



ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA

Manifestations of Neoliberal Urbanisation: The Case of Sulukule/Istanbul

Neoliberal Kentleşme Manifestoları: Sulukule Örneği

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the spaces of neoliberalism in Istanbul and more specifically Sulukule neighborhood constitutes its empirical focus. The hegemonic ascendancy of neoliberalism encounters contestations and social unrest, political mobilizations across the world. Through the case of Sulukule (Istanbul, Turkey), our aim is to illustrate how gentrification as a neoliberal instrument utilized by a conservative/Islamist local government intervene the urban space not only for economic purposes but also culturally. This study analyzes this process, which went through in Sulukule, a former low-income neighborhood, mainly inhabited by a Gypsy community, sustaining livelihoods through an historically created entertainment culture, which was not welcomed by the conservative political cadres. This study turns the attention to the dynamics generated at the interstices of economy, politics and society, and delivers a tale of resistance and contestation to the uneasy marriage between conservative Islamism and neoliberalism.

I. What is it All About in Sulukule?

“Don’t silence your darbuka (goblet drum), don’t leave Sulukule”¹ became a common slogan among the ex-inhabitants of Sulukule. This slogan has gained popularity in both the Turkish national and the local media over the past few years and, unlike many other stories of neoliberal urbanisation, the case of Sulukule received considerable public support and gained civil society engagement. For the ex-inhabitants of Sulukule, being the losers against neoliberal urbanisation, was not only about

ÖZET

Bu çalışma İstanbul’daki neoliberal mekanlara odaklanmakta, Sulukule ise çalışmanın ampirik odağını oluşturmaktadır. Neoliberalizmin hegemonik üstünlüğü toplumsal huzursuzluğa, itirazlara ve politik hareketlere yol açmaktadır. Sulukule örneği üzerinden muhafazakar/İslamcı bir yerel yönetimin neoliberal bir araç olarak kullandığı soylulaştırma süreci ile mekana sadece ekonomik bir müdahalede değil aynı zamanda kültürel bir müdahalede de bulunduğu gösterilmeye çalışılacaktır. Bu çalışma, çoğunlukla geçimlerini eğlence sektöründen sağlayan ve dolayısıyla muhafazakar politik kadrolarca hoş görülmemen Çingenerin ikamet ettiği düşük gelirli bir mahalle olan Sulukule’de yaşanan süreci analiz etmektedir. Bu çalışma, ekonomi, politika ve toplumsal çatlaklar ekseninde oluşan dinamiklere dikkati çekmekte ve neoliberalizm ile muhafazakar İslamcılığın rahatsız edici birleşimine karşı gelişen bir direniş ve mücadele hikayesini anlatmaktadır.

losing their shelters, but also meant losing their local culture, which was often associated with the darbuka, a kind of goblet drum. This specific instrument had constituted a popular representation of the Sulukule culture for centuries and the silence of darbuka in Sulukule triggered unprecedented social discomfort, political reaction among both civil society groups and planners and, consequently, received extensive press coverage. Sulukule was definitely not the first victim of neoliberal urbanisation in Istanbul – but what is it all about in Sulukule,





Figure 1. New construction taking place in the old neighbourhood, Sulukule. Photograph: Can Berkol, 25.11.2010.

making it is worthwhile to do a flashback and use this case study to reflect upon the concept of neoliberal urbanisation and its relevance in Istanbul?

“In Sulukule, where Fatih Municipality had expropriated the lands belonging to Gypsies for 500-800 TRY per square meter, [and] a land belonging to the Treasury is put out to tender for a price five times higher by auction” (Dağlar, 2010), reported in one of the major newspapers in Turkey, *Hürriyet*, in September 2010 – a mere three months after the demolition. Currently, a new construction (Figure 1) is underway on the bare land, with only a few signs remaining from the old neighbourhood.

Intense discussions broke out about the Sulukule Project, as the Housing Development Administration of Turkey (TOKİ) announced its intent of turning Sulukule into a construction project, aimed at luxury housing, while the former residents of Sulukule – mostly Gypsies – were left with no alternative but to move to Kayabaşı, Taşoluk – to other TOKİ-built mass housing projects far away from the city centre.

The enactment of the Law on the Protection of Deteriorated Historic and Cultural Heritage through Renewal and Re-use (Act 5366), heralded a new era for Istanbul, marked by ambitious urban regeneration projects taking place citywide, with Sulukule Project being one of them. The aim of the new Urban Regeneration Law number 5366 is “to settle the principles of transformation of regeneration areas, which are deteriorated or inadequate in terms of social and technical infrastructure

and need to be developed, revitalized, improved or cleared, taking scientific, technical, artistic, or hygienic standards into account” (Perçin, 2007:7). Previous efforts at urban regeneration had proved unsuccessful due to of the outdated and static bureaucracy of the High Council of Cultural and Natural Protection.² Due to the high costs imposed by Council, many buildings were left in a terrible condition and were destroyed individually and illegally to make way for new developments. Moulded on an individual basis, new developments were usually worse than the original ones.

Sulukule Urban Regeneration – often also referred to as “Transformation”, “Renewal” or a “Gentrification Project” – was jointly conducted by the Fatih Municipality and TOKİ, covering both the Neslisah and Hatice Sultan neighbourhoods. Previously designated as an urban conservation area, Sulukule residents were not allowed to effect any changes – neither to the buildings nor to the urban layout of the neighbourhood. Due to neglect and the absence of rehabilitation proposals for this area, the deterioration of the built-up environment speeded up (Avgenikou et al., 2007a:13). Backed by Act 5366, Sulukule was earmarked as an urban regeneration area, where development would be orchestrated in a top-down manner and based on a new set of conditions and rules. The plan proposed the demolition of the existing buildings, and to erase the neighbourhood urban fabric, so as to replace it with a new and “better” one.

Lawsuits, filed by former Sulukule residents pertaining to the unfair expropriation and demolition of their houses, still con-

¹ In Turkish: Darbukani Susturma, Sulukule'yi Birakma. For more information, please see <http://www.arkitera.com/h37915-darbukayi-susturma-sulukuleyi-birakma.html>

² <http://www.kultur.gov.tr/teftis/BelgeGoster.aspx?F6E10F8892433CFF060F3652013265D69CD69CF44AAF79CF>

tinue. Even the European Court of Human Rights accepted an application from former Sulukule residents, testifying that their property rights were being violated and that a neighbourhood, characterised by a very specific culture, had been destroyed. This paper analyses the concept of gentrification as a tool for neoliberal urbanisation, utilising the case of Sulukule, Istanbul. The case of Sulukule not only presents an instance in the which the neoliberal policies of the local municipal administration, in tandem with the national administration, extend capitalist relations into new places, but it also indicates that neoliberal policies, via gentrification, exert significant pressure on people's livelihoods.

Gentrification should be accepted as the physical emergence of the reproduction of capitalism or, stated differently, economic restructuring at macro level. The regimes of capital accumulation change; urban land constitutes a significant part of the project; and urban gentrification projects have become one of the tools of this new accumulation process. Just as in the case of the Sulukule Renewal Project, it is no longer profitable for low-income groups to reside on this land, as the land within the city centre increases in value. Thus, "sanitation" is perceived to be necessary for such land and the poor will be sent to the outskirts of the city where land values are lower. In the meantime, a new middle-high income group will claim the "sanitised" land, as they can afford to pay for it. Such gentrification projects target mainly new users, rather than the current inhabitants, thus clearly serving the new capital accumulation regime. Therefore, our study is positioned in the context of debates that focus especially on the interstices of urbanisation and gentrification. As Smith and Williams (1986: 12) correctly pointed out, there is a debate between those who regard gentrification as a harbinger of a desirable urban renaissance and those who view it as an instrument of urban restructuring that has negative consequences for the poor and working class residents. These debates still maintain their freshness and our paper contributes to the latter set of studies via the case of Sulukule, Istanbul. Among these studies, Atkinson and Bridge consider the process of gentrification as a form of new urban colonialism (2010: 51). The colonialist aspects of contemporary gentrification and its relationship with urbanisation patterns globally, have cultural forces embedded in them – especially when the neighbourhood level impact is taken into account (Smith 1996; Hammel and Wyly 2004, 2001; Zukin 1982; Slater 2002). These studies reveal that the interplay between neoliberalised forms of capital accumulation and culture has significant implications for the debates on gentrification, by proposing that, gentrification as a blanket concept, signifies a contested process of negotiation between treating urban spaces as arenas for neoliberal strategies of regulation/intervention and local cultural reproduction. These negotiations have socio-spatial implications for the local inhabitants and it is our task, by telling the tale of Sulukule, to contribute to the discussions on understanding the contours of the socio-spatiality of negotiations in a global city of the South – i.e. Istanbul. These implications are indicative of the urbanisation

patterns and societal repercussions in the context of developing countries.

Before turning towards a scrutinisation of the urban patterns of developing countries, conducting just a brief international literature review reveals that, in the 1960s and 1970s, both in Europe and US, the urban renewal movement focused intensely on making cities more economically competitive, while ignoring walkability and other key qualities that people value in urban environments – ultimately accelerating the decline of many cities (Brown et al., 2009:103). Trailing behind industrialised countries, Turkey, one of the later industrial countries and therefore categorised as a still developing country, has also been lagging with regard to urbanisation – not only in physical terms, but even the establishment of urban planning as profession in Turkey only dates back to 1983. Those things already experienced in Western economies, which were reflected in physical structure, are arriving in Turkey only lately. Yet, Turkey, in never learning any lessons from the Western urban landscape, is now experiencing the problems that Western cities have already faced time and again – and sometimes with even more damaging consequences, as the world is becoming globalised. What is happening in urban neighbourhoods is not only of interest to the local people anymore. Before the demolition in Sulukule, both UNESCO and the European Court of Human Rights warned local municipalities against the possible adverse consequences of such a project. Furthermore, some international NGOs tried to intervene and prevent the process – yet a deaf ear was turned to all formal threats.

The "beautification" movements of demolishing the "deformity" of the urban structures are actually aiming to create a globally and economically competitive city. What will result from it, will not actually be far removed from what Jacobs criticized in her book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, published as far back as 1961. Urban gentrification projects, such as the Sulukule project, will only accelerate the decline of the city, as key urban and social values (living in a community comprising a diverse society; social equity; social and cultural sustainability; creation and supply of choice; a response to human senses; integration of history, nature and innovation; emphasis on identity, etc.) are being ignored.

In approaching these socio-spatial interplays, a highly crucial question emerges: The meanings in urban space are redefined and argued about, but in whose interests are urban space and local economies produced and reproduced? In Sulukule, we observed how neoliberal urbanism attacked a vivid local culture in Istanbul under the guidance of an Islamist political party, namely the Justice and Development Party (AKP), which illustrated that neoliberal reforms in Istanbul had coincided with a conservative tendency that sought for homogeneity within the city centre, by displacing lower-income inhabitants. In accordance with this, the urban coalition, formed around the AKP guidance, was also sympathetic towards actors who aimed to neoliberalise the urban space.

Academics, civil society representatives and volunteers organised around community groups, recently prepared an alternative urban regeneration project for Sulukule and officially presented it to the Fatih Municipality. Yet, no attempt has been made to incorporate the alternative project into the existing one. As the project is progressing rapidly, the former residents of Sulukule resisted leaving their neighbourhood for a long time. Yet, when the destruction began, the families who could enter into negotiation with the municipality moved to Taşoluk – a suburban neighbourhood that is 27 km away from Sulukule and 33 km from the city centre (Em-inönü); while others moved to neighbourhoods adjacent to Sulukule. During the project's negotiation period, there were 900 shareholders in the neighbourhood. After the agreements made between the shareholders and the municipality, only 50 shareholders became eligible title holders. Among 500 tenants, whose homes were dispossessed, 337 tenants were relocated as TOKI residents on Tasoluk. Some of the families who moved to Taşoluk could not get accustomed to the living conditions of their new home or could not economically afford to live there and soon moved back to neighbourhoods close to Sulukule (Sulukule Workshop, 2009).

2. Neoliberalisation of Urban Space in Istanbul

In this study, we interpret the concept of neoliberalism as macroeconomic re-structuring that mobilises “a range of policies intended to extend market discipline, competition and commodification throughout all sectors of society” (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Brenner, 2004; Peck et al., 2009). The adoption of neoliberal policies and their increasing resonance in the crises environment of Keynesianism, had various repercussions, ranging from a local to a global scale. Our aim is to focus on the transformative impact of neoliberalism on urban areas. Cities have emerged as the privileged sites of the valorisation of neoliberal policies, implementation and strategies. As Candan and Kolluoglu (2008) portrayed in the case of Istanbul, socio-economic and political processes of neoliberalism created “spaces of decay”, “distressed areas” and privileged spaces. These dominant patterns have been analysed in the emerging literature on neoliberal urbanism. Our analysis extends this line of thinking by studying a particular aspect of neoliberalisation, namely its overlap and co-constitution with conservative policies, while engendering hegemony in certain areas and livelihoods of the city.

What does neoliberalisation mean for the city and why is the city, in itself, important to the processes of neoliberalisation? Neoliberalisation constitutes a range of policies intended to extend market discipline, competition and commodification throughout society. It is in search of securing the “vital cycle of economic growth”. In the current context, neoliberal doctrines brought about the deregulation of state control over industry and markets; assaults on organised labour; the downsizing and/or privatization of public services and assets; the dismantling of welfare programmes; the enhancement of international capital mobility; and the intensification of inter-

locality competition. Its implementation relied on national restructuring projects (Peck et al., 2009), while the dominance of competitive logic over redistributive objectives opened up new spaces of collaboration among economic actors, institutions, municipalities, nation states and civil actors. All of these have significant implications for localities, given the risks and responsibilities of downloading.

By understanding the increasing hegemony of neoliberalism in redesigning, restructuring and reproducing urban spaces, it becomes possible to conceptualise this phenomenon as a state strategy for creating new conditions for capital accumulation. However, as Brenner and Theodore (2002, pp. 120-130) note, although neoliberal projects take place at different and tangled scales, it is in the cities and regions in which the contradictions and tensions, emanating from actual and already existing neoliberalism, are manifested. Cities become the venues in which these tensions and contradictions are concretised and managed (or where attempts at management of these tensions and contradictions are made). There is currently, for example, increasing city level competition across national borders for foreign direct investment and for trade in city-based services and urban assets. Increasingly, urban economic performance matters more than national economic outcomes.

These dynamics, pertaining to the defining characteristics of neoliberalism, correspond to “a gradual shift away from distributive policies, welfare considerations, and direct service provision” and mark the competitive state's movement “towards more market-oriented and market dependent approaches aimed at pursuing economic promotion and competitive restructuring” (Swyngedouw et al. 2002, p. 200). Via this process, supply-side economic logic favours the production of urban “spaces of spectacle”, in which the consumption of, and access to, goods by the urban population exist as a source of political motivation for neoliberal ideas. In this sense, rather than attempting to shift the social inequities brought about by the neoliberal political economy and policy concerns, and which are directed at ensuring that urban centres appear attractive to mobile-capital and elite consumers, with the explicit goal of improving “the tax basis of the city via a sociospatial and economic reorganization of metropolitan space” (ibid p. 204).

This increasing emphasis on the rise of cities and urban centres as the new spaces of capitalist accumulation (Brenner, 2004) also brings into the fold a variety of new or more diverse actors that collectively produce and reproduce urban spaces.

The empirical focus of this study – i.e. the case study of Sulukule with its historic vibrant local culture – exposes gentrification as a form of neoliberal intervention in the urban space. It should be noted that not every form of gentrification is neoliberal. However, it is possible to infer from the literature on gentrification that gentrification is not an isolated process

of neighbourhood change, involving the rehabilitation of inner city residential areas, but an integral part of wider processes of urban spatial, political and economic restructuring (Smith and Williams, 1986; Smith, 1996). This is a terrain that is regarded as excessively fertile from the perspective of neoliberal urban policy-makers, city governments, developers and real estate agents. In this study, two dimensions of gentrification are prioritised, namely its political nature and its contextuality. What is meant by the political dimension is that gentrification is embedded in a broader neoliberal discourse and regarded as a tool for the political manoeuvres of neoliberal interests. The latter dimension refers to an emphasis on the importance of contextuality and scale issues. Lees (2000) emphasises the changing nature of gentrification and calls for a need to focus on the “geographies of gentrification”, considering emergent different forms that are due to locally specific and temporal conditions. As a result of the incorporation of neoliberal economic policy into the strategies and priorities of urban governments, gentrification came to be evaluated as an appreciated neighbourhood change.

This also coincided with a time when local governments acquired more responsibility. As a result of suffering deeply from fewer financial resources, municipalities, city governments and local governments became more inclined to pursue entrepreneurial governance models – in other words, they were forced to become more active players in the game (2006: 133). The ascendance of neoliberal ideas definitely increased the reliance of local government actors, city administrators and municipalities on taxes. Gentrification, as the neighbourhood-level manifestation of neoliberalism, actually replaces Keynesian logic with an entrepreneurial approach.

The literature on gentrification, as a neoliberal strategy, focuses on the active role of local governments, state agencies and urban public policy in gentrification processes in different cities around the world (Brenner & Theodore, 2002; Hackworth & Smith, 2001; Lees 2000; Slater, 2004; Smith, 2002; Hammel & Wyly, 1999, among others). Situated in the context of new urban politics, when initiating specific policy schemes, policy-makers actively adopt gentrification as an integral part of their revitalisation strategies. What is more subtle in the case of Sulukule, however, is that gentrification, as part and parcel of a neoliberal strategy, manifests itself within a myriad of local forms, variegated institutional constellations and versatile social processes. As the case of Sulukule illustrates, gentrification, as it is argued in this study, is not only a mechanism for dislocation but, as Peck et al. indicate, a transformed spatial strategy (as opposed to its earlier conceptualisations) that is utilised by urban growth coalitions and neoliberal-minded local/national administrations. Gentrification, as a neoliberal instrument in Sulukule, as well as its spatial interventions, brings with it various tensions pertaining to social fabric, together with a detrimental impact on cultural characteristics. Therefore, gentrification not only implies a socio-economic transformation that is executed by neoliberals, but it also entails cultural side effects. In order to

study this area analytically and decipher the penetration of neoliberal practices, as well as its contestations in Sulukule, providing a background of the urban landscape within which Sulukule is located, is deemed necessary. This actually refers to Istanbul’s encounter with neoliberalism and globalisation, which are two interdependent and correlated processes, equipped with significant transformative power, not only with regard to nation states, but also with regard to municipal and metropolitan governments.

The neoliberal policies paved the way for foreign direct investments (FDIs), and Istanbul stood out due to its attractive disposition for FDIs. Istanbul rapidly became Turkey’s globalising centre for finance and it has become a favoured location for multinational corporations attempting to make headway into the Turkish market (Perçin, 2007:6). Istanbul increasingly aimed to promote itself as a city of choice that not only hosts world-class facilities, such as offices, skyscrapers, hotels, cafés, restaurants and shopping and convention centres; but by also manifesting the contemplation of a “dominant” logic, led by market mentality. All these changes have had a direct impact on regeneration policies – especially with regard to Istanbul. Since then, the basic aim of the regeneration activities has been to make the city look attractive and to get rid of anything that could deform this beautiful picture. As in the Sulukule case, municipalities undertook major projects to transform the infrastructure and appearance of Istanbul to make it more attractive to foreign investors.

Istanbul’s “new development strategy” in the neoliberal era is most often framed around the concept of a global city, with a specific focus on the question, “How to sell Istanbul?”, posed by Keyder (1993). (See Keyder, 1992; 1993; Keyder & Öncü, 1993; and for a critical perspective, see Ercan, 1996; & Oktay, 2005, 2006). Istanbul’s encounter with the concept of being a global city dates back to the famous 24 January 1980 decisions, which constitute the initial adoption of neoliberal policies under the Turgut Özal Government. It was no coincidence that, soon after these decisions, the 1980 Master Plan of Istanbul (29 July 1980) included a section that identified Istanbul as a “world city”.

Perhaps, a critical milestone in Istanbul’s neoliberal trajectory relates to the increasing devolution of power into the hands of Bedreddin Dalan, Mayor of the Metropolitan Municipality during the 1984-1989 period. According to Oktay Ekinçi, the head of the Chamber of Architects during that period, argued that Istanbul’s encounter with neoliberalisation and its impact on urban space manifested itself on an undemocratic platform (Ekinçi, 1995).³ According to Ekinçi, the immediate consequence of this change was the relaxation of the planning mechanism. These relaxation measures established a suitable environment for the implementation of neoliberal practices via special laws, so as to promote the market mechanism. The ascendancy of market mechanism and its penetration in establishing master plans meant that the historical, social, natural and ecological considerations were immensely down-

graded, as opposed to the privileging of revenue generation. Urban space was approached and restructured firstly to engender more marketable areas and, secondly, to generate urban rent turned into a major mechanism for capital accumulation. In this way, urban development was turned into a significant growth sector (Kurtulus 2007; Keyder 2007; Swynedegouw et al., 2002).

In this way, neoliberal urbanisation in Istanbul embarked on a radical departure from any earlier forms of governance. As Ünsal and Kuyucu (2010: 52) emphasise, Istanbul could in fact be characterised as a late implementation of neoliberal policies. Nevertheless, notwithstanding the earlier establishment of neoliberal policies at a national scale, such as the rapid privatisation of public utilities; the liberalisation of trade and investment; and the role of finance capital, Turkey's neoliberal experience witnessed the increasing visibility of urban transformation projects as contained efforts to upgrade particular localities (physically) and, secondly, further entrenchment of the neoliberal governance regime.

While the recent regeneration projects in Istanbul are basically aiming to gentrify society – i.e. the users of the physical environment are to be sanitised. By emphasising “generation” in the concept of re-generation, the intention is to express the fact that the process of gentrification/regeneration addressed in this study, is not a natural process, but rather a forced and top-down process, which is usually imposed upon disadvantaged groups in the urban society (ethnic minorities, socially excluded groups, poor and uneducated people, etc.). For instance, as Ünsal and Kuyucu indicate, “gecekondu zones and inner city slums become particularly attractive for redevelopment for two reasons: legal ambiguities in their property regimes and their perceived status as centres of crime and decay” (54). Not surprisingly, these areas were put under serious pressure by the conservative AKP. Sulukule, as a region inflicted with a variety of informal practices, has been on the spot more so than others.

Following the 1960s, neighbourhoods that were not conserved by adequate policies, began to deteriorate rapidly (Ünlü et al., 2003). The emergence of twilight areas left the idea of urban regeneration its trail. However, regeneration practices usually overlooked the socio-economic characteristics of twilight zones and focused only on the physical dilapidation. Yet, living in an area that does not get its share of the infrastructure, nor the social and welfare services that the city is offering, traps both the neighbourhood and its residents into marginality.

Recently, the regeneration projects targeting Gypsy neighbourhoods in Turkey, such as the “Sulukule Regeneration Project”, are subject to dispute. Furthermore, these proj-

ects are criticised mainly for their violation of nature, as well as both human and citizen rights. Some questions, such as whether these projects really aim to regenerate the physical environment or the Gypsy culture, which has been neglected by mainstream society, are being raised.

Since 2006, when the project was just an “idea”, until now, when almost all of the buildings in Sulukule have been demolished, the project has been the subject of many argumentations in terms of conservation, participation, urban identity, sustainability and social capital.

3. The Case of Sulukule

There is implicit consensus that the gentrification/regeneration process is operating differently in these neoliberal times by the integration of multiple new actors, with new power asymmetries, hierarchies and cleavages. Since the neoliberal movements have been affecting Turkish urban politics, the basic aim of the regeneration activities has been to make the city look attractive and to get rid of anything that could deform this “beautiful picture”. Consequently, regeneration practices usually overlooked the socio-economic characteristics of twilight zones and tried to banish the users of these areas. So, the neighbourhoods where the most vulnerable groups, such as Gypsies live, have been defined as suffering from decay – both physically and socially. Having defined these areas as being in need of “rehabilitation”, authorities applied themselves to regenerate these “areas” as soon as possible.

This is where the global capital is reaching the neighbourhood by bypassing or cooperating with the state, constituting the most recent form of gentrification. Nevertheless, the commodification of the neighbourhood is not a one-way street. The more it is being influenced by global forces and the more attempts are made to try and dominate the market logic, it is becoming a crucial scale for contestations as well. Hackworth also maintains that gentrification is a neighbourhood-level of neoliberalism and creates opportunities for real estate capitalism. As he mentions, “recent economic restructuring appears to have altered the real estate industry in such a way as to encourage the presence of large corporate gentrifiers more [so] than small-scale owner-occupiers” (Hackworth, 2006: 139). In this regard, the gentrification process benefits some actors over others, it creates insiders and outsiders, and it also becomes a crucial rent-distributing mechanism.

It is important to recognise the features of the gentrification process, which now manifest themselves in the urban spaces that are, to a great extent, shaped via neoliberalism. The involvement of corporate developers, especially in terms of initiating these processes; the involvement of local governments; the silence of opposition parties; and increasing pressure on un-gentrified neighbourhoods, even though they are not situated in central locations, are the means utilised by neoliberalism to commodify urban spaces.

³ It was undemocratic because power was extensively concentrated in the office of the mayor and the executive committee, while the role of the elected members in the metropolitan councils was reduced (Ekinci, 1995).



Figure 2. Sulukule and Taşoluk in Istanbul.

Looking at the specific case of Sulukule, firstly one has to gain some insight into the neighbourhood itself. Sulukule is situated in the historic peninsula, within the boundaries of the World Heritage Site, as defined by UNESCO in 1985, and it is surrounded by the Byzantine city walls within the Fatih Municipality of Istanbul. The Gypsies settled in Sulukule in 1054, when Istanbul was the Byzantine capital. Its population increased after the Ottoman conquest in the 15th century, when Mehmet the Conqueror brought other Gypsy groups, engaged in basketry, metalwork and horse-raising here, in order to revive the local economy (Yıldır, 2007).

During the 17th century Ottoman Empire, the Gypsies of Sulukule were known as musicians, dancers, fortune-tellers, acrobats and illusionists. The community used to run entertainment houses, which constituted the backbone of the area's economy. Following the foundation of the Republic, the Gypsies of Sulukule continued to run informal "listen-and-drink" establishments until 1991. One could rent the entire house, a hall or a room, and have belly dancers and musicians performing while being served with food and alcohol. These establishments also assisted with the revival of other businesses, such as tobacco and spirits shops, as well as neighbourhood taxis that constantly shuttled entertainment house clients from distant neighbourhoods.

In terms of the current version of the plan, Sulukule is faced with the risk of losing both its cultural heritage and its urban fabric. There are two basic oppositions mounted against the Sulukule project. The first point, that some locations are being chosen as "appropriate" areas for Gypsies to be settled in, is based on a lack of knowledge, as no specific research on

Gypsy housing conditions in Turkey has yet been undertaken. In the case of the Sulukule regeneration project, Taşoluk has been chosen as being appropriate for Sulukule residents by the authorities (Figure 2). Moving the Gypsies to another location, where they cannot establish physical and social organisations appropriate for their business, is just pushing them into a deeper poverty trap. It is clear that in neighbourhoods where people belong to the same ethnic background, there are invisible networks that prevent the inhabitants from starving and from getting lost within the complexities of mainstream society. So, replacing a community which has become a united whole or entity, will result in the loss of a cultural asset, which could never be recovered or recreated.

The second point preoccupying the mind about the real intent of Sulukule project, is that it does not seriously consider the Gypsy way of living at all. The proposals offer something very different to what should have been proposed for a Gypsy community. For example, Gypsies in general use outdoor spaces intensely (Erdilek, 2007) and streets mean a lot more to them than merely being spaces for circulation. Without giving them the opportunity to use the streets in a way they are used to, the authorities are just pushing them into their "new" houses and, in that way, trying to turn Gypsies into something different to what they were born as. A very good example of the outcome of this insensitivity, is provided by Fonseca (2002:186). In her book, "Burry Me Standing", she states that she personally saw a horse on one of the upper floors of an apartment building in Bulgaria. So, if a Roma is earning his life from a horse cart, then one cannot expect him to feed his horse in the garden of an apartment. These are just basic facts which should not be ignored in any plan proposed for the Gypsy community.

In brief, even just by looking at these points one can acknowledge that local authorities, blinded by the breeze of neoliberalism, actually do interfere in the natural process of the integration of Gypsies, as Sulukule residents, into the mainstream via these projects. The proposals, as they stand, are clearly not in the interests of the local inhabitants. By not taking into consideration the needs of these people, the project initiators fail to recognise the already established patterns of life in these areas. In fact, residents, who do not possess any skills that would be marketable in another part of the city, are being detached from their social and “business” networks “by force”. Forcing them to be like the bigger rest of the population is just an act of extreme brutality (Figure 3a, b).

Hence, the answer to the question, whether regeneration is another concept to denote the neoliberal strategies to commodify space, seems to be “yes”. Gentrification nowadays refers to facilitating the highest and best land uses to supplant present uses, or forcing proper allocation of capital to land, as is prescribed by the market mentality (Clark, 2005). This is not a friction-free process. Indeed, and by looking at the scalar nature of the gentrification process in neoliberal times, it is possible to infer the polarised power relations, asymmetries and entangled power hierarchies that are vital for the hegemony of the neoliberal urban vision, as well as the reproduction and restructuring of capitalist tendencies.

According to Slater, for a long time, the literature on gentrification treated the concept as a consequence. It even chose to avoid considering the negative consequences associated with the concept, such as displacement as a research focus, and this situation coincided with the pervasive influence of neoliberal policies embracing considered gentrification as a new “social mix” in urban areas. Just as in the case of the Sulukule regeneration project, the said project was proposing that estate owners move to Taşoluk, which is about 35 km away from Sulukule and the city centre. So, in reality, the project did not consider the right of local community members to continue living in the same place where they have been living for more than one thousand years. The relocation proposals overlook the importance of social networks for low-income groups. As in many other Gypsy neighbourhoods, in Sulukule it is a fact that many people in the community depend on their neighbours for their day-to-day needs, whether Gypsy or gadje⁴ (UNDP, 2002:95, 97, 98). The eviction of the local community has to be avoided, because such relocation will break these social and economic ties. Sulukule inhabitants need this safety network to deal with their vulnerability and the discrimination that they are exposed to.

Linking the issue to a relatively more recent phenomenon, neoliberal urbanisation is a theoretical stance that some scholars adhere to. In the current era of neoliberal urban policy, there is a different understanding of “social mix” – i.e. as Blomley points out, “programs of renewal often seek to encourage home ownership, given its supposed effects on economic self-reliance [and] entrepreneurship. Gentrification



Figure 3. (a, b) Construction of new and quotidian houses in Sulukule. Photograph: Can Berkol, 25.11.2010.

on this account is to be encouraged, because it will mean the replacement of [the] anti-community (non-property owning, transitory, problematized) by an active, responsible and improving population of homeowners” (Blomley, 2004: 89). Again, as in the Sulukule, it has actually been the case, while the project proposes every claimant to possess a decent flat in Taşoluk. However, it is also evident that no study has been undertaken to understand the social, demographic, cultural or economic dynamics of Sulukule. Therefore, the project cannot be expected to be realistic. As this is indeed the case, the question actually becomes: What is really the aim of this regeneration and whose interests are really favoured? The proposal, as it stands, is clearly not in the interests of local inhabitants. For example, people in Sulukule are living in poor and overcrowded housing conditions. Several families share one house, usually without basic amenities. As household structures are so complex, insight need to be gained into how to accommodate these structures into new urban typologies (Avgenikou et al., 2007).

4. Conclusion

Today, the concept of gentrification/regeneration is very much employed and referred to as the diffusion of neoliberal urban policies in the context of neighbourhoods. The

⁴ Roma word for non-Gypsy.

case of Sulukule has been a representative case in the Turkish context, especially when the urban and metropolitan transformation of Istanbul is taken into account. The way neighbourhoods transform to serve the interests of the market and capital, is similar to the historical functioning of capitalism. Therefore, the globalisation of gentrification arguments made in the literature should not surprise us, given that it is a neoliberal strategy to extract value whenever and wherever possible – in the form of gentrification aiming to revalorise decayed spaces or slum areas.

Moreover, as a neighbourhood manifestation of neoliberalism, gentrification no longer resides within the boundaries of the local scale. It should be noted that the way neoliberalism penetrated everything and found its existence by devising strategies on a neighbourhood scale, depends on the dynamics of the state rescaling process since the demise of Keynesian times. The hollowing out of the nation state and transferring capacities and responsibilities to sub-national scales brought about tension, as well as new opportunities for local governments. They had to make better use the spatial opportunities by cooperating with the capitalists, real estate developers, planners and designers, in order to make their neighbourhood, city or urban context as attractive as possible, so that they would be able to increase their tax base and avoid the loss of transfers in the neoliberal era, which are due to the weakening and shrinking capacity of manoeuvres by the national states.

Furthermore, in Sulukule, the regeneration project aims to turn this old Gypsy neighbourhood into an attractive and sanitised area (Ünlü, 2005). Using the powers of Law number 5366,⁵ the municipality decided to evacuate run-down buildings and turn them into living space for an upper-middle class neighbourhood. A great many number of academics, professionals and representatives of NGOs and community groups view these decisions as a blatant injustice. None of the residents have been called upon to participate in the decision-making process, and most of them are left out of negotiations – especially if they are tenants. In Sulukule, authorities did not hesitate to push out the Gypsies, who are in any case regarded “persona non grata”. The aim of this paper is to reveal that the purpose of such urban projects is to pave the way for bigger [neoliberal] businesses (Cıravoğlu and İslam, 2006).

What we gather from the literature on gentrification in general, is that it is now regarded as a quick solution or, in Slater’s terms, as a saviour for cities, after its content has been depoliticised and it is being proposed as a key strategy to approach complex urban problems. And they are indeed complex because they create both winners and losers, and the irony is that nobody is really keeping track of what is

happening to communities who are dislocated due to disruptions through investment in their area. While gentrifiers are shown as the primary actors in this process, the “gentrified” (both the community and the physical space) constitute the other half.

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Key words: Urban gentrification; neoliberal urbanization; neoliberalism; Sulukule.

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