

# CAN THE LONG-LIVED MAHALLE BE A REFERENCE FOR FUTURE URBAN DEVELOPMENT? ISTANBUL AS A CASE-STUDY

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## **Abstract**

In the course of globalisation, the overgrowth of urban population has become a worldwide problem. As the urban population continues to increase, cities must create new settlements or restructure existing neighbourhoods to accommodate new residents with different income levels and ethnic identities. How can we envisage a correspondence between new settlements and groups of people with different income and/or different ethnic culture?

In this context, Istanbul represents a good example of an 'urban mosaic'. The *mahalle* in Istanbul historically enabled a unique social organisation defined as semi-autonomous social and physical unit where in the community comprises people who are in social solidarity and who are responsible for each other's actions. This feature brings special identity for each quarter of a city. In this study, I identify the key values of the *mahalle* notion related to social and physical sustainability and identity hints to develop such values for neighbourhood units. I start with an understanding of the design qualities in the traditional Ottoman *mahalle* and describe the features that could serve as a reference for future community models for contemporary cities.

The *mahalle* can be taken as a reference model for modern city planning. Questions arise as how to revive the *mahalle* and which aspects of the *mahalle* can still be revived.

## **The Neighbourhood Model in Literature**

According to March Fried, people–place relationships are manifested as the profound attachments people often develop to the places they live, where they share familial, communal and ethnic or cultural bonds with their neighbours. These bonds can form intimate links between people and places and may extend beyond the home and the street into a wider area where a sense of belonging is established and where both the places and people are cherished. (Fried, 2000, p.193) The neighbourhood unit can be considered as a microscale city organization through which people can interact with each other and rebuild their environment. Thus, for the purposes of urban planning, the neighbourhood unit design is one of the major social and physical planning implementations that have been applied in cities in many countries.

In an early Western model of the neighbourhood unit, Clarence Arthur Perry, who designed the unit, 1929, and was the chief figure behind its implementation, claimed that a planned neighbourhood district 'with its physical demarcation, planned recreational facilities, accessible shopping centers, and convenient circulatory system- all integrated and harmonized by artistic design, would furnish the kind of environment where vigorous health, a rich social life, civic efficiency, could develop and permanently flourish. (Neighborhood Networks for Humane Mental Health Care, 1984, p.78)

Perry's model, which was based on that of Stein and Wright, did not consider different aspects such as sociological viewpoints. Stein and Wright as well as Perry focused almost entirely on physical aspects of the

concept: the superblock, the shopping centre, the road pattern, the garden spaces and the organisation of houses. (Patricios, 2002, p.28) Scholars in many different disciplines have since transformed neighbourhood theory beyond the perspective of the Western model. The leading current movement directed toward combating urban sprawl and creating compact, walkable neighbourhoods is a professionally based movement called New Urbanism. (Larice, Mackdonald, 2007, p.308) Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk, two founders of the New Urbanism principles, recognise that physical solutions alone will not solve social and economic problems, but neither will economic vitality, community stability and environmental health be sustained without a coherent and supportive physical framework.(Congress for the New Urbanism, 1996)

Today, the idea of planning a city around neighbourhood units is still used as an urban development strategy. Physical design is an important aspect of neighbourhood life; however, its effect can only be understood within the total social and cultural context of the neighbourhood and society at large. (Merry, 1987, p.36)

The application of traditional–modern neighbourhood theory in Western cities has revealed that a social relationship with the environment is an important feature that we need to understand when designing neighbourhood models elsewhere. Middle East cities, for example, have a different cultural structure.

Neighbourhoods are a microcosm of our larger society and provide windows into the social relations required for modern cities to function. (Smith, 2015 p.23) Thus, from a historical perspective, reviving the traditional neighbourhood model could provide a frame of reference to create sustainable units in contemporary cities.

In view of these considerations, the Ottoman neighbourhood model is worthy of examination because, historically, it enabled the establishment of a healthy social and physical relationship among societies. The *mahalle* neighbourhood unit is a unique social and morphological structure in the Ottoman model. Unlike Western models, the traditional *mahalle* in the Ottoman model cannot be described in terms of certain physical characteristics. It is a resilient unit that differs according to location and religious identity. Therefore, in this paper, *mahalle* features such as general social public relations, social functions and administrative duties are investigated instead of focusing on neighbourhood size or physical features.

### **Mahalle as an Administrative Unit**

The envisagement of civilisation developed by the Ottoman Empire subsequently spread across the world. The Ottoman model was based on the *mahalle*, which was the smallest unit of its administrative organisation; great importance was attached to *mahalles* because of this fact. (Baday, 2011, p.21) Traditionally, the *mahalle* was the early administrative model of Ottoman cities and is well established as a basic unit for planning cities. It can be defined as a semi-autonomous social and physical unit.

When Fatih Sultan Mehmet captured Constantinople in 1453, he developed a system of laws that recognised ‘societies’, ‘nationalities’ or ‘communities’ on the basis of religious differences. Moreover, he let those communities live in the same neighbourhood under regulation by Ottoman law. This approach simultaneously provided a way of controlling *mahalles* as administrative units while providing economic advantages to the state in the form of taxes. Moreover, the *mahalle* strategy was further applied as an urban development methodology to accommodate immigrants from lost territories or to dispatch them to occupy newly conquered lands.

One of the important features of a *mahalle* that enables it to be considered as an administrative unit is that each *mahalle* had representatives who collected taxes for the Ottoman Empire and who were responsible for establishing security and for fulfilling certain obligations by law. (Bayartan, 2005, p.93-107) In Muslim neighbourhoods, imams (or, in non-Muslim neighbourhoods, priests), in addition to fulfilling their religious duties, were responsible for managing the *mahalle* (Eryilmaz,1992), including performing tasks such as keeping records of the transactions of the neighbourhood population, providing neighbourhood security and resolving disputes between parishioners.

After removal of the Janissaries, or ‘new soldiers’, who were elite infantry units that served as the sultan's household troops and bodyguards, institutions and organisations were asked to restructure according to

contemporary requirements. This restructuring was a consequence of the prevention of migration and was also conducted to provide security in the city; as part of this restructuring, the reeve service was founded for the *mahalles* of Istanbul in 1829–1830. Thus, after these years, neighbourhood management was provided by a neighbourhood's reeve instead of by a religious leader; the reeves were assigned by location. As a result, the authority of imams and priests was restricted.

The classical Ottoman urban management system was based on communities rather than on individuals or urbanites in general. Accordingly, urban municipal services were not carried out through defined management units but rather through religious, ethnic and professional communities. (Ozguven, 2009, p.136) As expressed by Ali Akay, establishing a *mahalle* is actually establishing a city. ( Akay, 2002, p.40-78) This statement is true because the different ways of using public spheres can be observed by the effect of the communities within the physical environment by virtue of a *mahalle*, which is autonomous in its internal activities as an administrative unit.

A *mahalle*, as an administrative unit in the Ottoman Empire, held the community it hosted responsible through a legal requirement, thereby ensuring a social communication arising from its cited responsibility. The residents of the quarter had the right to interfere with the actions of the *mahalle* if upholding the interests of the community and not the interests of the individual. A faster resolution process based on moral values was proposed within the *mahalle*, depending on the nature of the problems that arose. The person in charge of the *mahalle* played an active role in resolving small-scale problems among people before a judicial process was initiated.

After the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, the system of mukhtars (quarter headmen) was abolished by a law enacted in 1933 and the tasks assumed by mukhtars were shared among municipalities, municipal policemen and other departments. The system of mukhtars was subsequently re-established in 1944, although its abolishment had created an administration gap. Not recognising the *mahalle* as an administrative unit not only created a deficiency based on an administration gap but also hindered the resolution of problems that could have been resolved within the *mahalle*. This statement is based on the fact that the *mahalle* administration structure enabled the people of the quarter to participate in its management. The members of the *mahalle* were held accountable by a community that controlled the *mahalle's* fate and that could interfere in the course of events if necessary. (Düzbakar, 2003, p.107) For example, the people of the *mahalle* were at the same time responsible to each other because of the shape of the houses they owned; any changes they made to their houses would affect their neighbours' houses. If the changes to be made would lead to damage to a neighbour's property, such changes were ended immediately or altered such that they would not cause harm. (Düzbakar, 2003, p.107)

The influence of the mechanism of the administrative infrastructure of the Ottoman and early Republican periods of the *mahalles* has been lost in modern times, especially in large cities. The duties of a *mahalle* and the tasks of a mukhtar are created in different ways and by different local authorities (Arikboğa, 1998). Because the mukhtars do not have the authority to resolve the problems of the residents of the *mahalle*, the people report their problems related to lack of infrastructure to municipal authorities or to other authorised units individually. In this regard, the presence of *mahalles* in the city as administrative units has become ineffective. The urban environment should be an environment that encourages people to express themselves, to become involved, decide what they want and act on it. (Larice, Macdonald, 2007, p.103) Thus, the system of mukhtars should be discussed in modern times as a structure that enables social organisation and shaping of the urban space more than being an administrative organization.

### **Mahalle as a Social Unit**

The *mahalle* in the Ottoman model represented a unique social organisation whose influence was reflected into the urban space. Instead, of financial and administrative organisational approaches, a *mahalle* is a community comprising people who are in social solidarity and who are responsible for each other's behaviour. Moreover, given the concept of a *mahalle*, neighbourly relations can be established among dwellers, i.e. people who pray in the same mosque and spend their daily lives together. (Üstündağ, 2005)

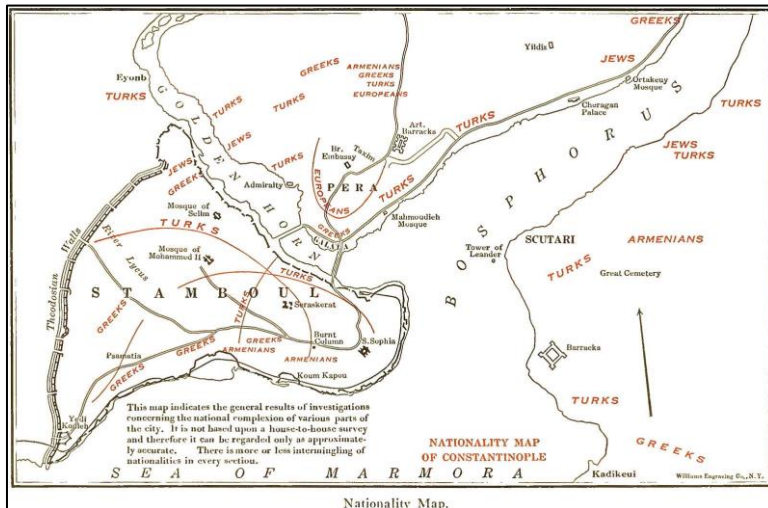


Figure 1. Istanbul Ethnic Map 1922

Traditional Ottoman quarters were not formed on the basis of differences of class or status; they were, however, formed on the basis of ethnic and religious differences. (Ortaylı, 1979) Ethnic diversity should not be considered negative or destructive, especially in the case of Istanbul city. Istanbul has unique social and geographical dynamics influenced by the city's past societal structure, which comprised a multicultural homogenous mixture of ethnic communities. Thus, the urban landscape of Istanbul is shaped by many communities. Religious minorities include Greek Orthodox Christians, Armenian Christians, Catholic Levantines and Jews (Figure 1). This diversity is why Istanbul is one of the best examples of an 'urban mosaic'.

According to Keyder, Ottoman administration was generally successful in devising ways to keep ethnic groups separate, internally hierarchical and accountable to the *mahalle*. This millet system worked well within the more static balances of the empire; however, in the much more globalised world of the late nineteenth century, with a weakened central authority, the Ottomans found their high-handed ethnic corporatism difficult to sustain. (Keyder, 1999, p.5) Contrary to Keyder's argument, after the globalisation process, internal immigrants brought this inherent neighbourhood tendency into the informal settlements in Istanbul. As evident in most of the *gecekondü* areas, slums, immigrants with the same ethnicity or who came from the same village tended to live together. Thus, social solidarity results in conditions that fortify their presence in the city, unlike Western individual life priorities.

In addition to religious differences in a traditional quarter, people from every class and in every region of the empire lived in a determined manner and under certain labels. The quarter's mosque and the coffee house were places for meeting and discussion and were centres where public opinion was created. (Bayartan, 2005) A quarter's unique ethnic structure and culture supported the creation of a unique quarter identity. In addition, the physical space was formed in accordance with this identity and culture, and mutual interaction occurred. These elements, which we identify as streets, mosques, houses, roads, cafes, etc., highlight the role of the quarter and determine its physical limits. (Baday, 2011 p.36) Cultural properties owned by these elements lead to various impacts on people, thereby making them more important. (Baday, 2011 p.36)

A *mahalle* in the Ottoman Empire reflected the identity of the community it hosted as a social and physical unit. At the same time, it embodied many different concepts such as the grocer of the quarter, night-watchman of the quarter and elder brother of the quarter. These concepts can be defined as social organisations in addition to being individual figures existing within the social structure of the quarter. The existence of a social infrastructure of the quarter is also underscored by virtue of these definitions. Through this social organisation, a neighbourhood creates patterns of authority and channels of communication. (Merry, 1987, p.36)

Another indicator of the social infrastructure of the quarter is its allowing the arrangement of events in which the entire quarter could have fun together. In particular, entertainment was organised on special days and nights and the games *Karagoz* and *Hacivat*, the traditional figures of Turkish Islamic art, were played at these events. (Baday, 2011 p.76)

A quarter in the Ottoman Empire denotes a social, administrative and financial unit headed by an imam and having unique sources of revenue and inhabitants who are in solidarity against various events. (Arıkboğa, 2004 p.274) In this respect, the quarter unit, which houses the most supportive concepts in the formation of social sustainability, such as confidence, solidarity, desire to live together and common identity, can be viewed as a reference to the quarter/neighbourhood models of the future. Bianca (2000) examined the structural conflicts between the 'traditional Muslim' concept of public and community ownership and the 'modern Western' planning methods. Specifically, he examined the effect of the latter on traditional community structures and institutions that were previously enhanced by shared values and sustained by direct human relationships, such as kinship and neighbourhood solidarity. (Bianca, 2000 p.195) As such comparative studies indicate, the traditional Muslim concept is based on the social cohesion through which one key notion makes a neighbourhood unit sustainable.

### Mahalle as a Physical Unit

The natural, spontaneous growth process was the most important distinctive feature of the Ottoman city. *Mahalles* were usually not very populous, nor did they cover a wide area. Istanbul *mahalles* had an average population of approximately 1500 people. The neighbourhood also usually contained a public fountain or two and a few shops catering to basic necessities or services. There might also have been some public utility buildings (e.g. a public bath or perhaps a dervish content or primary school, markets or bazaar). Centres were formed around structures such as temples or mosques (or churches or synagogues, depending on the ethnic makeup of the neighbourhood), schools, libraries and baths that create the main node of the *mahalle*. Religious buildings have always been one of the integral components of the urban layout of the Ottoman settlement (Cerasi, 1999). The streets resemble tree branches that start from the centre and wind through the landscape as vessels.

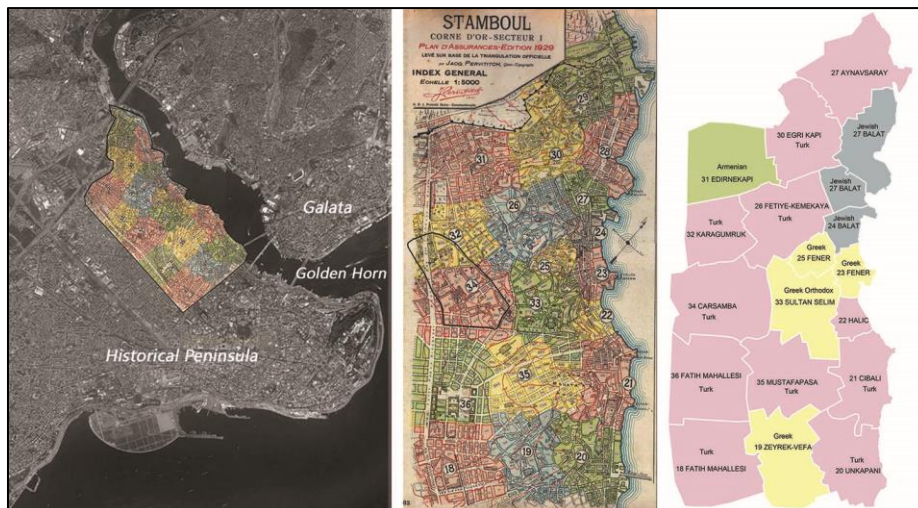


Figure 2. Map of Historical Peninsula overlapped Pervititch Eminönü District Map, Figure 3. Pervititch insurance maps with estimated border of Atikali, Figure 4. Ethnic Diversity Map

Numerous studies on Ottoman cities have been reported, and the phenomenon of the quarter has been widely included in these studies (e.g. quarter names, quarter populations, their religious structures, remarkable buildings and tax information); however, a method for the chronological specialisation of quarters on maps has (Çabuk, Demir, 2012 p. 139) not been developed. 'Pervititch maps' prepared by Jacques Pervititch between 1922 and 1945 are known to be based on districts and quarters. However, in the case of the Atikali quarter selected as the study area based on the data in the *Fatih'in Kitabı* (Göncüoğlu, 2013 p.402) prepared by the

Fatih Municipality, the area of the boundaries of the quarter is understood to differ from the Pervitic Map with respect to the area including historical buildings. The great Istanbul fires during the centuries of the Ottoman reign have also changed the administrative boundaries. The boundaries of the *mahalles* are not determined exactly within the scope of the work based on Fatih's book; however, a *mahalle* is assumed to be the area that includes the important buildings and its surroundings.

In this study, the role of social and residential areas in the quarter and their relationship with each other are evaluated on the basis of the organic form of the quarter.

The first map in Figure 2, shows an important district of a historical peninsula, Eminönü. The second map shows different *mahalles* by different colouring in the same district according to Pervitic. (Figure 3) As the figure indicates, the boundaries of the *mahalles* were never very strictly drawn. They have no specific form that could be justified. The last map in Figure 4 shows *mahalles* divided by colour according to different ethnicities, including the Balat neighbourhood, which had a sizeable Jewish population, and the Fener neighbourhood, with a large Greek population. (Kara, 2010) (Figure 4) However, neighbourhoods were not strictly divided by ethnicity; within the same quarter, an Armenian church was located next to a synagogue, and on the other side of the road, a Greek Orthodox church was found beside a mosque.

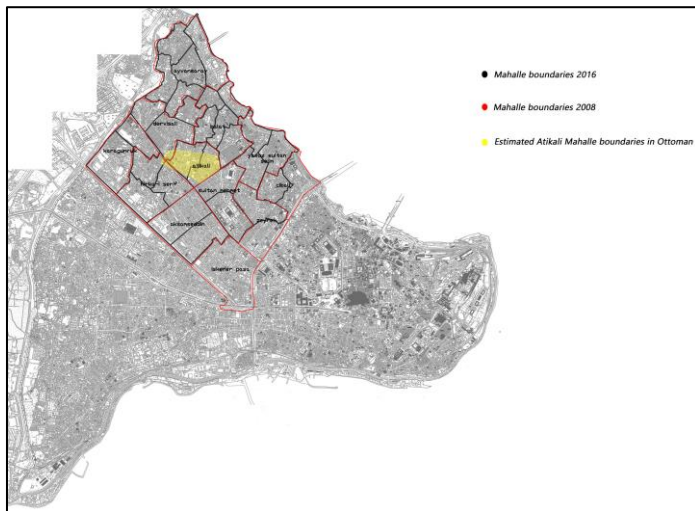


Figure 5. Mahalle boundaries

The district of Hirka-I Serif is located in the south of the Atikali district, whereas the Karagömrük and Yavuzsultan districts are located in the northwest and east regions of the Atikali district. (Figure 5) Mesa Road, which was the largest road in Istanbul and was the busiest road in the days of the Ottoman Empire, today divides Hasan Fehmi Pasa Street (Zincirlikuyu Street) and Fevzi Pasa Street. Fevzi Pasa Street was opened in 1926–1927, and the Fatih-Edirnekapi tram line on this street divides the district into two areas. (Göncüoğlu, 2013 p.402) When historical maps are overlapped, the boundaries in the Ottoman eras are observed to have changed in the modern day as a consequence of recently opened streets. (Figure 5) Therefore, the quarter boundaries could not be shown in this study.



Figure 6. Pervititch Map Atikali, Figure 7. Important Buildings Coloring, Path Typology

However, ratings could be assigned on the basis of the importance of roads on the quarter scale. Atikali is composed of three types of streets: main streets, where public buildings are attached to a path; secondary streets, where the local shops of the neighbourhood are located; and residential areas, where the streets are narrow and sometimes closed to traffic. All of the roads can be reasonably claimed to be shaped according to the landscape.

According to Kevin Lynch, any path has three characteristics that enhance its prominence: identity, continuity and directional quality. (Lynch, 1960 p.49) In the case of Atikali, continuity is prominent. A path may have continuity if activities along it are concentrated and varied, in which case people will be oriented by following the main stream of traffic. (Lynch, 1960 p.49) In our example of the Atikali quarter, we read the main street as a converted form to the district's public zones. (Figure 6) This interpretation is based on the assumption that buildings housing public functions along the main street instead of along a square or public zone stress the importance of the street and allow the entire street to become a meeting place. With respect to the presence of the path, we observe that it was developed organically on the basis of topography. In a traditional quarter, streets are where actions revealing the social aspects of humans, such as shopping, transportation and sightseeing, are performed. People communicate with the residents of the quarter. (Baday, 2011 p.32) Streets that are a compulsory encountering place where daily activities occur comprise much more than the public squares fictionalised in modern quarter models.

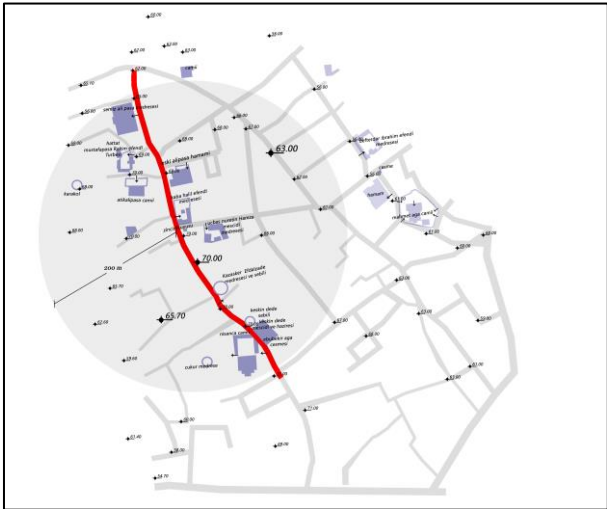


Figure 8. Mapping Atikali, code of the street, 200m radius

The relationship between physical landscape and building environment is known to be characterised by

natural topography in Ottoman *mahalles*. The first reason for this correlation is that it originates from the Islamic religion, which does not allow the height of civil buildings to exceed the height of the mosque minaret. As the minaret is a border reference of the *mahalle*, slopes are reasonable locations to build religious buildings that could control the landscape by height. (Figure 8) The second reason for building religious buildings at the top of the landscape is that it creates a monumental framework on the landscape. In the case of the Atikali *mahalle*, the figure shows the code of the street; around this area, slopes are selected for the construction of public buildings in continuity. (Figure 8)

When we examine the Western model of quarters, we note that quarters have become a central public space since the first model proposed by Clarence Arthur Perry and that the quarters are designed in a circular manner that encompasses the central public area and that can be reached within 10 minutes by walking. Although the Ottoman quarter model is not planned, it is designed around a central street instead of a central zone and the central zone is read (located) such that central locations can still be reached by walking.

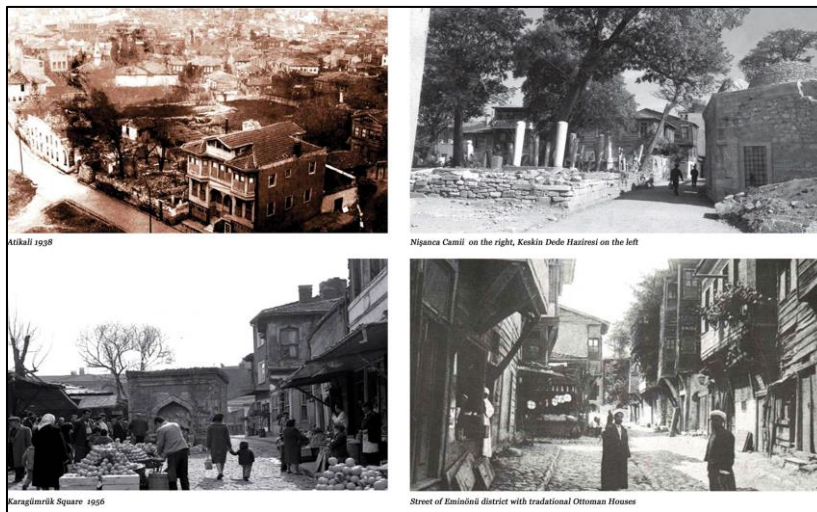


Figure 9. Images of Atikali (Fatih's Book)

Buildings constructed with different materials are described by different colours on the plan. In Atikali, a typical Ottoman house is two or three stories and constructed of wood; the yellow colour of the building indicates the material with which it was built. The close proximity of the buildings to each other and the openings of the windows on the facade exist as a cultural reflection at the quarter scale. Houses in the Atikali quarter are generally 2–3-storey wooden houses with oriel windows and constructed in the typology of a traditional Ottoman house. (Figure 9)

As a semi-autonomous feature of the *mahalle*, we observe that different public services and facilities are available within the Atikali *mahalle*. The *mahalle* contains many public spaces built as multifunctional complexes containing commercial and cultural centres. Close examination of the relation between the public buildings and the street reveals that buildings are surrounded by walls that form a border with the street. One of most important features of the public buildings observed in Ottoman architecture is that they are surrounded by walls that border their courtyards and are connected by a door or stairway to the street. Public and private spaces in the quarter have a certain hierarchical order. (Figure 6)

Examination of the relation between the building blocks and housing reveals that the same hierarchy exists here. Building blocks that are opened to the courtyard with dead-end streets constitute special places separate from the urban space.



## Conclusion

Cities are identified by various social, spatial and cultural structures that are contained within them. Given the diversity in contemporary cities, we have ignored identity at the neighbourhood scale. For instance, to achieve a sustainable social and physical neighbourhood unit, we need to discuss the mutual relationship between societies and the building environment.

Among various features, diverse ethnicity has played an incredibly important role in the formation of the Istanbul urban pattern. This diverse ethnicity has provided different opportunities for social and spatial organisation at the neighbourhood scale. *Mahalle* is not a separate income group in the unit, as reflected in the urban environment as an organic form. Moreover, under a *mahalle*, the features of the administrative organisation provide opportunities for different uses of the public spheres on the basis of the effect of the communities within the physical environment. Societal tendencies and living places with other common cultural features bring a particular identity to each quarter and *mahalle* became the resilient unit that allows dwellers to reinterpret and rebuild into an urban environment.

Physical boundaries in a *mahalle* transform over time, along with the dynamic structure of the society; the boundaries have been drawn and redrawn through the daily life of the inhabitants. Consequently, a small-scale *mahalle* unit with its identity value creates homogenous boundaries with its neighbours. The Ottoman *mahalle* compared to modern neighbourhood units are more integrated with the city along homogenous boundaries.

Daily needs, different public services and facilities are available within the *mahalle*. The structure of *mahalle* organisations encourage resident participation in a range of activities. Urban components such as streets, dead-end streets, public spaces, shopping and recreation areas enable the construction of a wide range of public and private spaces within the boundaries of the *mahalle*.

The *mahalle* in the Ottoman model has a mix of uses and activities and a variety of building types. The scale and proximity features make the *mahalle* unit safe, walkable, available and accessible, and this feature instils a unique identity. In the scope of this study, many concepts that we discuss for modern neighbourhoods are evident in the traditional Ottoman *mahalle*. Our analyses and descriptions of the *mahalle* unit in the context of administrative, social and physical units could provide data for future urban development. Moreover, we emphasise that designing the neighbourhood concept without social and administrative objectives could be a failure as a long-lived neighbourhood model.

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