Social Cohesion; Is it sufficient?
Migrant communities in two disadvantaged neighborhoods in Istanbul

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Abstract

Planners assume that old neighbourhoods have an atmosphere in which social relations can easily flourish. They also regard the strong social ties within a neighborhood as the guarantee for the success of housing rehabilitation. This article argues that existence of social cohesion in a neighbourhood is not necessarily an advantage in a process of modernisation and rehabilitation. In some cases the community may constitute a closed 'island' especially in places where communities have historically inherited an hierarchical character. The article is based on a recent research project dealing with urban communities in inner city areas of Istanbul, especially those containing migrant populations which seemingly have strong community ties. The historical background of the community from the Ottoman period is examined in the first part of the article. The roots of the community as a territorial administrative unit (*mahalle*) and its modification in contemporary migrant communities are analysed. The second part of the article presents the results of two case studies. One of the case studies is a social housing district where the migrant community is mixed and social relations with the rest of the city are relatively well developed. The other case study area is an historical district where strong social ties create an introverted character of the community in spite of its central location. The result of the study reveals that urban 'communities' in a city like Istanbul have both negative and positive aspects. Primarily it is important to assess and understand the degree of 'openness' of the community to the outer world. In any action to be taken planners should look not only inside the community, but also at its 'outer' relations.

Introduction

Planners usually are in favour of creating strong social ties in housing areas. Numerous models developed in the past from garden city to neighbourhood unit are intended to create, or support, social ties in newly developed urban areas. Existing communities, on the other hand, are something that modern planning tends to ignore. Existing communities may contain conflicts and tensions contrary to the imagined (created) ones that are supposed to contain homogeneity and harmony.

Housing rehabilitation is one of the processes in which planners inevitably have to involve local communities. Planners may assume that old neighbourhoods have an atmosphere in which social relations can easily flourish and that local communities have a strong sense of belonging to their neighbourhoods. They may take it for granted that existence of such relations would be a base for local initiatives and are the prerequisite for the success of a rehabilitation programme.

But is it true? Is it possible to say that strong social ties within a neighbourhood, or state of belonging to the place, is a guarantee for the success of a local organisation?

This article is based on a recent research project dealing with urban communities in inner city areas especially those containing migrant populations which seemingly have strong community ties. The research focuses on the community, its problems with the living environment and its relations with the city. The emphasis is on the 'outer' relations of the community as well as its 'inner' dynamics. It suggests to look not only inside the community, but also around it to see what is happening and what kinds of networks exist between the local community and the remaining parts of the city? Clues to future action can be found by this approach.

The needs of rehabilitation

For the last forty years a widely expanding spatial and social mobility has taken place in Turkey. People have been migrating towards the big cities and in particular to Istanbul. Physical structures of cities have rapidly changed.

Squatters of the first periods have become apartment owners. Apart from the squatter areas, the whole city has been faced with density increases which are supported by popular policies. 'Reconstruction' is the keyword of this process. Groups from the upper-middle income to squatter occupants benefit from 'reconstruction' of individual buildings. Planning practice allows this process as a result of extra

development rights introduced to both legal and 'illegal' areas.

The areas that cannot be 'reconstructed' due to the both legal and physical limitations are likely to decline if they are not occupied by well-off families. Inner-city housing areas, including social housing areas, can be considered frozen in terms of physical change. People living in those areas are usually immigrants rural origin. Dwellers in these districts face deprivation more seriously than squatter residents. There is a tension between the frozen physical structure of the area and the expanding character of immigrant population. Contrary to the squatter settlements, expanding horizontally and vertically according to need, these structures expand towards the inside, - new rooms are created by division, balconies are covered, and the areas are condensed over time. More people live in these areas than before and living conditions get worse.

Together with bad environmental quality, inhabitants of these areas have some difficulties in utilising the urban facilities even if they are spatially at the centre of the city. However they are not completely excluded from the city life, they have to create their own links to be a part of the city otherwise it is inevitable that they will become marginalised. They need to develop their relations with the city in social-cultural as well as in economic terms. Thus rehabilitation is necessary not only for the elimination of physical problems of the environment, but also to open the potentialities of city life, particularly economic possibilities, to their inhabitants.

Why migrants need community

Cities today exhibit a complex and chaotic character. This complexity may make them attractive, but it does not mean that all relations in day-to-day life are conducted in anonymity. The alienating and chaotic city life is composed of small 'islands' of security that Maffesoli (1996) defines as 'new tribes'. These groups establish a set of relations in which people (members) feel comfort and ease. These identities are ranged from sport club enthusiasts, interest-based collectives to even clientele of a particular café. While overlapping with each other, they may also cover different aspects of life.

In the Istanbul case studies, the 'islands' are, however, developed around identities that look more traditional, such as familial relations, *townsmenship*, ideology, religion, sects etc. These identities may have originated from a traditional area, but they do not stay as they were, they are re-formed as a new urban identity consisting of both traditional and modern elements. Elvin (1986), a historian working on China, describes modernity as 'not based on chronology' ,but prefers to see societies as *varying combinations of 'modern' and 'non-modern' elements, sometimes mutually indifferent, sometimes mutually supportive, and sometimes mutually hostile*. Recent comparative studies in anthropology, sociology and political sciences have focused on networks such as family, patron-client relations, affinial and traditional social structures and power systems, for which modern 'rational' institutions tend to be a substitute.

Persistence of familial groups and traditional groupings in 'modern' forms deserves a serious examination rather than being disregarded as some primitive residues in a newly modernising system (Springborg, 1987).

Migrants, in our case studies, exhibit this kind of hybrid character in the formation of communities. Migrant communities look traditional and are supposed to be destroyed in the process of urbanisation, but they seem to constitute a permanent part of urban organisation. Being a member of the community provides the migrant family with social and economic security, help to solve daily problems and gain confidence in the chaotic city life. The traditional elements appearing as, e.g. *townsmenship* or neighbour relations, is something 'rational' helping to maintain for them a relationship with the city by offering an opportunity for having power in its economic or cultural life. In order to understand the urban migrant communities in Turkey, it is useful to look back to the formation of communities in the past, their role in the city and their relationship with power.

Community of the past: *Mahalle* in Ottoman origin

Mahalle - a territorial community - is the main component of many Eastern cities. The main settlement policy of the Ottomans had been to create new neighbourhoods – *mahalle* - around conquered cities by the resettlement of people from various parts of the Empire. People were resettled according to their religious, ethnic and tribal origins. Thus, cities were not only segmented into main religious groups such as Muslims, Jewish, Christians, but into more detailed identities like Gregorians, Orthodox Greeks, Catholic Latins, etc. Ethnic and religious communities were organised both vertically representing the whole community all over the Empire and horizontally; remaining at the city and neighborhood level (Cerasi, 1999). The latter was a territorial level and remained more open to the influences than the others. There were no clear-cut spatial divisions between *mahalles* in the Ottoman, unlike in other Eastern, especially Arabic, cities. Communities permeated through each other in time. Cohabitation of different ethno-religious groups could happen and identities could exist side-by-side without disturbing each other. This diversity created a rich social milieu (Enlil, 1994).

Mahalle was not only a territorial community, it was also the smallest administrative unit which was represented by a local religious leader. The state did not interfere in the day-to-day activities of the community. Local public services, religious buildings, schools, fountains etc. were provided by the elites or well-off families within the community. Very strong local foundations - charitable endowments - were developed for that purpose. The well-off families also provided relations with the state and 'outer' world. *Hierarchy* was the keyword in community life.

New urban community: migrant communities

After the creation of the Turkish Republic at the beginning of the century, the main policy for the newly developing nation-

state was total modernisation of the system through direct intervention. Traditional communities, especially religious ones, were partially dissolved or isolated as a consequence of the secular policies. But in time, the nation-state failed to perform the universal role ideologically and practically, and could not create an overall frame of reference within which modern institutions could work. New sorts of communities flourished in the areas where the nation-state remained ineffective. One of those areas where the nation-state's policy was 'not-to-interfere' has been towards rural-urban migration and the subsequent housing of newcomers. In big cities, the geographical background of immigrants became the basis of new communities. *Townsmenship* (or fellow citizenship) belonging to the same geographical area, city, town or village from where they had migrated has been a glue for the new urban community. It was a useful mechanism for job finding, housing provision and security of immigrants in the city. *Townsmenship* contained a wide variety of identities that are rooted in religious, ethnic and tribal origins with geographical reference. However, through time, geographical origin lost its importance and *townsmenship* became associated more with urban-based social ties, such as local societies, mafia, sport clubs, etc. It appears in many traditional forms of groupings from friendship and neighborhood relations to familism and patron-client relationships. The most important aspect is that such communities have local and city-wide political power. With this power they compete with each other and with other settled segments of the city to get more territory for themselves into which to move as well as carving out an increased niche in economic life.

One important point is the hierarchical character of these semi-modern communities. They preserve unequal power relations and the hierarchy of traditional communities whilst they try to survive in the modern city (Eisenstadt and Roniger, 1984). In the course of time, however, their territorial control as well as hierarchy and power relations become weaker while they are expanding over the city.

Two case studies: Migrants in social housing and inner-city areas

Case studies conducted in two districts in the Istanbul metropolitan area are the basic components of the research project. The first one is a social housing area built in the 1960s for squatter residents, and the other is a historical inner-city area. (Figure 1)

Mahalle administrative division was the basis for definition of the research areas. But for both cases, *mahalle*, as an administrative unit, was too large for a research based on long interviews and dependence on face-to-face relations. Thus, after a local inquiry made with the headman of the district, one street or a few blocks were selected for more detailed analysis. Environmental conditions of the street, or the blocks were analysed by researchers in order to define the level of physical problems and consequently the need for rehabilitation. Structured and unstructured interviews on the household base were made with women, men and youngsters in selected street and blocks in a 30% random sampling. The main questions were about basic household data, education, homeownership, neighbourhood relations, local organisations and participation, relation with the city, expectations for the future of the family and for their neighborhood. Interviews with local officers, school teachers, real estate officers and planners of local authorities provided important information for the research.

A social housing area; *Tozkoparan*

The social housing area (*Tozkoparan*) was built after a citywide squatter clearence programme in the 1960s. It is located close to an early industrial development area which was on the outskirts of the city, but which now due to urban sprawl is in the inner part. Textile and leather manufacturing supplying international and local markets are the main sectors in the nearby industrial zone. They provide an important employment opportunity. Women benefit from minor home-based production.

Tozkoparan was designed as a new town containing 'neighborhood units' (Figure 2). Today the area contains about 4500 residential units with a population of 22,275. Its population has decreased 2.8% in 1990–97, while the population of surrounding districts increased 25% in the same period. Some blocks were recently demolished due to extreme level of decay. These blocks had been illegally resided by homeless and gypsies for many years.

The layout is composed of single blocks of four and five storeys and a few high-rise houses. Its population is a mixture of former squatter residents (resettled after clearance) as well as other low income groups who purchased or rented the flats. Flats range from one-and a half rooms to three rooms. The block selected for detailed investigation is a five storey one built around a common courtyard . There are twelve apartments on each floor, the total amount being sixty units with one-and a-half rooms each. The common courtyard and galleries are the only places where children and women can spend time during the day as the units are extremely small.

The social pattern is complicated because people from various parts of the country live side-by-side. After clearance, former social groupings and community patterns, probably based on *townsmenship*, were destroyed, even though people coming from the same squatter clearance area were resettled in nearby blocks. The spatial structure of modern blocks also contributed to this destruction. Former common spaces in squatter settlements streets, courtyards and gardens were replaced by new ones block stairs and galleries. While former common spaces had strengthened social ties and solidarity, the latter were the places of tensions and quarrels disturbing social harmony.

The area has become, after thirty years, a settled part of the metropolitan city. New relations were established in spite of spatial barriers. Broken ties were replaced by new ones, strong neighborhood relations were established and low income groups who are not so mobile, especially subgroups like women, elderly and very poor, were in need of each others in many respects.
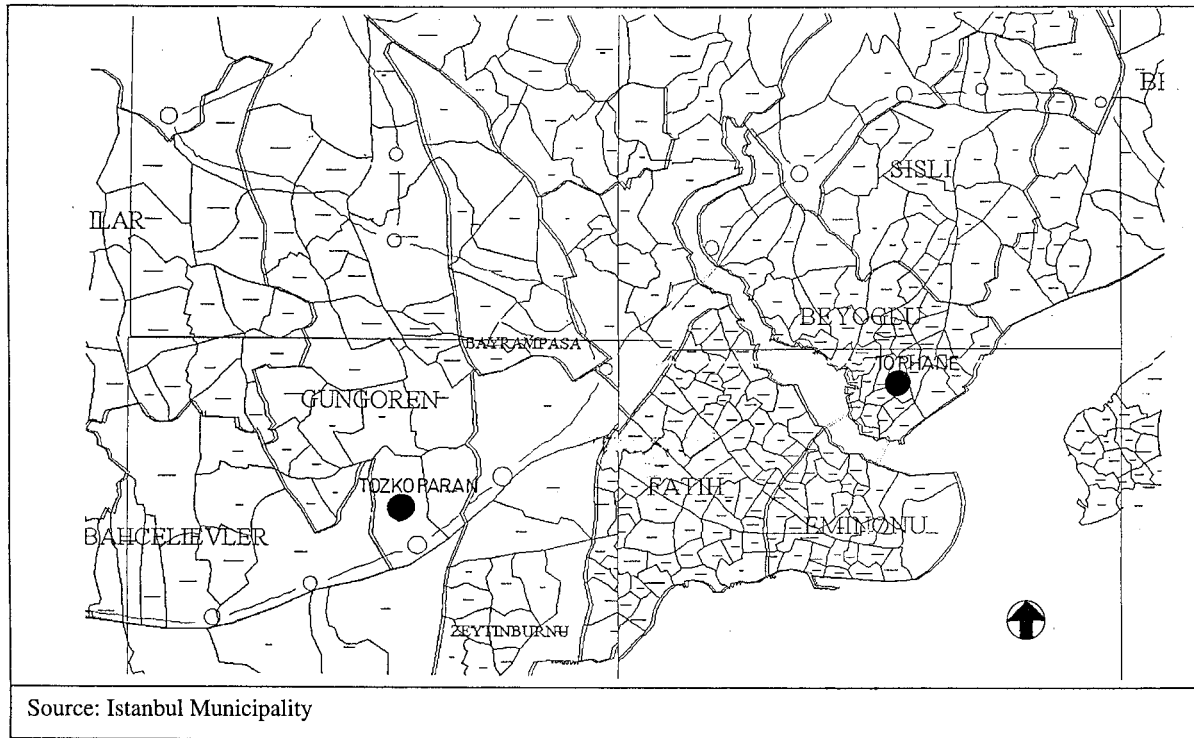
Source: Istanbul Municipality

Figure 1. Location of the case study areas in Istanbul (map source: Istanbul Municipality)

In spite of the close neighborhood relations, the social atmosphere of the district is not safe for children due to the expansion of street gangs and drug users. Neighborhood relations become a means of keeping control over children, youngsters and women. However, these relations has not created a homogenised social pattern even at the block level. There are several sub-groups excluding each other, e.g. homeowners *vs.* tenants, settled families *vs.* newcomers, elderly *vs.* youngsters. They have established separated social networks within the block. Thus, it can be a question to what extent such a social patterns can constitute a base for solidarity. Their attitudes towards their environment is not positive. Besides the social handicaps, environmental quality is low, blocks are not well-maintained and flats are small. Even if they are happy with close social ties, they indicate that if they had an opportunity they would leave.

Figure 3 shows the most visited sites by men and women. Quite large areas of the city are used by the men. Women are less mobile than men within the metropolitan area as can be expected. The relation of the area to the city is, however, not limited to surrounding districts, it expands to remote parts of the metropolitan city.

The neighbourhood is part of a huge mass- housing area comprising both low and lower middle income groups. A new metro station in the area has increased its accessibility. An old military complex near the housing zone has recently been transferred to a university and a technopark is proposed there. All this may change the face of the area in the future. The relations of the community to the outer world is developing. On the other hand, inner community relations are not strict and hierarchical. It can be said that the neighbourhood has strong potentials for opening itself to the city.

A historical inner-city area; *Tophane*

The second case study was conducted in a historical inner-city area named *Tophane*. It is located on the European side, near to Galata and Pera. (Figure 1) Historically the area had been occupied by Turks, Greeks and Armenians until the 1950s. After the 1950s when former residents left the district, houses were bought or rented by immigrants from the Eastern Anatolia. The part of the district studied (*Tomtom Kaptan Mahallesi*) was occupied mainly by immigrant population. The population of district is 3,617 and 90% of them belong to the immigrant families. First newcomers had been from a particular town in the east; Siirt. They settled here because they found jobs in workshops of chandelier and furniture production in the vicinity. They encouraged their relatives to come, hence a Siirt community was established in the course of time. The first-comers (20%) controlled the job market, bought houses at reasonable prices and rented them to their relatives or other Siirt immigrants. More than half of the landlords are living in the district. Landlords who are 'been-heres' are the most powerful group in both economic and social terms. They control tenure in many ways and try to keep the Siirt identity within the district. There are few outsider families from other parts of the country. Outsiders are almost excluded from the social life of the street. On the other hand, they are reluctant to be a part of
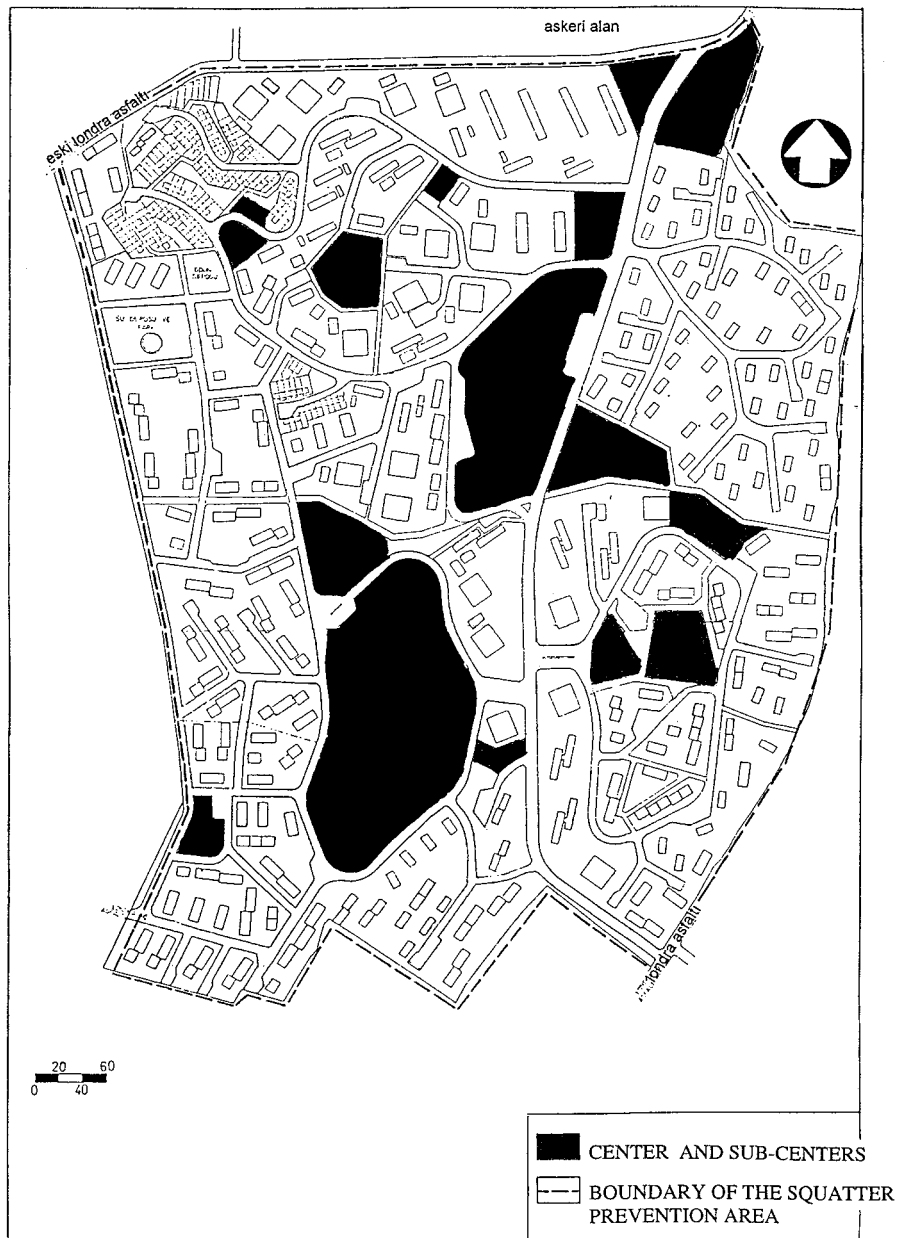
Figure 2. Neighborhood units in Tozkoparan. Black: Centers and subcenters. The spotted line delineates the squatter prevention area.

the social network, because they find the existing community conservative or even fundamentalist in religious terms.

Those living in this quarter are geographically settled in the very center of the metropolitan city, but socially they experience a peripherality. Figure 4 shows their relationship to the wider metropolitan area, which is weak compared to that of the previous case. Some figures support the introverted character of the district. Household size is 5.3 which is larger than Istanbul and Tozkoparan averages. Illiteracy rate is 30% for women, 50% of all the women never attended school, they never work outside the home and think that they will never be allowed to take paid work. Some women never visit the nearby pedestrian leisure area just behind their street.

The location of the area is important for understanding why the inner social ties are so strong or why they display an introverted identity. (Figure 5) The area is jammed between non-residential functions. In the west, Istiklal Street forms one kind of barrier. This is a densely used pedestrian axis linking various cultural and leisure activities - cinemas, cafes and pubs. In the south-west, an old brothel district is located. There is a historical commercial area with a port and warehouses in the south. Adjacent to the historical district to the east, gentrification is observed, rehabilitated buildings are turned into antiquarian shops, offices and high status flats. In such a complicated situation the response of immigrants is to close themselves off from the city to keep the control over their social milieu. The strong social ties in the case study area provide an 'island' of safety. On the other hand the inhabitants are very well aware of the future potentials of the area. Still the rents are quite low in comparison to adjacent zones. Buildings are badly maintained, usually divided into several units and some additions have been made illegally.
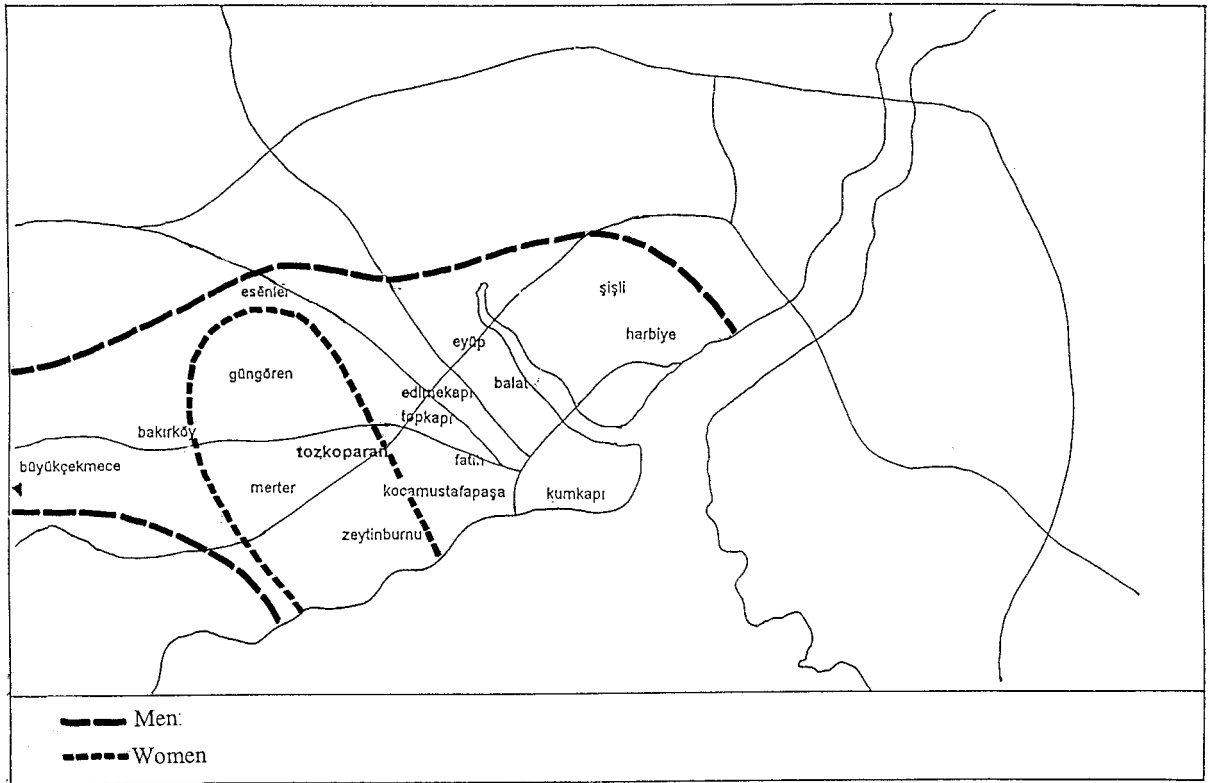
Figure 3. The most visited places in Istanbul by Tozkoparan residents. Outer dotted line: men, inner dotted line: women.
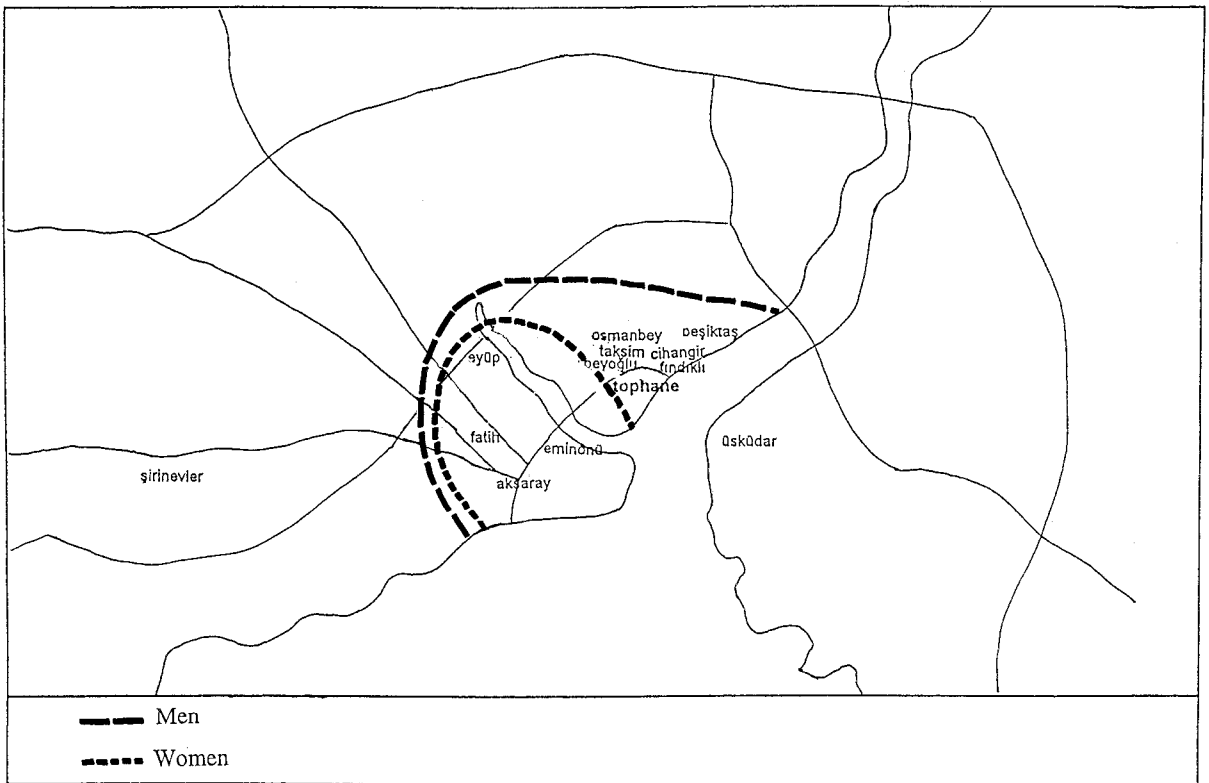

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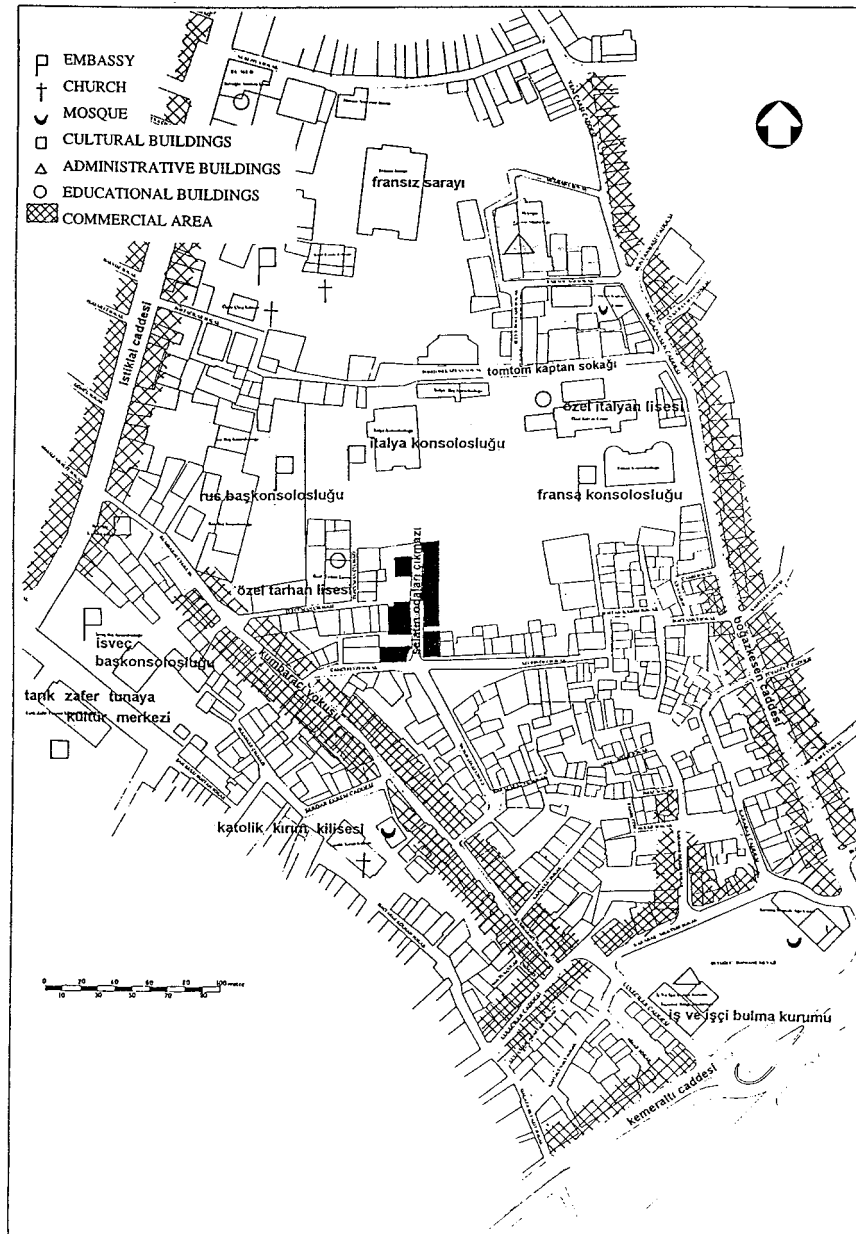
Figure 5. Land-use in Tophane. The black area: street of detailed investigation.

But selling prices are high and transactions are very rare. Today it seems the area is waiting for a change. In spite of its stable, hierarchical and closed character, it will eventually develop relations with the city.

Conclusions

It appears evident that *community* exists in various modern forms in metropolitan cities. It is not going to be weakened in the modernisation process, on the contrary, it takes on a more complicated form. The *community* is something that people use in order to benefit from the opportunities provided by the city. At the same time it functions as a means by which people are maintained in more stable conditions faced by the social, cultural and economic fluctuations that occur in the city. It is open to discussion whether strong social ties in a low income neighborhood necessarily indicate a potential for the future. It appears that it is conjunctural for people to remain in, or to escape from, the *community*. It depends on the opportunities community offer to them for providing change in social status and expectations. The *community* is neither a stable nor homogeneous unity in social terms. Hence, the existence of social ties or cohesion may be a base for organisation of housing rehabilitation, but it should be kept in mind that it could be a 'slippery' base. The important point is not the level of homogeneity or social cohesion, but the degree to which there is an openness of the *community* to the city.

An important point is that the historical background of organisations at *mahalle* level exhibited a hierarchy, an unequal distribution of the power and strong patron-client relations. Social and infrastructural facilities within the *mahalle* was provided by the elites and well-off families for

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centuries. Existence of these power relations were a pre-requisite for providing basic services. This tradition might be hidden in the common consciousness of people, despite the development of the modern welfare state and expansion of modern relationships.

Modern local organisations, on the other hand, depend on the basic principles of voluntary participation and equality. Democratic participation is a pre-requisite of the success of the organisations. The problem for planners who attempt to develop any local organisation is to handle this conflict. Planners have to be aware of the common traditions in local organisations and support the transformation of hierarchical relationships to become more democratic ones.

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