

Social Cohesion in Housing Rehabilitation; A Study of Three Housing Areas in Istanbul

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Planners are usually in favour of creating strong social ties in housing areas. Lots of models developed in history – from garden city to neighbourhood unit - intended to create social ties in newly developed urban areas. Existing community, on the other hand, is something that modern planning tends to ignore. Housing rehabilitation process is one of the cases in which planners inevitably have to involve local communities. Taking the term *community* within the framework freed from modern-traditional dichotomy, the thesis deals with especially low income immigrant urban communities who are living in bad environmental conditions, but seemingly have strong community ties. The aim of the thesis is to see whether these ties can constitute a base for an organization of housing rehabilitation.

Approach to the modern and the traditional

The thesis begins with some groups of questions;

1. What happened to the *community* in ‘modern’ cities of non-Western countries in the «global age»? How is the *community* distorted during so-called modernization and globalization processes? What kind of combinations is established between “modern” and “traditional” aspects of social life?
2. What is happening in low income immigrant neighborhoods in terms of “solidarity”? Can social relations be defined as “social cohesion” in these areas? What kind of social networks are established between low income neighborhoods and remaining parts of the city?
3. Can these social relations be developed as a base for further local organizations for housing rehabilitation?

The study, firstly, has focused on “persisting” of the *community* in non-Western civilizations. It is widely accepted that if the *community* still exists in a civilization, it has not yet completely modernized or that it is still at the beginning of the modernization process. These arguments are based on the definition of modernization as a one way process originated from the West and encapsulating remaining part of the world through destroying pre-modern elements like *community* as well as neighborhood, religious orders and sects, and finally the family. However we describe modernity rather in a different way. Modernity is not reserved for a particular time (nineteenth to twentieth centuries) and a particular place (West and its expansions) Elvin (1986), a historian working on China, describes modernity as ‘not based on chronology’ and prefers ‘to see societies as varying combinations of “modern” and “non-modern” elements, sometimes mutually indifferent, sometimes mutually supportive, and sometimes mutually hostile. Recent comparative studies in anthropology, sociology and political sciences have focused on some networks-such as familisms, patron-client relations, affinal and traditional social structure and power systems- that modern ‘rational’ institutions intend to substitute. Insistent persistence of familial groups and traditional groupings in ‘modern’ forms deserves a serious examine rather than being left aside as some primitive residues of a newly modernising system. Globalization, if we look from this point of view, is not a homogenizing process dominating all over the world in a global age –like modernization- rather it is a part of twin processes of which other part is processes of the “excavation of traditional context of action”.

Resettled communities; Mahalle in Ottoman origin

In the context of the thesis, the research has focused on the neighborhood as a territorial community. It takes the term neighborhood not in the “modern” planning context, but as a basic component of traditional cities of the East, mainly of the Ottoman Empire. Main settlement policy of the Ottomans had been to establish new neighborhoods –namely “mahalle”s- around conquered cities and resettlement of people from every part of the Empire in these neighborhoods. People were resettled according to their religious, ethnic and tribal origins. Thus, cities were not only segmented into main religious groups such as Muslims, Jewish, Christians, but into more detailed identities like Greeks, Orthodox Greeks, Catholic Latins, etc. Ethnic and religious communities were organized in both vertical; representing whole community all over

the Empire and horizontal; staying at the city and neighborhood level. The latter was territorial and remained more open to the influences from each other. There were not spatial clear-cut divisions between “mahalle”s in Ottomans unlike the other Eastern, especially Arabic, cities. Communities permeated through each other in time. Cohabitation of different ethno-religious groups could happen and identities gained a continuation.

Mahalle was not only a territorial community, it was also the smallest administrative unit which was represented by a local religious leader. The state did not interfere with day-to-day activities of the community. Local public services, religious buildings, schools, fountains etc. were provided by the elites or well-off families within the community. Very strong local foundations – charitable endowments- developed for that purpose. A kind of clientage is rooted from the community where the state stayed far from everyday life.

Migrated communities

After the establishment of the Turkish Republic in the beginning of the century, the main policy of the newly developing nation-state was total modernization of the system through direct intervention. Traditional communities, especially religious ones were partially dissolved or isolated as a consequence of the secular policies. But in time, nation-state failed to perform the universal role –ideologically and practically- and could not create an overall reference within which modern institutions could work. New kind of communities flourished in the fields where the nation-state remained ineffective. One of the areas where nation-state’s policy was “not-to-interfere” has been the internal immigration movement and housing of newcomers. In the big cities, like Istanbul, the geographical background of the immigrants became the basis of new communities. “Townsmanship” (or fellow citizenship) – belonging to the same geographical area; city, town or village, in this case the place from where they migrated- has been a kind of glue for the new urban community. It was a useful mechanism for job finding, housing provision and security of immigrants in the city. “Townsmanship” contained a wide variety of identities that is rooted from religious, ethnic and tribal origins with geographical reference, but through time, geographical origin lost its importance and “townsmanship” associated with more urban based social ties, such as local societies, mafia, sport clubs etc. It appears in many traditional forms of

groupings –from friendship and neighbourhood relations to familism and clientage – Most important is that these communities have local and citywide political power with which they compete with each other and with more settled segments of the city to get more space for themselves to use and settle in..

Three cases; migrants in social housing and inner-city areas and elderly in an old district

The case studies have been conducted in three areas in Istanbul metropolitan area; one of which is a social housing area, the other is an inner city depressed area, and the last one is a co-operative housing area. Physical analysis were made to reveal environmental conditions of the street or the blocks and the buildings. Structured and unstructured interviews were conducted with women, men and youngsters in selected streets and blocks. Interviews with local officers, school teachers, real estates managers and planners of local authorities have provided useful information.

The social housing area –namely Tozkoparan- was built after a citywide squatter clearance programme in the 1960s. It is located close by the early industrial development which was at the outskirts of the old city, but now is encapsulated in the inner part of the metropolis. Textile and leather sector serving the international and the local market are the main sectors in the nearby industrial area. It created an employment opportunity of a full employment basicly for males. Women benefit from having the opportunity of doing minor piece-work at home. The social pattern is very complicated, because people from various part of the country live side by side. After clearance, even though people coming from the same squatter clearance area were resettled in nearby blocks, former social groupings and community patterns, probably based on “townsmanship”, were destroyed by this move. The spatial structure of modern blocks also promoted this break. Former common spaces in squatter settlements –streets, courtyards and gardens- were replaced by new ones -block stairs and galleries. While former common spaces had been strengthening social ties and solidarity, the latter were the places of tension and quarrel diminishing social comfort.

The area has been –after thirty years- a settled part of the metropolitan city. New relations were established in spite of spatial barriers. Broken ties were replaced by new ones; strong

neighborhood relations were established. That is because low income groups especially those who are not so mobile- like women, elderly and very poor- are in need of each other in many respects. On the other hand, social atmosphere of the district does not seem safe for children due to expansion of street gangs and drug uses among youngsters. Strong neighborhood relations become a tool for keeping control over children, youngsters and women. However, neighborhood relations did not create a homogenized social pattern even at the block level. There are several sub-groups excluding each other. Homeowners vs. tenants, settled families vs. newcomers, elderly vs. youngsters established separated social networks within the block. Thus it can be a discussion point that to what extent this social pattern can be a base for solidarity. Their attitudes to their environment is not very positive. Apart from the social handicaps, environmental quality is quite low, blocks are not well-maintained, flats are small. Even if they are happy with close social ties, they state that if they have an opportunity they prefer to move from the neighbourhood..

The second case study was conducted in a historical inner-city area –namely Tophane-. It is located in the European side, near Galata and Pera. Historically the area had been resided by Turks, Greeks and Armenians together. After the 1950s when older residents left the district, houses were bought or rented by immigrants from the East Anatolia. The studied part of the district was settled by people from a particular town of the East, from Siirt. They are very densely settled here, because the first newcomers found jobs in metal workshops of chandelier production and furniture workshops nearby. They called their relatives and a Siirt community was established in time. The community is here constituted around "townsmanship", basically Siirt identity. There are several family groups in the community. Homeowners own more than one flat in the street and rent them to their relatives or other Siirt immigrants. There are few outsider families from other parts of the country. They are almost excluded from the social life of the street. Outsiders are reluctant to be a part of the social network too, because they find the existing community conservative or even fundamentalist.

Those living in this quarter locate in the very center of the metropolitan city geographically, but they experience a peripherality as they have limited access to the central life of the city. Location

of the area is important to understand why the social ties are so strong or why they established a introverted identity. The area gets jammed into non-residential functions. In the west, Ostikla Street, primary a leisure center, is located. It is a very densely used pedestrian axis with various cultural and leisure activities; cinemas, cafes and pubs. In the south-west an old brothel district is located. Historical commercial area, port and depots in the south expands into the area. In the east, the adjacent historical district begin to gentrify, rehabilitated buildings are turned into antiquarians, offices or high status flats. The strong ties probably provide an "island" of safety for the inhabitants in the case study area in anonymous city life.

The third case study is conducted in a co-operative housing area, that was developed for the families of public officials in the 1950's, now occupied by an elderly population. The housing stock is terraced houses which is now under the threat of high density development. The existing elderly community established a very strong social network, they resist to demolish their old houses, but the demographic profile is going to change inevitably. Real estate companies begin to prepare plans for future redevelopment. This case study has not been finished yet.

Outcome

It seems evident that the *community* persists in various modern forms in non-Western metropolitan cities. It is not going to be weakened in the modernization process, on the contrary, it takes more complicated forms. *The community* is something from which people benefit in reaching opportunities provided by the city, and at the same time a vehicle to keep people in more stable conditions against social, cultural or economic fluctuations occurring in the city. It can be a point of discussion whether strong social ties in a low income neighborhood means existence of social cohesion, or solidarity. It looks that it is conjunctural for people to stay in or to escape from *the community*. So it can be a "slippery" base for further organization of housing rehabilitation.

Reference:

Elvin, M. (1986), "A Working Definition of "Modernity"?", *Past and Present*, 113 (November), 209-213.