

HOW TO ACHIEVE SUSTAINABLE CONSERVATION IN THE HISTORIC HOUSING NEIGHBOURHOODS OF ISTANBUL?

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ABSTRACT

The launch of several conservation and regeneration initiatives in the deprived historic quarters of Istanbul raises the question of how far these recent endeavours have achieved sustainable solutions responsive to the historic environment and the fundamental elements of the social environments. This paper aims to address this question by setting out a relationship between sustainability, community needs and conservation. Based on the premise that conservation and regeneration strategies, if they find the ways of reconciling the needs, aspirations and concerns of local communities, will lead to more equitable and sustainable solutions to the problems historic quarters face, it examines the recent European Union funded conservation-led regeneration initiative in Fener and Balat, a declining neighbourhood located in the Historic Peninsula and mainly inhabited by the poor, vulnerable immigrants. After highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the initiative, the paper underlines the key principles for the future initiatives to achieve sustainable conservation in deprived historic neighbourhoods of Istanbul.

INTRODUCTION

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, with the increasing interest of global capital on Istanbul, the city 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 regeneration¹ 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. It is therefore questionable how far the recent conservation and regeneration efforts have achieved sustainable solutions for the historic sites in Istanbul. This paper seeks to answer this question by setting out a relationship between sustainability, community needs and conservation, and by examining the recent regeneration story of Fener and Balat (F&B), a declining neighbourhood in the Historic Peninsula, some parts of which were inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage List in 1985. After studying how far the recent F&B regeneration initiative has provided equitable and sustainable policy solutions to balance community needs, aspirations and values and conservation policies of the historic fabric, it seeks to give recommendations for future regeneration and conservation initiatives to achieve sustainable conservation solutions in historic housing quarters of Istanbul.

SUSTAINABILITY, COMMUNITY NEEDS AND CONSERVATION

The Brundtland Commission provided the often-quoted definition of 'sustainable development' as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987: 8). The Commission underlines two key concepts of sustainable development: "the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to

which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization in the environment's ability to meet present and future needs" (WCED, 1987: 8). Sustainability, therefore, is about meeting basic human needs and wants by researching and identifying new ways of creating economic vitality, protecting and maintaining healthy environment, and building healthy communities (Bauen *et al.*, 1996).

Satterthwaite (1999) categorises human needs in today's cities under three broad groups, namely *economic needs*, *social*, *cultural*, *environmental and health needs* and *political needs*. *Economic needs* refers to "access to an adequate livelihood or productive assets; also economic security when unemployed, ill, disabled or otherwise unable to secure a livelihood", while *social*, *cultural*, *environmental and health needs* comprises both "a shelter which is healthy, safe, affordable and secure, within a neighbourhood with provision for piped water, sanitation, drainage, transport, health care, education and child development", and "a home, workplace and living environment protected from environmental hazards", and shelters and services meeting the specific needs of children and of adults responsible for most child-rearing (Satterthwaite, 1999: 96). This category embraces "needs related to people's choice and control -including homes and neighbourhoods which they value and where their social and cultural priorities are met" (Satterthwaite, 1999: 96). To achieve these goals, a more equitable distribution of income between nations and, in most cases, within nations is indispensable. The third category comprises *political needs* including "freedom to participate in national and local politics and in decisions regarding management and development of one's home and neighbourhood, within a broader framework which ensures respect for civic and political rights and the implementation of environmental legislations" (Satterthwaite, 1999: 96). This category essentially requires the creation and safeguarding of a continuous public realm within which community participation and involvement in decision making processes can take place. Sustainable development in cities arguably requires that economic, social, cultural, environmental, health and political needs of local communities are met. To satisfy all these needs will ultimately help to ensure social justice, equity and to improve quality of life; and therefore to achieve greater sustainability in the built environment (Lezama-Lopez, 2006).

Likewise, sustainable development implies minimising the waste of cultural, historical and natural assets within cities that are irreplaceable and thus non-renewable -such as, historic artefacts, buildings and districts (Satterthwaite, 1999). The cultural built heritage is the inherited fabric with particular cultural, historic and aesthetic values among others (Lichfield, 1997). It is considered not only as a resource but also as an asset for the present and future society. Hence, conservation of these assets and their management in an effective way are indispensable, although conservation of the built environment with different types of implementation in practice has always been a subject of debate, particularly leading to raise questions about what should be conserved, how and for whom. From this stem, Ashworth (1997) notes two general approaches to conservation that directly affect the manner of how and for whom the existing assets should be used or adapted. The first one is 'preservationist', where pure conservation is sought for the products of the past, but new development or change in the urban fabric is seldom permitted, whether those changes are creative or not (Ashworth, 1997). The other approach is conservation as heritage which seeks to conserve the past as a commodity in order to be consumed by certain targeted markets, mainly tourism (Ashworth, 1997).

A new perspective on the sustainability-conservation praxis, however, emerged from the United Nations' (UN) sustainable development programme, Agenda 21, suggesting the restoring of the built environment fabric to meet collective needs (Satterthwaite, 1999). This new understanding -namely *sustainable conservation*-requires the continuous utilisation of the built heritage in a more rational and resource-efficient way, adapting present needs and new uses but lengthening the life of the assets and at the same time recycling derelict lands and historic buildings, reducing demand for peripheral development and facilitating the creation of compact cities (Delafons, 1997; Lichfield, 1997; Couch and Dennemann, 2000; Rodrigo-Cervantes, 2006). Here the challenge is to find innovative and creative conservation solutions fitting modern uses without risking the loss of inherited built resources for future generations. Sustainable conservation therefore implicitly requires the need for good design, the use of modern technology to

enable building adaptation and the introduction of the regulations which should be flexible for sensitive conversion and renewal into the legislative structure (Feilden, 1994).

For heritage resources, sustainable conservation involves not only ensuring the continuing contribution of heritage to the present and the future through the thoughtful and intelligent management of change responsive to the historic environment and collective needs, but also preserving the fundamental elements of the social environments. As Luxen (2004) suggests, “there is an increasing agreement on the definition of heritage as a social ensemble of many different, complex and independent manifestations, reflecting a culture of humanity”. Thus the challenges of (*sustainable*) conservation field stem not only from historical heritage sites themselves, but from the context in which society embeds them (Punekar, 2006, italics added). “These contexts -the values people draw from cultural heritage and the uses to which the cultural heritage is put- are the real source of meaning of heritage, and the *raison d’être* for conservation in all senses” (Avrami and Mason, 2000). Hence, protecting poor, vulnerable communities living and working in, and using economically depressed and socially and physically deprived historic urban quarters in accordance with their multi-faceted needs, aspirations and values and, ultimately turning them into sustainable communities are also indispensable for sustainable conservation. The difficult task of conservation initiatives, particularly in historic neighbourhoods, is therefore to develop strategies encompassing both the conservation of historic built environment and the elements of the social environments. Such strategies, if they find the ways of reconciling the needs, aspirations and concerns of local communities and the conservation of the historic environments, will lead to more equitable and sustainable solutions to the problems historic quarters face. The following section elaborates this assumption using the F&B example.

FENER AND BALAT: ITS LOCATION, HISTORY AND COMMUNITY PROFILE

The F&B Quarter, surrounded by Byzantine walls from the fifth century AD to the west and the Golden Horn to the north, is located on the Historic Peninsula of Istanbul. The history of the Quarter dates back to the Byzantine period. Fener, the home of the Greek Patriarchate and the centre of the Orthodox Church, was predominantly an upper-class Greek neighbourhood from the Ottoman period to the 1960s (Belge, 2003). Balat, inhabited mostly by Jews, with some Armenian, Greek and Muslim dwellers, was a vibrant hub for fishery and port management before the nineteenth century (Belge, 2003; Özbilge, 2005). The move of the wealthy inhabitants of the Quarter in the 1960s and their replacement with poor immigrants, together with the contamination and pollution of the Golden Horn, caused the dilapidation of F&B (Özbilge, 2005). Between 1984 and 1987, the coastal area was cleared by large-scale demolition and a park and a road were built along the shore of the Golden Horn. Despite the coastline clearance, the area continued to deteriorate (Özbilge, 2005). F&B, with its nineteenth-century grid plan and hewn-stone, terraced houses with bay windows and richly ornamented facades, as well as its many churches, mosques and synagogues and the sixteenth-century Balat Market, is today under grave threat of decline.

With 36158 inhabitants in the year 2000, F&B is densely populated (TSI, 2007). The community constituted immigrants dominantly from the Black Sea Region (Fatih Municipality et al., 1998; FSWW, 2004). Family ties and kinship were found to be very strong. The majority of families (62%) were made up of four or five people with the father-mother-children family unit and a significant number of the families shared their houses with parents or relatives (TSI, 2007; Fatih Municipality et al., 1998). The majority of the residents were tenants (60%), but allegiance to the neighbourhood was found to be high among the residents (FSWW, 2004).

The local community suffered from multi-faceted problems of economic, social and urban deprivation. 46% of the families in F&B earned less than €243.90 monthly, being under the poverty line for a family of four in Turkey that was €261.59 per month in 2004 (FSWW, 2004). High unemployment among residents with mostly unqualified labour force, poor education and health services, high crime rates, problems of security and safety were the major community-related issues to be tackled for the regeneration of F&B (Fatih Municipality et al., 1998; FSWW, 2004).

The local community complained about poor living conditions -including the accumulation of rubbish in the streets, flooding in winter due to the inadequate drainage system, heat insulation problems in the houses and unclean drinking water- and ranked nine issues that should be addressed. From the most to the least urgent, these were: i) restoration of the buildings and improvement in living conditions; ii) introduction of natural gas into the district; iii) improvement of streets and the removal of traffic problems; iv) construction of parks and green spaces; v) provision of regular street cleaning and rubbish collection services; vi) improvement in the drainage system in order to prevent flooding in winter; vii) demolition of highly dilapidated buildings for health and safety reasons and the reconstruction of new ones; viii) robust solutions to remedy environmental pollution (especially air pollution caused by the burning of low-quality coal in stoves); ix) solutions to clean up the Golden Horn (Fatih Municipality et al., 1998; FSWW, 2004). A sustainable conservation strategy that would tackle both the multi-dimensional community problems and needs and conservation of the historic environment appeared to be needed.

ASSESSING THE RECENT EUROPEAN UNION-FUNDED REGENERATION INITIATIVE² REGARDING SUSTAINABLE CONSERVATION MEASURES

The recent F&B regeneration initiative grew out of the 1996 UN Habitat Conference in Istanbul and was launched in January 2003, following a grant of €7 million and a financial agreement signed between the European Commission, the district municipality and the Secretariat of the Treasury of the Turkish Republic (UNESCO WHC and ICOMOS, 2008; RFBDP, 2005). The scheme, run by an international consortium, was completed in July 2008. The designated site for the project, covering an area of 16.2 ha and including 1401 lots and 1267 buildings, was only one-sixth of the whole Quarter (RFBDP, 2005). The scheme had four main components: the restoration of buildings, the foundation of two social centres, the renovation of Balat Market and the development of a waste management strategy (RFBDP, 2005). Within the project budget, €3.85 million was allocated for building restoration, €1 million for the social centres, €150,000 for Balat Market, €100,000 for the waste management strategy and €1.9 million for the technical assistance team (RFBDP, 2005). The scheme was seen as exemplary by both UNESCO and ICOMOS (2008) because of the efforts made to accommodate community needs and to facilitate the local community participation into the project through the organisation of Community Forum and Community Volunteers.

Becoming a turning point for the regeneration of the Quarter, the project showed that: 1) conservation projects in such heritage sites should be area-based so that the investments focusing on a small designation area can act as a trigger for attracting more investment and economic benefits into a wider locality; and 2) contrary to the conventional conservation policy in Turkey, the multi-dimensional problems of urban deprivation cannot be addressed by upgrading the physical conditions alone. Despite these merits, it failed to provide a sustainable conservation strategy that reconciled the multi-dimensional community needs and conservation policies, as will be elaborated in the following sections. Strategies of conservation and housing needs

The Quarter constituted multifarious problems of historic conservation. Of the total building stock within the designated project site, 157 buildings required extensive repairs while 376 buildings required basic repairs, and 365 buildings needed a medium level of repairs (Fatih Municipality et al., 1998). Urgent measures were needed to make these buildings earthquake resistant (D'Ayala, 2003). According to the local community, the priority issues when restoring the buildings were to re-design the interior layout in order to create larger rooms, to separate bathroom and toilet, to construct a separate kitchen, to repair to the stairs, roofs, interior and exterior walls, ceilings and floors, to strengthen the buildings and to provide necessary connections to the natural gas system (Fatih Municipality et al., 1998; FSWW, 2004). Another important issue was the overuse of the historic buildings. These buildings were originally designed to accommodate single families, but they had been inhabited over the last three or four decades by two or three families (a total of 10-15 people), which detracted from its historical qualities. A conservation strategy that would offer solutions to decrease the number of people living in the historic buildings was crucial. A conservation strategy for the historical churches, synagogues and mosques and their historical and symbolic values was also needed.

Despite these multi-faceted issues, the scope of the conservation strategy was limited to the partial improvement of the physical and living conditions of only 13% of the total historic buildings in the Quarter. Only 119 buildings were restored, of which 86 buildings received basic repairs, and the rest received extensive repairs (Altınsay Özgüner, 2009). For the buildings that underwent extensive repairs a considerable improvement was achieved except in the drainage problems and connection to the natural gas system. The restoration works of the historic buildings were carried out responsive to original materials and building techniques (Altınsay Özgüner, 2009). Despite this, the number of buildings restored by the regeneration initiative lagged far behind the number of historic buildings in need of restoration. Likewise, the conservation strategy could not offer a comprehensive, long-term and sustainable conservation strategy associated with a balanced land-use, economic and social structure. It did not provide any mixed-use strategy for balancing residential, commercial, and community services (transportation, recreation, education and health). Nor was there any strategy to bring together residents from low-, middle- and upper-income groups in a diverse structure of tenure (e.g., owner-occupied, private and social rented accommodation at affordable rates of occupation). The conservation strategy did not provide F&B with alternative policy solutions to protect the historical and heritage qualities of the buildings while also creating alternative affordable housing strategies for the poor families (such as moving some families from the historic buildings to the new buildings that could be constructed specially on suitable vacant land within the Quarter or on neighbouring residential sites). The scheme thus failed to provide a model for affordable, healthy and safe shelters for F&B or other historic neighbourhoods of Istanbul. Historic buildings with religious and symbolic uses did not fall within the scope of the conservation strategy, except the former house of Dimitrie Kantemir, a late-seventeenth century Romanian writer, which was restored in order to become a museum (RFBDP, 2005). Apart from one street, the objective of restoring building groups to enhance the visual impact of regeneration and thus to create a trigger effect was not accomplished either.

The restoration of historic houses and Balat Market and the opening of the museum have not only helped conserve the historic fabric and image of the area, but have also functioned as means for attracting investment, tourists and visitors into the Quarter. Although the preservation of the historic heritage and character of the area has certainly served in the public interest, the recent improvement in the historic urban landscape has attracted the attention of middle- and upper-middle class, national and international investors and real estate companies, with the inevitable result of increased house prices and rents (Kutay, 2008). The initiative had a policy to protect both tenants and private owners, thereby discouraging the gentrification of the Quarter for a short period of time. Under the initiative, private owners were not required to pay for the restoration of the buildings on the condition that they would not sell them or increase rents above inflation during the following five years (coordinator of the feasibility and director of restoration projects). Despite the short-term measures taken by the regeneration initiative, gentrification has inevitably started to occur in response to the increasing historic appeal of the area, creating pressure on the local poor inhabitants to move out of F&B. This is exacerbated by the central government's designation of F&B in 2006 as 'urban renewal site', as well as the Istanbul metropolitan municipality's strategy to use this site (and the neighbouring sites) as the catalysts for economic competitiveness, city image promotion and marketing campaigns (Kireççi, 2007; Dinçer, 2009). The designation of Istanbul as the European Capital of Culture for 2010 in 2008 has also increased the interest in historic heritage sites, including the neighbourhoods such as F&B with their improved images and appeal, thereby becoming a potential factor contributing to the gentrification. Looking at the conservation strategy overall, the scheme failed to protect the historic heritage and address community needs.

Strategies of social, cultural, environmental, health and economic needs

Most parents expressed their desire for a community centre serving local women, youngsters and children and a multi-purpose social centre was founded under the regeneration initiative to serve the interests of a small group from a local community (RFBDP, 2005). Now, a part of the social centre is operated by an NGO, and offered courses for a small number of local children while another part is

rented out by the district municipality to a private investor to work as a café (Altınsay Özgüner, 2009). The local community still needs a comprehensive, integrated and long-term strategy of health care, education and child development that will help create a sustainable community in F&B. As such, studies from the late-1990s highlighted the need for urgent action towards permanent job creation, provision of poverty aid for very poor families, organisation of courses in accounting, mathematics and marketing and provision of small start-up credits for the community. The regeneration initiative failed however to provide a comprehensive strategy for creating a vibrant local economy in the Quarter.

Nevertheless, the scheme satisfactorily addressed the problem of rubbish accumulation in the streets. Cleaning services in the public spaces and waste collection services were improved in collaboration with the metropolitan and district municipalities. A waste management strategy, focusing mainly on the recovery and recycling of solid waste, was developed (RFBDP, 2005). This strategy was never part of the local demands and appeared to be inappropriate for the local community because the poor inhabitants did not produce much solid waste and they used to use solid waste for different purposes, such as newspapers being burnt as fuel in stoves, tin boxes used as plant pots, plastic or glass bottles used as water containers (director of the restoration projects). Likewise, it was found after a while that the plastic boxes that had been distributed for the collection of domestic waste by the district municipality were being used for other purposes, such as for the carrying of fruit and vegetables or as laundry boxes (local co-director). The regeneration initiative also failed to provide new outdoor public spaces, except for the conversion of the derelict warehouses near the Dimitrie Kandemir Museum into a park, including a playground and a café (director of the restoration projects). The open spaces in the quarters are still below standard. Likewise, the initiative did not provide any strategy of regulating traffic circulation within the Quarter and strengthening the accessibility and integration of F&B to the rest of the city through, for example, the development of a public transportation system, safe pedestrian and cycling routes. Equally, traffic congestion, lack of car-parking, environmental pollution, inadequate drainage and clean water systems, lack of a natural gas system, and crime are still the predominant problems of F&B. All in all, the scheme failed to improve the environmental quality of the Quarter.

Strategies of political needs

The regeneration initiative was also inadequate in terms of fulfilling political needs of the community. Although its participatory approach was considered exemplary, the key regeneration strategies were introduced by the international consortium from the top-down approach, without community consultation or support. Likewise, the regeneration initiative failed to create and sustain a public realm for ongoing community involvement in the different implementation stages of the scheme. Continuous dialogue between the project team and the local community however was vital to shape the regeneration strategies according to community needs, aspirations and values and to develop a feeling of ownership towards the regeneration initiative that would in turn have encouraged the sustainability of the project. Sadly, participation of local people and other stakeholders in the waste management strategy was rather sporadic and tokenistic. These failures led the locals to develop prejudices against the project and also caused delays in the progress of the scheme (director of the restoration projects and general secretary). All these factors ultimately undermined the social justice and equity, frustrated the need for a democratic and socially inclusive renewal process, and thereby the targets of achieving the sustainable regeneration and conservation of the F&B Quarter.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has shown that the recent regeneration initiative in F&B was too small in its coverage area, too narrow in its scope and too limited in terms of time. The initiative provided F&B with piecemeal policy solutions rather than a long-term, robust regeneration strategy with long-, medium- and short-term objectives in accordance with a sustainable organisational, management and financial structure. Nor did it offer a comprehensive and integrated strategy espousing social, economic and environmental goals, addressing community needs and providing innovative, creative and sustainable solutions for urban conservation. These shortcomings ultimately resulted in the declining capacity of the area to sustain its

historical heritage and increased pressure on the poor, vulnerable local community to move out of their neighbourhoods without having had their problems addressed.

To achieve sustainable conservation for historic neighbourhoods in Istanbul, there is a need for a wider vision of conservation that should be seen as the process of safeguarding and managing the cultural and historical landscape based on a broad range of values, including the values of different communities, professionals from other fields, and special interest groups in the conservation field with their own criteria and opinions. Such a vision will not only lead to the democratisation in the conservation field, but also to the development of sustainable conservation policies about what to conserve, how to conserve, where to set priorities and how to handle conflicting interests. This vision will recognise cultural heritage as a social construct dependent on social processes in a specific time and place, involving different communities (Avrami and Mason, 2000). Hence, the involvement of local communities and other interested parties (professionals from other disciplines, special interest groups, etc) in 'conservation processes fed by both 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' approaches should be the pre-requisite of this vision. Conservation programmes shaped by this vision will be more sensitive to the needs of communities, localities and the physical context of cultural heritage, and will evolve through a reconciliation process of conflicting interests built on a wide range of values. "The greater the relevance and sustainability of conservation efforts and the more they serve to foster community building and civic dialogue, the more cultural heritage conservation will be embraced by society as a 'public good'" (Avrami and Mason, 2000).

NOTES

- 1) 'Urban transformation' is a common term used in Turkey for its wide scope, as it encompasses several planning interventions, such as urban conservation, urban regeneration, urban renewal, urban rehabilitation, urban (re)development. This paper however opted to limit its scope with economically depressed and socially and physically deprived historic sites in need of both regeneration and conservation strategies.
- 2) Roth (2004: 73) defines urban rehabilitation as "a process of revitalizing, of regenerating the town, to be conducted over the medium or long term". Roberts (2000: 17) defines urban regeneration as "comprehensive and integrated vision and action which leads to the resolution of urban problems and which seeks to bring about a lasting improvement in the economic, physical, social and environmental condition of an area that has been subject to change". Based on both Roth and Robert's definitions of the two notions complementing each other, this paper considers the recent EU-funded regeneration initiative -the Rehabilitation Programme of Fener and Balat Districts- as a conservation-led regeneration scheme, i.e. a regeneration scheme with a strong emphasis on urban conservation.

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