

Local identities on change: urban waterfront regeneration within the global city Istanbul

(Local identities on change within the global city Istanbul)

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1. Transformations in Halic

Over the last decades, many cities worldwide have promoted urban waterfront regeneration for a variety of reasons building on the particular scenery of these sites. The success of the first well known urban waterfront regeneration project, Baltimore Inner Harbor regeneration (1960), has served as a prototype for cities around the world with the desire to position themselves in the race to become Global Cities (Harvey 1989) by providing strategically located high-quality investment opportunities to attract global capital, or by constructing attractive spaces to promote tourism and leisure. Nowadays, almost every city at water's edge is engaged in regeneration projects with strong political impetuses and interest from various parties: authorities, developers and neighboring communities (Hoyle 2001).

These developments have been critically examined by many scholars, many of which share the belief that urban waterfront regeneration is often not addressing the underlying, deep-rooted problems of the cities and furthermore, ignoring the socially and economically unstable landscapes in which they often occur, veritably contributing to the escalation of inequality, polarization and deprivation in the city (Harvey 1989; 2005; Brownill 1990; Gordon 1997b; Hoyle 2000; Saarinen and Kumpulainen 2005; Butler 2007; Healey 1997; Gordon 1997a, 1997b; Feldman 1999; Fainstein 2001; Granath 2005; Butler 2007).

Studying urban waterfront regeneration as a complex urban intervention, specifically its special governance, resistance and impacts on the neighboring tissue, could be considered a prism through which broader societal transformation processes and related planning challenges can be understood. For the scope of this study, the empirical research gathered both primary and secondary data through: literature review, review of laws, review of official documents and land-use plans, 31 interviews, 91 questionnaires, participatory- observation, an workshops, observation and photographs.

In order to understand the planning processes of the regeneration of Halic's waterfront, a reflection is done upon the peculiarities of Istanbul's urban regeneration policies and the institutional framework at city and national level that have facilitated it: Istanbul, Turkey has been experiencing a neo-liberal reconfiguration that is now in its final stage. In this context, urban regeneration is steered as a tool for development within a special legal framework and while the purpose of the projects seem to be in the name of upgrading the built environment and improving the living conditions of the poor, the top-down approach, reduce the projects to just transformation of physical space and neglecting the social, economic and environmental dimensions, which along with the unwillingness of government to allow grassroots participation in the planning process become the focus of discontent and protest.

Halic, a 7,5 km bay of the Bosphorus and the cradle of settlement since the birth of the city, was heavily industrialized and contaminated in the 1970s and since then has been experiencing a long process of transformation along its waterfront. In line with popular North-Western examples of urban waterfront regeneration at that time, this process was triggered by Mayor Dalan in 1983 who famously stated his mission: „The water of the Halic will be as blue as my eyes”. Behind the environmental concerns, there was also an economic motivation to bring Istanbul between the competitive global cities with a vision of a "Cultural Valley".

The following forced de-industrialization process of the 1980s was impressive and did indeed improve Halic from an environmental perspective, but the clearing process was pursued with a heavy-handed, top-down governmental approach to planning and the legacy of Dalan is contested: The project created an approximately 50m wide strip of vacant land– a great opportunity in terms of offering open green spaces for the city- but also mass unemployment and poverty in the backstage neighborhoods populated by former dock and shipyard workers.

The following initiatives to regenerate Halic's waterfront showed no intention of resolving the social and economic burning issues of the neighboring communities. Within the same top-down planning approach, as in the 80's clearance intervention, urban waterfront regeneration projects are ad-hoc initiative of different bodies of the government depending on ownership and planning rights over the land, creating developments for middle-high income citizens: "With empty convention centers in the middle of poor neighborhoods, a few art galleries right beside demolished historic buildings, and newly built museums next to squatter housing". (Bezmez 2008 pp. 817).

Still, this 7,5 km green belt of parks and recreational spaces in the heart of the city, represents an enormous opportunity for a congested global city as Istanbul and its citizens, but mostly for its low-income neighboring communities in need of public space.

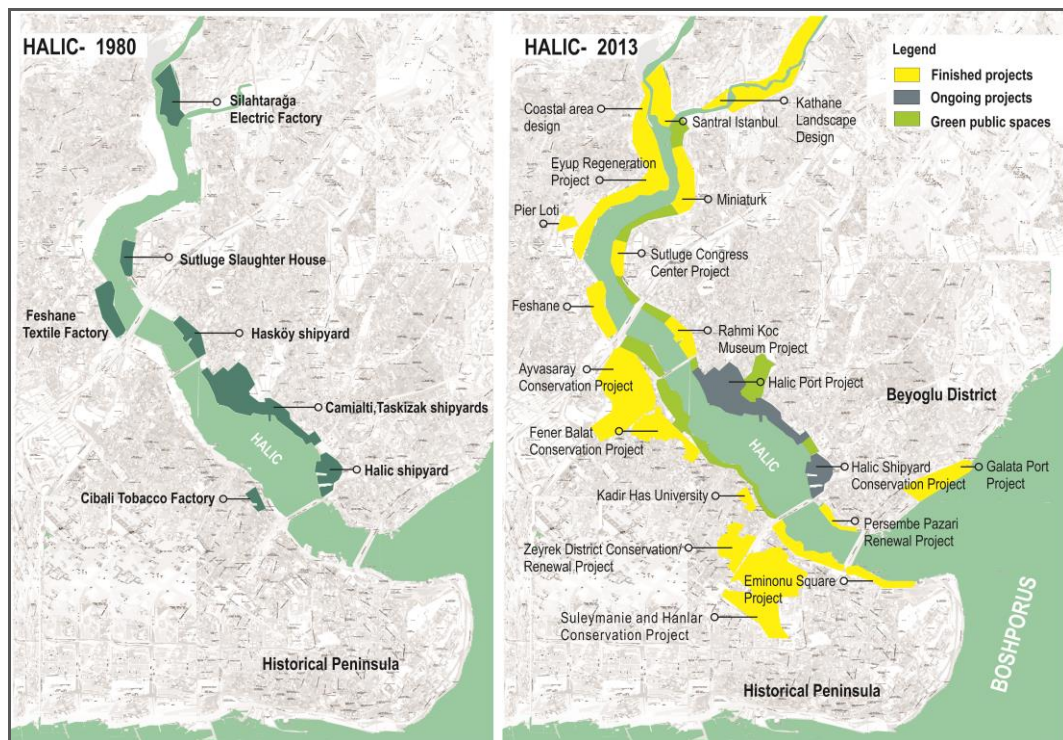


Figure 1: Change of Halic's waterfront from 1980s until 2013

1.1. Halic shipyard conservation project

Halic Shipyard Conservation Project is an urban waterfront regeneration project in on-going planning process, initiated and subsidized by Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality and creates hope in tailored outcomes, serving the citizens interest as a public project, but is missing its transparency.

The site of Halic shipyard was for long under pressure of transformation due to the opportune location and also being one of the last projects that could complement to the “Cultural Valley” vision. For understanding the area of the project and its relevance, it must be noted, that the shipyards aimed to be transformed are also important for their cultural and historical value at global, national and local level. Considering the legal framework, all three shipyards are under Law of Conservation and designated to regeneration and their current function will be changed with the suggested functions from existing plans: culture, recreation areas, commerce and education. Also Conservation Board No. II (representing Ministry of Tourism and Culture) will be added to the planning process.

The ownership belongs to different governmental bodies which makes a collaboration between these actors challenging. Major actors in the planning process of Halic Shipyard Conservation Project are: Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, the initiator of the project, owner of the land and also the provider of the finance in realizing it.; the Department of Historic Environment Protection managing the project, having mainly the responsibility to

assure the conservation and restoration of the historical monuments in the area; the Conservation Board No. II, representative of Ministry of Culture and Tourism, having also the main responsibility to assure the conservation and restoration of the monuments; Istanbul Metropolitan Planning in charge of the plans and design of the project and also IDO (private company), having the tender of the land.

In the interviews with representatives from the planning department of Istanbul Metropolitan Planning, the team planning Halic Shipyard Conservation Project, it has been revealed that the outcomes of the project will take into consideration the previous suggestions. Halic Shipyard Conservation Project will respect the 1/1000 Plans of Beyoglu in terms of conservation of the shipyards, along with the recommendations of implementing cultural and recreational activities. Moreover, creation of green spaces is emphasized, the vision being to open the waterfront for the broad public, the citizens of Istanbul. However, the project contains no analysis of impact assessment such as: environmental, economic or social, this showing the physical focus of urban waterfront regeneration in planning, putting in doubt the success and purpose of this project. Strategies concerning the development have been proposed by Istanbul Metropolitan Planning: "conservation of the buildings, enhancing the transportation in the area, introduction of recreational and exposition areas, bringing the city to the waterfront, protection of green spaces and ensure the participation of the local people of the area." But although these strategic points presented, there was no information for the broader public about the project or the request for any collaboration from the citizen's side. This leads to questioning the outcomes of the project because of this type of non-transparent planning process that leaves no input from the citizen's perspective. As seen and criticized in other examples of projects along the Halic, the project could also potentially enhance existing socio-economic problems, a matter that will be presented in the following part of the article, by analyzing the neighboring community in rapport to the project.

2. Bedrettin inhabitants, a neighboring community on struggle

This part presents the evaluation of the Halic Shipyard Conservation Project, considering the impact on the neighboring community. Bedrettin Neighborhood is chosen for analysis because it is the closest community next to Halic shipyard, also being the first group of actors impacted or that could benefit from this project will be exposed.

Bedrettin Neighborhood is a low income neighborhood (according to median monthly household income 2010) at the shores of Halic, in Beyoglu District. It was strongly connected to Halic Camialti and Taskizak shipyards, being occupied by blue collar workers at the shipyards. Therefore, the neighborhood was much affected by the clearance process done by Mayor Dalan in 1983, the first regeneration along Halic, its current problematic economic condition being outcome of the forced deindustrialization process of that time. Today, approximately 1500 people live in Bedrettin Neighborhood and are mostly divided as retired workers from the shipyards, people coming from Anatolian side of Turkey and a considerable group of roma minorities.

Based on the interviews with the "muhtar"(mayor of neighborhood) of Bedrettin Neighborhood, the questioners realized with the community and the personal observations of the researcher on site, is found that the neighborhood is in on-going transformation due to several reasons. First, Bedrettin Neighborhood was declared as Renewal Area in 2005 and, according to Law of Renewal, the neighborhood will go under a process of regeneration which will put in danger of displacement the poor citizens living in the area. Although 80% of the citizens living their own their land, the houses built are not in good condition, being classified as "gecekondur", squatter housing, and have to be renewed and improved for their safety, this being a hard task for the majority of the community which is poor. Second, the increasing prices of land in the area are the proof of the process of gentrification seen also along the whole waterfront of Halic.

These changes bring a strong opposition from the community, who is against this renewal project and afraid of displacement. Together with their muhtar, the community found a neighborhood association named Bedrettin Neighborhood Association. This has the purpose to fight in court, as the only way of challenging decision-making, against the regeneration of their neighborhood and all other regeneration projects that could affect them. All citizens of Bedrettin Neighborhood signed a list opposing this intervention and the municipality's project was given to court. However, the results were not positive ones and this created mistrust between the community of Bedrettin Neighborhood and municipality along with loss of hope towards the actions of the government. In this context, although the purpose of the urban renewal project seems to be in the name of upgrading the built environment and improving the living conditions of this poor community, the top-down approach along with the unwillingness of government to allow any participation from the citizen's side can be questioned.

The reason for opposition, from the citizen's perspective was not only the fear of displacement, but also the difference between the new proposed plans and their actual needs. As reason for this are the un-transparent processes of planning with no collaboration or participation from the community's side. Public planning policy in Turkey gives rights of involvement in planning process just to the owners of the land and welcomes participation from the citizen's perspective at the end of the planning process. Still, studying the neighboring community of Halic Shipyard Conservation Project, it was found that the citizens have been informed about the development of the shipyards and active in influencing the planning process. The community doesn't believe that the project will be done for their interest and that will bring them job opportunities or other benefits of such. Also there is a lack of information regarding the project which proves the lack of transparency in planning.

The lack of information regarding the project makes the community come closer to Chamber of Architects, Neighborhood Associations and Halic Resistance urban social movement, the actors currently engaged in a fight against the waterfront regeneration of the shipyards. In the questioners conducted during the meetings of Halic Resistance, besides the fear of displacement answers also as: "to learn the truth", "because this project is being used strategically against us" were given.

2.1. True needs of the citizens

Looking to Bedrettin Neighborhood, one could see a condensed living environment, trapped between wide boulevards and with a great view towards the shore of Halic. Analyzing the built environment, it can be seen through the narrow streets and lack of public spaces, that it evolved organically and unplanned. The lack of public space and also green areas is a main loss for this neighborhood, but also one of the main aspects that Halic Shipyard Conservation Project could improve.

Although, as previously mentioned, the citizens of Bedrettin Neighborhood are against the Halic Shipyard Conservation Project, outcomes of the questioners regarding what they would need in the future development were: green spaces, culture and education facilities, keeping the working shipyards, health facilities. In the discussions with the community, especially with the group of mothers, mostly staying home and taking care of their children, the need of closer public space and green areas was emphasized. It was found that families go to other parks along the Halic and make barbeques or just bring their children to play, this being the only recreational activity for these families. An intriguing vision of the children is the one of the "fisherman", a symbol of the waterfront of Istanbul which should not be blurred in the landscape of waterfront development for global economic gain given by projects in name of tourism and consumption.

The regeneration of Halic shipyard, is understood to be a big opportunity for the community in terms of creating public space for recreation, improving the quality of their life considerably.

Taking into account the vulnerable position of the neighborhood in terms of economic situation, the on-going gentrification process at Halic's waterfront and the renewal project in the agenda of the government, it can be argued that Halic Shipyard Conservation Project will contribute to this picture considerably, creating social and economic impacts on the community. From the questioners conducted in the neighborhood it is clear that the community is against Halic Shipyard Conservation project, the main reasons being in relation with the mistrust towards the regeneration projects initiated by the government, the lack of transparency in the planning processes, the lack of good quality information and the fear of displacement rather than the project itself or its outcomes. These aspects are also the reason why the neighboring community is engaging with other actors in opposition.

The community of Bedrettin Neighborhood is an important actor being the most affected by the project, but also by its potential to give inputs to the project. Due to the lack of consideration of this neighborhood in the planning process the true benefiting outcomes of the project will not be achieved. Opportunities for more inclusive and transparent processes in planning can be found after analyzing the neighboring community as the openness and interest of the community in participatory planning methods and in expressing their need. The community is not only in need of public green space which can be created with the Halic Shipyard Conservation Project, but also in need of programs and solutions for its vulnerable economic condition. Halic Shipyard Conservation Project, if planned carefully, might satisfy and resolve some of the problems faced by the community, but this is possible only if the community is involved in the planning process.

Urban waterfront regeneration in the context of Istanbul reveals the same features of the popular contested cases of North and Western examples . The leading factors are an entrepreneurial government and also a national policy on urban regeneration designated by the central government. The strong and constantly growing opposition is not only the resistance to this particular urban waterfront regeneration project, but it leads to a bigger picture of urban regeneration projects in Istanbul, realized through a top-down approach to planning, creating major social and economic impacts. One may argue that only through a change towards a more inclusive planning approach, along with clear targets for the improvement of the quality of life for the neighboring community, the urban waterfront regeneration project, Halic Shipyard Conservation Project, will be able to escape the current deadlocks and collisions between government, investors, resistance and local community and might have a chance to actually set an urgently needed precedent of a new planning culture in Istanbul.



Figure 2: Opposites. Right : Renewal Plan of Bedrettin Neighborhood; Left: the garden of a citizen

Source: Geambazu, S (2014), Date: 19.11.2013

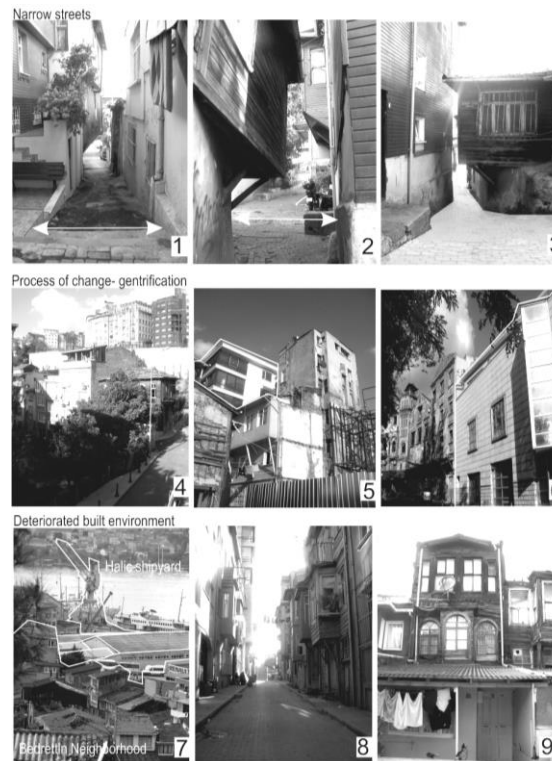


Figure 3: Perspectives: Analysis on the urban tissue of Bedrettin Neighborhood through photographs;

Source: Geambazu, S (2014) ; Date of photographs: 23.09.2013; 19.11.2013; 11.11.2013

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