



How to Achieve Sustainable Conservation in the Historic Housing Neighborhoods of Istanbul?

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Istanbul, with its rapidly growing population of 12.6 million, its strategic location and history, is not only the largest and most important socio-economic and cultural centre of Turkey, but also it is regarded as a world city. Since the early-1980s, along with the increasing interest of global capital on Istanbul, the city's urbanscape has been changing more rapidly than ever before. New, luxurious, distinctive and exclusive urban 'ghettos' have been developed in the core and periphery of the city, remarkably strengthening urban segregation, fragmentation and social exclusion. Equally, the historic urban quarters have become the main concerns of key decision-makers due to their potentials of being used for city-marketing and imaging strategies, thereby increasing the city's competitiveness. Several conservation and regeneration initiatives have been recently launched in deprived historic quarters to create exclusive and distinctive places for tourists, visitors, potential residents and service sector office workers, while resulting in the displacement of poor, vulnerable communities of these sites.

The recent interest in the historic sites in Istanbul is a promising sign, as the decline and deprivation had lately become their predominant characteristics. However, it is still questionable how far the recent conservation and regeneration efforts have achieved sustainable solutions for these areas. To answer this question, this paper integrates the interplay between conservation, community needs and sustainability, premising on the assumption that finding the balance between the needs, aspirations and concerns of local communities and the conservation of the built environments will lead to more equitable and sustainable solutions to the problems Istanbul historic quarters are facing. First, it briefly mentions how far the principles of sustainability and community needs have been integrated to the policy agenda on urban conservation in Turkey. Then it summarizes the recent changes in the urbanscape and socio-spatial structure of Istanbul over the last three decades, as well as the impacts of these changes on the historic fabric of the city. Later, it examines the assumption above by focusing on the recent regeneration story of Fener and Balat (F&B), a declining neighborhood in the Historic Peninsula, some parts of which were inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage List in 1985. In many senses, F&B may be perceived as 'textbook' examples of conservation of historic fabric to become place-marketing tools and catalysts of urban regeneration. But equally, several aspects of the F&B's experience stand out distinctive, not least the fact that the European Union funded regeneration program has been shown as an exemplary to implement further community-based regeneration projects in deprived historic districts of Turkey by UNESCO World Heritage Centre and ICOMOS. The paper therefore examines F&B to see how far the recent regeneration initiative has provided equitable and sustainable policy solutions to balance community needs, aspirations and values and conservation policies of the historic fabric. Finally, debating on the strengths and weaknesses of the scheme, it seeks to give clues for future regeneration and conservation initiatives to achieve sustainable conservation solutions in historic housing quarters of Istanbul.

KEY WORDS: Sustainability, urban conservation, urban regeneration, community needs, Fener and Balat, Istanbul.