



Local responses to urban redevelopment projects: The case of Beyoğlu, Istanbul



Emine Yetiskul ^{a, *}, Serap Kayasü ^a, Suna Yaşar Ozdemir ^b

^a Department of City and Regional Planning, Middle East Technical University, Ankara, Turkey

^b Department of City and Regional Planning, Cankaya University, Ankara, Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Urban redevelopment projects became the primary mechanisms of neoliberal urban policies in Istanbul. By analyzing the urban redevelopment projects of Beyoğlu and the responsive practices of local actors, this paper highlights the role of community organizations in resisting and challenging the state's urban planning policies. A collaboration among local citizens, civil society institutions, and community organizations of the case study area formed the Beyoğlu Neighborhood Associations Platform and searched for opportunities to reproduce neoliberal priorities and policies.

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1. Introduction

Neoliberal urban policies following the 1980s have led to economic and socio-spatial restructuring in Turkey. Urban redevelopment has been fueled, and it became a priority for the state to meet market-driven demands in urban land and property markets. The 2000s have witnessed a dramatic shift in restructuring the city's economy and urban environment by developing larger, more expensive and more symbolic projects. Recently, a substantial body of literature analyzed the intertwined relations between neoliberalism and urban redevelopment in Turkey. The legislative and institutional frameworks of urban policies are assessed through a detailed analysis of new laws and state roles (Balaban, 2012; Eraydin, 2012) in relation with global trends of economic and political spheres and the changing socio-spatial structure (Türkün, 2011). The changing power dynamics among various policy making actors are delineated with regard to different phases of neoliberalism (Kayasü & Yetiskul, 2014). The unique coupling of neoliberalism and Islamism is discussed in the Karaman's research (2013). The urban redevelopment in Istanbul, as a suitable exemplar of Turkey, is investigated using case studies, thereby

illustrating the distinctive local characteristics of Istanbul and the context-specific factors of the project areas (Aksoy, 2012; Bezmez, 2009; Candan Bartu & Kolluoğlu, 2008; Dinçer, 2011; Geniş, 2007; Kuyucu & Unsal, 2010; Lovering & Türkmen, 2011; Sakızlıoğlu, 2014; Unsal, 2015). These papers cover various redevelopment projects that range from flagship projects on the historic and touristic centers of Istanbul and its waterfronts to urban design projects of internationally renowned architects for commercial business districts and projects for dilapidated inner-city neighborhoods, as well as the squatter neighborhoods of Istanbul.

The urban redevelopment projects have been developed in high urban rent potential areas that are no longer economically disinvested or in geographically peripheral areas because of the economic restructuring and rapid urbanization processes present in Istanbul since the 1980s. Many historic inner-city neighborhoods have been attracting major commercial and touristic investments, whereas many squatter neighborhoods surrounded by upper-class residences and gated communities are subject to urban redevelopment. Additionally, the reserves of public land or large-scale investment of public infrastructure in close proximity to a neighborhood increases the possibility of redevelopment. These projects on either public land or privately owned land are managed by central and local governments through several laws. Urban redevelopment does not entail the social and economic dimensions of spatial change; therefore, the projects become solely a tool of urban income transfer from less-advantaged urban groups to new

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: yetiskul@metu.edu.tr (E. Yetiskul), kayasu@metu.edu.tr (S. Kayasü), sozdemir@cankaya.edu.tr (S.Y. Ozdemir).

entrepreneur groups. Thus, redevelopment pressures in these project areas have been affecting the long-established residents and local shop owners, resulting in dispossession and displacement.

To protect these groups' interests, the various response practices have been developed by those who are subject to urban redevelopment. [Kuyucu and Unsal \(2010\)](#) illustrate the local roles and actions against two projects implemented in a historic inner-city neighborhood, Tarlabası, and a squatter neighborhood, Başbüyük, in Istanbul. The predominant *de jure* ownership structure in the former neighborhood, in contrast to the *de facto* use of the right of the latter, emphasizes the formation of effective resistance. [Loving and Türkmen \(2011\)](#) reveal the diversity of local responses in the analyses of three urban redevelopment projects in the squatter neighborhoods of Istanbul, whereas [Unsal \(2015\)](#) exhibits resistance from another squatter neighborhood, which has forced the local government to redesign the entire process. In [Dinçer's research \(2011\)](#), the opposition campaign of the professionals organized as the Sulukule Platform focuses on the Sulukule neighborhood, and its Roma population is analyzed using the redevelopment policies in the historic areas of Istanbul.

The undermining of local planning decisions by the neoliberal state and marginalization of the citizens, civil society institutions, and NGOs in urban policy making have led urban residents to become more active and better organized to react against urban redevelopment projects in their neighborhoods and public spaces, green areas, and historical sites. Finally, the strongest urban uprising in the history of Turkey emerged in June 2013 when the government decided to demolish the Taksim Gezi Parkı and build a shopping mall over one of the few remaining green areas in the historic center of Istanbul. People who were against the project occupied the park and then streets of Istanbul. In this paper, we focus on a reaction story of the local citizens who live in the neighborhoods of Beyoğlu District, within which the Gezi uprising started and spread all over Turkey. Being close to the historic peninsula of Istanbul as well as the European shoreline of Bosphorus, Beyoğlu with its unique natural and historic urban environment, reflecting late Ottoman era, has had a high potential for urban redevelopment projects ([Fig. 1](#)). In order to attract more commercial and touristic facilities to Beyoğlu, the neoliberal urban policies and investment priorities of the state and market originated with the promulgation of the Beyoğlu Conservation Plan in 2011 ([Fig. 2](#)).

The case study areas of this research cover the residential neighborhoods of Beyoğlu, namely, Ayaspaşa, Cihangir and Galata.¹ These inner-city neighborhoods were used to house non-Muslims until the 1950s and subsequently housed rural migrants and their poor, marginal and informal tenants; these areas have become gentrified or gentrifying neighborhoods of Istanbul since the 1990s. The traditionally diverse communities of these neighborhoods established the Neighborhood Associations (NAs), which are one of the first examples of the community organizations that were organized to subvert and address neoliberal urbanism. By forming the Beyoğlu NAs Platform, the active NAs have been searching for new forms of participation by using direct or indirect tools to

engage in the plan making process of Beyoğlu and protect their historic, residential and local neighborhoods.

This article examines the emergence of the NAs, their networks and collaborations in forming organized local responses in accordance with the neoliberal urban redevelopment projects of Beyoğlu District in the post-1980 era. The study of the urban redevelopment processes in Beyoğlu before and after the 2000s demonstrates the gradual proliferation of neoliberalism in Turkey, particularly in Istanbul, and dominance of highly centralized state. The investigation of the Beyoğlu NAs Platform can highlight some of the reasons why the Gezi uprising emerged and neoliberal urban policies led to an opposition of that scale.

2. Neoliberal urbanism and new roles of community organizations

Neoliberal urbanism has expanded the role of market forces in real estate and property industries; in addition, urban redevelopment policy has become an increasingly central focus of neoliberal urban policy driven by inter-urban competitiveness and urban entrepreneurialism ([Hall & Hubbard, 1998](#); [Harvey, 1989](#); [Leitner, 1990](#)). Urban redevelopment projects, as a part of an effort to re-enforce the competitive position of the city, define processes that reflect the changing local, national and global conditions; in addition, these projects are emblematic examples of neoliberal urbanism ([Swyngedouw et al., 2002](#)). Actors from the real estate and property development industries have become the main players in urban policy ([Sager, 2011](#)). In contrast to market-driven and entrepreneurial discourses of a neoliberal economy, urban redevelopment was often state-led and state-financed. The state that became a key factor in the development of economic strategies ([Brenner & Theodore, 2002a](#); [Gough, 2002](#); [Jessop, 2002](#); [Smith, 2002](#)) took a more proactive role in inserting market rules in urban development ([Taşan-Kok & Beaten, 2012](#)). Civil society institutions, community organizations and citizens who are engaged in the processes of urban spatial change also attained new roles and responsibilities in urban planning processes and public service delivery as a result of the contraction of the state's role and responsibilities ([Brenner & Theodore, 2002a](#); [Peck & Tickell, 2002](#)).

The transformation of the role and responsibilities of the state and the increase in the civil responsibility caused certain changes in the structure and consequences of the relations between the state and community organizations. Traditional democratic participation mechanisms have not been respected and applied; however, counter-neoliberalism social movements became marginalized within the urban political sphere ([Hackworth, 2002](#)). New forms of power relations and partnerships have emerged, which is part of a larger scale transition in governing processes that can be described as movement from 'government towards governance' ([Le Gales, 1998](#)). A substantial body of work has focused on debating the influence of civil society institutions and community organizations on democratizing society and to the extent to which urban governance forms neoliberalism empower citizen participation. In spite of the prevailing concerns regarding the increase in state autonomy and power in the relations with civil society ([Atkinson, 1999](#); [Brenner & Theodore, 2002b](#); [Ghose, 2005](#); [Gough, 2002](#); [Peck & Tickell, 2002](#); [Taylor, 1999](#)), neoliberalism generates a level of openness towards active participation in urban governance. [Peck and Tickell \(2002\)](#) emphasize that enhanced citizen participation and legitimized community organizations increase the vulnerability in the neoliberal agenda and open a new crack.

The micro-scale of the neighborhood is increasingly identified as an important arena for innovations in neoliberal urban governance ([Sorensen & Sagaris, 2010](#)). Community organizations play an important role in creating a flexible process that combines

¹ The field research upon which this paper is based was initially developed from a wider research project, 'Practices and policies for neighborhood improvement: Towards 'Gentrification 2.0' funded by TUBITAK JPI Urban Europe (113K026), on the developments of four inner-city neighborhoods across Europe. Cihangir is one of the four case studies, and the fieldwork on community organization of Cihangir is one of the eleven fieldwork protocols structured in the project according to the main actors of interest. The authors broadened the field research and covered other Beyoğlu community organizations because of the extensive discussions regarding urban redevelopment in Beyoğlu and the powerful local response groups.

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