

'How to legalize 'informal culture' and settlements: Government Acts and Social Implementation in Turkey'

Aylin Şentürk, H. Aysun Özkan,

Abstract: While it has been discussed whether informal settlements are problems or housing solutions, government attitudes and reactions also have changed dramatically over the time. In 1950's, squatter settlements were considered as an integrated part of developing industry and a new consumer group in economical flows of cities. In that sense, they had been tolerated by Turkish government because of their vote power of them and capacities to handle with housing bottleneck. However, this moderate policy has ended in the early 2000's by neoliberal politics. While land scarcity and increasing land values have made urban land the most important investment tool, the centralized government policies also supported the boom in construction sector.

Neoliberal approach mainly affecting Turkey during late 1980's and 1990's, has taken urban land as commodity and investment tool while making it an attempting source for major urban projects. Meanwhile, urban land, which was getting less and less, became more valuable than ever. In same period, foreign capital and investments in construction sector has gained more power and construction industry ended up as leading sector. All that pressures on construction sector and urban land drew government's attention and caused major changes on laws and planning powers.

In 2000's, government meeting with housing shortage and economic crisis declared 'housing mobilization' and has made a set of regulation changes including housing policies. As a result of the changes, central government organs gained privileged powers on planning of special areas including squatters but most importantly urban land became an economic asset of property-led development.

The land has become a negotiation tool between public and private sectors while it has been transformed to get more profit. Once for all, the former 'misery' areas which are tolerated by government firstly, turned to economic assets for settlers, then became transformation areas and market-based commodities of government. As the perception of gecekondu changes, policies, reactions and laws were recreated by government over time.

In many cities informality, containing “inequality” in dealing with its citizens. These citizens easily defined as the informal culture who migrate from less developed rural regions to urban land, or as it is nowadays the case finds refuge in another country. Being the most-populated and most-developed city in Turkey, Istanbul has become the focal point of informality and informal cultures, which makes it an exceptional research area.

Sulukule neighbourhood located in historic peninsula of Istanbul is quite famous for its cultural heritage stemming from Romanian populations who have been working in informal sectors. However, this informality, which is also a push factor for the choice of living area close to the city center has turned in to a reason of transformation after some certain regulative changes.

In 2000's, by the changes in government regulations and acts about housing policies in Turkey, urban renewal has started to be direct policy. Right after that, while groups of housing settlements were declared as renovation areas, Sulukule became one of the pioneer renovation projects. However, the project and the area came with a set of critics and arguments mainly focusing on how it turns to a gentrification project.

During the process, Sulukule citizens had been constrained to leave their homes due to their insufficient financial conditions that restrain them from buying a house from renovation project. Afterwards, government addressed new social houses for Romanian population locating urban periphery, which they couldn't adjust or survive in as well. For that people whose incomes are increasing fairly connected to live in city center, living on the periphery has become very devastating. That was the case, which brought informality one more time to the city center. The Romanian population, who had been forced to leave their living space once upon a time, turns back to city center as tenant again.

Sulukule renovation project was planned as high-income social groups centred ‘formal’ neighborhood. However when project was finalized, neighborhood has stayed as unused and ineffective area. At the same time, refugee population in Istanbul has increased dramatically because of the war in Syria. Meanwhile, Syrian who are real ‘informal culture’ has created their own housing system in Sulukule which is based on illegal re-renting process creating legal and illegal renters in a parallel way.

As seen in the Sulukule case, government acts may not be effective enough to legalize ‘informal culture and settlements’ and even they may trigger some other forms of informality by causing kind of vicious circle reproducing it over and over in urban space.

Key Words: Gecekondu, transformation, laws, neoliberalization, informality, informal culture, regulative changes, Turkey.

İstanbul Technical University & Yıldız Technical University Department of Urban and Regional Planning, İstanbul:
aylin_senturk@hotmail.com

İstanbul Technical University, Department of Urban and Regional Planning, İstanbul: ozaysun@hotmail.com

