

Urban regeneration projects in Istanbul and documentary value

Yonca KÖSEBAY ERKAN, E.Füsün ALIOĞLU
Kadir Has University, Cibali, Istanbul, Turkey

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Abstract:

Historic cities directly reflect urban transformations and the restructuring of social life shaping the physical environment of a city. In Istanbul, however, recent changes in the physical environment have taken a different path from that of the past. The legal framework and organization of this forced transformation has rapidly developed. Such transformation projects will set into motion irreversible processes altering historic areas in Istanbul. On the one hand, new spaces for divergent formations are sought, utilizing the power of law. On the other hand, the stratification of the city, which dates back centuries, has been subjected to regeneration projects including conservation work. However, the preservation approach employed in these projects displays an inclination towards “gentrification” at the higher scale, which bears the risk of neglecting the authentic qualities of the actual urban fabric or the buildings. In other words, the underlying aim of such projects is the removal of the dilapidated, ruinous, poor and marginal character of the present via processes of gentrification. The documentary value of a structure consists of the qualities of a cultural asset which require preservation. In this regard, this paper will demonstrate the documentary values which are threatened by proposed urban transformation projects in the historic peninsula of Istanbul.

Keywords: *Urban transformation, heritage, documentary value, authenticity.*

Historic documentary value

It is inevitable that changes and transformations will occur as the result of factors which impact the present. One of these factors is the construction of structures that mark a radical rupture from the past, instigated by such prompts as religion and new forms of production. When the inputs of societies change for various reasons, including cultural, social, and economic shifts, the effects are visible in every field. Throughout history tangible and intangible life inputs have always been directly affected by change and transformation. The illustrious buildings and their surrounding environments in many European cities today such as Paris and Rome are testimonies of such a process. The architectural narrative of coexisting remnants from antiquity, the medieval age and industrialism can be seen simultaneously in these cities. The inputs of this process enable the

acceptance of conservation theories implemented in European countries like Italy and France.

Throughout the centuries, European cities oscillated between preserving the physical artifacts of heritage and duplicating and even destructing them. The nineteenth-century debate over conservation centered around three approaches: Eugene Emmanuel Viollet le Duc's (1814-1879) contention for stylistic unity; John Ruskin's (1819-1900) "romantic view" which supported minimal intervention against monuments; and, the historical restoration theory supported by Luca Beltrami (1836-1914) which valued historical evidence. The most significant focus of these arguments is the documentary value which is evident in every detail of a given building. In the conservation principles of Camillo Boito (1836-1914) written in 1883, the concern that changes "...could cause misleading results and decree" and "...the additions through time should be respected" is put forward (Ahunbay, 2004). What is mentioned here are the values attained in history; in other words, the documentary value of the building. Later in other conventions in which conservation theory is discussed, documentary value has been a principal issue.

What changed in the understanding of documentary value when conservation was handled traditionally and when a more flexible approach was favored in the post-war period was the profundity of the concept. The theory of conservation evolved over time in a number of ways: from a focus on monument conservation to the conservation of cultural assets; from a focus on single structures to historic environments; and, from an emphasis on tangible cultural values to intangible cultural values. In all of these shifts, documentary value was the key concept upon which the theories were developed. Documentary value can take a number of forms, including:

- The historical topography of a city
- The spatial organization of the urban fabric
- Urban zones
- The socio-cultural structure of the urban fabric
- The structure of a quarter, street, or parcel
- Urban facilities
- The myriad details of the design, material and construction techniques of the architectural heritage

In short, documentary value can occur as a reflection of the cultural, social and economic characteristics of the settlements or the buildings. Sometimes it can be tangible, but at other times it can be perceived emotionally or ideologically.

Conservation interventions certainly have the potential to damage documentary value. At the same time, the proposal put forward by John Ruskin (1819-1900) would also not be valid today: "Neither by the public, nor by those who have the care of public monuments, is the true meaning of the word restoration understood. It means the most total destruction which a building can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered: a destruction accompanied with false description of the thing destroyed... Do not let us talk then of restoration. The thing is a Lie from beginning to end." (Jokilehto, 2006, 175).

The dynamics of tangible or intangible heritage which conservation as a concept owes its existence, often and naturally will reject the preservation approach. On the other hand it is not a concern for the underdeveloped

countries of today where the urge to unite with the rest of the world in cultural, social and economic terms is high. Rushed restoration and urban regeneration fills the agendas of local and central governments. At this point it is evident that protecting historic documentary value has its own risks because the ability to conserve historic documentary value conflicts with the restorations and urban regenerations based on a premise of gentrification.

The historic peninsula, urban regenerations, restorations

As the new economic politics of today has increased competition among cities, historic urban centers once again are under pressure to be reorganized as housing, office space and areas of touristic interest for upper-income groups. This reformulation and the actors involved have been defined by the drafting of new legislation. In this regard in Turkey, a new legal framework has been set up, referred to as Conservation Code 5366 (Yıpranan Tarihi ve Kültürel Taşınmaz Varlıklarının Yenilenerek Korunması ve Yaşatılarak Kullanılması Hakkında Kanun). Notable features of this code include:

- An improvement over the prior code, Conservation Code 2863
- It is internally organized (Renewal Boards)
- It centralized decision-making power

This new legal legislation has made it possible to inflict trauma not only on socio-cultural and economic spheres but also on urban and structural features. The graveness of the situation becomes apparent when the details of the interventions are examined up close. Applications leave the principal conservation criteria in danger, one of which is historic documentary value. Restoration and design decisions concerning urban conservation or of a single monument are left to certain contractors and architectural offices empowered with the unplanned and undemocratic character of the law. Further, the right to information access is hindered, and what is shared with the public through related websites are usually superficial renderings with a notable lack of detail.

In Turkey, it is a well-known fact that the drafting of legal legislation primarily targets Istanbul and it follows that the first implementations take place in Istanbul. This city of significant world heritage is on the brink of undergoing a transformation unlike any before.

Which aspects of “documentary value” are disappearing?

There are more than enough projects on the Historic Peninsula of Istanbul, either realized or in the design stage, to provide data for a discussion of the loss of documentary value. One of these is the Fener Balat Rehabilitation Project. Although it has not been treated as falling within the purview of Code 5366, this project began in 2003 as a joint venture between the European Union and the Fatih Municipality (www.fatih.bel.tr). The project is composed of four main stages:

- The socio-economic regeneration and sustainable rehabilitation of the Fener and Balat Districts
- The creation of economic activity for the members of the community
- The strengthening of the technical capacity of the Fatih Municipality
- The creation of a replicable, successful model of urban rehabilitation

The tenets of the project have been defined thus: “...Buildings in Fener and Balat districts demonstrate severe problems of decay and dereliction, compounded by the poor economic status of the inhabitants. To remedy this

situation, an indicative number of historic houses will be rehabilitated, selected on the basis of various social and architectural considerations...” (www.fenerbalat.org)

The project, although very prominent by its social content, can be considered as a project which has failed to reach its goal due to the poor descriptions of the restorations at the beginning and at the implementation stage. as the project plan states that “...the roofs and façades of these houses will be restored, outside door and window frames will be renewed, and annexes/extensions that do not fit the original character of the buildings will be removed during the restoration...” (www.fenerbalat.org).

This statement makes it clear that substantial restoration was not the original aim. Merely repairing the roof or the facade of a historic building cannot be accepted as a restoration. There should not have been any limitations in a project like in the case of Fener Balat where structural and constructional problems coexist. As a matter of fact, serious structural problems continue to exist in the interiors of the houses. This project failed to deal with the problems of the interiors of the structures, and therefore could not provide healthy living conditions for inhabitants. On the other hand, the project implies a gentrifying character to people viewing the houses from the outside, and gives the impression of a healthy, well kept environment (Figure 1).

Secondly the project did not live up to its promises, and “the additions hampering authenticity” have not been removed. For example, balconies made of concrete were not removed regardless of their size. In some others, unskilled additions were not accepted as they are, but treated as authentic and reproduced accordingly, as in the case of a dilapidated building that had lost its projection where the projection was reconstructed. A later addition, such as an overhang, was redesigned as a marquee and applied to several houses. In addition:

- Window sills were treated as moldings,
- Floor additions and the moldings framing the eaves were constructed with newly invented details.

Of course, restoration applications require reintegration. However, reintegration in this project was not designed specifically for a given building, but rather generic design solutions were invented.

A self-critical statement made by the project team is worthy of note here: “...It would seem that it contradicts the basic principles of restoration to approach every building individually, but here the restoration descriptions are grouped generically; for the cases that required specific solutions, the descriptions were customized over these generic ones...” (Altınsay Özgüner, 2009). It is apparent that this project did not take a standardized analytical approach in compiling an inventory concerning the following:

- The moldings at the floor level of each building, moldings framing the eaves, window frames and building height
- Decisions to keep or remove unskilled additions
- Decisions for lost items (keeping the existing one, replacing it with an imitation or constructing it with neutral materials)

Through such applications, the buildings were adorned with new details while the historic documentary value in the materials, construction techniques and craftsmanship that ought to be passed on to future

generations has been damaged. Therefore, the project failed to achieve its goal as a model of urban regeneration for other locations.



Inventory no. 19 (Simple repair)



Inventory no. 20-22 (Simple repair)

Figure 1. Rehabilitation of Fener and Balat Districts Programme / Building Examples, (www.fenerbalat.org)

Another project designed for the historic peninsula is the Fener Balat Waterside Renewal Project (www.fatih.bel.tr). The project encapsulates a 29.353 m² area of land over which 297 buildings currently exist. Of this building stock, 181 are listed vernacular buildings. The Municipality of Fatih stated that the goal of the project is to repair neglected and damaged buildings within the project area indicated as the protection zone in which there are 34 monumental buildings, and to bring into being a district suitable for the Golden Horn and its history. However, the project seems to have gone beyond this description; the apparent purpose seems to give way to

new constructions and cause structural change on a large scale (Figure 2, 3). Some of the effects include:

- A recreation of the character concerning the relation of the Golden Horn with the city walls
- The traditional small parcels supporting small dwellings are replaced by a new fabric composed of larger masses
- The traditional style with certain heights and façade organizations are replaced by larger buildings creating a continuous wall effect
- Buildings that need to be preserved are incorporated into these large blocks
- The horizontal and vertical aspects of these buildings are changed
- The relation between buildings and the street has been shifted
- The relation between buildings and the city walls has been shifted
- The materials and techniques used in the construction of the buildings has been disregarded.

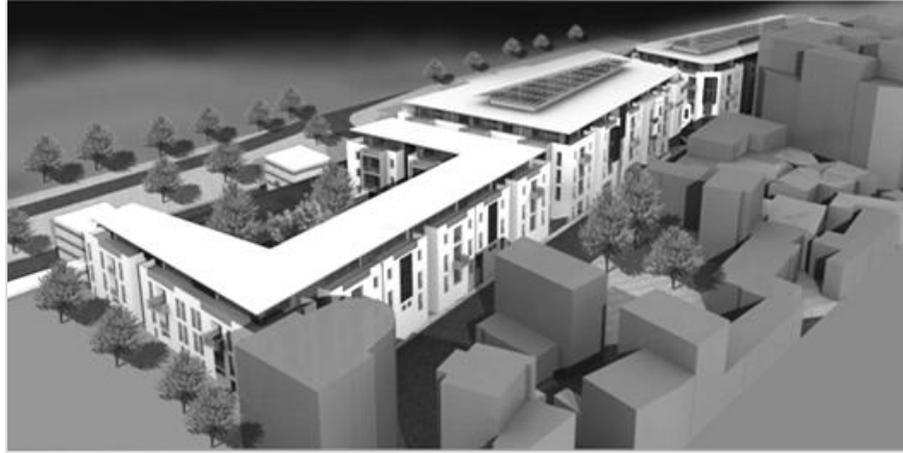


Figure 2. Fener- Balat Waterside Renewal Project / Examples Façades Proposal (www.cinicimimarlik.com)

Another regeneration project is taking place at Ayvansaray, as it is called The Ayvansaray (Turkish) Quarter Renewal Project (Figure 4). In this project, “the fact that it is a Turkish quarter shaped the urban design project as one of the main criteria.” The characteristics of the area are described as follows:

- The area is composed of buildings that are made of timber, two stories high, with courtyards
- In masonry buildings decorations made of brick are used in the narrow eaves, and decorated plastering is used on the facades. Timber buildings are constructed on masonry bases with a post and beam system.
- External, central and internal sofa plan types are used.
- The projections of the buildings are located centrally or at one of the sides or continuous along the façade. The projections at the corners are designed to expand the view.
- Single, double, and triple vertical sliding window modules are used
- In masonry buildings usually the façade is plastered. In some plastered plain buildings decorated thin window door sills are used. Often in the masonry entrance floors of the timber buildings, window sills made of brick are used.

In the design stage, many of the significant characteristics of the traditional Turkish house have been modernized. Therefore the above mentioned characteristics , also defined the quality of the intervention. The analysis and the resulting design do not contain any information regarding the historic documentary value. What is actually addressed in this project are in fact new constructions resembling Turkish Houses.



Site plan and roof view



Historic House and Facade Proposal

Figure 3. Fener- Balat Waterside Renewal Projects
(www.sepinmimarlik.com)



Figure 4. Ayvansaray (Turkish) Quarter Renewal Project Facade Proposals
(www.fatih.bel.tr)

Another urban regeneration project has been prepared for the quarters of Küçük Mustafa Paşa and Haraççı Kara Mehmet (www.fatih.bel.tr; Figure 5), and has been described as follows: “The remaining historic buildings in this quarter can be viewed entirely from the Golden Horn shore. In this project, considering the potential arising from the location and organization of the area, it has been planned so that the renewals will elevate the urban quality” (www.fatih.bel.tr). Upon closer examination of the details of the project, we can see that certain preferences were made:

- The relation of the Historic Peninsula *vis a vis* the city walls has not been taken into consideration
- Inappropriate zoning has been proposed
- New urban spaces are to be created
- The new design concept is ambivalent as regards the rendering of traditional architecture.
- The topography has been disregarded in this project and the constructive experience has been undervalued.



Figure 5. Küçük Mustafa Paşa and Haraççı Kara Mehmet Quarters Renewal Project, Facade Proposals (www.utopia.com)

The Süleymaniye Regional Renewal Project is another attempt at renewal in the Historic Peninsula. As part of the endeavors undertaken under the auspices of “Istanbul’s selection as the European Capital of 2010, the goal of the project is to create a new Istanbul and Fatih district faithful to history and culture in which mixed-use facilities (commercial, touristic and cultural) coexist. This would enable the area to become a positive and attractive urban area at the national and international levels, but most of all at the local level. The goal is to create a safe, sustainable, and livable urban settlement fabric which is secure against all kinds of disasters and risks and also to preserve and perpetuate the architectural fabric.” The project, as planned by the Fatih Municipality, should:

- Be sensitive to change
- Be respectful of humankind and history
- Enable large-scale community participation
- Include the surveying, restitution and reconstruction of demolished historical buildings
- Include the restoration of standing historic buildings

- Involve new design projects sensitive to the environment (www.fatih.bel.tr).

However, on-site observations reveal that either:

- The current architectural and historic values of the area will be demolished and then reconstructed
- The newly designed facades will imitate Ottoman Houses (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Süleymaniye Region Renewal Project, Elevations (Actual and Proposal) (www.fatih.bel.tr)

In either case, it is evident that the historic documentary value of each building or environment is not being taken into consideration, revealing that the underlying aim is to gentrify the area by creating street facades that will merely resemble stage settings.

Evaluation

Cultural identity is embedded in the urban fabric, and this includes traces of cultural, social and economic structures as well as reflections of political periods and changes in the politics of civil engineering, and all of these are an integral part of historic documentary value. In this regard, no matter what conservation action is taken, the historic documentary value should be explored and surveyed in terms of tangible and intangible cultural heritage, from the small scale of single buildings to the larger scale urban areas. However, Fatih Municipality has disregarded this approach in its planning which encapsulates cultural heritage and has radical potential for change. The project descriptions have been developed through a contemporary “urban planning and conservation” discourse, and several analyses have been generated utilizing historic documents and gathered information. However, the outcomes display a superficial character, as if no such analysis had actually been carried out.

At the urban scale, the impacted elements include:

- The city-wall – sea composition
- The building – wall – sea composition
- Organic street patterns
- Narrow parcel organization comprised of small houses

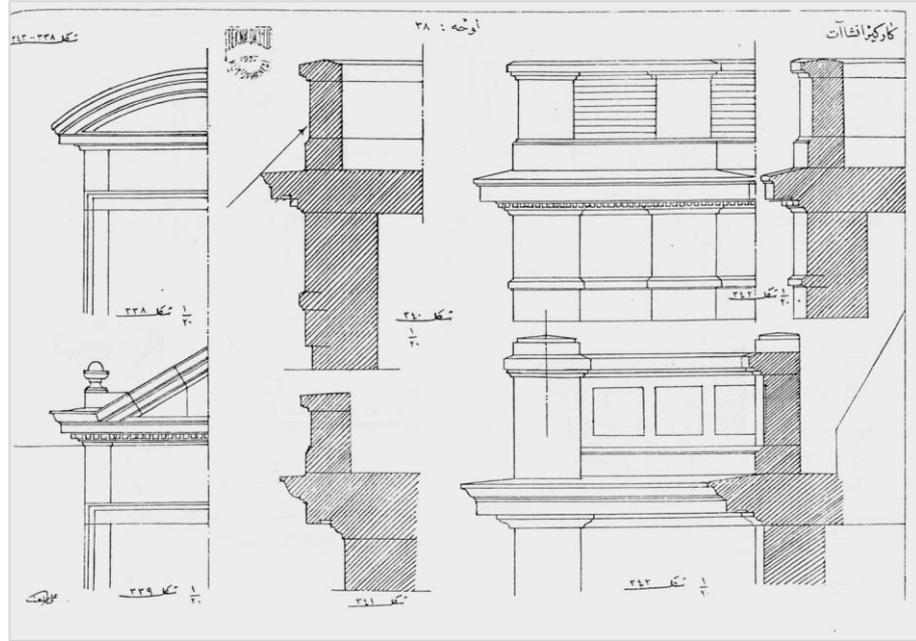
- Building and backyard layouts
- Traditional roof patterns based on the usage of narrow parcels
- Urban facilities (historic water pipes and sewage canals, and lighting)
- At the single-building scale;
- In the inventory files, the architecture has been conceptualized on a larger scale materials and construction techniques are not taken into consideration
- All of the survey/restitution/restoration projects have been prepared on a scale of 1/50, creating a generic approach,
- The materials and construction techniques have not been documented in detail,
- Restitution projects have been treated as application projects.

The applications implemented by Fatih Municipality did not stay within the framework of Code 5366. Also, in the category of design projects or conservation plans, projects with a similar attitude disregarding historic documentary value have been produced. The common characteristics of these projects can be listed as follows:

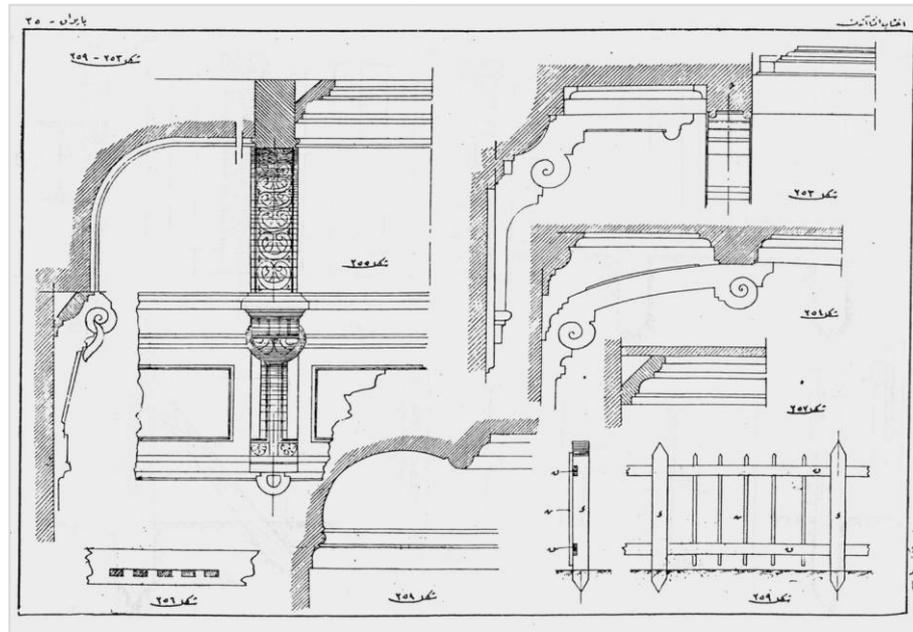
In all of the proposed projects, constructing new urban spaces and buildings entailed:

- Clearing heritage buildings where possible, but maintaining the façade as a setting
- Using particular architectural firms, which results in generic projects
- All of these urban regeneration projects are flawed in the following ways:
- There is a disregard for historic topography
- There is no attention paid to the underground archaeological values known or unknown today
- No preparations for an inventory at the urban or building scale that could be passed on to future generations have been made
- There is an overall lack of a holistic approach rendered concrete through a management plan, even though all of the projects are centered on the Historic Peninsula.

All of these projects, should they be implemented as they are, will cause damage to the urban memory, which will be unrecoverable. No documentation has been prepared in the destruction of the authentic characteristics resulting from these restorations. In this way, these projects will be unable to protect the historic documentary value which will soon be forgotten. Future generations will have to suffice with the local architectural history through silhouettes, streets and buildings that are like paintings in character. Unfortunately, there will not be any detailed study handed down to them, like the ones prepared at the turn of the 20th century, for understanding traditional construction techniques (Figure 6.). In the end, the common characteristics of new urban spaces and buildings which have been decontextualized are such that they could be constructed anywhere in Turkey or in the world.



Masonry Building Details, Cornice and eave



Timber Building Details Wooden ceiling

Figure 6. Studies on Traditional Details (Ali Talat Bey, Osman Nihat Bey, 1926)

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