

REPORT ON THE IMPACT OF SULUKULE URBAN RENEWAL PROJECT

By Sulukule Platform, 25 April 2009

In this brief report we would like to evaluate the arguments put forward by Fatih Municipality, echoed by the 2009 Progress Report 'Historic Areas of İstanbul' by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (REPORT), for intervening in the Sulukule area with an Urban Renewal project (PROJECT). Our aim is to draw attention to how the stated objectives of the Sulukule Urban Renewal Project are not being met. On the contrary, what we see happening is that the PROJECT is having detrimental impact on the residents, and on both the tangible and intangible heritage of the area.

The stated aims of the Sulukule Urban Renewal Project (as reiterated in the REPORT) are given as follows:

- improve living quality of inhabitants,
- adopt conservation of world heritage and living culture as a leading principle and goal,
- prevent physical decay with providing sustainability for historical pattern and distinctive identity of city,
- recover of economic life,
- increase living quality and activation of cultural dynamics,
- ensuring participation,
- support socio-cultural development,
- integrate district and inhabitants to the whole city and citizens,
- attain modern, habitable, sustainable places integrated with history and culture.

We have grouped these aims under 4 headings and have examined the impact of the PROJECT in terms of whether these state aims are being achieved.

Presently (April 2009), of the total urban renewal area, the Hatice Sultan neighborhood section as a whole, and 2/3 of the Neslisah Neighborhood section have been demolished. The neighborhood is mostly vacated. Around 30-40 families continue to reside. Those who still remain in the neighborhood are: 1) property owners who have not settled on an agreement with the Municipality; 2) tenants who have not been granted entitlements to houses in Tasoluk by the Municipality; 3) tenants or informal dwellers who do not meet the Municipality's criteria for entitlement; 4) tenants or informal dwellers who were granted entitlements in Tasoluk yet have sold their entitlements to third parties. Among these four groups the most populated is group number 2, tenants who have not been granted entitlements to houses in Tasoluk by the Municipality.

(1) improve living quality of inhabitants

The PROJECT stated that it will improve quality of living of the residents of the area by 1) giving possibility to the tenants to become homeowners in a TOKİ built mass housing

scheme 45 kilometres away from İstanbul, in Taşoluk; and 2) by allowing the property owners to buy into the new Project.

In terms of the TENANTS: Ministry Of Culture and Tourism REPORT states that: ‘The tenants can benefit from the opportunity of becoming homeowners where TOKI built social dwellings in Tasoluk, Istanbul without a drawing of lots and with modest payments spreading through 180 months (15 years). 346 families of the tenants accepted this alternative and determined their door numbers in two stages by drawing. The carriages of the tenants who move their houses in Tasoluk satisfied by Fatih Municipality and municipality provided them to settle their new houses. The tenants who resided in the project area were supported with 300 TL of rent help within the period until they moved to their new houses.’

However, even though initially, 300 tenant families have been granted entitlements in Tasoluk, 2/3 of these families sold their entitlements to third parties before moving in to Tasoluk, and only 1/3 have moved in to their new homes in Tasoluk. Those who moved to Taşoluk have been selling their entitlements. This is due to costly monthly dues and maintenance costs of the new homes (natural gas, maintenance of common areas, etc.). At present the number of families remaining in Tasoluk is 27, and many “for sale” signs could be seen in the area. Majority of those who sell their entitlements have moved to the vicinity of Edirnekapi.

The conclusion is that the Tenants have been dispersed, leaving Sulukule and not being able to afford Taşoluk.

In terms of the PROPERTY OWNERS: Ministry of Culture and Tourism REPORT states that: ‘According to the surveys on building stock, registry of deeds and registry of local authority, 620 dwellings and 45 offices were determined in the region. This number is taken basis in the preliminary project and it’s aimed to offer one dwelling in response to each dwelling and one office in response to each office. The number of dwellings and offices in the current situation corresponds to the numbers in the preliminary project. Accordingly, the tenants can continue to live in the region even if they agree with their property owners. The possession right for new houses developed to the property owners within the range of the project pertains. Various alternatives are presented for the property owners in the case of price differences between their old and new property. For instance, in the case of deficit in old price there is an alternative to pay in 180 months, in the case of excess there is an alternative to obtain it in cash or possess one of the social dwellings that TOKI built in other regions. Within the compass of these alternatives, the agreement was provided with 530 of 620 property owners in the region and these property owners were provided to possess a new dwelling in the region. Additionally, housing benefit of 400 TL for every month is being relieved for the property owners who live in project area until they will move to their new dwellings.’

However, at present 65% of the property owners sold their property rights; 10% made an agreement with the Municipality to buy into the PROJECT, and there are 30-40 families (with deeds) who have not come to a settlement with the Municipality. These families

have begun to receive expropriation notices from the Court. The Court has apparently appraised the value of expropriated houses as 1.300 TL per sqm. (The Fatih Municipality was offering 500 TL. However, the value around the district is about 2.000 TL per sqm.)

The conclusion is that most **property owners could not afford to buy into the project and have sold their rights and have moved out.**

In terms of the RESIDENTS WITH NO ENTITLEMENTS; 400 of the tenants who have not been granted entitlements by the Municipality continuously appealed for entitlement during the Summer of 2008. 102 of them have been approved as entitled tenants, while the situation of 60 families is still under investigation.

The conclusion is that it has been positive that some of the residents with no entitlements did in fact gain an entitlement due to continuous efforts of civil society organizations. However, their situation is not different from the tenants category.

The overall conclusion is that, the PROJECT ended up in a process of displacement of the residents (both owners and tenants) from their neighborhood, with immediate detrimental impact on their social networks and on their livelihood.

(2) adopt conservation of world heritage and living culture as a leading principle and goal

Of the total urban renewal area, the Hatice Sultan neighborhood section as a whole, and 2/3 of the Neslisah Neighborhood section have been demolished.

The issue of listed buildings: As indicated in the report that was presented to the UNESCO DM commission during their visit on May 2008, the Sulukule Platform appealed for the registration and conservation of 85 more buildings in the area in addition to those that are already registered. The Renewal Board has agreed to register 9 of these proposed buildings. It has been determined that, due to ongoing demolitions and evictions, security has decreased in the neighborhood, and recyclers have begun to dismantle vacated houses. For this reason the Sulukule Platform has appealed to the Renewal Board and stated the necessity of keeping registered houses occupied by its residents and that if they are vacated these houses would be looted by recyclers and become irreversibly damaged. Taking notice, the Renewal Board has sent a letter of warning to the Fatih Municipality.

Ministry of Culture and Tourism REPORT states that ‘Whole listed buildings in the district will be restored on location. Property owners of 16 of 46 archetypes of civil architecture in district are allowed to prepare measured drawings, restoration and restitution projects.’ However, no progress have been achieved in this as property owners were given very little time (and no technical guidance and help) for the completion of the restitution projects.

Conclusion: Some of the houses, registered as historic buildings, have been demolished and almost all of the listed properties are in no state of conservation due to the detrimental impact of ongoing demolishings in the area.

The issue of conservation of historic fabric of the area: In a petition submitted to the Renewal Board on 26.09.2008, the Human Settlements Association, referring to the explanations under the Sulukule heading of the May 2008 Istanbul Report of the UNESCO World Heritage Commission, stated the necessity of the protection of the original typology of houses with courtyards, and the unique fabric and structure of the streets as a whole. In the same letter, the preservation of Küçükçeşme Street, which has maintained its characteristic fabric, and surrounding blocks was requested. The Renewal Board sent a letter to the Fatih Municipality on November 13, 2008, with the statement: “It has been decided that the issue of the preservation of islands 2495 and 2484 and Kucukcesme Street that is shaped by these islands could be considered within the holistic framework of the project.” Nevertheless, on December 18 and December 25, 2008, demolitions were carried out on these areas. Today, Kucukcesme Street is completely demolished.

Conclusion: In terms of the preservation of the tangible heritage of the civic culture of the residents, the PROJECT has not achieved its stated objectives. The monumental buildings (Land Walls, Mosque of Mihrimah Sultan, Mosque of Neslişah Sultan, Sarmaşık Greek Orthodox Church) are said to be conserved with the new PROJECT. However, the PROJECT eliminated the existing civic form and architecture, replacing them with new structures (with underground car-parks)

One positive development, which has happened entirely due to the work of civil society institutions, is the basic repair of 2 historical houses with the support of KUDEB. These two cases demonstrate that it could have been possible to engage in a participative conservation and rehabilitation programme with the active engagement of the residents themselves.

The issue of intangible heritage: The Ministry of Culture and Tourism state in their REPORT that ‘A project that conserves the historical street silhouettes for the region and is compatible with the life habits of the inhabitants was prepared.’ However, the new PROJECT envisages a different life style, incompatible with the habits of the residents of Sulukule.

On June 12, 2008, the Sulukule Roma Culture Development and Solidarity Association appealed to the UNESCO Turkey National Commission for the inclusion of the neighborhood within the embrace of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. In its reply dated September 8, 2008, the UNESCO Turkey National Commission stated that: “In reality the subject was brought to the agenda at the latest investigation on Istanbul of the World Heritage Centre of UNESCO and almost all of the subjects that you have mentioned were presented in the report and some suggestions were made. For now it is perceived that waiting for the developments in this matter is beneficial as this report was accepted in the

meeting of the World Heritage Centre.” These correspondences were sent to the UNESCO World Heritage Commission.

The survival of the Roman community and its culture in Sulukule is the key issue of the project. Although Sulukule Roma Culture Development and Solidarity Association has appealed to the UNESCO Turkey National Commission, no substantive steps have been taken in this direction. It is clear that as residents have ended up having to leave their neighbourhood one way or another, **the intangible heritage of the area has also been affected**. The proposal by the PROJECT for “a Socio-Cultural Facility Zone” in the new development is not realistic as there will be no Roma community left in the area to make use of these facilities.

Conclusion: **The evaluations and recommendations concerning Sulukule by the UNESCO Joint World Heritage Centre/ICOMOS Mission to the Historic Areas of Istanbul World Heritage Site in 2008 are not being kept**. The mission recommended that “a balance must be found between conservation, social needs and identity of local communities.” However, with the dispersal and disempowerment of the community, it is not possible to see how this recommendation will be taken up.

3) Support socio-cultural development; recover of economic life

Fatih Municipality have organized skills-based workshops for the residents before the demolitions started. However, after the demolitions there are no residents (except for 30-40 families) left and the socio-economic support programmes have lost their meaning.

Conclusion: **it is clear that the PROJECT did not put in force mechanisms to ensure the continuity of the residents in their neighbourhood**. Without these measures to carry out a rehabilitation programme with the residents themselves, the stated aim of socio-cultural development remains empty. It is far from clear what the Socio-Cultural Facility Zone in the project is going to serve. Ministry of Culture and Tourism in their REPORT says that ‘these facilities is defined for these users in order to acquire them a profession and help them to develop their ability of music and enhance their cultural background. As well as the multi-functional galleries, workshops for vocational studies and music education were designed. In these workshops, the courses are planned to organize for children, unemployed men and especially women. There is also the opportunity for the users of these facilities to sell their productions.’ However, as the neighbourhood has disintegrated, and no real prospect of the residents coming back, these stated aims remain unfeasible.

4) ensuring participation

Ministry of Culture and Tourism in their REPORT says: ‘Demolitions in district are being carried out following the permissions of the agreed inhabitants.’ However, we need to take note of how the PROJECT was put into action. It was initiated with a ministerial order for compulsory purchase arrangements, which functioned as a threat for the residents – most of whom were poor. When the municipality offered very low prices

(offering 500 TL. though, the value around the district is about 2.000 TL per sqm.), the inevitable exchange of property happened, leading to many deed-owning residents selling their rights to third parties early on in the project. Now, it is estimated that 65% of properties have exchanged hands. In recent newspaper coverage, it has been reported as 'Sulukule's Regeneration as a Rent-Generation Project'. What these reports have been claiming is that third parties have been buying property from the residents and that 50% have exchanged hands' (19 March 2009, Hürriyet).

Conclusion: The essential problem of the PROJECT has been that it lacked a sustainable mechanism to ensure that the residents did not feel they had to sell their properties. On the contrary, the Municipality having recourse to a ministerial order for compulsory purchase arrangement made the situation untenable in terms of the trust and participation of the residents. All the efforts to protect listed buildings, to get permissions for basic repair, appeals for new entitlements, warnings about the conditions of historic buildings, and tracing of displaced people were all done by civil society initiatives, under difficult conditions, against the obstacles put by the Municipality.

The statement by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism REPORT that: 'wide spread negotiations between local residents and municipality were tried to be established by both municipality itself and the universities like Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University and NGO's like Chambers of Architects and City Planners. These efforts were even translated into alternative advocative planning proposals by the Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University and some negotiations were held between university and official planning and project office' does not reflect how this process actually developed. The STOP initiative (that is the alternative neighbourhood rehabilitation plan developed by Mimar Sinan Fine Arts University and NGO's like Chambers of Architects and City Planners, putting forward a project management framework whereby, a preliminary archeological investigation in the area takes place, then the revision of the approved architectural design project with the objective of accommodating the residents who have left the area as well as those who have bought into the new project.) received very cold reception by the Fatih Municipality with no indication as how to take the recommendations on board.

No information has so far been disclosed so far as to the Area Management Plan for the Historic Areas of Istanbul, and how Sulukule is positioned in that plan, with indication as to the extents of the City Wall buffer zone.

Conclusion

The WHC-ICOMOS Reactive Mission Report dated May 8-13, 2008, characterised the Sulukule Renewal Project as a gentrification project and recommended "that a balance must be found between conservation, social needs and identity of the community." Unfortunately the developments over the past year show that this advice has not been taken into consideration. Sulukule, famous for its distinct Roma musical heritage, as well as for its particular urban fabric and culture, constitutes a good example of intangible heritage that the UNESCO Mission was referring to. Sulukule is at the heart of Roma music and culture in Turkey, however, as the area lies in ruins today, the culture is

scattered. It is clear that intangible heritage cannot be protected when the built heritage is destroyed, when the community members are scattered and displaced from their neighbourhood. Sulukule would have been a perfect example of conserving and rehabilitating an urban area with distinctive built and intangible heritage. With the Sulukule issue, the Municipality had the chance to develop a programme of work that addressed the combined issues of built and intangible cultural heritage, and to start a collaborative and participative process between the stakeholders with a clear objective of neighbourhood rehabilitation in line with the UNESCO recommendations.