

DESIGN FOR CULTURAL DIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

Modernization project and the globalization processes affected most parts of the world that led to emergence of cultural, social and spatial similarities. As the result of this process some cultures and local identities have even come to the point of being vanished. The last quarter of the 20th century, however, has been a waking-up period for many. Parallel to the development of postmodernist approaches, preservation of local cultures and characteristics have been put on the agenda and in most parts of the world studies and efforts have begun to dwell upon research and preservation of local cultures. There appear to be voluminous research on how such local cultures shall be preserved within development context of contemporary cities. Planning and design problems emerge as one of the main sets of intervention that is to take specific characteristics of local life into due consideration. This remains a difficult task however. Between the local and the global parameters that shape the local circumstances, particularly the settings that have to deal with ethnic communities appear to be further problematic as the conflicts of urban life seem to lead even to gentrification of certain parts of cities. Cities intend to target at a special level of “spatial quality” at the expense of deprived groups, which possibly involve the gentrification of local communities. Departing from such a point, the way how planning and design issues are undertaken at such parts of cities appears to be especially important particularly if the main intention is to avoid occurrence of any processes of gentrification. From this standpoint, this paper aims to discuss how a local culture/diversity could be preserved and can be kept vital through design processes on a specific case.

The second year urban planning studio of Dokuz Eylul University, Faculty of Architecture, Department of City and Regional Planning focuses on the design of a residential area, where the students are obliged to design a neighborhood. During the first semester of the year 2007, the mentioned studio coordinators have prepared a different program in order to avail the students for going beyond learning special parameters of and gain skills in designing a neighborhood. Students were to learn and engage with a different culture and they were to develop design skills for the needs of a specific cultural group. For this reason a gypsy neighborhood in the •zmir metropolitan city has been selected. The first part of the studio work consisted of a detailed site survey. Through this

analysis, students were to understand the cultural and spatial characteristics as well as spatial and social needs of this special group. The second part of the studio consisted of the design of a livable housing environment for this group of people. The design process implied successes as well as failures. Following the discussion based on analytical studies accomplished, the aim of the discussions involve further consideration of the successes as well as the failures of studio work as based on sample projects of students.

With this studio work, students were to understand a different culture and they were to design a livable housing environment. However, there have been specific difficulties met that shaded the success of designs based on diversity. It may be concluded that this is mainly due to our modernist design and planning training on the one hand and legislative framework and regulations on the other. The paper will further try to scrutinize a range of different reasons that result in failures of design with the intention to develop a better strategy in methodology of training in general.

Key words: diversity, local culture, design, izmir, gypsy community

INTRODUCTION

The modernity project as defined by Habermas (1983) that had started by the Enlightenment project diffused to our lives in a short period of time and this project created very strong effects in all aspects of our lives.

The cities we live in most parts of the world, the rules and regulations for planning and architecture are all the results of modernization project that had aimed to create the democratic and the rational city. Architects and planners such as CIAM, Wright, Le Corbusier or Mies Van der Rohe had developed their design within the modernization context. However, critiques to this project soon emerged, firstly by Jane Jacobs (1961) in her book “The Life and Death of Great American Cities”, where she defined the social housing projects as the focal point of social crime and vandalism and criticized the public spaces created by the Modernity thought.

Berman (1982) pointed to other aspects of modernization project such as its effects on local identities and cultures.

The modern environments and experiments divide all the geographic, ethnic, class and national boundaries vertically. In this means, it can be asserted that modernity unites all humanity however, this is a unity of paradox where each of us swifts to an unharmonious unity and conflict. (Berman, 1982)

Today, we experience that the modernization project led to the emergence of cultural, social, and spatial similarities, or in other words, 'identicalization'. As result of this process some cultures and local identities have even come to the point of being vanished. The last quarter of the 20th century, however, has been a waking-up period for many. Parallel to the development of postmodernist approaches, preservation of local cultures and characteristics have been put on the agenda and in most parts of the world studies and efforts have begun to dwell upon research and preservation of local cultures. There appear to be voluminous research on how such local cultures shall be preserved within the development context of contemporary cities.

This paper focuses on the design for a local culture/diversity. The adopted aim has been to discuss how such diversified local cultures could be kept vital through design processes. This paper discusses the issue on the sample of a design studio work that has been conducted for the second year urban planning students at the Faculty of Architecture in Dokuz Eylul University, Izmir, Turkey. The second-year urban planning students in the Faculty are expected to design a residential district where they can obtain the knowledge concerning special parameters of and gain skills in designing a neighborhood. However, during the fall semester of the year 2007, this program has been taken one step further. The coordinators of the project studio have directed the students to discuss design principals for a culturally diverse group under threat of displacement. For this due course, a gypsy neighborhood has been selected since it constitutes a very good example for 'design for diversity' issues with strong representation of spatial and social characteristics. The selected neighborhood is also located at proximity to the central city where the land prices are quiet high.

That area is also subject to regeneration, displacement and gentrification processes.

Students were to asked to identify and discuss the issues below;

- Social and spatial characteristics of the neighborhood differing it from the rest of the city
- Main reasons underlying the difference.
- Current spatial, economic and social problems
- Threats for the neighborhood
- Spatial parameters contributing to community development
- Spatial and social reasons for exclusion of the neighborhood.
- Design principals for designing a residential area for this specific local culture.

Following analyses and syntheses concerned with the above-mentioned issues and questions, students were obliged to design a residential area for this special group. Nevertheless, there have been specific difficulties met that shaded the success of designs based on diversity. It may be revealed that this is mainly due to the Modernist design and planning training on the one hand and legislative framework and regulations on the other. The paper will further try to scrutinize a range of different reasons that result in failures of design with the intention to develop a better strategy in methodology of training in general. Prior to that, a brief explanation concerning the differences in the development process of urban pattern in Turkish cities will be given in order to outline the basis for the main discussion to be made in the paper.

A Modernity Project – The Urban Pattern of Turkish Cities

The establishment of the Turkish republic constitutes a breaking point in terms of the modernization of Turkish cities. Till the end of Second World War, this period has been addressed as the institutionalization period of both planning and architecture in Turkey. (Batur, 1998; Tekeli, 1998) The republican government had put great emphasizes on spatial strategies for success of the government. (Batur, 1998; Tekeli, 2001)

During this period many Turkish cities gained a European appearance with wide boulevards and squares. Relatively, the architecture styles have changed. However, this modern context had a destructive approach towards the historical sites. The traditional sites were being criticized for their irrationality. Rules and regulations of urban planning and architecture were mostly established during this period. By the end of 1950s, all the large Turkish cities had similar planned parts. Wide streets for transportation, and circles at the intersection points of these streets, parks, wide areas for the institutions and identical plots were all planned homogenously in all cities despite their distinctive characteristics.

However, there were some developments that were to be regarded as against the modernity project. These were the informal housing areas built at the peripheries of the cities which are called squatters. Squatter areas started to emerge by the second half of the 20th century in large Turkish cities and since that time they spread to the peripheral areas of the cities and by the last decades of the 20th century, they appear to have invaded almost half of the built up areas of metropolitan cities. The squatter areas are different from other planned parts of cities, because they are mostly self-help and self-planned areas. For this reason, it has usually been the organic pattern of housing areas and architecture developed according to the needs and supplies of users that formed the main spatial characteristics of squatter areas.

By the 21th century some of these squatter areas, mostly the ones that are located at critical locations, such as the vicinity of the highway crossroads have become subject to regeneration. With these projects the squatters are being demolished for the construction of new apartment buildings with a modern look that serve the tastes of consumers.

Briefly, it can be stated that the development of Turkish cities dwelled on the ideals of a modernity project. However, some unexpected results such as the emergence of squatters and other problems such as over densification and insufficient infrastructure have also emerged.

Diversified Cultures in the Metropolitan City of Izmir – Ege Neighborhood

Izmir, the third metropolitan city of Turkey, has experienced the above-mentioned irregular urbanization processes. The squatters at the peripheries of the cities displayed such an appearance that conflicted with the modernity project of the city and at these areas migrating groups gathered according to their identities and sustained their local cultures. One of these areas belong to that of the gypsy culture. Gypsies are one of the ethnic groups that live at some parts of the squatters and the inner areas of the central city.

Ege neighborhood, which is located at the inner area of metropolitan city Izmir, has been selected as the subject of the second year project studio. The reasons for such a selection are as follows:

- this neighborhood reflects the local culture characteristics both spatially and socially;
- the size and population of the neighbourhood displays an easy-to-handle scale, which were to fit the studio subject of the second year.
- this neighborhood can be easily identified from other parts of the city, because it has borders;
- it is subject to regeneration projects because it is located at the inner part of the city where land prices are quite high and;
- people living in this neighborhood suffer from problems of social exclusion.

Therefore, students were to discuss issues such as exclusion, regeneration, displacement, diversity and gentrification as well as the design principals for a local culture.

The Spatial Characteristics of the Neighborhood that Contribute to the Development of Community Spirit

As mentioned before, Ege neighborhood is located at the inner area of Izmir. This neighborhood has been a gypsy neighborhood since the second half of the 20th century. Residents have first settled at the historical housing stock of the area. Later, with the growth in the number of population they have built slums to environs, and in due

course the municipality has built some blocks by 1970s to move the people at the slums to healthier conditions. However, construction of slums has continued in the following periods. Today, three different types of housing developments can be examined in the neighbourhood: firstly, the existing historical urban pattern; secondly, the multi-storied housing blocks; and third, the low-rise slum areas neighbouring the blocks.

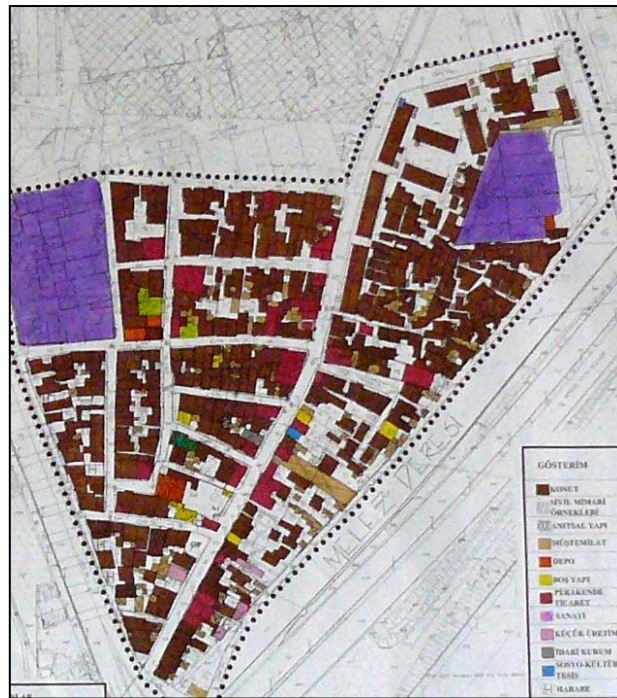


Figure 1: The land use pattern at Ege neighborhood, 2007.



Figure 2: The grid housing stock that implies historical buildings, 2007.



Figure 3: The blocks that were built previously to upgrade the residential areas of the neighborhood.



Figure 4: The slum areas in the neighborhood

During the visits at the site, the site surveys and analyses have shown that this neighborhood built in three different traditions in fact displayed a singular character. The character of the gypsy culture was experienced in every part of the neighborhood. It may therefore be claimed that community spirit is in fact formed by the social ties of the community itself, more than the spatial characteristics of the community. However, it may additionally be indicated that some characteristics such as the borders of the neighborhood contributed to the development and preservation of the community spirit.

Below is given the list and explanations of some of the spatial characteristics of the area that helped to develop and preserve the community spirit:

1. Borders

The neighborhood has definite physical borders. The neighborhood, which has a triangle shape, is bordered by railway on one side, and

by a river on the other. The third side of the neighborhood neighbours non-residential uses. These borders that excluded the neighborhood from the environment also contribute to the development of community spirit within borders.



Figure 5: The railway that borders the neighborhood on one side

2. Gates

The neighborhood has only two accesses. That is, accessibility to the neighborhood could be limited by its residents, which also contribute to the development of community spirit. For instance, permission had to be asked from the residents to carry the researches for the project in the neighborhood.



Figure 6: The entrance of the Ege neighborhood that has been formed by the railroad crossing

3. Close-ended Streets

Within the urban fabric of the neighborhood, close ended streets are located where the inhabitants gather during the day and night. Besides, some wide close ended streets are being used for rather special occasions such as weddings. Residents of Ege neighborhood organize some of these close ended streets at the weekends for the

weddings of their residents and the street gains a party appearance with these organizations.

4. Shopping Along the Main Street

Even at a rainy day, residents easily prefer to get out of their houses as soon as the rain stops. The main route of the residential area where the shops are located is always the main activity area of the neighborhood. Density of the pedestrians along the main traffic route of the neighborhood also helps to slow down the vehicular access.



Figure 7: The main route of the neighborhood where shops are located

5. Housing and Street Life

Most of the buildings at the neighborhood are one or two-storied except the formerly built blocks. These low rise buildings also directly open to the streets. Therefore, their locations, entrances and building heights allow people get involved and create an active life along the streets. The communication opportunities also help develop the community spirit.

Even the blocks in this neighborhood strongly contribute to the community life because people prefer to sit at the balconies of the blocks and chat with each other from their balconies.

Street life at the neighborhood creates pedestrian environment independent from any rules or regulations.

6. Building Density

The neighborhood had a high population density. Although the buildings are low rise, they are closely located and constitute a

dense structure. Especially at those parts where urban pattern gives an organic form, houses seem to be entangled to each other. In due course, this part of the fabric carries many problems such as lack of ventilation and lightning. The houses are also humid. However, low rise –high dense structure surely contributes to the community spirit of the neighborhood.



Figure 8: The colorful buildings and narrow paths in the organic pattern of Ege neighborhood.

7.Identity

The neighborhood implies identity different from rest of the city. Identity of the neighborhood has been defined by the social characteristics of the residents, but their reflections to space also contribute to the development of identity at the neighborhood. For instance, the happy spirit of the gypsy community is reflected to the colors of the houses.



Figure 9: The colorful buildings at the grid urban pattern

Attempts to Design for Cultural Diversity

During the second year urban planning studio, some of the students were asked to extract the elements that have build the community

spirit of Gypsies and redevelop these elements while regenerating the same sense of community.

However, the design attempts have resulted in successes as well as failures due to some restrictions.

Density

Although Ege neighborhood is a low rise neighborhood, it is a high-dense settlement, because residents live in small-size attached houses that are located in a complex organic form side by side.

In the design studio, students were to design houses that were at average sizes, sufficient for the number of people living in the unit. That is, the students designed the housing units in universal standards, which ended up with large residential areas that increased the building density.

High building density created the need for larger open areas among the buildings to supply the living standards for ventilation, orientation and lighting. For this reason, most of the students preferred high rise apartment blocks in order to supply the necessary health standards for ventilation and orientation that could be solved in order to keep the same number of people at the same place. However, high rise building environment hardly creates similar street space. Although the initial intention was to create common areas for public use, the wide open areas between high rise buildings fail to contribute to the community spirit when compared to those formed by compact location of buildings.

The Width of the Roads

Rules and regulations of urban planning in Turkey indicate that the least width of a vehicular road cannot be less than 10 meters in width. The least width of a pedestrian road could be 7 meters wide. For this reason, our students were to design roads according to the regulations; however the organic pattern of the Ege neighborhood has been formed mainly by pedestrian axes with widths of even 2 meters.

Attempts to supply the necessary standards for roads appear to have restricted the design skills of the neighborhood as well.

These two main restrictions building/population density and the road widths have been the main reasons for the failure of developing community environment similar to the existing urban fabric at the certain case.

The students had successes in the attempts to create the similar physical urban features.

Gathering Places

Students tried to design gathering places for the gypsy community as exists in Ege neighborhood.

Places for Special Occasions

Students also tried to create places for special arrangements of the gypsy community such as the wedding ceremonies.

Organic Urban Pattern

Some students tried to create the similar organic urban pattern with the Ege neighborhood.

Heterogeneity

Some students tried to create heterogeneity with the sizes and different types of housing units similar to the heterogeneous appearance of the Ege neighborhood.

Terraces as open gathering places

The gypsy community is used to chatting at the streets and terraces. Therefore, some students chose various housing units in their neighborhood design that allows gathering or chatting at open terraces and the fronts of buildings.



Project #1 Aslı Curavcı Project #2 by Ersin Demir Project #3 by Arif Balaban

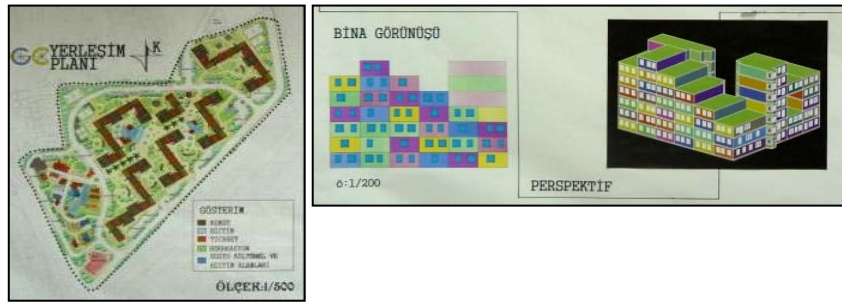
Figure 10 : Successful projects of the studio work

Project # 1 has been regarded as considerably successful compared to other projects, since it appears to have created gathering areas

including community centers for specific needs of the gypsy community.

Project # 2 was also successful in maintaining the semi-private places, creating a heterogeneous housing environment consisting of different sizes of buildings. In addition, the attached and semi-attached buildings have given the opportunity to identify the street character, which the living community was in need of.

Project # 3 was regarded as successful for maintaining the lively environment with its terrace-housing units. The difference of the project's spatial layout seems to have reflected the difference of the gypsy community. While the enclosed spaces provided public as well as semi-public uses, the graded character of the units seems to avail for social gathering in different elevations.



Project # 4 by Harun Balcı

Figure 11

In the final project reviews, project no. 4 has been considered also as one of the successful projects for its attempts to use colorful and heterogeneous housing blocks that also enabled use of the terraces. The intention in selection of the blocks has been to prevent multi-storied housing from bringing any monotonous layout. This concern has also been reflected in the public open spaces allocated to a wide range of activities that the gypsy community was thought to be in need of.

Concluding Remarks

During the second year urban planning studio, the attempt has been to design for cultural diversity. Even though the scale of the project

displayed an easy-to-handle content, the background issues of the area has turned the project into a difficult-to-grasp formulation. The reason underlying the selection of such a special neighborhood in Izmir was that it outstands with its distinctive characteristics, community spirit and the identity of the local culture very strongly. Students were asked to analyze and make their designs for the same culture in order to understand and gain skills for designing for a diversified local culture. However, the results implied successes as well as failures. In their design tasks, even though the students have tried to extract some elements such as gathering places, building heterogeneity and the organic urban pattern, failures mostly depended on national urban planning rules and regulations that were developed as part of the modernity project.

It may be suggested as a conclusive remark that although modernity project and the globalization processes affected most parts of the world, there is still the chance to experience the spatial and social elements of local cultures and identities. The gypsy culture and its spatial organization constitutes one of those local identities that should be kept vital.

The education strategy of planning and urban design education shall therefore involve such considerations that are based on understanding a different culture and spending effort to design according to specific needs of specific communities. Only through adoption of such a strategy can the modernist basis of design and planning approaches may be questioned further. The practice of designing may then be followed by criticizing the legislative framework and regulations that seem to homogenize urban life.

For reasons as such, it is important to let students in urban planning and design education to become aware of the difficulties of planning for specific communities with an approach that shall be purified of subjective considerations. For this reason, despite the failures that may emerge, the selection of such topics and 'places' within the complexity of cities may provide for knowledge and skills to be utilized in dealing with complex urban problems of any kind.

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