



From Urban Renewal to Urban Renaissance

S. Güven BİLSEL, Emeritus Prof. Dr.
Selcuk University, Turkey
guvenbilssel@gmail.com

A significant turning point was observed in the perception and approach of planners and local governments toward enhancing the livability of the historic settlements and built-up areas and coping with the needs of citizens, in 80s in the West. This new approach, which found its expression in the “European Campaign for Urban Renaissance,” brought the principle of conserving and re-using the historical fabric of cities as far as possible instead of their destruction and renewal. In this perspective, it was aimed to conserve urban cultural values and re-use them through revitalization, and to provide the active participation of citizens in the betterment / rehabilitation of the environment in which they live. (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, Strasbourg, 1982)

The changing view and policy brought by the Campaign was the replacement of the urban renewal strategy with that of Urban Renaissance. In order to grasp the difference of understanding between the two, one should look at what is aimed by their use. The “urban renewal” strategy brings along radical interventions that consist of demolition and rebuilding of large areas with the objective to sanitize the existing urban fabric and to define a new way of life. It is impossible to find any reference to the old urban fabric transformed by such interventions. The growing awareness and criticism in the face of problems such as “loss of urban identity” and standardized urban image, aggravated by such operations implemented in the European cities of culture in 1950s and 1960s, constituted the foundation of the “urban renaissance campaign.”

The “urban renaissance strategy” that was proposed to replace that of urban renewal, was placing the citizen in his/her relations with the urban environment in the center. It aimed at revitalizing the culture and life of cities, conserving the existing urban values and meanings together with the dimensions, proportions that defined urban spaces. Hence, it strived for making the historical environments, which had lost their original attributes and livability, re-usable again in conformity with modern living conditions; transforming the derelict areas into inspiring urban spaces that one would enjoy living in with minimum intervention. Turkey participated in the “Urban Renaissance Campaign” with a number of “demonstration projects” that brought the re-use of the historical heritage together with their active conservation providing the awareness and participation of citizens.

The country was acquainted with a massive migration from countryside to cities in the mid 20th century. Areas, unsuitable for settlement on the periphery of cities, were spontaneously built-up in these years. While urban developments have extended in every possible direction covering environmentally valuable lands, the existing settlement areas have been subject to a process of piecemeal urban re-development and densification beginning from these years.

This process of urban change and development continues today through “planned urban transformation” projects. These projects, mostly concentrated on the central areas where excessive increase in land prices have been observed, have been oriented to mere economic interest. These individually developed “urban projects”, isolated from any integrated planning, have been enabled by the enactment of a highly controversial new legislation.

This paper will discuss, through a number of examples, how the urban transformation projects in the “urban development, transformation and metamorphosis” process that the Turkish cities have been subject to, are different from the current “urban regeneration projects” implemented in the Western cities. It will finally emphasize the possibility of developing a “sustainable urban renaissance strategy” that aims at revitalizing and enhancing the livability of cities while conserving their existing values instead of the renewal and destruction brought by the current transformation projects.

KEY WORDS: Urban change, development, transformation, urban regeneration, urban renewal, urban renaissance, sustainable spatial strategic planning.