

Istanbul becoming profit-city and fear-city...

(summary of "Istanbul2010" conference lecture, J.-F. Pérouse : jeanfrancoisperouse@gmail.com)

Let's go beyond the current "cool Istanbul" stereotypes and the misleading marketing of "Istanbul European Capital of Culture", to size the drop in Istanbul public spaces. We are tired with the predominant 'political correct' (and investments-oriented) discourse about Istanbul which mostly tends to hide some very questionable realities.

In this context, the Ayamama river floods of September 2009 could be regarded as the pointer to the dominant way of urbanization : a short-term urban rant seeking urbanization way, a way of urbanization denying the environment and the historical heritages, a partial, narrow-scale way of urbanization, at least a way of urbanization which decision making process remains very blur.

The now 12,5 million people-metropolis we are dealing with - where half of its workers is remaining out off any official social security system, where the monthly guaranteed minimum wage doesn't exceed 320 Euro, and where the real estate market has, since 2002, became a huge international investment field - is realizing roughly the half of the Turkish exports, is covering at least 5 700 square kilometers, and is holding 3,5 million housing units and 1,5 million buildings.

At the top of that, we are dealing with a metropolis where 2/3 of the housing units aren't conform with the complete legal frame... and where half of the buildings has been condemned to be destroyed by local authorities...

I) The growing fail of the "right to the city"

A) The fail of the right to housing and the current urban transformation policy

The so-called urban transformation policy could be characterized as an urban renewal policy – which conduces to direct evictions or indirect pressures due to the growing housing prices – monitored without any sincere participation by the public authorities in close collaboration with private constructing companies, and, till now, out of any specific legal frame. The law on urban transformation which should have been issued since about 7 years is still waiting, thrown out the parliamentary agenda. And now private construction companies are leading their own "urban transformation" policy, with the benediction of "public authorities".

This policy is launched and ruled at different scales under various names and pretexts to justify compulsory purchases: earthquake, urban esthetics, urban modernization, hygiene, security, enlargement of roads...

Beyond the projects known by the public opinion and frequently mentioned by the main newspapers, there are more than 100 projects currently launched in Istanbul. Each of the now 39 Istanbul district is proud to announce its urban transformation projects supposed helping Istanbul to become a worldwide attractive big business city.

Besides the discussed projects, there are many *de facto* renewal operations, like the "Avrupa Konutları (TEM)" built since 2007 by TOKİ/Emlak Konut GYO A.Ş. and the Çetinsaya Construction Company in the area of Karayolları (district of GOP), just over the noisy highway, in a previous

gecekodu area. Comprising 3 100 housing units, these secured and swimming-pool provided “modern” buildings are targeting car-addicted middle-class.

Nevertheless, the Urban Transformation (UT) policies are based on a totally unreal aim that is the renewing of half of the Istanbul buildings stock (instead of trying to improve the existing stock). In the historical peninsula, for instance, the Fatih-district mayor’s has recently declared he wanted to reduce the amount of inhabitants from 1/3.

Moreover, these UT policies don’t consist only in architectural or urbanistic projects, they have mutated into almost “totalitarian” social engineering projects which claim equally dealing with social, economical and even cultural dimensions of the city... When local leaders begin to claim improving the ‘urban morality’ through UT projects, the targeted objectives change radically.

B) The decline of the right to beauty and shared environment

Meanwhile, the current processes are leading to the growing privatization of urban amenities (access to seas, to Bosphorus, to forests, to clean green areas, to noteworthy landscapes...), which are gradually removed from the common use. Accordingly, the ongoing reconfiguration of social geography shows clearly the removal from urban amenities of the low classes (in fact, most of the UT projects could be seen and interpreted through this unique prism). The transformations planned in Armutlu or Gülsuyu/Gülsuyu or the recent transformations of the Golden Horn shores have to be replaced into this perspective. Urban beauties are at present selectively sold or for sale.

C) The endangered right to shared historical heritages

In this same process, the countless historical heritages of the city either become commodities or are transformed into supports for narrow/nationalist historical narratives. The long lease of the “Bin bir direk Sarnıcı” (Thousand one pillars-Cistern) to a private entertainment company could be considered as an example of the ongoing process of history’s commodification). Besides, all of the interventions conducted towards the byzantine city-walls are embedded in an Ottoman-times glorifying “conquest” narrative. The 2008 opened “1453 Panorama City-Museum” is one of the most striking and frightening examples of this extremely narrow reading of local history. Consequently, it seems impossible to promote historical heritages without promoting an incomes-provider tourism or without flattering the nationalist proud.

D) Gentrification-like processes in the historical areas

In the same times, as in Galata, the historical areas are undergoing gentrification-like processes which mean transformations of local social profile of dwellers and, meanwhile, transformations of local economic basis and local ways of life. These processes are especially remarkable in the areas where minorities (it means non-muslims) have previously lived. Social value given to “historical areas” by upper and up-middle classes have significantly changed these last years. That for, there is a trend to historical areas, with many differences according the stages and the landscape factor. In this respect, the term *gentrification* should be used with many precautions in Istanbul.

The witnessed change of value has been understood by local authorities that try now to take their own share of this trend, through the promotion of renewal projects inside historical areas (Tarlabaşı, Sulukule, Ayvasaray, İMÇ, Fener-Ballat-II...).

To some extent, the historical urban fabric has become a distinctive commodity “offered” to the culture-consumers. If necessary, to enlarge the history-consumption area, the local authorities have even began to build *ex-nihilo* new “historical” buildings, like in Suleymaniye or Zeyrek. Furthermore, with the wonderful-located luxurious “apartotel” fashion’s, both Istanbul landscape and history’s are sold. Launched first in 1986 in Galata area, the “apartotel” concept is now widespread throughout the all historical Beyoğlu.

II) The decline of the common urban places and the social segregation trends

A) The merciless domination of car

Citizen without their own car haven’t the whole right to the city. Furthermore, carless urban citizens are quite suspicious. And despite the official discourses which are stressing on the necessity to develop alternative means of transport, in terms of public investments, the roads are privileged. In order to carry out its ambitious underground road-tunnels program, the Metropolitan Municipality has recourse to public lands-selling incomes while for the railway-tunnel Marmaray it has borrowed on international markets. Priorities are clear.

B) Difficulties to develop public places

Due to this crushing car-domination, car-free public places could not be easily developed. Taksim square looks more like an enormous roundabout under surveillance than like a public place. But mosques and more recently commercial malls have generated their own “pseudo-public places”. For instance, “Meydan” in Ümraniye is now often quoted as a model of private-produced pseudo-public places. The reluctance of public authorities to guarantee the possibility, the sustainability and the impartiality of public places should be seriously thanked.

C) The trivialization of ‘gated communities’ as predominant model of housing

Since the middle of the 1980’s the gated communities have become a model for construction companies (even for those related with the Metropolitan Municipality or with the state), and for “consumers”. Through different forms (among them the vertical integrated one has recently become salient) and through different standards, they are now the most attractive “product” of the urban real estate market, despite their short life-time. In the all Istanbul province (which is covering about 5 700 km²), there are roughly 600 gated communities in the beginning of 2009, that comprise about 100 000 housing units. Beyond their speculative dimension, these gated communities supply a body-centered consumerist way of living, of being together and an exclusive way of enjoying environment amenities.

D) A general trend of enclosure and the coming of the fear-city

Parallel to the development of gated communities, we notice – as a result of a contamination process – a general trend, for existing middle-class dwellings, towards enclosure and spatial exclusiveness. In fact, the discourses launched to promote closed residential forms have contributed to impose at the top of the city-agenda the security-issue. In this context, since 2005, there are more private security-sector employed than public policemen in Istanbul... Earthquakes, robberies, aggressions, pollutions are mixed up to sell security systems and secured ways of life.

E) The tremendous selling of public urban lands

Since 2000, the Turkish state seems more and more incline to sell public lands (or to rent their in a long lease way), in order to get quickly fresh money incomes. And the most expensive public land pieces are located in Istanbul. In doing so, public authorities are losing one of their most effective control tools on the urban growth. In this frame, the 1984 founded Mass Housing Administration (called TOKİ) has become the main qualified body to ensure most of these transfers from public sphere to private sphere. Given, in contrast to open public spaces production policy, the city goes towards growing land privatization.

III) The price to pay for becoming Dubai or Monaco...

On the one hand, reiterated claims to become an international finance center, huge tower projects, fest-shopping events (like in Dubai), or Formule-1 dreams and disappointments and “Cruise-center” projects, like in Monaco, on the other hand, out of the marketing-picture, the life conditions of the majority are going better.

A) Towards a city without any poor? (“If you don’t have money, don’t try to go to Istanbul”, Istanbul’s Mayor, 2008)

The city which is now dreamed, designed and drawn by the local authorities (especially through the Istanbul Metropolitan Planning and Design Center, namely İMP) is a clean and sterilized city. That means a city which can be conceived only by Photoshop, like the “new Tarlabaşı” displayed in the Tarlabaşı Renewal Project booklet.

Since 2003, the places devolved to tourism in the central districts have been cleaned from all the disturbing elements. Like the Eminönü square, besides the famous mosque, which has been radically cleaned up from its centenarian street sailors (called *seyyar satıcı*). In the same scheme, the new designed city is purged from its single men (like in Küçükpazar last times), its seasonal workers, its migrants in transit, its refugees, its new comers from provincial areas, its “black Kurds”, its “dark citizens” (that means gypsies) and its poor carless elements.

However, currently, the officially produced housing units could not be in any way bought by the large majority of the inhabitants. Plus, although all the official discourses largely broadcasted, the serial “social housing units” produced by TOKİ don’t in fact be aimed to the needy households. Serial TOKİ’ler. There is a total discrepancy between supply and demand, due to the blindness of the authorities vis-à-vis the social structures.

To sum up, the new designed city is drawn only for owners or rich renters. When city-planning doesn't go to past attractive image-making, the risk of huge misunderstanding is permanent.

B) The launched process of deindustrialization and the dream of a city without workers

In Mai 2006 a new 1/100 000° scaled Urban Master Plan has been published by the İMP, that has been twice taken to court by the professional chambers. According to this Master Plan, Istanbul has to renounce radically to industry, in order to become fully a financial and touristic world-city. For this reason, all of the production activities of the historical peninsula had to leave quickly. In the district of Kartal, for instance, this transformation process of economical restructuring is labeled "Urban Regeneration". In Merter, in addition, the 1970's established textile factories are now letting the place to commercial malls or "luxurious" housing units development projects. But beyond this change of functions of territories, in the name of progress or "modernity", "useless people" have to leave the place.

C) Towards a city where all the "citizen" will be firstly submissive individual consumers

The targeted new urban inhabitant would be a fervent consumer, endowed with a lot of credit-cards. In front of us, we can see a city sculpted by the individual credit opportunities and by the 2007-set up Mortgage system ; in other words, a debt-metropolis, where, as mentioned above, the commercial malls developers will be the principal creators of public spaces.

Final proposals to resist face to these prospects:

-Ensuring the sharing of knowledge between all concerned actors, to avoid suspicious and socially sterilized monopoles of information.

-Accepting and making accept the social realities, particularly in terms of household incomes, and setting-up a suitable social housing policy (with a public rental sector).

-Remaining far from all ethnical community-based approach, and remaining cautious vis-à-vis the "civil-society projects" that mainly last just a cup of years and that produced their own frame of norms, imposed from outside. Existing policy making bodies (like trade-unions, professional chambers, political parties...) seem sufficient in a first step.

-Reinforcing the initial functions of public authorities, in terms of continuity of policy-making, of collective memory, of definition and guarantee of collective values and goods, of right/access to the city and of spatial justice.

-Avoiding making poverty a matter of culture or, worse, falling in aestheticism within this sensitive social context.