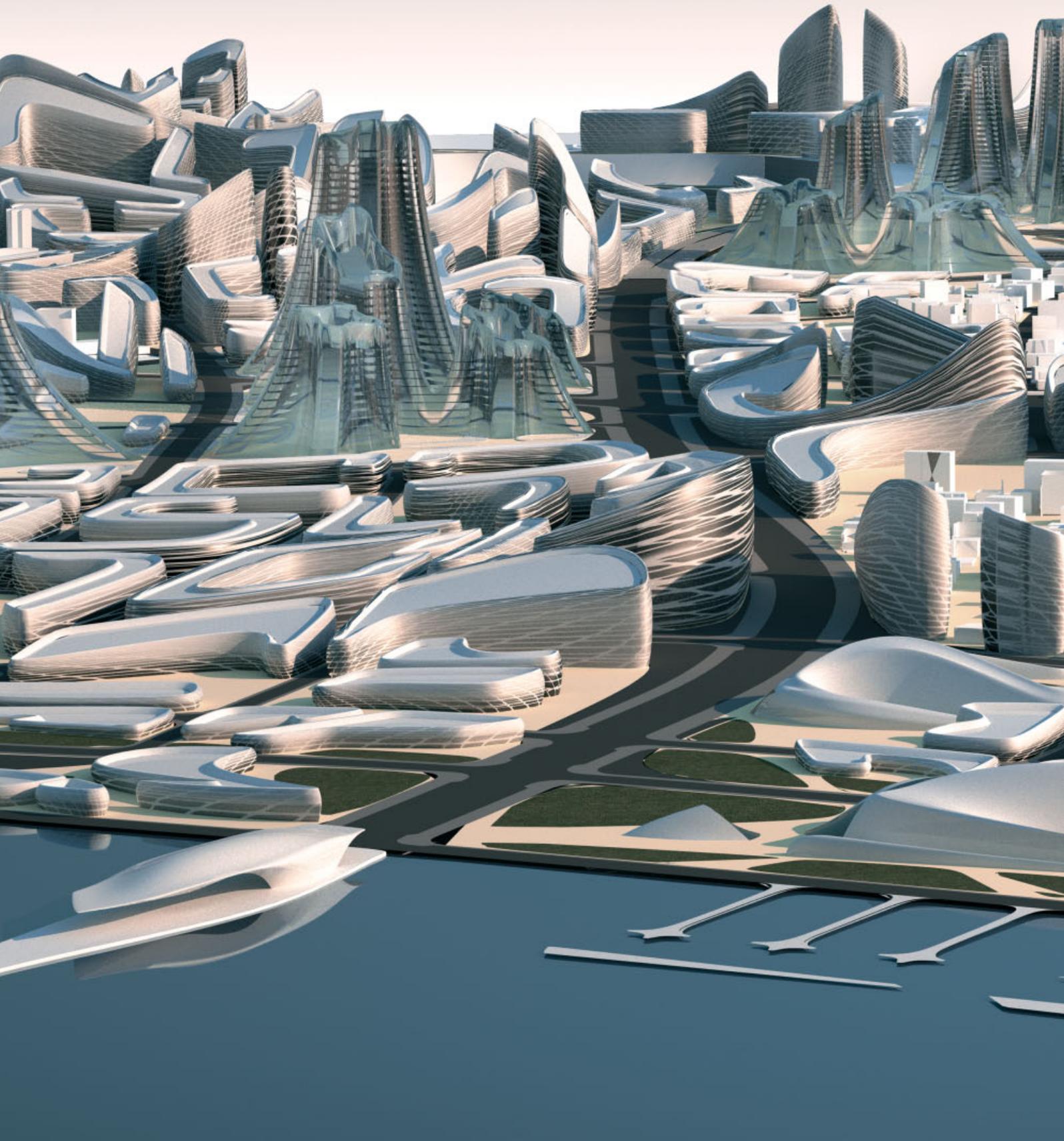


# Current Urban Discourse

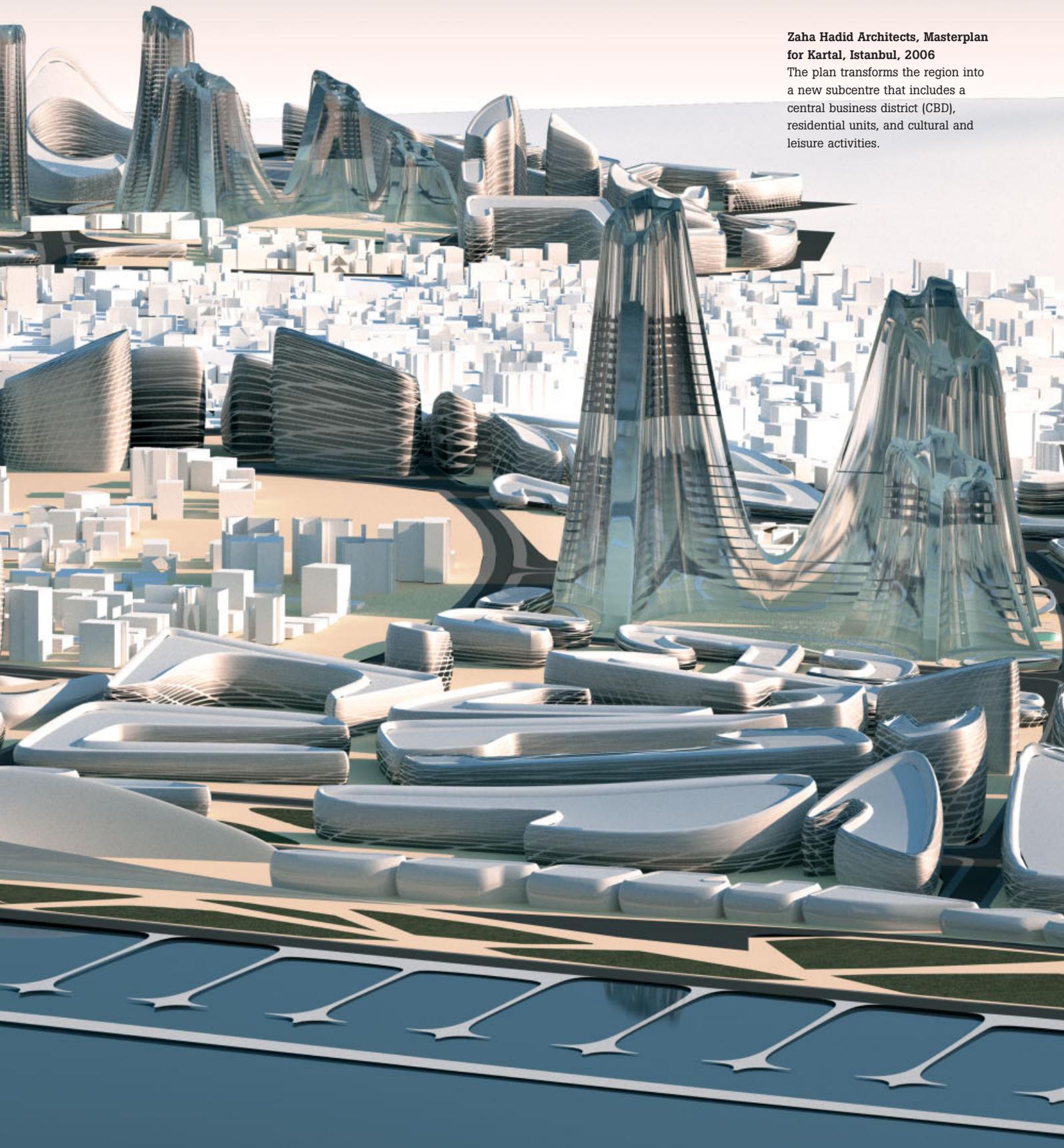
Urban Transformation and Gentrification in Istanbul



In the mid-2000s, unprecedented economic growth provided a catalyst for Istanbul's transformation. **Tolga İslam** outlines the background to large-scale urban development and renewal projects that have been undertaken by local authorities throughout the city.

**Zaha Hadid Architects, Masterplan for Kartal, Istanbul, 2006**

The plan transforms the region into a new subcentre that includes a central business district (CBD), residential units, and cultural and leisure activities.



**Tabanlıoğlu Architects,  
Galataport project, Istanbul, 2001**

*right:* The project involves the construction of a cruise-ship port and the conversion of existing buildings for cultural and leisure activities. Although the project has not yet been realised due to problems that occurred during the bidding process in 2005, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism has declared Galataport among Turkey's tourism goals for 2010.

*opposite:* The newly constructed high-rise apartment buildings in the Başbüyük renewal area stand in sharp contrast to the organic pattern of the existing neighbourhood.



Since 2000, Istanbul has entered an entirely new era with rapid transformations taking place on an unprecedented scale. The city has been changing continuously since the 1980s due to the major role it has played in the opening and incorporation of Turkey's economy to the global world. But what makes this era different is the scale of change that casts past experiences into the shade.

The continuous economic growth at the global scale and the political stability maintained by a one-party ruling regime after many years of coalition governments helped Turkey's economy show spectacular growth between 2002 and 2007, with an average rate of around 7 per cent (almost three times the previous 10 years' average), where the gross domestic product (GDP) increased from \$350 billion to \$850 billion in just these six years. In the same period, the volume of foreign trade showed a threefold increase, reaching \$280 billion, 60 per cent of which was realised in Istanbul. Likewise, flows of foreign direct investment (FDI) into the country grew from \$1.1 billion in 2002, to \$20 billion in 2006 and \$22 billion in 2007 – 95 per cent and 89 per cent of which, respectively, were absorbed by Istanbul alone.<sup>1</sup>

The reflections and indicators of these dramatic changes in the physical sphere of the city have manifested themselves mainly as investments in the transportation infrastructure, construction on vacant land, and transformation of the existing built environment.

Between 2004 and 2009, massive investments were made in Istanbul's transport infrastructure, amounting to around half of the greater municipality of Istanbul's budget. The investment focused on the construction of miles of underground tunnels for new metro lines, including the Marmaray project that connects the Asian and European sides of the city with an undersea tunnel

passing through the Bosphorus. A second reflection of the changes in the city's economic base are the increased levels of new construction by big capital on the city's vacant plots, for either commercial or residential uses. This is best exemplified by the construction of new shopping malls in every possible empty space: the number of shopping centres has increased around sevenfold, reaching 72 since the start of the decade, with an additional 49 under construction and due to be completed by the end of 2010.<sup>2</sup>

At the residential level, the most remarkable development has been the intensification and diversification of the construction of gated housing communities at different scales for different social groups on the city's remaining vacant land. Over the past few years, gating has been so prevalent that it has become the main design principle for almost every new residential project in the city.<sup>3</sup> Another type of residential development worth mentioning is the new housing on state-owned land undertaken by the Mass Housing Administration (TOKİ), which in the last five years has arguably become the biggest real-estate actor in Istanbul. (Between 2003 and 2008, TOKİ was responsible for the construction of around 60,000 housing units in the city and is projected to create 65,000 more by 2012.)<sup>4</sup>

In addition to the aforementioned, another, and perhaps more significant (in terms of its impact on the social fabric of the city) development is the transformation of the existing built environment via urban transformation projects.

### **Transformation of the Built Environment**

The term 'urban transformation' has been at the centre of the public authorities' urban discourse since the start of the 2000s – a magic term used by politicians at all levels as a tool to justify how they organise the physical sphere. The policy rhetoric surrounding it is quite persuasive, promoted as it is to the general public as a solution to almost all of the city's ills: it helps to avoid earthquakes, reduces crime, decreases segregation, removes stigma, increases poor living conditions and even combats terrorism! The highly convincing nature



of such political discourse has contributed significantly to the formation of a legitimate base and support among the mainstream population for the concept, and its easy translation into Istanbul's urban space. This takes the form of: urban design projects at the district level; flagship projects on the city's waterfronts; the transformation of gecekondular (squatter settlements on public land) areas; and the transformation of historic neighbourhoods (via urban renewal projects).

In 2006, the greater municipality of Istanbul launched architectural competitions for the masterplans of two districts located towards the eastern and western edges of the city. The aim was to create two new centres at the end nodes of the new transportation network: a central business district (CBD) in Kartal and a recreational centre in Küçükçekmece. Star architects and architectural offices with international reputations were invited to make plans: Zaha Hadid, Massimiliano Fuksas and Kisho Kurakawa for Kartal; and Ken Yeang, Kengo Kuma and MVRDV for Küçükçekmece, with Hadid winning the competition for Kartal, and Yeang for Küçükçekmece. The invitation of these star architects, whose presence would draw international attention to the city, was part of a wider marketing strategy to promote Istanbul as one of the world's top cities.

Apart from these large-scale projects that cover the entire districts, waterfront projects on a smaller scale are also on the city's agenda. Among these are the two waterfront projects along the Marmara Sea coast: the Galataport project on the European side and the Haydarpaflaport project on the Asian side. The projects involve the transformation of former port areas (which over the last two decades have lost their functional advantages) for use by tourists and the general public: mixed-use areas that involve cruise-ship ports, shopping

centres, hotels, offices, recreational areas and marinas. These are envisaged as flagship projects that would have effects beyond their immediate surroundings and add value to the city as a whole.

Another phase of transformation is evident in the gecekondular areas, the settlements that were informally and illegally developed by emigrants from rural areas of Turkey on public – and in some cases on others' – land in the post-1950s rapid industrialisation and urbanisation era. Following the revisions in the municipality law and mass housing law in 2004 and 2005 respectively, the transformation of gecekondular areas including Başibüyük, Gülsuyu, Gülenisu, Derbent and Kazım Karabekir is now on the agenda. A common characteristic of these areas is the ambiguous and complex structure of the property rights.<sup>5</sup> Another is the changes in the status of their locations that have occurred over time; the expansion of the city has meant that neighbourhoods located on the peripheries at the time they were founded have now become inner-city neighbourhoods. This acquired centrality has definitely increased the desirability of these neighbourhoods, and thus contributed to the pressures to transform the land for the use of more affluent populations or, in other words, to open them to the process of gentrification.

One recent example is the case of Başibüyük, a more than 30-year-old gecekondular area located on the north of the E-5 highway on the Asian side. The neighbourhood was declared a renewal area in 2006 by joint protocol between the local municipality, TOKİ and the city municipality. High-rise apartment blocks are now under construction on a former park, and the gecekondular residents have been asked to move into the new units and pay the difference between the construction costs of these units and the current value of their existing gecekondular houses in instalments over 10 to 15 years. This led to high levels of protests from local residents who did not want to lose their previous gains. However, despite this, the first stage of construction (the high-rise blocks) is almost completed, though residents did succeed in keeping the project on hold by refusing to move into the units under these terms. Following the municipality elections in March 2009, Başibüyük is now under the rule of a different political party, but ambiguity about the future of the neighbourhood continues.

There were also other areas of the inner city which, in the eyes of the ruling neo-liberal Justice and Development Party (Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi – AKP) should not have been deprived of this wind of change but were beyond the reach of their powers: namely the dilapidated, historically designated sites where disposition and control over the built environment was in the hands of relatively independent preservation boards. However, following the 2004 municipal elections, the agglomeration of the local authorities, the city municipality and the central government under one single party proved useful in overcoming this hurdle.

Two local municipalities, Beyoğlu and Fatih, lobbied for a new legislative framework to gain powers to intervene, and in June 2005 Code 5366, 'Law on the Protection of Deteriorated Historic and Cultural Heritage through Renewal and Re-use', was passed in the Grand National Assembly, providing the local municipalities with new powers of expropriation to implement renewal projects within historical sites and abolishing the need to obtain the consent of the property owners.



*above and right:* The proposed renewal project for Tarlabası transforms the area into a mixed-use development with luxurious residential buildings, shopping malls, cafés and hotels. The buildings in the render are the work of three different architectural firms: MTM Mimari Tasarım Merkezi, Tures Tourism Planning Restoration Agency and Trading and Tasarım Danışmanlık Hizmetleri.

*opposite:* Sulukule before and after the demolition that has destroyed the area's unique street fabric.





The law, or at least the way it is being implemented by the authorities, has proved to be a good recipe for increased gentrification via urban renewal projects in areas that have remained largely untouched during earlier rounds of the process. Newly declared renewal areas include Süleymaniye, Fener-Balat, Yalı, Kürkçübaşı and many others, but the most significant have been the pioneering projects in Tarlabası and Sulukule.

Tarlabası is a mixed-use neighbourhood in the centre of the city known for its high crime rates. Under the new law, an area of around 20,000 square metres (215,285 square feet) consisting of nine blocks and 278 plots was declared a renewal area in 2006. The renewal project is based on a model of public–private partnership where responsibility for its preparation and implementation rests with a private company (GAP). The aim is to transform the area into a gentrified enclave with luxurious residential buildings and commercial activities such as shopping malls, cafés and hotels. However, the project remains on hold due to conflict between the developer and residents over the percentage of the new units to be allocated to the existing owners.

Sulukule – now a ruined and deserted land – is a former residential inner-city neighbourhood in the historic peninsula along the city walls, characterised by its Romany population. In 2005, an area of around 90,000 square metres (968,783 square feet) encompassing 12 blocks and 382 plots was declared a renewal site. However, in contrast to the case at Tarlabası, the project here is based on a public–quasi–public partnership where the local municipality and TOKİ are working together to demolish the entire area to construct new and high-quality housing. To obtain one of the new units, existing owners must pay the difference between the cost of construction of the unit and the value of their current building in monthly instalments over 15 years. Existing renters, on the other hand, are granted the right to own apartment units in TOKİ's social housing in Taşoluk, a peripheral area around 30 kilometres (18.6 miles) away, by paying monthly instalments of around 200 euros over 15 years.



The Sulukule renewal project has been widely criticised by activists in the city who have created a platform for resistance and managed to draw the attention of the media to the neighbourhood at both national and international levels by arguing that the project will disperse the Romany community, erase the Romany culture and create homelessness. Despite this resistance, the municipality has already completed the most difficult step of the project by clearing almost the entire area by bulldozer in preparation for the construction of the new houses.<sup>6</sup>

All of the processes mentioned above form only a small fraction of the recent attempts at urban transformation by local authorities within Istanbul. Though there are certain differences between these processes regarding their scale, location and implementation, their outcomes remain the same: they all serve the appropriation of existing land for the use of higher-status groups – in other words, the gentrification of the city. Once these ongoing pioneer projects are implemented and emerge as concrete examples, they will form the basis of a larger wave of transformation across the city, and serve as a model for further transformation across the country. **D**

#### Notes

1. For the economic growth rates and foreign trade volume figures see [www.turkstat.gov.tr](http://www.turkstat.gov.tr); and for the foreign direct investment (FDI) flows to Turkey and Istanbul see [www.treasury.gov.tr](http://www.treasury.gov.tr), and the reports of FDI in Turkey for 2007 and 2006 at [www.treasury.gov.tr](http://www.treasury.gov.tr).
2. Jones Lang LaSalle, Turkey Retail Market Overview, April 2009.
3. Based on the actual increases in the gated developments in Göktürk, a region that is characterised by such communities, Bartu Candan and Biray Kolluoğlu Kırılı speculate that the number of gated compounds in the city may have doubled since 2005. See 'Emerging spaces of neoliberalism: A gated town and a public housing project in Istanbul', *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No 39, 2008, pp 5–46.
4. Interview with Erdoğan Bayraktar (head of the Mass Housing Administration – TOKİ) by İsa Sezen, 'TOKİ'den 65 bin ucuz konut' (65,000 cheap housing units by TOKİ), *Zaman Newspaper Construction and Real Estate Journal*, 22 August 2008.
5. As a result of the amnesties granted in the 1980s, the gecekondu areas have a diverse ownership structure: those with title deeds, and those with use rights or no rights. The presence of diverse stakeholders with different interests and with limited legal rights (like the latter two groups) provides certain leverage for the local authorities during the negotiation processes.
6. In June 2009, an interesting and unexpected development took place that may have a significant impact on the future of Sulukule. The head of TOKİ, Erdoğan Bayraktar, asked the activists to present their alternative plan for Sulukule that accommodates more local residents in the neighbourhood. As of September 2009, negotiations between the activists and TOKİ are ongoing.

---

Text © 2010 John Wiley & Sons Ltd. Images: pp 58–9 © Zaha Hadid Architects from IMP Istanbul Metropolitan Planning & Urban Design Center; p 60 © Tabanlıoğlu Architects; pp 61, 63 © Tolga İslam; p 62 © GAP İnşaat

---