

CONSERVATION ISSUES IN FENER – BALAT REGION IN THE CONTEXT OF RESILIENCE

Emre Kishali, Department of Architecture, Kocaeli University,
emre.kishali@kocaeli.edu.tr

Elisabetta Rosina, Department of ABC - Politecnico di Milano,
elisabetta.rosina@polimi.it

ABSTRACT

Fener – Balat represents the 19th century Ottoman social way of life with particular construction techniques and urban life in Istanbul. In the 20th century, conservation approaches influenced the area and the recently there has been intervention in disaster prevention concerning architectural heritage. In this paper, a brief history and values have been elucidated. Urban resilience was intended in the historical area starting with a rehabilitation programme; however, various stakeholders display inconsistent scenarios on the historical built environment. As a methodology, the paper analyses major urban interventions influencing the area; in addition, monitoring after the Rehabilitation Programme via direct investigation on the neighbourhoods was discussed in the context of resilience.

Keywords: Fener - Balat, Conservation, Urban Resilience, Sustainability, Monitoring

Introduction

Multi-layered Istanbul includes various cultural and historical conglomerations perceived through architectural tissue. Fener – Balat is one of those historical areas representing 19th century Ottoman social life with particular construction techniques and urban fabric. Within the scope of westernization, after Tanzimat Charter, the urban pattern started to change to prevent fires via the regularization of streets and building compulsory fire resisting masonry walls. On the other

hand, industrial activities influenced the social fabric and the area turned into a non-maintained, non-healthy environment after the 1950s (Çelik, 1993).

In the 20th and 21st centuries, many plans influenced the conservation of the area: Henry Proust Plan (1938 – 1950), Golden Horn Rearrangement Project (1984 – 1989), Fener – Balat Rehabilitation Programme (2003 – 2007) and the recent urban transformation plans via renewal acts. The paper analyses the programme and its realization after 2008, and includes the resilience criteria of: keeping and developing diversities (at social, economic, cultural level), the valorization of the experiential knowledge (Colucci, 2012), the action for diffusing the memory and awareness of the positive overcoming of past transition, therefore the valorization of the community cultural heritage, both the material (historic districts, functions, etc.) and the immaterial.

The assessment of building resilience and sustainable systems in a social environment is based on several principles: maintaining diversity and redundancy, managing connectivity, managing slow variables and feedbacks, fostering complex adaptive systems thinking, encouraging learning, broadening participation, and promoting polycentric governance systems (Biggs et al. 2015). The aforesaid principles are also the follow-up of conservation critiques focusing on the area. Short-term monitoring between 2008 and 2017 reveals that gentrification attempts are present as transformation of social tissue, intense estate activities via sales or letting and restoration and reconstruction activate economic value.

In the last 9 years, a discussion arose on the conservation level of dwellings in Fener – Balat, within the scope of changing social tissue. Within the expected results of the rehabilitation programme come challenges due to legislation and the effectiveness of the interventions. Specifically, various interventions have been affecting the memory of districts. New inhabitants and users are the major actors to redefine the memory via contemporary macro legislative practices, uses and global needs. Urban resilience has been intended in the historical area starting with the rehabilitation programme; however, various stakeholders display inconsistent scenarios on the historical built environment. This is evident in the activity of reconstruction, urban transformation projects, neglect, improper physical interventions or restoration acts without considering the social values of the area. The main objective of the research is to define peculiar values of cultural

heritage in Fener – Balat, to compare conservation activities starting from 2008 and to monitor the transformation after the programme.

A View of Fener – Balat in the Context of Resilience

In the context of dynamic environment, the expression and comprehension of values, display significant methodology importance about what to conserve, how to conserve the cultural properties, where to set priorities within various interests, as the Getty Conservation Institute (De la Torre, 2002) established 15 years ago. In this respect, the values were mentioned due to their articulation with urban fabric and its resilience: in fact, critical points in the history of neighbourhoods were analysed to assess the presence of resilience.

The Values of Fener Balat

The current urban fabric of Fener - Balat dated back to 1880 when a fire devastated the area. Before the 19th century, fishery and port management were the major activities of the site (Akin, 2016). Regulations about urban planning and construction activities between 1848 and 1882 indicated masonry residential buildings spread around the capital city and also in Fener - Balat (Çelik, 1993). In Fener – Balat, the window frames and openings, oriels, iron ties, construction techniques (connection between floor arches and timber floor, floors and load bearing masonry) are the most significant features of the building stocks. The ornaments, decoration of façades, jetties of housings and row housing techniques are still in the site (Fig. 2 and 3) and they are unique 19th century Ottoman typology in the urban footprint.

Intangible values embodied in monuments and places give spiritual identity for the cultural groups (Burra Charter). Religious, spiritual and inspirational are closely related when cultural values are considered, despite all religious values not being spiritual for different cultural groups (Worthing and Bond, 2016). Considering that the religious buildings belong to various cultural groups in Fener – Balat, spiritual richness and its reflection on architectural production display the uniqueness of multicultural diversity in the area.

After the establishment of the seat of the Greek Patriarchy in the Hagios Georgios Church, the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople is still in Fener serving Orthodox Christians. Sveti Stefan Bulgarian Church (1898), with a steel structure

and an iron sheet roof is another religious architectural value on the coastal part of Fener. Balat was mainly a Jewish quarter and various synagogues were constructed. Today, there are only two active sanctuaries in the area: Balat Ahrida and Balat Yanbol Synagogues. Finally, Tahta Minareli (Timber Minaret) Mosque (1458), Hz. Cabir Mosque (15th century), Ferruh Kethüda Mosque (1562), Hızır Çavuş Mosque (burnt down in 1854, rebuilt with reinforced concrete) are the worship places for Muslims. It is obvious that various religious groups were lodged in Fener – Balat regions, the religious values of each cultural group were shaped in the architectural form which is still noticeable.

On the other hand, the inhabitants of the neighbourhood started to change in the 19th century. Some prominent families of Fener moved to the villages along the Bosphorus and to the bourgeois neighbourhoods. In the meantime, fishing and port management activities started to decrease. Following the earthquake in 1894 and a series of fires, rich Balat inhabitants moved to Galata. In the 20th century, the most influential migration occurred after the establishment of the state of Israel; one fourth of the Balat population left the neighbourhood. As a result, the region became an important destination for new immigrants because of good job prospects and low rents. In the 1990s the lower income immigrants from Anatolia started to settle down in Balat. With these newcomers, the neighbourhood witnessed a significant transformation in its social structure. The same occurred to Fener, mainly Greek inhabitants left at that time. After this, new inhabitants, who came from Anatolia, started to settle in the area in large numbers. The area maintained the principles in terms of diversity, establishing social connectivity and adaptive systems via combinations of various social and cultural groups until the 1950s but afterwards diversity and connectivity disappeared (Akın, 2016).

Critical Points on Conservation in 20th Century

In the 20th century, two important urban refurbishments influenced the conservation and continuity of architectural tissue of Fener Balat. In 1937 Henri Prost submitted a masterplan that included functional zones, enhancing the themes of urban beautification and strong transportation networks (Akpınar, 2010; Bilsel 2011). In Istanbul the plan stated the conservation of monuments and urban properties (monuments, Bosphorus, Golden Horn etc.), the widening of existing roads, development and beautification of old buildings, design/maintenance of green areas in sun radiated urban neighbourhoods, identification of functional zones in accordance with the economic and hygienic scopes for city-dwellers

(Akın, 1994). The plan impacted the region in terms of development of new industrial activities along the coast of Golden Horn. Warehouses, industrial facilities and storage spaces residing on the coastal road, that was the connection of district with sea, were cut off, sea activities were transformed and the air pollution issue raised (Bilsel 2011; Turgut and Sismanyazici, 2011). While the plan did not change the urban fabric; nevertheless, the decision of transforming the Golden Horn into an industrial zone resulted in active commerce, water – air pollution and the increase of migrants.

In the late 20th century, the Golden Horn Coastal Rearrangement Project started after the assessment that industrialization, environmental pollution and insufficient living conditions were dominating city life. The removal of industries was the main scope; in 1980s, it led to the clean-up of the coastal areas of the Golden Horn (Dinler, 2013). As a result, commercial activities in the area started to decline due to the transformation in the shores of the Golden Horn. These developments impacted on commercial buildings of Fener-Balat districts; they were closed and people employed in commerce left the area.

Attempts for Resilience: Fener – Balat Rehabilitation Programme

The Rehabilitation of Fener and Balat Programme (2003 – 2008) was the first project of rehabilitation of the inner cities in Turkey. It was funded by the European Commission and implemented the partnership with Fatih Municipality, the beneficiary. The project was seen as promoting social restoration as well as a project to improve urban resilience, including building rehabilitation, assisting in improving the conditions and creating workable solutions for housing in the inner cities. The project included several phases of differing contents. (Altınsay and Ünlü, 2003). In the first phase, 80 buildings were chosen for the rehabilitation, with a particular concern for their location. Only 26 property owners authorized the restoration and signed the agreement. Therefore, external repairs and restoration of their houses were realized in the first phase. The second phase pertained to 74 buildings including houses, shops in Balat Market and buildings that became social centres. The third phase included the restoration of 21 residential buildings. At the end, 121 buildings were restored and strengthened against seismic risk. Moreover, the project relies on social rehabilitation with the functions of nursery, education and a center for mothers and children (Akın, 2016).

The primary goals of Fener – Balat Rehabilitation Programme has been the participative conservation and the development of the area via sustainable urban rehabilitation, by improving the local authority's technical capacity and awareness of conservation. The publication of the results generated impacts of the Rehabilitation Programme on other historical areas (Fatih Municipality, 2017). In 2003, the Turkish Commission Representative of the European Union defined the expected results of the project as follows

- Restoration of around 200 historical buildings;
- Establishment of a social centre;
- Establishment of a waste management strategy of solid waste;
- Improvement of Balat Market;
- Revitalisation of Fener and Balat Districts with improvements of the economic and social life of the inhabitants of Fener and Balat.

The important aspect of the programme is to keep the residents inside the building during the restoration works and 5 years after the accomplishment of the interventions (Altınsay and Ünlü, 2003; Aysev Deneç, 2014). In this way, broadening participation, and promoting polycentric governance systems had the aim of providing feedback and handling the prospective challenges.

Monitoring after Fener – Balat Programme: Challenges

The law No. 5366 passed in June 2005 (Preservation by Renovation and Utilisation by Revitalisation of Deteriorated Immovable Historical and Cultural Properties) has the aim of maintaining and conserving by renewing the sites within the boundaries of urban conservation areas, as neglect is the major threat for the conservation of area. Moreover, the Act on Disaster Prevention (no. 6306) passed in 2012, aims at the cities that are in the first degree, such as an earthquake region. With the issuing of Law (No. 5366) and later Law (No.6306), Fatih Municipality started some urban transformation projects of the region by Ayvansaray Urban Renewal Project. The objective of the projects was the urban renewal of 909 lots with 370 buildings and the interventions on the coastline of Ayvansaray, including the few lots rehabilitated under Fener – Balat Programme.

The City Council of Fatih Municipality approved the preliminary renewal projects in 2009, and critiques on these were discussed in various research papers (Aysev Deneç, 2014; Dinler, 2013; Turgut and Sismanyazici, 2011). In March 2014, İstanbul First Administrative Court cancelled 1/5000 scaled Conservation Master

Plan of Fener Balat Ayvansaray Urban Renewal Project. The final decision of the court was to favour the neighbourhood association and declared that Fener Balat was no longer a renewal area. However, the Mayor of Fatih Municipality applied for its cancellation, thus the decision was reversed on 2 April 2015. A Concept plan with slight changes was approved by Istanbul 1st Cultural and Natural Heritage Regional Preservation Board of Renewal Areas. Through this development, the governance system became unplanned and undefined for conservation and resilience, because of the lack of the participation of communities.

Discussion and Conclusion

Considering the historical layers of Fener – Balat, the rehabilitation programme was a successful attempt in the conservation of an historical area in the matter of establishing urban resilience prioritizing social, cultural, economic and environmental values, according to the current definition of economic values of cultural heritage¹. Direct investigation reveals that the international conservation acts and rehabilitated buildings give the feeling of real architectural and urban value. The programme grew as participative conservation through the inclusion of Fatih Municipality, local architects, EU initiatives, non-governmental organisations, ICOMOS, users, inhabitants, international technical experts etc. This unique and cross-disciplinary programme in Turkey is an initiative of the methodology that should be maintained in future intervention. However, some critical points in terms of renewing methodology and adjusting the economic value of heritage, without considering other values, were observed as the main tools of planning instead of establishing resilient neighbourhoods. The post-

¹ One of the most recent EU projects, Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe, defines economic values with respect to their relation with cultural, environmental and social value. According to this taxonomy, return on investment; real estate market and gross value added are independent potential areas of economic value for cultural heritage. Place branding and the labour market are linked to social value and housing stock management is associated with environmental value. Furthermore, some parameters of economic value are interwoven with more than one value. Economic aspects of regional attractiveness are shaped with both cultural and environmental values; those of regional competitiveness are influenced by environmental and social values (CHCFE Consortium, 2015).

programme experiences display that the pressure on cultural heritage was intensified by building stock and the restoration activities. Therefore, return on investment and the real estate market indicate the demand for heritage without concerning educational, social and cultural issues.

Monitoring after 2008 reveals that gentrification attempts can be observed: keeping the same residents for 5 years is not enough for the social sustainability of the rehabilitated buildings. Intense estate activities via sales, letting or other (not under the programme) enable the change of inhabitants, use and economic value. Despite the involvement of the old residents in the programme, increasing stock market values and new renewal attempts led to decrease in the sense of belonging and dynamic user profiles. The worship and monumental buildings of orthodox Greek, Armenian and Jewish community still stand there which create diversity and a multi-cultural environment. On the contrary, their conservation plans were not included in the programme. Finally, the continuity of technical, scientific and social experience deduced from the programme was not adequately communicated. Despite the various researchers and scientists working on the conservation of the area, the holistic knowledge of the intervention was not published and acknowledged.

Consequently, the new physical pattern of Fener – Balat encounters the threat of having a brand new urban memory with different users and afore said projects. In the 21st century, the region was seen as a resilient neighbourhood; on the contrary, at present, new social tissue via gentrification, changes the occupants and results in unplanned restorations (Fig 4).

Degradation and building pathology anomalies have increased in both rehabilitated and vacant buildings. Buildings without restoration remained in poor condition and indicate that the maintenance plan is not sufficient. Some buildings having historic and architectural value did not go under repair; therefore, damage could be critical and in some cases dangerous for the buildings themselves and the surrounding ones. ,

Moreover, new policies for managing the area, after the internationally funded programme, represent controversial acts with regard to the resilience and participative conservation. Some monitored cases are considered to be serving as non-governmental organizations; some are planned to remain residential, nevertheless, they are waiting for new owners via sale or letting (Fig. 7).

At national scale, Law 5366 encompasses the area with urban renewal proposals along the coastline including urban lots in order to provide a safer and healthier urban neighbourhood. However, the existing historical, urban and social tissue are constantly ignored; the planned intervention is against the rehabilitation programme and international conservation philosophy. Therefore, resilience strategies need to be organised in the area without prioritizing only economic value for urban resilience with conservation acts.

On the other hand, the link between gentrification and resilience can be evaluated as a method of rethinking urban planning to reduce the distinctive borders between social classes. The peculiarity of the gentrification process and resilience attempts by projects, communities or entrepreneurs in Fener – Balat would provide the opportunities for sustainable neighbourhood development. Recently established cafes, art galleries, ateliers as small businesses, free thinkers, art events, social community activities with inhabitants, think tanks, intellectual gatherings by artists and the impact of controlled tourism could form social and economic resilience without relocating and excluding any social class. Regional attractiveness and competition would provide opportunity for investors, artists, tourists, entrepreneurs and stakeholders to create sustainable economic development with creativity, identity, continuity and sense of place in the area.

REFERENCES

- Akın, N. (1994), “Balat”, *Encyclopedia of Istanbul from Past to Present 2*, pp. 10-12. Kültür Bakanlığı ve Tarih Vakfı, İstanbul.
- Akın, N. (2016), “Haliçte Bir Rehabilitasyon Alanı: Balat”, in Ahunbay, Z., Akın, N. and Şahin, Ç. (Eds.), *Neoliberal Kent Politikaları ve Fener – Balat, Ayvansaray*, Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, İstanbul, pp. 17 – 42.
- Akpınar, I. (2010), “İstanbul’u (Yeniden) İnşa Etmek: 1937 Henri Prost Planı. 2000’den kesitler II: Cumhuriyet’in Mekanları/Zamanları/İnsanları” in Altan, E. and Imamoğlu B. (Eds.), *Doktora Araştırmaları Sempozyumu Kitabı*, ODTU yayınevi, Ankara.
- Altınsay, B. and Ünlü, A.E. (2003) “Fener ve Balat Semtleri Rehabilitasyon Programı” *Mimarist*, Vol. 10, pp. 80-87, İstanbul.

Aysev Deneç, E. (2014), “The Re-Production of the Historical Center of İstanbul in 2000s: A Critical Account on Two Projects in Fener – Balat”, *METU Journal of Faculty of Architecture* Vol. 31:2, pp. 162-188, (DOI: 10.4305/METU.JFA.2014.2.9).

Biggs, R., Schlüter, M. and Schoon, M. L. (2015). *Principles for building resilience: Sustaining ecosystem services in social-ecological systems*. Cambridge University Press, United Kingdom.

Bilsel, C. (2011), “Les Transformations d’Istanbul”: Henri Prost’s planning of Istanbul (1936-1951)”, *ITU A/Z* Vol. 8 (1), pp. 100 – 116, Istanbul, Turkey.

CHCFE Consortium (2015), “Cultural Heritage Counts for Europe” available at www.encatc.org/culturalheritagecountsforeurope (accessed at 22.01.2017).

Colucci A. (2012), *Le città resilienti: approcci e strategie*, Jean Monnet Centre of Pavia, Università degli Studi di Pavia, Italy.

Çelik, Z. (1993), *The Remaking of Istanbul, Portrait of an Ottoman Capital in the Nineteenth Century*, University of California Press, Berkeley, USA.

De la Torre, M., (2002), “Assessing the Values of Cultural Heritage: Research Report”, available at http://hdl.handle.net/10020/gci_pubs/values_cultural_heritage (accessed 22.04.2017)

Dinler, M. (2013), *Impact Assessment of Major Urban Interventions on the Cultural Heritage of Fener and Balat Districts*. MA thesis, Middle East Technical University.

European Commission Representation to Turkey, (2003), EU Funded Programmes in Turkey 2003-2004, available at: <http://www.euromedtransport.org/Fr/image.php?id=1513> (accessed 03.01.2017).

Fatih Municipality, available at <http://www.fatih.bel.tr/icerik/1156/fener-balat-semtlerinin-rehabilitasyon-projesi/> (accessed 02.01.2017).

Resilience Alliance, available at: <https://www.resalliance.org/resilience> (accessed 21.01.2018).

Turgut, H. and Sismanyazici B. (2011), “Social and Spatial Re-Structuring in Inner-City Residential Areas: The Case of Fener-Balat”, Istanbul, in R.Lawrence, H.Turgut, P.Kellett (eds) *Requalifying The Built Environment: Challenges And Responses*, Hogrefe and Huber, Göttingen.

Worthing, D. and Bond, S. (2008), *Managing Built Heritage: The Role of Cultural Values and Significance*, John Wiley & Sons.



Fig. 1 – Overview of urban pattern and historical monuments, personal archive.



Fig. 2 - Remains of the city wall from Constantinople in 2017, personal archive, photo by Emre Kishalı.



Fig. 3 - 19th century row housings and urban pattern, personal archive, photo by Emre Kishalı.



Fig. 4 - New functions and transformations of ground floors as café, personal archive, photo by Beril Alpagut.



Fig. 5 – Vacant buildings in 2017, personal archive, photo by Parviz Kurbanov.



Fig. 6 - Current restoration interventions on buildings in 2016, without respecting the authenticity of the buildings, personal archive, photos by Emre Kishali.



Fig. 7 - Rehabilitated buildings on sale and for rent in 2017, personal archive, photos by Emre Kishali.



Fig. 8 - Non-scientific restoration attempts, personal archive, photo by Emre Kishali.