

# Istanbul Version 2.0: The Struggle between Modernisation and Historical Heritage The Case of Sulukule

Ece Özden PAK, Evrim YILMAZ\*

Urban Planning Department, Istanbul Technical University, Turkey

## Abstract

*Istanbul has become a construction site by the beginning of 1990s following a dramatic change in policies on housing and urbanization policies. While the new middle class was invading city centre, urban poor was evicted by force from their habitats due to a rapid increase in land prices. Therefore, by the time the heart of Istanbul, the historical peninsula, where many ethnic groups have been living, has lost its diversity and become more homogeneous. As an outcome of six years of experience, this paper discusses the results of on-going urban policies and their impacts on historical neighbourhoods in the last 15 years. It takes Sulukule as a case study to illustrate.*

*Sulukule, has been a place for the urban poor including the Roma minority since the beginning of 11th century. Today, behind the Byzantium City Walls in a gated community, there is a settlement of the new middle class who want to be in the city centre in order to access the benefits of it, despite it being a sterile place. As a result of long-term intimidation policies, the inhabitants of Sulukule have faced deprivation. Hence, instead of questioning socio-economic problems, Sulukule Renewal Project not only increased urban segregation but also broke the social networks.*

*This paper argues that cultural diversity and historical patterns can act as the ability to cope with gentrification. They are also accepted as the sources of sustainable urban renewal. The paper uses the evaluation of Sulukule Renewal Project through social segregation and forced eviction to do this. Urban development and the changes in socio-economic structure and physical space of six years of the renewal project are examined.*

**Keywords:** *Istanbul, Urban Renewal, Gentrification, Participatory Planning, Cultural Diversity, Spatial Reproduction of Urban Poverty, Urbanization Policies.*

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\*Corresponding Author: e-mail - [evrimg@gmail.com](mailto:evrimg@gmail.com)

## Introduction

Urban renewal can be viewed as a process, generally associated with government, in varying degrees of re-development projects of urban areas to moderate population and built-up spaces. The objective of urban renewal projects is to improve socio-economic structure while tackling problems of the existing built environment (Behar and Islam, 2006; Akkar, 2006). The key aspect of sustainable renewal implementation is to engage with participatory methods in order to identify critical problems, joint priorities, elaboration and adoption of socio-economic development strategies. As stated by Olthelen (1999), participatory planning is the initial step in the definition of a common agenda for development by a local community and an external entity or entities. Over the period, this initial step is expected to evolve for the parties concerned towards a self-sustaining development planning process at the local level (Thomas and Bendapudi, 2003).

Interestingly, the question how Istanbul's local government has been dealing with urban renewal demonstrates that they ignore the local needs. Due to this reason, Sulukule Platform emerged in 2007. Urban activists collected and analysed data by using participatory approaches and methods which emphasized local needs with the purpose of empowering local people to make their own appraisal. A relationship of mutual trust was built up and an alternative planning process started as a reaction against the local municipality's renewal project. With regard to participatory planning steps; people were mobilized, a comprehensive local database was generated for every local planning level. Further, a development report was prepared which included the information about the local economic, social and geographical structure, and participation meetings were held in the neighbourhood to prepare a project that defines the local objectives clearly (Thomas and Bendapudi, 2003).

In parallel with the studies above mentioned, various research methods were used to examine the issues. Historical texts, original plans, former and current studies, and also laws with the municipality's renewal plan were reviewed for the transformation and development of the area. The morphologic structure and social networks were analysed on-site. Again as on-site analysis; listed buildings and trees, to-be listed buildings and houses with the courtyards were determined and socio-economic structure with expectations of Roma community were detected via field surveys which had generated the basic frame of the alternative plan. All the data were adapted in design proposals which aimed to enhance the socio-economic structure and physical space for Roma people.

This paper aims to highlight reflections of urban renewal on historical urban patterns that were ignored by investors and local governments. These are the unique patterns, which are characterized by low-income residents and having Roma culture who faced with gentrification. Sulukule settlement of Istanbul is an example that represents one of the most extreme cases of renewal. In Sulukule Renewal Project, locals were forced to experience eviction which led to awaken urban activism. This paper outlines urban renewal policies in Turkey over Sulukule case and discusses how this context negatively and/or positively influences the dynamics of sustainable renewal.

## Reproduction of Istanbul's Urban Space in Neo-Liberal Era

A study of urban renewal cannot be done without paying attention to the wider urban policy context in which the observed local transformations are embedded. Turkey became a Neo-liberal government in 1982. The crisis in the 1970s raised the importance of ensuring economic stability. In order to provide this, privatisation was seen as the main tool by the central government (Dinçer, 2011). Temizel (2007) argues that there are three phases of neo-liberal reconfiguration in Turkey which are the liberalization phase in the 1980s, the implementation of reforms in 1990's, and configuration of a new market-friendly, coordinating state in 2000's.

In 1980's, the replacement of public investment by a free market mechanism had spatial impacts such as the neglect of sectorial planning, abandonment of historical city centres, and amnesty for unplanned developed sites of squatters. In the second phase, the local authority power of privatising properties was centralised to provide exceptional development permission in valuable city centres. In the last phase, the government changed its role from the organiser to the re-developer of inner city deprived areas, especially in support of the property market with public-private partnerships (Dinçer: 2011). Türkün describes this process as the 'growing power of the urban coalition' between central government, local authorities and state institutions (Türkün: 2011). This transformation has been described by Harvey (1989) as a shift from urban 'managerialism' towards 'entrepreneurialism' and has given rise to a growing literature on neoliberal city politics.

In order to do this, there had been many changes in regulations related with urban regeneration which were mainly focusing on property ownerships for demolition and re-construction of neighbourhoods. Urban policy was introduced to Turkey in 1996 at the Habitat II Conference as a solution to urban renewal and urban decline which were only seen as an economic issue. In 2004 and 2005, several amendments were made in municipal laws to foster the municipality's authority in urban policies and decentralize planning power (Bartu and Kırılı: 2007, Özden: 2008). In June 2005, the Turkish Parliament passed Law 5366 for Renovation, Protection, Cherishing and Use of Worn Historical and Cultural Immovable Properties (*Yıpranan Tarihi ve Kültürel Tasınmaz Varlıkların Yenilenerek Korunması ve Yasatılarak Kullanılması Hakkında Kanun*), which became the main legal background for urban regeneration in Turkey. The law authorized municipalities to implement large scale urban regeneration projects with the right of expropriation in deteriorated historic areas and zones of degeneration with the extensive power (Uysal: 2009). In this regard, new renewal sites are designated with the hand of municipalities in order to build public housing estates, conserve historical and cultural heritage and take precautions against earthquake risks with the aim of increasing marketing policies (Karahan: 2011, Uysal: 2009).

As a matter of fact, the negative socio-economic and politico-economic impacts of focusing physical development and relocation with the aim of increasing urban land rents had been strictly criticized by urban activists, including a wide variety of professions such as urban planners, architects, art historians, photographers, musicians, sociologists, human rights advocacy groups and so on (Karahan: 2011). On the other hand there were oppositions by some of the local inhabitants who are evicted from their neighbourhoods with the support of urban activists against new renewal sites.

To understand this more clearly, it is possible to take a closer look at Istanbul's transformation after 2000. There has been many "renewal projects" implemented by the government in recent years throughout the Historical Peninsula by creating a contradiction with the sustainability of the cultural identity of Istanbul. In this process, the physical and symbolic settlements of Istanbul (including the public spaces) have experienced conservative, restoration and renewal practices. The owners of the historic town centre were trying to be re-organised as upper-middle and/or upper income elementary families with the help of the renewal projects that were developed by the local government under the context of the Law 5366. The case of Sulukule differs from the other renewal areas as being a settlement where the Roma minority who constitute an ethnic group of the community is the majority property owners or tenants. Considering that the "New Sulukule" is the entrance of Historical Peninsula, it is clear that the settlement has been planned as an appropriate spatial spot for the new middle-income families that are foreseen to live in the city centre.

### **The Case of Sulukule**

Sulukule was one of the oldest settlements within the borders of Neslişah and Hatice Sultan neighbourhoods located adjacent to the city walls in Fatih District. After the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the very same spot was the habitat for Roma people till 2009. It was commemorated with the entertainment houses, which had an important role in the entertainment life of the city, managed by the Roma people. Due to the closure of the entertainment houses in 1990s which were providing the livelihood to many families, the main economic activity of the region was changed and the dilapidation process of the settlement commenced. Thus the settlement turned into a site linked with the criminal elements like drugs, shootings, prostitution, and theft and became a "dangerous place to be after dark". Sulukule is the very first example of declared and implemented projects in the scope of Renewal Law (Law no. 5366) enacted in 2005. The legal framework of the renewal process for the settlement was completed in 2005 and the implementation process began in 2006. The destruction of the last house was in 2009 and the construction process is almost completed today. Except that 2 out of 317 families that were forced to move to Tasoluk which is 40 km. away from Sulukule, moved back to Historical Peninsula or close proximity to their old neighbourhood like Ayvansaray, Balat and Karagümrük neighbourhoods (Sulukule Atolyesi: 2009).

To be able to read the process in Sulukule, it has to be told in chronological order. Every year brought more destruction to the neighbourhood both physically and socially.

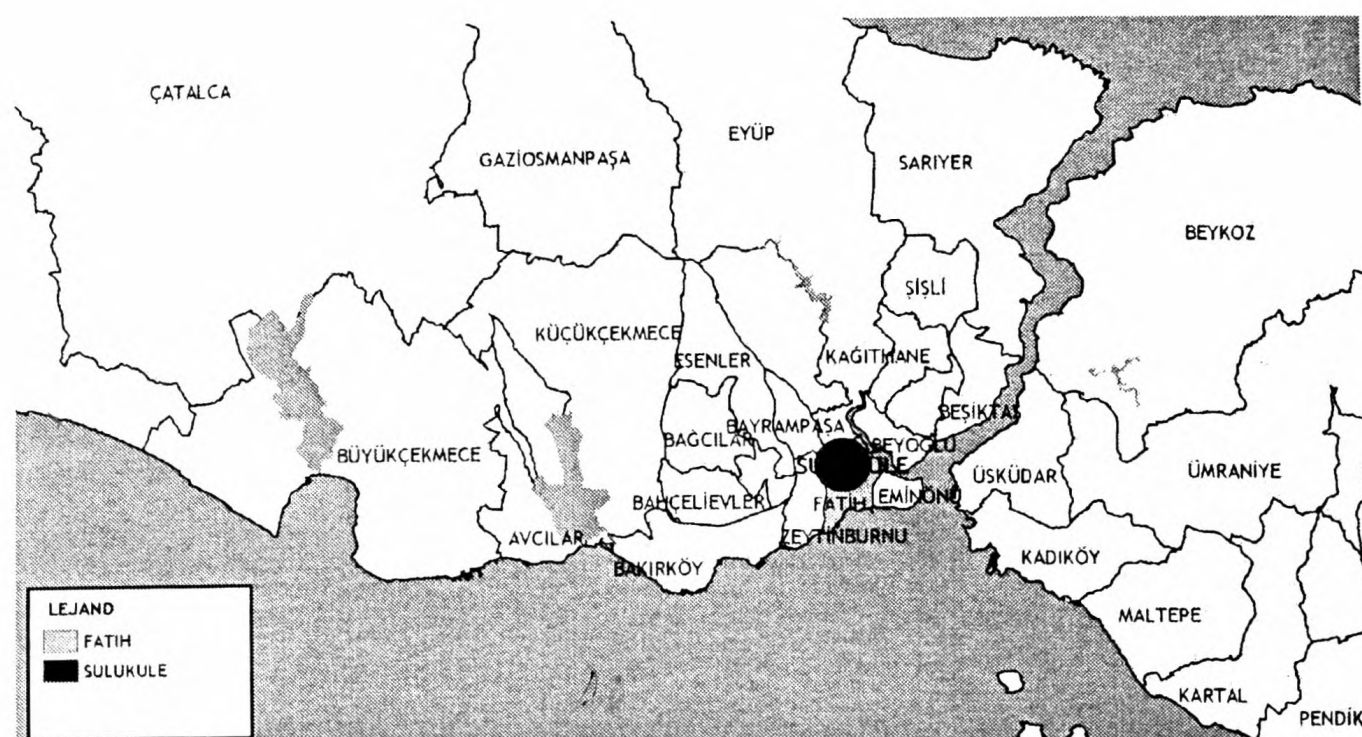


Fig. 1: Location of Sulukule in Istanbul Map  
Source: Author

In 2005, after the enactment of Law 5366, Sulukule was announced as “Renewal Area” by the Cabinet (Council of Ministers). Right after this, a protocol was signed between IBB (Istanbul Buyuksehir Belediyesi / Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality), Fatih Municipality and TOKI (Toplu Konut Idaresi / Housing Development Administration) to carry out the construction process. An urgent expropriation decision was also made by the central government to take precautions in case the people of Sulukule did not wish to sell their properties.

As mentioned above, demolitions started at Sulukule in the same year, in 2005. Municipality was in a rush to complete the project before the local elections which would take place in 2009. They were hoping to show this as a ‘success story’ that they later announced as “the most social urban renewal project in the world” (Yilmaz: 2009).

A fully residential area has been turned into a residential plus commercial area. Additional profit making facilities such as a hotel, a shopping mall and an entertainment centre, converted to a private school today, reduced the capacity of the residential area. Therefore there was no offer to tenants a high percentage of who were living in the area. There was no offer even to some of the landlords who were (had to be) left out of the project. The legitimate explanation from the government was stated as “improving the living conditions of Roma people in regard to the contemporary context” (Fatih Belediyesi: 2010).

During the legal process of the renewal project Sulukule a Platform emerged to create solidarity with the people. These were mainly individuals who read on newspapers what was going on in the area and decided personally to take action. Sulukule Platform (SP) which was composed of academics, students, journalists, doctors, psychologists, and activists, became official in September 2007. They started calling the people and institutes to their events, actions and research.

The main aim of aggregation of the people which formed the SP was manifested as “to protect the property and housing rights of Roma people and prevent the gentrification process in Sulukule” (sulukulegunlugu.blogspot.com: Who we are: 2007). Solidarity organised researches and actions which were many times an instant reaction to central and local government’s actions. As a result the number of participations sometimes contracted and sometimes dilated.

The Platform was involved in many issues diverting from getting green card for the poor people to working on kids who quit school (sulukulegunlugu.blogspot.com). In addition to social issues, SP worked hard on creating awareness in the international arena. They got in touch with many institutions to make pressure on the local and central governments. As a result Sulukule was referred to in European Union's 2007 Progress Report of Turkey. Fatih Municipality's actions were criticized for not taking care of Roma people's shelter, basic health and socio-economic needs.



Fig. 2: European Parliament visit of the local association in 2008  
Source: <http://sulukulegunlugu.blogspot.com/>

One of the most important outcomes of work done by the Platform was preparing an alternative project against the municipality. Participants of this project also demonstrated diversity. A group of students, professionals, experts, activists and academics gathered in summer 2007 and started to work on "Sulukule Socio - Economic Development Plan and Spatial Strategies". The group called themselves STOP<sup>16</sup> and the main aim was to show renewal can be done without evictions by improving their socio-economic and cultural conditions with low-budget investments. The alternative was revised in 2008 due to the request that came from the TOKI who was the main actor in the project. When the Platform went to Ankara to present, the institution had already lost its interest and afterwards it was cleared that they only seemed to show interest for 'public relations'.

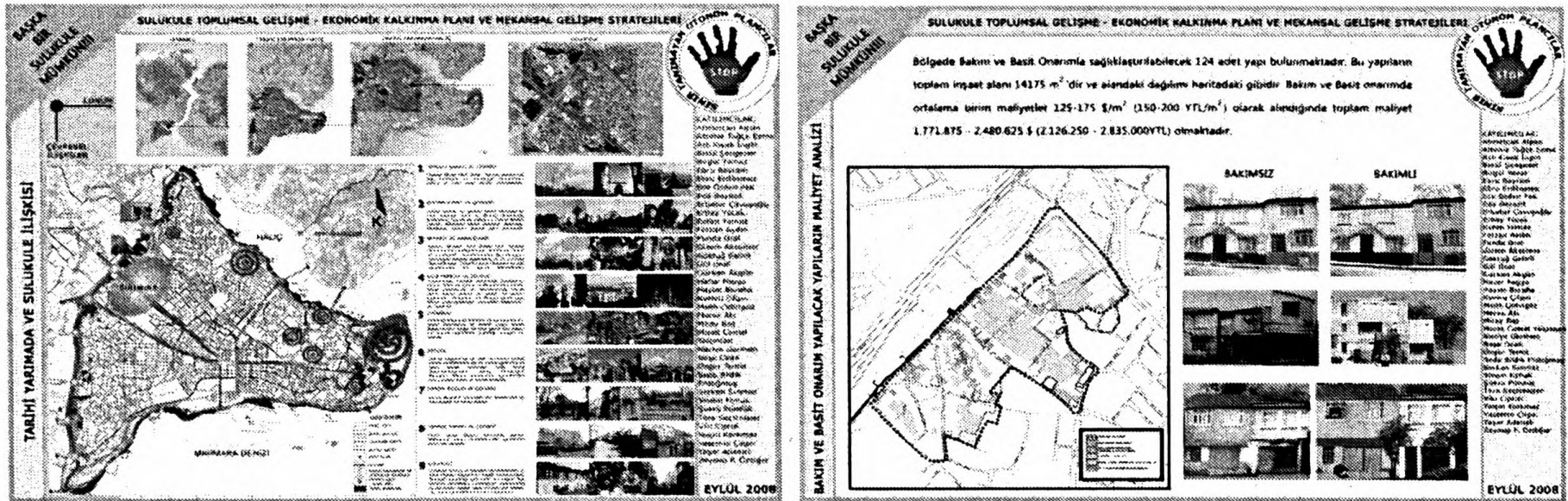


Fig. 3-4: Alternative Project (Sulukule Socio - Economic Development Plan and Spatial Strategies) visual; pattern and faced studies (2008)  
Source: <http://sulukulegunlugu.blogspot.com/>

<sup>16</sup> STOP (Sinir Tanimayan Plancilar / No Fronteirs Autonomous Planners) group later evolved to 'Sulukule Atolyesi'.



Fig. 5-6: Alternative Project (Sulukule Socio - Economic Development Plan and Spatial Strategies) visuals; building types and voting in the neighbourhood (2008)  
 Source: <http://sulukulegunlugu.blogspot.com/>

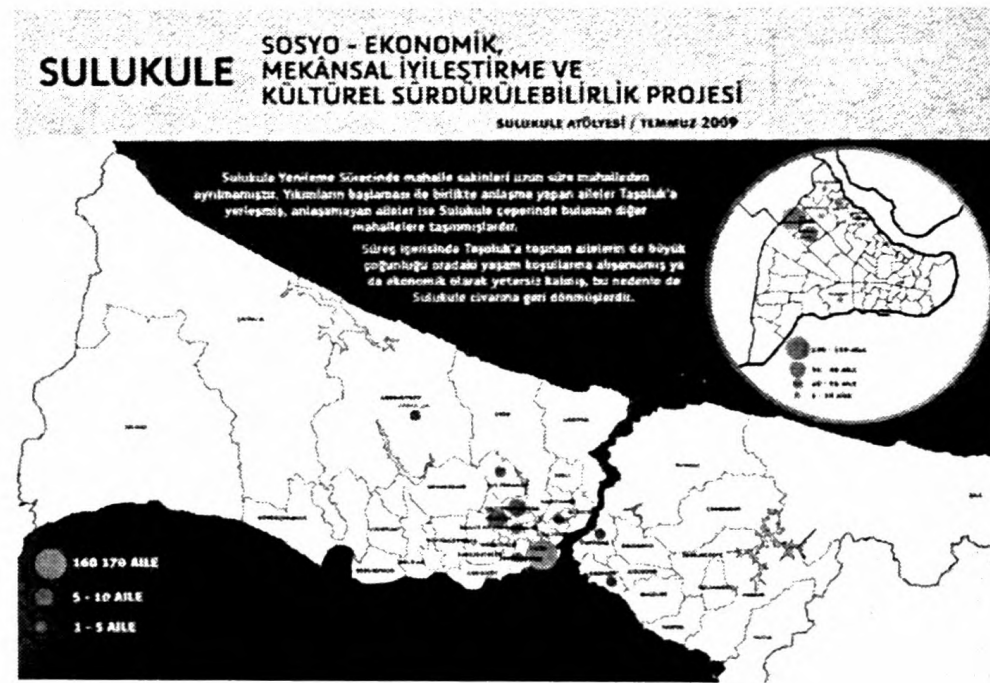


Fig. 7: Alternative Project (Sulukule Socio - Economic Development Plan and Spatial Strategies) visuals; immigration analyses (2009)  
 Source: <http://sulukulegunlugu.blogspot.com/>



Fig. 8: Alternative Project (Sulukule Socio - Economic Development Plan and Spatial Strategies) visuals; SWOT (2009)  
 Source: <http://sulukulegunlugu.blogspot.com/>

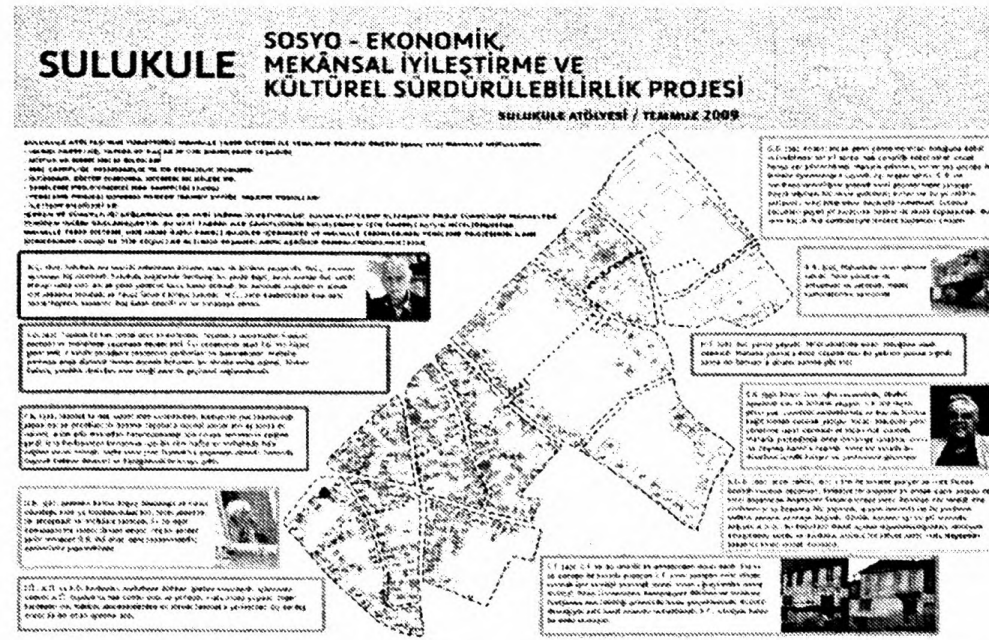


Fig. 9: Alternative Project (Sulukule Socio - Economic Development Plan and Spatial Strategies) visuals; local families monitoring analyses (2009)  
 Source: <http://sulukulegunlugu.blogspot.com/>

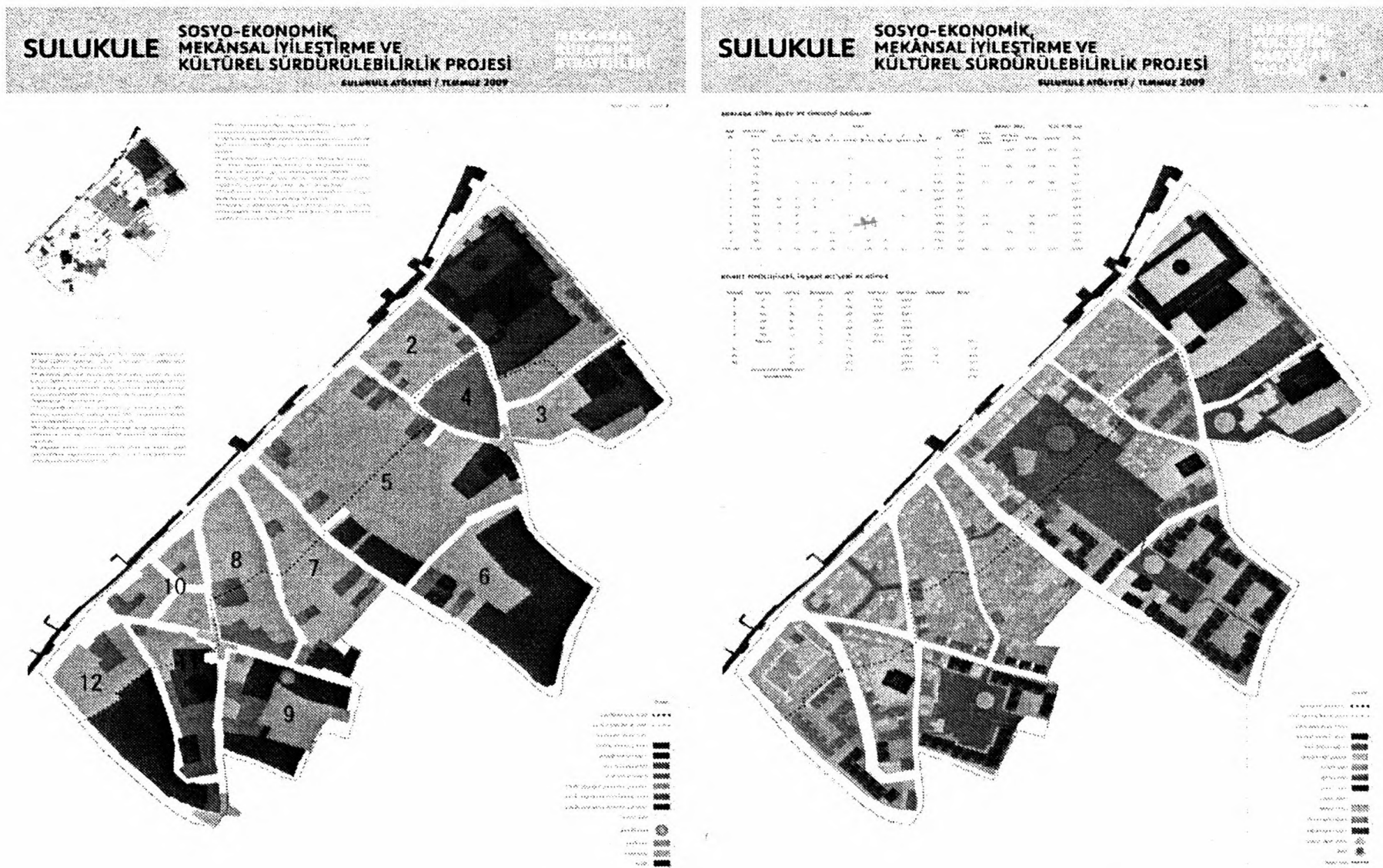


Fig. 10-11: Alternative Project (Sulukule Socio - Economic Development Plan and Spatial Strategies) visuals; concept plan and proposed local plan (2009)  
 Source: <http://sulukulegunlugu.blogspot.com/>



Fig. 12: Demolishing day in the neighbourhood, 2008  
Source: <http://sulukulegunlugu.blogspot.com/>

Fatih Municipality had no intention to hide their discrimination policy. In 2008, their approach just before the demolition showed how they defined Roma people. One day, Sulukule people woke up with red crosses on their doors. When they discussed this with the municipality, it was explained that this was for marking the houses that were sold and were to be demolished. This behaviour reminded many people of the Nazi times. There were more than 20 listed buildings within the area originated from 19<sup>th</sup> century. Sulukule Platform managed to save 4 of them but the rest were demolished by force.

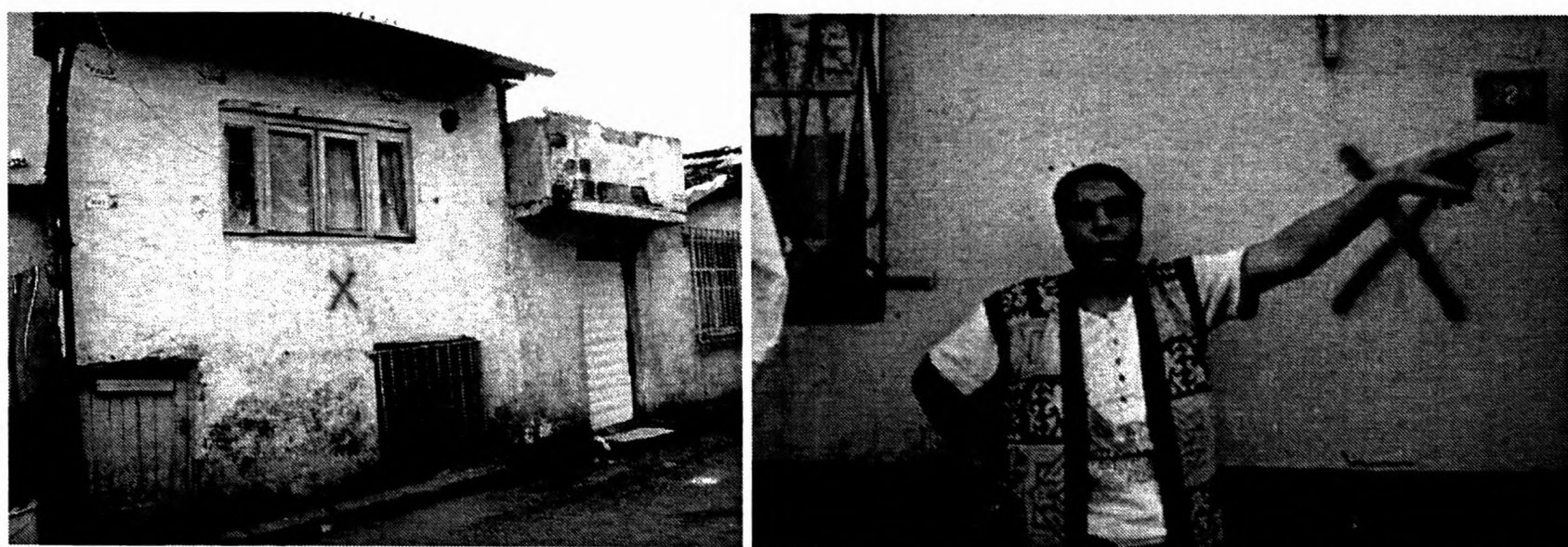


Fig. 13-14: Houses marked with the red crosses  
Source: Evrim Yilmaz's archive (13) and Najla Oserian's Archive (14)

Chamber of Architects and Chamber of Urban Planners took it to the court "Sulukule Renewal Project" in 2008 (Court case No: 2012/3386 File No: 2012/1154 E.). Meanwhile Sulukule was mentioned in OECD's (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) Territorial Reviews: Istanbul, Turkey 2008 report. In the report, urban development conditions of Fatih and Beyoglu districts were criticised within the on-going renewal projects. As it was stated in the report, "Project area lacks a comprehensive legal and financial framework that will allow the

integration of objectives and to protect low-income residents". U.S. Helsinki Commission Co-Chairman and representatives of the Helsinki Commission sent a letter to the Turkish Prime Minister requesting to conserve Sulukule. The commission expressed its concerns about the transformation in Istanbul with this statement: "Sulukule is home to the Roma community since 1054, is planned to be demolished in order to build villa-style houses. Unfortunate result of this urban renewal project, not only the destruction of historic neighbourhoods, and 3500 Sulukule residents, force to move 40 kilometres out of the city, to Tasoluk or to street". In addition to this, 3 members of the European Parliament also expressed their concerns to Prime Minister Erdoğan in 2008 in terms of human rights violations (Hammerberg: 2009, Hobbs: 2009).

Sulukule took place in the UNESCO 'World Heritage Patrimoine mondial 32COM 2008' and 'World Heritage Patrimoine mondial 33COM 2009' report, with regard to mission's visit to neighbourhood in previous years. As it was stated in the report, "...distribution of local communities and the destruction of the tangible and intangible values of the area as a result of gentrification programme implemented by local authorities is unacceptable..." During the same period, the United Nations IAI - HABITAT AGFE (Advisory Group on Forced Evictions) visited the neighbourhood and made an open-call<sup>17</sup> to the government to stop the project. But at the end of 2009, the last building was demolished in Sulukule.

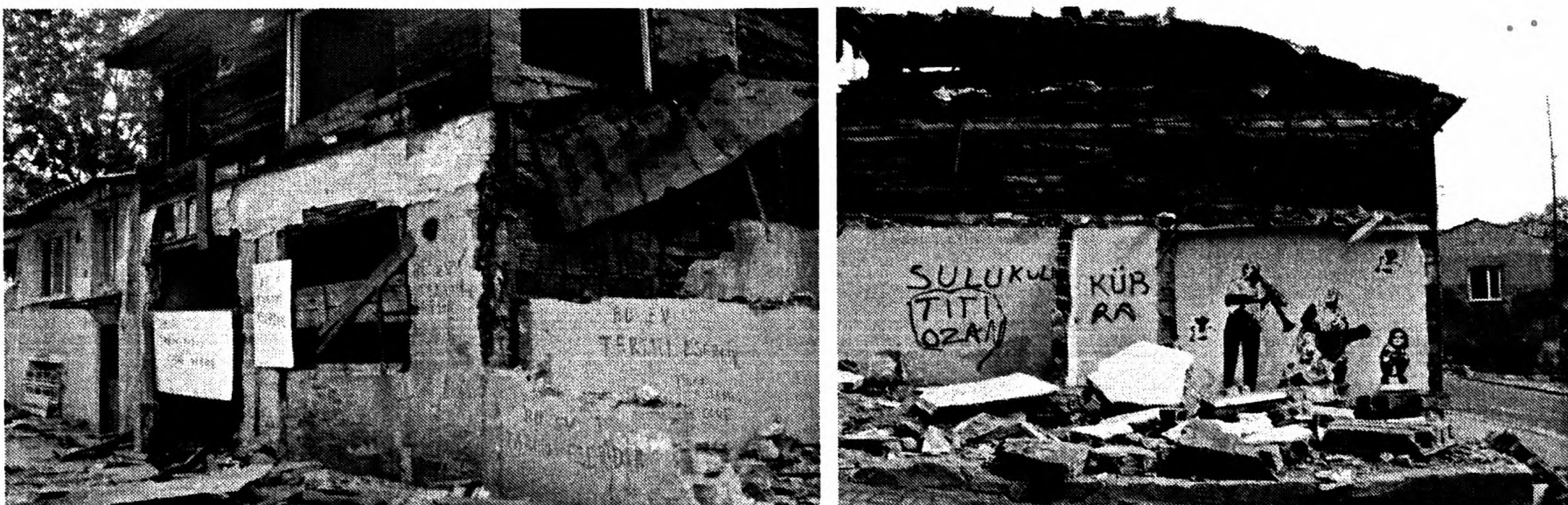


Fig. 15-16: Listed houses about to be demolished  
Source: Evrim Yılmaz's (15) and Ece Özden Pak's (16) archive



Fig. 17-18-19: Listed houses  
Source: Ece Özden Pak's (17-18) and Najla Osserian's (19) archive

<sup>17</sup> IAI named the call 'Urgent Support for Sulukule' and declared on its web site on 13 October 2008.

In 2010, while construction was starting, archaeological excavation got attention. Board of Conservation decided that construction should continue under the supervision of an archaeologist in the area, because of being a part of the Historical Peninsula which is declared as an urban conservation area by UNESCO in 1995 (World Heritage List No: 356). Meanwhile, Sulukule residents declared that their culture and the neighbourhood were destroyed. With ECHR's (European Convention on Human Rights) support, they requested an appropriate compensation from the Republic of Turkey (Songu: 2010).



Fig. 20-21: A scene of Daily life in old Sulukule  
Source: Najla Osserian's archive

Although the lawsuit that Chamber of Architects and Chamber of Urban Planners of Istanbul Branches brought against the Project was resolved with the "stay of execution" decision in June 2012, there were already no cultural elements left in Sulukule because the construction was not stopped. After 4 years, the lawsuit was concluded with the decision of adjudication and the cancelation of the project, pointing out that "the project is not in favour of public interest" by court. Although the court so decided, it was too late for Sulukule, it establishes a precedent for the other settlements that are under the threat of urban renewal. Even the court decision could not stop the government and construction was completed. The average square meter price of the houses doubled and thus the debt of the stakeholders also doubled. Because local residents could not afford the new apartments, more and more advertisements started to show up on windows of real estate agencies with the title 'villa in the heart of Istanbul'.

Today, out of 620 units, there are around 30 units occupied. Less than half of this number is former Sulukule residents. The ones who are living in the new apartments are complaining about the bad conditions; lack of heating, unavailability of proper infrastructure, high rate of managing fees and theft. On the other hand, many landlords given an option to buy the new apartments have no way of paying TL-4.000-9.000 to buy apartments. Most of them don't even have jobs. Although the decision of the court was taken when it was too late for Sulukule, it establishes a precedent for the other settlements that are under the threat of urban renewal.



Fig. 22-23-24: New apartments and 'for rent signs'  
Source: Evrim Yilmaz's archive

It should be emphasized that, in Sulukule Project, which was declared as "the most social renewal project of the world" by Fatih Municipality as mentioned above, displacement, eviction, impoverishment and social exclusion culture were experienced in the most severe form. Today, the discussion about the post-impacts of Sulukule project is still continuing. ..

## Conclusion

This study is limited to the Sulukule Renewal Project which is one of the basic themes of the renewal process in the historical city centre. Therefore, other projects which are currently taking place in Historical Peninsula like Fener-Balat and Ayvansaray Renewal Projects and other projects like Halic Metro Bridge, Avrasya Tunnel connection and Yenikapi Meeting Area are not mentioned. However, all these projects which affect the spatial and functional development of Istanbul should be considered within an integrative master plan. The only work done by the government which can be considered as a "goodwill attempt" is the Historical Peninsula Site Management Unit which also overlooks the integration of all these projects. However, even the "Site Management Plan" could not deal with these projects together.

There is no transparent plan that has been objectified with urban design and/or architectural contests that discussed or reconciled publicly for the examples mentioned above. Hence, it appears that this was an "undeclared major plan" of current Prime Minister and Mayor of Istanbul from the very beginning.

Sulukule is still the unique example of urban renewal approach in Turkey. The old Sulukule surely needed physical and infrastructural upgrade but preserving the characteristics of the area was left outside the project. The opposition which proposed to preserve the Roma culture as valuable as it has been for hundred years and to improve the living conditions was defeated. As a result, the social structure which was seen as "problematic" by the government was driven away to other neighbourhoods of Historical Peninsula and the socio-economic problems were left unsolved.

Instead of forcing the inhabitants to move out to the other parts of the city, proper socio-economic and infrastructure projects are needed which aim to improve both social and physical spaces with small interventions. Such works are neither complex nor expensive but need pro-public politics.

If Istanbul aims to continue to be the junction of the civilizations like it has been for thousand years, the spatial development and improvement approaches are needed to be re-considered. As long as implementations like Sulukule Renewal Project continues, the city centre where low and middle-income groups live will turn into scenery of a kitsch Ottoman spirit which excludes current social pattern. This will be nothing but a tragedy for a city that markets itself with the slogan "bridge together".

Last but not least, to avoid repeating the socio-spatial negative impacts that has happened in the case of Sulukule and not to lose the unique neighbourhood life of the Historical Peninsula, the following practices can be considered:

- 1) Use of participatory methods and tools in the renewal activities.
- 2) Generation of a database for every neighbourhood at local level.
- 3) Preparation of development reports including information about economic, social and geographical aspects of cities.
- 4) Preparation of a common project format that clearly defines the objectives, beneficiaries, activities, organizations involved, financial analysis, assessment and monitoring arrangements.
- 5) Integration of local level plans with the district level plans.

With a mutual understanding of every aspect of the local structure and by co-planning with communities, zero eviction is possible. Local or central governments need to stop creating fear of being deported in such vulnerable areas and analyze the local inhabitants without making segregation. It's important for institutions to focus on improving communication skills with locals, gaining confidence and trust and being transparent. Together with people, a co-operative planning process can work for the benefit of cities and all their stakeholders.

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