lack the heterogeneity of urban neighborhoods. This problem is attacked by developers by inviting a number of architectural groups; however the problem persists at times exaggerated by the economic concerns of developers.

**Homogenous Urban Environments.** Neighborhoods that are partially transformed such as Galata present problems of not only of a new gentry, but also a homogenous urban usage. Such areas quickly become centers for nightlife and get invaded by cafes, restaurants, boutiques. Thus they become areas that mostly attract tourists and lose the sense of a real urban neighborhood.

**Extreme densities.** In the case of sensitive models such as ‘Support’, there is the need to increase urban densities in order to create a viable economic model without relocating the original inhabitants. In the case of already very high densities such as Esenler neighborhood, higher densities add to the pressure upon infrastructure, roads and public amenities.

**No interest by developers.** In the case of models such as ‘Support’ it can be difficult to attract developers since the areas in urgent need of transformation are not primary targets for higher economic gain in the city.

**Transparency.** Projects that are especially controversial such as Sulukule tend to be not transparent to lessen public reaction, they are hastily implemented. Thus their developers as well as designers are mostly connected to the government.
References


