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## CHAPTER 3

# RIGHT TO THE CITY AS AN URBAN UTOPIA? PRACTICES OF EVERY DAY RESISTANCE IN A ROMANI NEIGHBOURHOOD IN ISTANBUL

GÜLÇİN ERDİ LELANDAIS

Many countries, including Turkey, are keen to reconfigure the spatial organisation of their cities in order either to facilitate the exploitation of profitable resources or to create ‘for-profit’ housing (Kibaroglu and Baskan 2009). However, the social and cultural impacts of these planning projects, including forced displacements, uprooting and assimilation, are often ignored. Within this framework, old and dilapidated neighbourhoods and inner-city *gecekondus*<sup>1</sup> full of low-income classes and ethnic minorities become the target of this policy.

These neighbourhoods are made up of those ethnic, religious or political minorities whose identity is constantly shunned by public institutions. The city and the neighbourhood make it possible for them to create enclaves where their identity is recognised without repression, and these life spaces enhance the development of a collective identity for the community. In this sense, the state’s desire to destroy these enclaves constitutes a threat to this identity and triggers resistance.

My research draws on a campaign organised against a renewal project in the Sulukule neighbourhood of Istanbul, which aimed to destroy entirely the gypsy settlements. Lefebvre’s theories and ideas about the urban space, especially the concept of the right to the city and the social production of urban space, will, in this paper, help highlight the social dynamics of urban protests and everyday forms of resistance.

After explaining methodological tools, the paper will highlight firstly the evolution of urban policies in Turkey, before explaining the mobilisation process in the neighbourhood. The emphasis will be placed

on how identity and space shape the protest in order to reclaim a right to the city.

## **Case Study and Methodology**

The investigated neighbourhood, Sulukule, is a part of historical peninsula of Istanbul declared as a World Heritage Site in 1988 by UNESCO. Sulukule was selected as the case study of this research in order to show that neo-liberal urban policies are not only directed against informal settlements and squatters inside the city, but also in historical and well-established neighbourhoods if they do not fit in principal and into plans designed by these policies. In addition, Sulukule represents the first example of urban resistance in Turkey, reaching a transnational scale and contesting the neo-liberal restructuring of the city. It could also permit us to understand how the concepts such as 'perceived space', 'conceived space' and 'right to the city', as elaborated by Lefebvre, find concrete fields of practice and proposed a detailed understanding of the dynamics of the capitalist city.

The community of Sulukule originated in its current location in 1054, when Istanbul was the capital of Byzantium and the majority of the population was still Romani. While there are other neighbourhoods in Istanbul with Romani communities, Sulukule's historical heritage made it the most famous.

The Sulukule Romanis are, in general, musicians and dancers. The children start to play a musical instrument very early and girls train to be belly dancers in house taverns from 10-12 years old. Related to this particularity, since the 1980s, Sulukule gained a reputation for crime and prostitution due to the Romani house-taverns and their female dancers. In the past, the community ran a series of entertainment houses, which were the backbone of the area's economy but, in 1991, were shut down by the police. Since then the economic condition of the community worsened, with many residents relying on the support of their neighbours for survival. The district underwent several cycles of demolition, forced displacement and police intervention, all of which reinforced its negative image, while its inhabitants suffered high levels of social and economic instability<sup>2</sup>.

The stigmatisation of this district arises from the devaluation of the Romani culture, which is officially identified as the source of these problems and which has served to justify the regeneration project. All the agencies involved in the neighbourhood's transformation agreed that its environmental degradation created the urgent need for renewal.<sup>3</sup> However,

advocacy organisations and the inhabitants of Sulukule themselves demanded that these agencies take into account the needs and wishes of the neighbourhood's residents.

Evidence for this article was drawn from in-depth interviews with dwellers, academicians (urbanists, architects and sociologists) and associations (Solidarity Studio, People's Urbanism Movement, Sulukule Volunteers, Association for the Development of Romani Culture and the Solidarity), who have been involved in the project in order to propose alternative solutions or to protest against the existing ones. Official documents, public reports, advisory reports and letters to/from international organisations, brochures, alternative project descriptions and presentations from associations have been collected. Archival searches were also conducted in daily journal records (*Hürriyet*, *Radikal*, *Birgün*) to follow the chronological development of the subject. The fieldwork was undertaken in two phases. The first phase was between March and May 2011 in Istanbul to ensure the first contact with inhabitants and civil society representatives and activists involved in Sulukule. Inhabitants affected by urban transformation projects, activists from organisations mentioned above, fighting against the destruction of the neighbourhood, and representatives of associations or platforms working to organise resistance were questioned via in-depth interviews. Participatory observations, informal discussions and participation in meetings, seminars and associations' activities have been also realised. This phase aimed to observe the acts of resistance in everyday life to analyse how the inhabitants perceive their living environment and what this space means in the construction of identity and protest. In the second phase, focus group interviews with mostly activists and researchers were privileged.

In the following sections, I will examine the evolution of Istanbul towards a global city and the housing policies conceived in a neo-liberal context. I will then focus on how these evolutions create a resistance in several neighbourhoods in which inhabitants attempt to protect their life space considered as the main source of their collective identity. I will conclude by studying different forms of resistance showing that methods of social movements like street actions, struggle against police forces and destruction are not always accepted or desired by inhabitants and that they formulate their refusal in alternative forms of resistance in everyday life.

## **Istanbul: A global city within global transformations?**

Istanbul offers us a case study in the construction and implementation of a broadly ‘neo-liberal’ approach to development, but with the distinctive local characteristic that this is being pursued under the authoritarian influence of the highly centralised Turkish state (Lovering and Türkmen 2011). However Istanbul is not an exceptional case and undergoes the same evolution of many Mediterranean cities, which is the spatialisation of neo-liberal order (Ababsa et.al 2012). Hence, the neo-liberal economic system has been introduced from 1990s by the liberalisation of markets, reducing progressively the control of the state on markets and services under the rule of Turgut Özal. However, the space has rarely been considered as a resource for the regeneration of the neo-liberalism.

Starting from 2000s, the AKP, Party of Justice and Development, introduced policies in order to surpass the economic and financial crisis in 2001 and to reintroduce economic growth. The solution has been found in the promotion of planning and development projects by accelerating the construction industry, which was already boosted during 1990s via the emergence of Real Estate Investment Trusts and the privatisation of a number of urban public constructions (Enlil 2011). The sector has been designated by the government as a solution to revive country’s economy and growth (Yalçintan and Çavuşoğlu 2013). In this sense, urban entrepreneurialism denotes an array of governance mechanisms and policies aimed at nurturing local and regional economic growth by creating a business environment propitious to capital investment and accumulation (Hall and Hubbard 1998; Harvey 1989; Leitner 1990).

**Table 3-1**

<b>Years</b>	<b>Construction sector’s growth</b>	<b>Economic growth</b>
<b>2001</b>	-17,4 %	- 5,7 %
<b>2002</b>	13,9 %	6,2 %
<b>2003</b>	7,8 %	5,3 %
<b>2004</b>	14,1 %	9,4 %
<b>2005</b>	9,3 %	8,4 %
<b>2006</b>	18,5 %	6,9 %

Source: National Institution of Statistics

In order to support the construction sector, several legislative arrangements are realised by the government. The first stage of this restructuring is the reinforcement of Mass Housing Agency's (TOKI) competencies in 2003 by Law N°4966, permitting the transfer of all treasury lands to the use of TOKI with the permission of Primary Minister in order to create lands for housing. Between 2004 and 2008 several laws were passed by the Turkish parliament in order to establish land and housing policy directions of the government. Law N° 5162, accepted in May 2004, gave TOKI the possibility of forced expropriation in the areas of urban renewal, to establish partnerships with private firms and financial trusts and to develop transformation projects in *gecekondu* areas. Law N° 5216, accepted in July 2004, extended the rights for municipalities to decide about urban transformation projects and areas. Another important law granted to the municipalities and TOKI to carry out urban regeneration projects not only in those zones considered to be decayed and unhealthy, but also in historical districts, ostensibly to renew and protect them (Law N°5366, 5/2005). Meanwhile, urban space had become a significant means of capital accumulation during the same period (Ünsal and Kuyucu 2010). In this fashion, vast areas have been designated as renewal zones in several cities in the past seven years, the process being particularly intensive in two major cities of Turkey - Istanbul and Ankara. The overarching mandate is to increase Istanbul's share of revenues from tourism, culture industries and finance, and further integrate the spaces of the city into global real estate markets (Karaman 2013). To ensure a sustainability to the construction sector, all *gecekondu* areas, inner-city slums and old "unhealthy" neighbourhoods have been opened to the regeneration and gentrification (Türkün 2011). Lower-class neighbourhoods inhabited by the city's poorest, which at time same time carry the highest potential in terms of the rising value of urban land, are refashioned by local municipality-private sector partnerships and allotted to new İstanbulites with highest cultural and economic capital - such as local and foreign executives working in sectors that are in great demand in the post-industrialist era, such as finance, design and informatics, as well as professionals of the institutionalised field of arts and culture (Adanali 2011).

Neo-liberal urban regeneration policies have three major characteristics in order to legitimise this process and to reduce potential resistance channels. First, they are supported by a wide range of legal mechanisms, as indicated above, which the government adapts according to needs and conditions. Secondly, urban security discourses are used for these policies in the public opinion in order to legitimate human consequences such as

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forced displacements and house destructions. In 2009 the General Directorate of Security published a list of neighbourhoods in which so-called “illegal terrorist groups and organisations” were operating (*Aksiyon* 2008). The Director of TOKI has stressed that:

Today, urban transformation ranks among the most important problems in Turkey. But Turkey cannot speak about urban development without solving the problem of the shanty towns. These are known to be the source of the health issues, illiteracy, drug abuse, terrorism and distrust towards the State. No matter what, Turkey must get rid of these illegal and non-earthquake-resistant buildings<sup>4</sup>.

As some researchers argue, and this is also the case in Istanbul, urban transformation targets the urban poor and the informal economy, aggressive enforcement of these via ‘broken windows’ and order maintenance policing, the privatisation of security, the literal or *de facto* privatisation of public space and the emergence or re-emergence of an often racialised discourse of the poor as dangerous and criminal. All contribute to spatial fragmentation and a massive fortification of the spaces between rich and poor (Herbert and Brown 2006; Wacquant, 2002). This statement brings out the desire of policy-makers to link the shantytown or unhealthy downtown districts to criminality and to designate their inhabitants as potential offender and enemies.

In this framework, the multiplication of gated communities in Istanbul is correlated to the sentiment of (in)security<sup>5</sup> and the desire to be among his/her similar (Danış and Pérouse 2005; Genis 2007; Low 2001). Isin explains this phenomenon by introducing the concept of “neurotic citizen” who is incited by governing actors to make social and cultural investments to eliminate various dangers by calibrating its conduct on the basis of its anxieties and insecurities rather than rationalities (2004: 223). He relates it to the home becoming a fortified castle through gated communities, surveillance technologies and security industries that address the vulnerabilities and anxieties associated with “home security” (ibid: 230).

Thirdly, this neo-liberal restructuring of cities in Turkey has an authoritarian character, since it is almost blind to the demands and desires of the majority of residents, namely middle, lower-middle and poor classes and privileges the market priorities in order to integrate Istanbul into global economic, financial and cultural flows (Öktem 2011). This authoritarianism of neo-liberal policies has been widely discussed in academia, ~~for instance, s~~Such authors as Dryzek (1996), ~~who~~ defend deliberative democracy and underline that neo-liberalism values individuals who myopically pursue their material self-interest in the

marketplace, not citizens who cultivate their civic virtue in the public square. As democratic decision-making tends to involve political wrangling and debate, it could take time and become an obstacle in urban governance. Collective decision processes, therefore, are not desired. This can be observed in many urban projects in Istanbul where the inhabitants are the last ones to know public decisions concerning the future of their neighbourhood. This process refers to what Lefebvre (1974) calls difference of perception between conceived and perceived space, which is often adversarial in capitalist urbanisation. In Sulukule, the project has been decided upon inside the decision-making chain of the Fatih district municipality, with TOKI and private building firms and inhabitants learning the details of the transformation project only after the involvement of chambers of architects and planners. Some researchers (MacLeod 2002; Miller 2007; Purcell 2008) explain that neo-liberalisation narrows the options open to decision-makers and because of the disciplining force of the perceived need to remain globally competitive, democratic decision-making is therefore seen as slow, messy, inefficient, and not likely to produce the kind of bold entrepreneurial decisions that attract and keep capital.

In this perspective, the objective to make Istanbul a global city forces public actors to respond quickly to the market opportunities. Urban governing institutions are being, therefore, increasingly 'streamlined' so they can foreclose lengthy debate and more quickly respond to market opportunities (Purcell 2008). As a consequence, urban governments adopt ready-made policy ensembles developed in other places rather than engage the city's public in generating policy through democratic debate (ibid). The project in Sulukule has, like those in other neighbourhoods concerned by urban transformation in Istanbul, been introduced by virtue of this logic, and the inhabitants learned that their neighbourhood and life will be affected only when the project is officially launched.

Consequently, alternative lifestyles, different political ideologies and various traditions of socio-political resistance feel themselves under threat and approve the need to resist this evolution. In the case of Turkey, these struggles and resistances tend to emerge in some neighbourhoods with a particularly strong group identity, often related to an ethnic and/or political status that is closely associated with the neighbourhood itself considered as the place of the collective memory production of its residents. Resistance is, therefore, connected to identity and to space that plays a crucial role for mobilising social resources and solidarity reinforced by the memory of the neighbourhood.



## **Reclaiming the right to the city against state-led urban restructuring**

Over the past several years, the idea of a right to the city has become increasingly popular. Many in the literature are exploring resistance to neo-liberalisation specifically (Holston 1998; Purcell 2008; Salmon 2001). Purcell (2008) reports that the idea is not only discussed inside academia but is also evoked in conflicts over housing and several international conferences organised by international organisations, such as the Worldwide Conference on the Right to Cities Free from Discrimination and Inequality in 2002.

Lefebvre perceived the right to the city as a way of legitimating “the refusal to allow oneself to be removed from urban reality by a discriminatory and segregative organisation” (1996: 197). For Lefebvre, the urban is not simply limited to the boundaries of a city, but includes its social system of production. Hence the right to the city is a claim for the recognition of the urban as the (re)producer of social relations of power, and the right to participation in it (Gilbert and Dikeç 2008). In that sense, the right to the city could be described as a right to the appropriation and the participation of the inhabitants. As Marcuse explains, it is, at the same time, a right to produce the city as well as to enjoy it, and two are integrally linked. It is not only the right to a choice of what is produced after it is produced, but a right to determine what is produced and how it is produced and to participate in its production (2012, 36).

This is on this point that the right to the city becomes meaningful in the restructuring of the cities in the current world. The reason is that, as we mentioned above, neo-liberalism rules the city and this logic expects results in culture, tourism, economy, housing and education, generating profit inside the city and is not so interested in the type of city in which inhabitants want to live. In Istanbul, several neighbourhoods oppose this change in different ways. Some choose to protest in order to prevent the transformation project while others try to resist in an invisible way by defending their lifestyle, social networks and establishing solidarities in everyday life.

Harvey emphasises the genesis of the emergence of this concept in current urban resistances by saying that:

The idea of the right to the city does not arise primarily out of various intellectual fascinations and fads. It primarily rises up from the streets, out from the neighbourhoods, as a cry for help and sustenance by oppressed people in desperate times. [...] It is here that a study of how Lefebvre responded is helpful – not because his responses provide blueprints (our situation is very different from that of the 1960s, and the streets of Mumbai, Los Angeles, Sao Paulo and Johannesburg are very different from those of Paris), but his dialectical method of immanent critical inquiry can provide an inspirational model for how we might respond to that cry and demand. (2012, xiii)

In Sulukule, at the beginning of the transformation project, the inhabitants were not considered as legitimate interlocutors by the municipality of Fatih. They were informed by organisations such as the Istanbul Chamber of Architects and Engineers, Human Settlement Association and Solidarity Studio, who were working on urban questions and policies<sup>6</sup>. Thus, a committee was founded in 2006 in order to ensure the contact with the municipality and to obtain information on the course of the project. The latter was presented by the mayor of Istanbul as “the most social urban project of the world”<sup>7</sup>, in that it aimed “to improve the living conditions of Romanis” in the district, by proposing new housing possibilities. The choice was left to inhabitants to take a house rebuilt in the district or to accept a flat in a newly built housing site in Taşoluk. Many inhabitants thought, at the beginning, to accept the first alternative in the hope to see their activities legalised and public services improved. Nevertheless, in spite of the involvement of above-mentioned associations, the project turned out not to be as “social” as announced. This was for a number of reasons. Firstly this was because it implied, in reality, a heavy loan for inhabitants who were financially precarious. In addition, these new houses did not correspond to the lifestyle of Romani who preferred to live in communities and to pass their time in the streets of their neighbourhood<sup>8</sup>. Inhabitants finally understood that the project was not conceived for them, but rather, as an extremely profitable real estate opportunity for the TOKI in order to sell the new houses to populations with high income<sup>9</sup>.

Consequently, in 2006, mobilisation was organised in Sulukule. Initiated by external associations mentioned above, some inhabitants of the district also join to it by founding their own association – the Association for the Development of Romani Culture. Although the role of the association in term of orientation and training remained determining, they founded together the *Sulukule Platformu* (Platform of Sulukule)<sup>10</sup>, some thus initiating into activism. The mobilisation in Sulukule was organised

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around two consubstantial topics: the right to live in the city and the right to a convivial life in a human environment – the main elements of the right to the city defined by Lefebvre, in fact. It was first of all a question of denouncing the inhuman character of the urban projects promoted by the AKP, whose opponents denounced the objective of benefit, instead of the constitution of a socially equitable urban space. Thus, it tried to show that all renewal projects targeted systematically the disadvantaged districts and excluded the low-income social groups by preventing them *de facto* from living in the city centre. These claims were then completed by the defence of Romanis' cultural identity. Inhabitants and militant associations emphasised the historical bases of Romanis' installation in Sulukule so as to show that they were the 'true inhabitants', 'real owners' of Istanbul and had as much right to live there and to invest in the city as any other Turkish citizen, with their identities, their traditions and their practices. This claim crosscut directly what Lefebvre understands to be the right to the city. In his opinion, this right represents something more than reclaiming basic needs. As people in Sulukule reclaimed, it signifies an access to the resources of the city for all segments of the population, and the possibility of experimenting with and realizing alternative ways of life (Schmid 2012). This awakening and resistance also made it possible for Romanis to think about their role as full citizens. The president of the Association of the Romani Culture of Sulukule explains:

Before the project, people's reflex was not to oppose to the State. It could be explained by the denigration and the contempt [of which are victims Roms] since centuries. There was neither an organisation, a spirit of resistance nor political conscience. Myself, I have only the elementary school diploma. It is with this project that I learned how to write official letters, to become town planner, lawyer, activist and speaker at the same time. We understood that it is necessary to defend our rights and that we have also our word to say on decisions which concern us.

(Şakir, inhabitant-activist in Sulukule)

From the beginning, the Platform of Sulukule stated an agreement to a transformation project in Sulukule only if it had the objective to improve the well-being of the residents without forced evictions. It stated that the inhabitants had the right to continue to live in the district and to practise their professional activities. In this regard, professional associations and researchers from different universities conceived an alternative project<sup>11</sup>. Their request concerned clearly a claim of a right to the city insofar as their will to take part in the design of their life space came from a will to make the city more inclusive, where opportunities are distributed better in

the population (Purcell 2003). Resistance to Sulukule was not limited to a simple opposition to the destruction of the houses; it refused above all the process of urban segregation implemented by public institutions and the lack of viable alternatives for the Romani population. Thus, in all its confrontations with the public actors, in the booklets and letters addressed to the various international institutions, the mobilisation in Sulukule formulated its desire to take part openly and equitably in the production process of urban space and to reach the advantages of the city life. It emphasises the point that to live in the city centre is not a luxury and was opposed to all forms of spatial segregation and containment imposed by a top-down process.

For the neighbourhood's Romanis, the project meant uprooting, a rupture in their collective history. In fact, if any resistance practice was not observed among the Romani community until the launch of the project, it is probably because, in Sulukule, their life space remained after each attempt at destruction and they succeeded in reinvesting and rebuilding their space. In other words, Sulukule represented for its inhabitants a place of shelter, serenity and stability, an enclave where they escaped stigmatisation, exclusion or contempt. A resident tells us that:

You have seen the Byzantium castle walls around our neighbourhood. They might appear to you as ordinary stones but actually, they were our shelter. It was a shelter which covered our poverty, our quarrels, and our honour. The district was our house. It was regarded in this way...we were a merry neighbourhood from which music was heard all the time and our evening... you know the Carnival of Rio, it was like that every evening. Our celebrations, joys, sadness and burials...we were sharing everything together. It was the place that made us what we are. When they destroyed our neighbourhood, we suffered like a mother separated from her child. It was everything for us.

(Sakir, inhabitant-activist in Sulukule)

This statement explains clearly the importance of the neighbourhood considered by its residents as the place representing "a sense of community...a feeling of solidarity between people who occupy the common territory based on a strong local network of kinship, reinforced by the localised patterns of employment, shopping and leisure activities" (Knox and Pinch 2010: 188). In spite of the generalised injustice and the contempt they felt because of their ethnic origin, Sulukule's Romanis remained loyal towards public authorities and had interiorised the state's authority. As soon as this injustice became spatial, it combined with a feeling of uprooting and some inhabitants decided to resist. They understood that, with this project, a space that is a part of their identity

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would not be accessible anymore and that they would be condemned to live outside the city. For the majority, it was the end of their community:

After the destruction, some families went to Tasoluk but, they could not live there. As Sulukule did not exist anymore, they could not return there either. Some of them found apartments in Karagümrük near Sulukule, and the others left for various districts of Istanbul. In a town of 12 million people, they progressively lost each other, the frequentations rarefied with time. They lost their friends, neighbours and also their social life. Today, there are still people who cannot exceed this traumatism.

(Nesrin, volunteer in Sulukule)

The mobilisation effort in Sulukule used a wide range of repertoires in order to make their claims heard. Organisations and people operating in *Sulukule Platformu* arranged their action around local and transnational levels, mobilising also the justice and legal framework as a basis for collective action (Benford and Snow 2000). Transnational strategies were also mobilised (Keck and Sikkink 1998) and internationally known artists such as Manu Chao, Gogol Bordello and Goran Bregovic took part in musical demonstrations. European institutions such as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the Helsinki Commission to the American Congress were seized on as ways of raising recognition of the rights of inhabitants and to put pressure on the Turkish government. Even if the mobilisation of Sulukule's Romanis was not entirely successful and ultimately unable to prevent the destruction of the district, it constituted a first example of resistance that articulates spatial justice, right to the city and urban citizenship.

However, in spite of the fact that the mobilisation with Sulukule was very dynamic, involving many associations and organisations at local, national and international levels, it remained essentially an external mobilisation because it did not succeed in including actively the majority of the inhabitants. Many inhabitants explained that the destruction of the neighbourhood had been very easy and that the destruction teams had not met an active resistance. In fact, Romanis preferred other forms of resistance and asserting themselves in spite of the planned disappearance of their neighbourhood. These forms of resistance were less visible in the public space but observable in the daily practices within the neighbourhood.

Their resistance consisted of the denial of the destruction of their neighbourhood, the rebuilding of their cultural identity and its valorisation,

which resulted in an increased vigilance with regard to the threats weighing on their community.

## **Neighbourhood and dwellers' everyday resistance after the campaign**

The Sulukule neighbourhood, as I mention below, is characterised by the relative social and ethnic homogeneity of its settlement. This leads to a strong identification with a small territory in which the majority of dwellers' socialisation is realised, while the dense kinship connections in a local space establish effective networks of mutual aid. As an inhabitant from Sulukule emphasises:

We were able to buy a little bit of food with the little money we earned each day. The grocer registered it in his notebook and we paid it when we had money. If we were having difficulties, the owner of our apartment told us to pay whenever it was possible. We didn't need much money to live in Sulukule.

(Türkan, age 39, inhabitant of Sulukule since birth)

In this context, the neighbourhood plays an important role in determining the identity, the way of being and the position of individuals *vis-à-vis* the external world. Mills, for example, explains that “landscapes are powerful materialisations of collective memory, because particular forms in the landscape both come from and reproduce this memory by serving as symbols that remind us of the past” (2005: 443). Additionally, the social networks constructed in the neighbourhood are instruments for preserving collective identity, giving residents the ability to resist in order to protect this space of identity. Neighbourhood cements collective identity, but not just in relation to the specific codes and practices associated with ethnicity. This identity is also enriched by the traditional customs, social networks, rituals, symbols, collective memories and mechanisms of mutual aid that exist only within the physical living environment of that community:

The neighbourhood in Sulukule is considered as “inside” by its residents while the rest is “outside”. Inside is the place where everybody is free and comfortable. Outside signifies rules, absence of freedom and unfriendly relations. [...] People in Sulukule live in the streets of the neighbourhood rather than their house. Except sleeping and eating, all activities are going on the streets within the community. Especially women and children stay

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almost every time in the neighbourhood and go to the outside only for few needs absents there. Women take their chairs and stay in their street together and chat until the evening. The neighbourhood is their main socialisation area. (Güngör 2008: 2)

Identity, insofar as it relates to belonging to a space, was also mentioned several times by the interviewees as an important aspect of the individual and a source of pride. Several aspects of Romani culture, in particular their music, the festive character of their gatherings and their gaiety, are in direct opposition to the delinquency attributed to this neighbourhood by public authorities. In both instances, identity is specifically related to the neighbourhood or city, with inhabitants in both places underlining the importance of their neighbourhood to their sense of self.

After the destruction of their neighbourhood, organisations struggling against the project started to leave the neighbourhood progressively as their claims were not heard. The inhabitants then stayed alone to adapt to the new life conditions, losing most of their social marks and relationships. As a result, they found new forms of resistance in their search of survival.

Firstly, the Romanis did not accept easily their resettlement in Tasoluk, which was undertaken without considering their way of life. For them, Tasoluk was a ghetto almost completely cut off from the city centre, making it impossible to maintain their traditional profession as musicians:

They proposed installing us in an area 30 km away from here where there is nothing which looks like a city. To take a bus, to see a doctor, it is necessary to walk kilometres. All these things could be managed in some way but we are musicians, we earn our living like that. Tell me, who will travel 30 km to listen to us? Who will come to our houses? Our music is our life. We cannot live without it, but they tell us to find other jobs even though we cannot do anything else. They should give us the freedom to exercise our talent here in Sulukule.

(Sakir, inhabitant and activist in Sulukule)

As a result, the majority of the Romanis returned to the district of Fatih in neighbourhoods near to Sulukule. As Sulukule was demolished, they rented apartments or moved in with close relatives, especially in Karagümruk, where there is another important Romani community. In this way they have reproduced the daily structure of Sulukule society with the same social unity and similar arrangements of streets and Turkish cafés, where the most of neighbourhood's men spend their day.

Another example of this symbolic reinvestment of the neighbourhood was the re-establishment of cultural rituals such as marriages, burials or

boys' circumcision). Until the rubbles were entirely removed, those that had left the district decided to organise their marriage or circumcision inside Sulukule, with the musicians of the district. Romanis remain particularly attached to their feast, which becomes thus "a place of production of modes of identification, categorical attributions, symbolic borders, signals and devices of differences" (Dorrier-Apprill and Gervais-Lambony 2007, 176).

This attachment allows dwellers, dispersed in the city because of the project, to register a collective action intended to maintain a strong social network, to make visible a cultural identity and finally to put forward the shared identity in the neighbourhood (Stébé and Marchal 2011). Lastly, the district thus reconstituted, thanks to the continuation of symbolic acts, makes it possible for dwellers to affirm their right to appropriate the city, to form it according to their needs and practices and to refuse the public processes of decision-making that excluded them. These claims are not, however, expressed as acts of citizenship in public space through mobilisations, petitions or street demonstrations.

This resistance is observable within the district by ordinary acts of everyday life, such as the permanent watchfulness of residents who are now aware of the irreversible loss of Sulukule. This watchfulness could be explained by the will to protect this new life space they created as alternative and exerted in particular by the control of foreign people coming to the neighbourhood from outside. This was because of the way in which the project was launched. The transformation project was conceived by the agents of the municipality, followed by signature of approval being proposed to residents, often illiterate, explaining that it was simply a reinforcement of buildings against the earthquake risk. Being suspicious about the repetition of the same type of misleading behaviour of the public actors, the inhabitants do not appreciate and welcome people coming from outside. It is no more easy for them to pass along the neighbourhood without being bothered and followed by the children of the community.

Lastly, Romanis consider that, if the mobilisation of associations, as presented earlier in this article, was not successful in stopping the project, then it was mainly because residents did not consider themselves as citizens enjoying their rights *vis-à-vis* the state and its institutions. From this point of view, it proved necessary to develop and to make visible the Romani identity and culture in public space in order to claim it as a citizen's right:

For various reasons, Romanis were never regarded as equal citizens to the others. Romanis should be recognised and protected like one



## Right to the city as an urban utopia?

of the founder communities of the Republic as they also worked for the foundation of this country. So we claim rights within a constitutional framework as equal citizens and with whole share.<sup>12</sup>

(Manifesto of Romani Associations 2012)

The opening of a studio bringing together well-known musicians, coming from Sulukule, and the organisation of a concert at *GarajIstanbul* (a famous concert hall), in 2007, were one of the first examples. Lately, three young people of the neighbourhood founded a group of rap called *Tahribat-i Isyan* (Revolt against the destruction) to express their opposition and their anger to the transformation of their neighbourhood. Zenci, the singer of the group, explains that “people should not speak any more about Sulukule only for report incidents like street battles, the sale of drug or the battle of gangs. People should speak about Sulukule to evoke its music, its rappers, its culture”.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

The example of Sulukule proposes alternative ways of thinking about the conception and the use of urban space. The resistance observed in this neighbourhood shows that dwellers are sometimes able to resist against urban public policy without using the tools of contentious politics but by mobilising the resources that could be provided. This statement alludes to possible ways in which spatial constraints are turned to one’s advantage in political and social struggles and the ways that such struggles can restructure the meanings, uses, and strategic valence of space (Sewell 2001).

As Lefebvre points out in *La Production de l’Espace*, space becomes a place of struggle for its appropriation and conception between public actors and their opponents. In this struggle, the right to the city is chosen as a tool by urban dwellers in order to legitimate their right to ‘be’ in the city. Neo-liberal hegemony tends to absorb alternative logics and shape them to its ends as it was the case for the alternative lifestyle of Romanis in Sulukule. Claiming a right to the city in that context is a challenge (Purcell 2008). Resistance in Sulukule claimed a right to appropriation, in Lefebvre’s terms, to show that the city belongs to everyone and that it is unowned.

As Purcell argues, the meaning of the right to the city is enriched by local patterns and struggles, for it would mean that neighbourhood groups (not citywide bodies) should decide how neighbourhood space is produced, since they inhabit that space fully every day (2008, 101). The right to the city is the way to control the production of space in the city.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The *gecekondu* has a particular significance in Turkey and is distinguished from slum. Originally a technical term, *gecekondu* derived from everyday language to signify a specific housing and settlement typology of self-service urbanisation that occurred during Turkey's industrialisation and rural migration between 1945 and 1985. *Gece* means 'the night' and *kondu* 'landed'-- hence *gecekondu* translates as 'landed at night'. The term has evolved to encompass a variety of informal settlements and building typologies. Its usage denotes a bottom-up, spontaneous action, especially prevalent during the first wave of mass migration, to provide mass housing under conditions in which conventional or government-initiated models of housing supply failed. See Erman (2001) for a further discussion on *gecekondu*s and *gecekondu* studies in Turkey.

<sup>2</sup> For a wide range information about Sulukule, see the website created by associations and inhabitants inside the neighbourhood during the demolition process: <http://sulukulegunlugu.blogspot.fr/>.

<sup>3</sup> This degradation is largely related to the behaviour of the local and national public agencies. The municipality has never provided the necessary public services in the district under the pretext of its supposed criminality. They failed to regularise the professional activities of the Roma, which would have enabled them to raise their living standards and repair their houses. Also, by classifying this neighbourhood as part of the historical peninsula of Istanbul, they prevented any construction or improvement schemes, unless residents had authorisation from the official council of historic buildings.

<sup>4</sup> This speech was given by the Director of TOKI during a conference that was co-organised by the Municipality of Istanbul and Urban Land Institute on "Urban Renewal Projects and Real-Estate Investments". For further information, see "Kentsel dönüşümü tamamlayamazsak terörü de bitiremeyiz" (We cannot finish with terrorism if we cannot finish the urban transformation). *Mimdap*. Accessed 2 February 2009. <http://www.mimdap.org/w/?p=2114>.

<sup>5</sup> By this concept, I refer to critical security studies, especially those of Didier Bigo, which consider security as a phenomenon accentuating the feeling of insecurity and thereby introducing a snowball effect in the implementation of securitization measures. (In)securitisation, as a process of extrapolating dangers and fears of what could be and is not, becomes a central feature of contemporary societies. It often leads to a loss of perspective and to attempts to achieve "re-assurance" through simplifying myths constructed from partial knowledge and institutional or collective anticipations of an exceptional violence. These anticipations neglect ordinary forms of violence that are no longer considered as such. See Bigo (2003).

<sup>6</sup> Nezihe Basak Ergin's chapter in this book gives a general view and a deep analysis of these organisations and groups struggling against urban transformation projects in several area in Istanbul.

<sup>7</sup> Purpose of the Mayor of Fatih district, Mustafa Demir, published in *Zaman*, 17 November 2006.

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<sup>8</sup> They explained being “accustomed to living in houses without stage with a garden and an interior common court, to have a collective family life”; and not to have understood “need for the garages in the underground of the houses” whereas they rarely own a car.

<sup>9</sup> The newspaper *Hürriyet* thus revealed that, well before the beginning of the project, many deputies of the AKP had already bought houses in the new neighbourhood. See “İşte Sulukule’nin rantsal dönüşümü” (For-profit transformation of Sulukule). *Hürriyet*, 18 March 2009.

<sup>10</sup> This platform was made up of associations, academics and independent individuals working for the preservation of the district and rehabilitation on site without the obligation for inhabitants to leave the neighbourhood. The Chamber of Architects Engineers and researchers at Mimar Sinan University were most active in the platform. This was an open space with a flexible activism to where everybody could join. For more information, to see the website of the platform: <http://sulukulegunlugu.blogspot.fr/>.

<sup>11</sup> Ce projet alternatif a été conçu par un groupe d’urbanistes nommé STOP (Sınır Tanımayan Otonom Plancılar, Urbanistes autonomes sans frontières). Il a été exposé devant un public composé des décideurs publics locaux, d’universitaires, d’étudiants et d’ingénieurs à l’Université de Yıldız à Istanbul en 2008. Il n’a jamais été pris en compte par la mairie de Fatih. This alternative project was conceived by a group of town planners named STOP (Sınır Tanımayan Otonom Plancılar, autonomous Urbanistes without borders). It was exposed in front of a public made up of the local public decision makers, academics, students and engineers at the University of Yıldız in Istanbul in 2008. It has never taken into account by the mayor of Fatih.

<sup>12</sup> Declaration of Romani Associations, addressed to the Parliamentary Commission for a New Constitution, published in *Aksam*, 17 April 2012 [our translation].

<sup>13</sup> Interview carried out by Zuhale Erkek at the Art Studio for the Children of Sulukule, 25 May 2012. Available at: <http://www.on5yirmi5.com/genc/haber.91801/sulukulenin-protest-cocuklari-tahribat-i-isyan.html>.

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