HOUSING AND SPATIAL EXCLUSION IN TRANSFORMING HISTORIC URBAN CENTRES, RE-READING TARLABAŞI

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“Is the city a product to be sold on the tourism market and/or a location in which to invest money? Or is the city a place to live, where people can express themselves, even if it is in terms of resistance to, rather than rejoicing in, the dominant culture?”

INTRODUCTION

Globalization leads to social inequality and a lack of services in present-day cities, consequently, there appears the concept of “Urban Slum Areas”. This concept contains socio-economical and socio-cultural factors in addition to physical deterioration. The people called “urban poor” living in the slum areas of the city centres have to work in marginal sectors and live in the poor districts which have no infrastructure services. Within this neo-liberal globalized context urban centers are becoming key issues that are subject to new processes of transformation as they adapt to attract capital and investment.

In Turkey, after the 1950s, rapid urbanization and an increase in immigration movements directed towards the cities from other parts of the country led to two different situations: first, the establishment of shanty (gecekondu) houses in governmental areas, secondly, the occupation of historical house areas in the centre of the cities. After the 1990s, because of the geographical inequality of income distribution and the obligatory migration from the East and Southeast of Turkey, some districts close to the centre of big cities started to be transformed into slum areas. The migrants coming from different geographic areas and cultures of Turkey are usually poor people. They have to leave their homes because of the obligatory migration and live in the slum areas of cities which are the most vulnerable areas to social exclusion processes. People living in these areas have to struggle with economic difficulties in addition to cultural conflicts; consequently, they are excluded from the community and city life.

Istanbul is the largest and most urbanized city of Turkey, with a heritage dating back to the old civilizations of Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman. Some districts in Istanbul have striking environmental, economical and psychosocial problems and irregular building types caused by rapid urbanization and industrialization, bringing to the surface a multi-layered and multi-cultural structure. The different city layers and the different people living on them present a large contrast. It is a city of immigrants where more than 60 % of the population was born outside of Istanbul, and the rate of rural-urban migration is at 500,000 per year. The migration from rural to urban has reshaped the city.
New urban policies appear to be guided by the vision of the city as the centre of international finance, services and tourism, which are mainly based on encouraging the development of the real-estate and construction sectors by increasing the urban rents. As a result, the importance of urban areas that have a high rent-gaining potential has increased, resulting in a growing pressure on especially informally built squatter housing areas as well as the historic urban centres populated by the urban poor.3

In the 2000s, the authorities started to say that urban regeneration/ transformation was needed in squatter housing and in the historic districts which were invaded by the urban poor. Many laws were enacted to make these transformations happen and the justifications for these laws were “organized and planned development” or the danger of earthquakes, however, it is seen that the legal framework for the realization of individual urban regeneration projects is attempted to be created against the idea of comprehensive planning and urbanization.4 Areas that were declared as urban regeneration areas are both historic and squatter housing districts that are now becoming valuable urban district and beginning to host a new middle class population.

THE EVOLUTION OF TARLABAŞI-SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
Tarlabaşı is surrounded by Taksim Square and Gezi Park to the East, Tarlabaşı Boulevard to the South, Kasımpaşa and Golden Horn to the West, Dolapdere Street to the North, and its urban life began in the second half of the 19th century. Tarlabaşı, which has undergone social, economic, cultural and spatial changes since the 1950’s, is a significant part of Istanbul because of its close location to the city centre, Beyoğlu, its historical building reserve, its multicultural social structure, and its different public space usages.

The 19th century Beyoğlu (Pera) was a commercial and cultural center in Istanbul, with quality housing, streets, theaters and embassies. This area developed as a residential and commercial centre for foreigners and non-Muslim Ottoman subjects, contrary to the older parts of the city. Within Beyoğlu, Tarlabası was a residential area of the middle and lower-middle classes and, until the 1960s and 1970s, a significant part of its population was non-Muslim.

Subsequent to the Republic, while Embassies moving to Ankara were removing business opportunities for the residents, the fixed property belonging to non-Muslims changed hands in 1943 after the introduction of the Property Tax. Tarlabası got its share of the migration wave affecting the whole country by the 6-7th September Events in 1955. While public properties and historical places were being invaded in cities receiving significant migration, Tarlabası buildings, which had been abandoned due to the events having been overcome over and over, began to be hired as cheap residential by the opportunists. Its proximity to city centre, entertainment and trade centres, the presence of buildings which could be occupied and the property situation of the district lead to fact that Tarlabası became the first preferable place by the migrants coming from several regions of Turkey. From that period
onwards much of its residents were replaced by rural migrants from central Anatolia in a period of rapid urbanization that actually began in the 1950s.

In the 1980s, with rapid population increases in the cities, the density of building in the city centres and surrounding areas increased; the arrival of the services sector in the city centres in relation to improvements in the services sector and many other factors that should be understood together resulted in the middle class choosing areas close to urban centres for settlement. In the second half of the 1980’s, 350 buildings were destroyed in order to enlarge Tarlabası Street and turn into it a boulevard. At this time, Tarlabası was separated physically from Beyoğlu, moreover, the effects of the obligatory migration made the economic, social and spatial differences increase at the district. Tarlabası has witnessed major shifts recently such as the displacement of its population, the construction of a boulevard which disrupts its spatial linkage with the rest of the city, together with demolitions in various neighborhoods. As a result of this the area has entered a process of deterioration and has change in terms of its socioeconomic and physical conditions.

Enli and Dinçer⁵ analysed Tarlabası population 125 with respect to the arrival period of the migrants and they state that 51% of the total households arrived before the 1990s, whom they call “old migrants”; 27% came after 1990 whom they call “new migrants”. The ones born in Istanbul constitute 18% of the total households, whereas “special groups” constituted by “international migrants, the ones who identify themselves as travesties, prostitutes, drug addicts, etc.” constitute 4% of the households.

Our research was conducted in 2007 in the Tarlabası, which has mostly old and poor buildings left from 19th century, and the following results has been obtained:⁶

- The educational level of the habiants is found very low, (40% primary school, 22% secondary, 17% high school, 4% university, 17% unschooled)
- Most of the people are living in temporary settlements, (62% 1-5 year, 33% 6-10 year, 5% +11 year)
- Approximately half of the people are retired or unemployed, (32% unemployed, 21% craft, 8% student, 28% self-employment, 11% retired)
- Most of the people are not happy about living there and said that the first problem of the district is their security.

RE-READING TARLABAŞI

Tarlabaşı is seen as a problematic area, with respect to both the physical and social environment. Since the 1990’s, many areas that have been through similar changes have been defined as slums. As noted above, Tarlabası is inhabited by the most disadvantaged segments of the, including Kurdish people from the southeast, Romans, foreign immigrants as well as gay and transsexual communities. In this district, the people either work in the service sector in the touristic places nearby with very low salaries, or as street vendors selling food produced in small workshops.⁷
In the year 2005, the article of the law 5366 regarding the “Renewal and Protection of Aging Historical and Cultural Immobile Entities and Their Use by Sustenance” made a priority for the transformation and rehabilitation of city areas in Turkey. According to this law, which enables regeneration in historic areas, parts of Tarlabası were declared “urban renewal” areas. The intention was to convert the district into a place of hotels, shopping spaces and quality residences. It is now experiencing a physical and social transformation based on purely economic motivations and ending with gentrification and spatial exclusion – all in line with the regulations of local and central authorities.

Beyoğlu Municipality has already envisioned renewing Tarlabası, as it had already become visible that the economic value of Beyoğlu increased, and it became a major point of economic and cultural attraction in the city. Restoration and renewal studies are being done at total 269 pcs parcels, 210 of which are registered in the field of 20 thousand square meter on 9 city blocks of Tarlabası throughout Project. Facade of the buildings will be protected while getting small historical houses with 50-100 square meter-sizes into one block by combining in 5-10 groups. The functions across the field is composed of 52 % dwelling area, 12 % trade, 17 %tourism and 14% offices. Seven local architectural firms have been subcontracted by the development company to prepare projects according to the proposed plan to transform the area into a mixed-use development with commercial centres, luxury residences, offices and hotels.
As for the peculiar targets of the renewal plans at large and of the first stage pilot project proposal in specific, they can be listed as follows by the company:

- Physical renewal
- Economic revival
- Social development

As an umbrella target, attracting capital investment to Tarlabası has been inserted as the crucial one to realize the targets above. Tourism, residence and commerce are determined as the main functions for the renewal areas. While developing hotels, residences, shopping centres, and student dormitories etc. is targeted for the commercial and cultural revitalization of the area, small scale manufacturing facilities are envisioned to be transferred from the area.

Dincer bring five main criticisms to these projects:

- Speculative Upturn,
- Misuse of expropriation powers,
- Displacement,
- Lack of participation,
- The loss of historic identity.

The renewal project in Tarlabası is designed in such a way that all the buildings are planned to be demolished and reconstructed. Although the title of the law encompasses the phrase ‘Protection of Deteriorated Historic and Cultural Heritage,’ what is in practice regarded as ‘protection’ is bulldozing and reconstructing—or imitating— the original facades. In other words, it is nothing but ‘renewal under the guise of protection.’

Once these impacts are evaluated in relation to gentrification, the study argues that the renewal process that has been experiencing in Tarlabası is preparing the infrastructure for gentrification in the district as the result of the municipal initiative. Urban renewal plans formed by the municipality do not include any social mechanisms, measures and programs to prevent the displacement of the low-income and marginal groups living in Tarlabası in this process. By reason of this new renewal policy leaves the low-income groups living in this district to face the very tangible problem of displacement.

According to Hamnett’s opinion, gentrification is simultaneously a physical, economic, social and cultural phenomenon. Therefore it does not only mean the organisation of physical environment and infrastructure, but also the improvement of the community’s education and training, culture and socio-economic situation.
CONCLUSION

As mentioned above, Tarlabası has been ignored and allowed to transform into a slum area for the sake of daily politics and rental interests and hoped that this transformation can possibly legalise the attempts of gentrification. The most important point in that process is that the slum areas considered as annuity areas. If the renewal projects are launched in this way, the eventuality for gentrification to take place in Tarlabası may easily occur. This is a totally an antidemocratic approach ignoring the scientific and professional knowledge, user needs, participation and the musts of urban life.

As a result; spatial dimensions of exclusion in the region are extremely poor physical living conditions in which Tarlabası itself, not only as a spatial, social, cultural and economic life in a quick be slummed of process. The solution is; open and reasonable approach using scientific knowledge, embracing the user needs, participation, simply the musts of urban life.

ENDNOTES

3 Asuman, Turkun and Besime, Sen. "Radical Transformations in Historic Urban Centres and Squatter Housing Neighbourhoods in Istanbul", (paper draft copy for RC21 Congress, 2009 Inequality, Inclusion and the Sense of Belonging, 2009, 1)
8 Turkun, Sen, Radical Transformations, 29.
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