

ARE BRANDED GATED COMMUNITIES SUSTAINABLE? ISTANBUL AS A CASE STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

Istanbul is a fairly unique city whose structure has survived many centuries. At present, the city is undergoing extensive change due to the burst of the economic bubble at the start of the 21st century, which led to an exponential increase in immigration of people with middle and upper incomes. These demographics spurred the interest of public and private investors, who initiated numerous development projects in the city, often involving the construction of gated communities. Such communities, with their artificial concepts or grouped apartment blocks, have thus become a major issue in urban planning.

Current housing policy allows many different types of large-scale projects that are not integrated into the urban fabric of Istanbul. More importantly, companies are starting to invest in projects with the aim of creating new behavioural patterns and an identity for each community. Venice-Istanbul is just one example of branding of a gated community: its architectural footprint is taken exactly from Venice. The project claims to offer a living experience similar to that of Venice; however, the problem is that the identity of the community becomes a brand and is thus transformed into a marketing strategy. Such a branding strategy dilutes the social and physical sustainability of the city, which is based on the recollection of the previous image of the city with its citizens and its rich history.

Gated communities enclose a physical and social structure, thereby forming an identity that is independent of the rest of the city. This paper aims to explore the identity of such gated communities by considering their sustainability in the case of the Atakent neighbourhood of Istanbul. We thus address the question of whether branded gated communities are sustainable.

'COMMUNITY' GATING

Gated communities are artefacts that aim to form both physical and communal identities. Blakely and Snyder define the term 'gated community' as 'physical privatised areas with restricted entrance where outsiders and insiders exist'.¹ Other researchers applied various different assumptions in defining these new types of housing areas and came up with labels such as 'gated enclaves',² 'enclosed neighbourhoods',³ 'walled community' and 'retirement-lifestyle communities.' The term 'community,' which is a social concept, is emphasised as a common denominator in the definition of this new residential concept. The concept of 'community' is widely used by sociologists, urban designers and urbanists, but different opinions exist regarding how to identify a group of people as a 'community.' Most scholars define 'community' as something rooted in territorial, spatial and generational togetherness.⁴ Keller emphasises the spatial connotations in the term; the territory on

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which a community lives generates proximity and a density that is conducive to other types of closeness. No matter the container—village, town or suburb—the community has a captured, delimited space that shapes the scale of collective life and the patterns of life created therein.⁵ Based on this definition, people living in a given geographical region with physical limits can be defined as a community such as those that we call gated communities. In support of this statement is the fact that, from their first appearance, gated communities have claimed to provide this sense of community. Thus, investigating gated communities under the scope of social sustainability requires the broader issues of community and identity to be considered.

In the 1960s, early gated communities appeared in America to cater to retirees. Communities such as Leisure World were the first places where average Americans could wall themselves in.⁶ The primary aim in the planning of such secure residential units complexes to collect people around a common interest such as golf, tennis and other sports to provide them with shared services. These developments involve a form of ownership in which home buyers also purchase shares in recreational centres, golf courses and other facilities.⁷ Social cohesion and a sense of community were important features in the development of gated communities. In the late 1980s, upscale real estate speculation and the rising trend of conspicuous consumption saw a proliferation of gated communities around golf courses that were designed for exclusivity, prestige and leisure.⁸ From the 1980s onwards, the gated-community model took root in many countries in Latin America, Asia, the Middle East and Africa, where, rather than seeking solely to create a sense of community living, it was transformed according to local needs and requirements.

GATED COMMUNITY IN ISTANBUL

Since the beginning of the 1980s, neoliberal economic and spatial-restructuring policies have targeted Istanbul with the aim of transforming it into Turkey's global city. State land has been put on the market as a major source of investment. Throughout this globalisation process, the city has seen the uncontrolled construction of new highways, skyscrapers, shopping centres and settlement units with the contribution of local and foreign investors. According to Bilgin, the main distinguishing feature of the post-1980 period is that large capital groups have begun to invest systematically in the construction sector and real estate.⁹ Housing is becoming a consumption article, which means that, from an economic point of view, the market economy moves away from egalitarian politics and, from a social point of view, the market is explained by the consumption paradigm.¹⁰ This cycle of consumption took its power from the free land, the growing construction sector and the increasing number of urban elites. Thus, gated communities with their artificial concepts or grouped apartment blocks have become a major planning issue.

Neoliberal urbanism, which has accompanied neoliberal economic restructuring, seeks to expand the role of market forces in the housing and real estate sectors, to privatise the provision of urban and social services and to increase the role of elites in shaping urban landscapes.¹¹ With a newfound lifestyle, the private sector has invested in developing gated communities which, starting in 2005, have offered a particular lifestyle for their residents.¹² Thus, gated communities have become a lifestyle choice for their residents and, inversely, the way in which their residents portray their lifestyle to others.

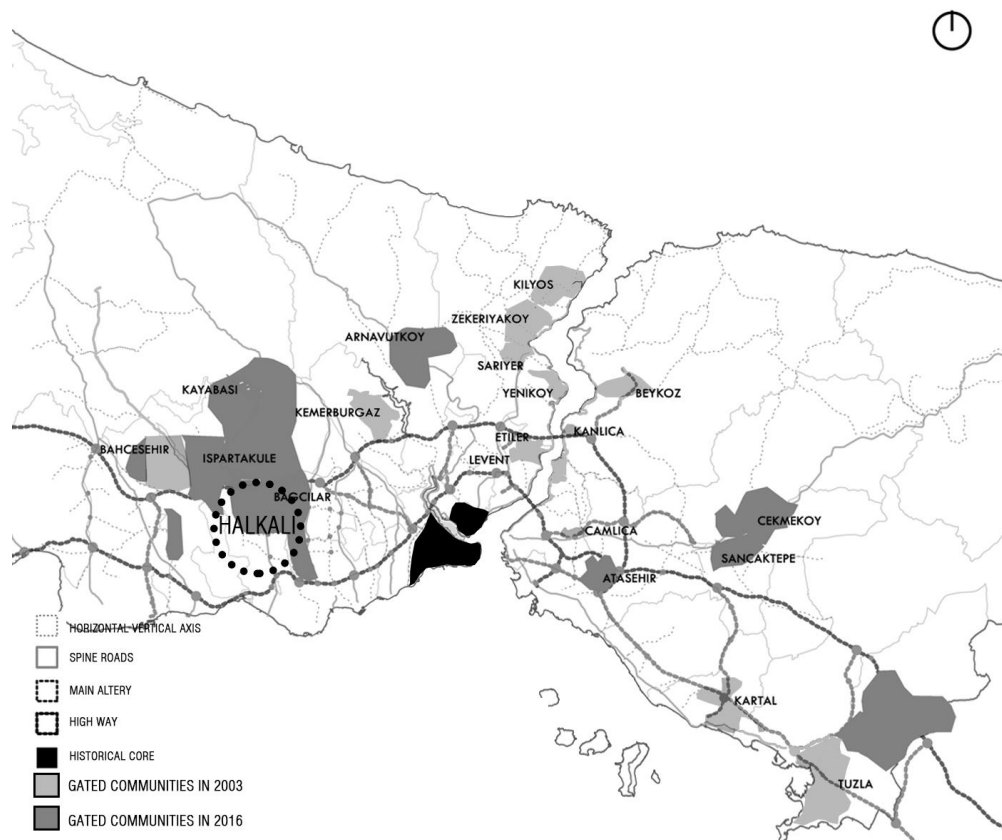


Figure 1. Map of Istanbul City.

In both Europe and Asia, the trend of gated communities as housing developments on the periphery of central business districts has increased over the last 20 years. Figure 1 shows that, as of 2003, gated communities in Istanbul have emerged in the north (Göktürk-Kemerburgaz, Zekeriyaköy-Demirciköy) and southwest (Bahçesehir, Büyükçekmece) on the European side and near the second Bosphorus Bridge (Beykoz) and in the north (Ömerli) on the Asian side.¹³ By strengthening the links with the main roads on the west and east sides of Istanbul, gated communities, indicated in dark grey in Figure 1, have sprouted along this axis over the last 15 years.

According to the 2014 Istanbul Branded Housing Survey of the EVA Real Estate Appraisal, 1,007 housing projects exist in 34 regions of the city, with 430,000 branded houses in the city.¹⁴ The report reveals 395,000 residential homes within 855 branded-housing projects in 2013, which represents an 18% increase in the number of residential housing projects in Istanbul over the year.¹⁵ The present study concentrates on the Küçükçekmece District, which is the area enclosed by the red curve in Figure 3. This was chosen as the most concentrated region where physical and social fragmentation clearly threatens sustainable development.

The Atakent neighbourhood, which is delineated by red boundaries in Figure 2, is one of 21 districts connected to Küçükçekmece Municipality. As of 2000, gated communities have become the standard development pattern for the newly built residential areas in this neighbourhood. The satellite image acquired in 1982 (Figure 2, top panel) shows no housing developments in the area, which was devoted to agricultural land at the time. In 2006 (middle panel), a number of gated-community projects were implemented as a function of land availability. The satellite image in the lower panel of Figure 3 shows that, in 2017, a total of 27 gated communities exist in the Atakent neighbourhood. The gated communities in this area were created with a particular identity and envisaged the life of certain communities separated from their neighbouring communities by architecture and lifestyle.

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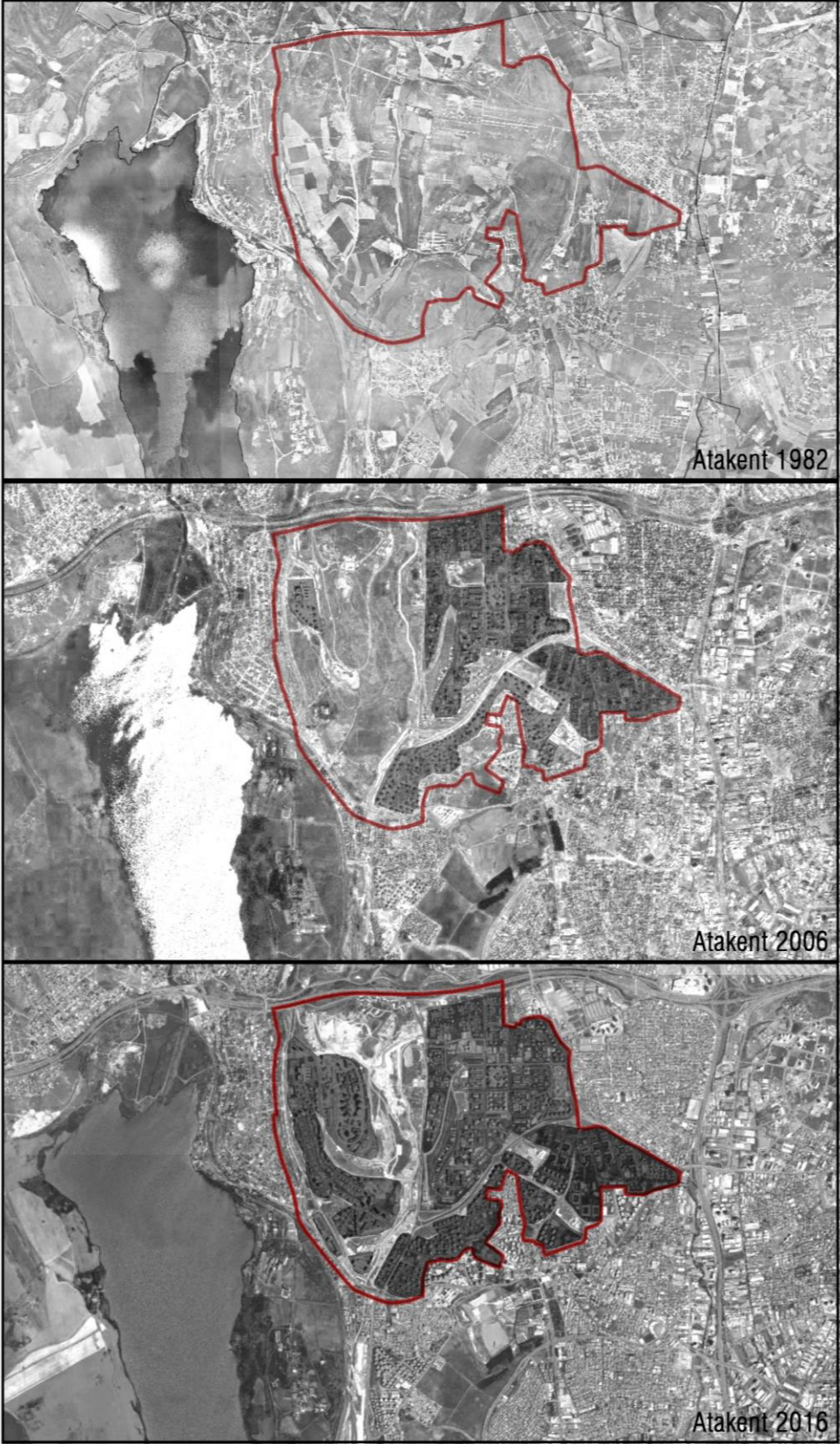


Figure 2. The red boundary indicates the Atakent Neighbourhood. The images shown in the top, middle and bottom panels were acquired in 1982, 2006 and 2017, respectively.

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According to the 2008 population census, 34,452 people resided in the Atakent neighbourhood in 2008, rising to 88,956 in 2016.¹⁶ In this research, 15 out of 27 Gated Communities in the province were found in detail. Figure 4 shows the architectural diversity of the applied projects. Projects have been culled since 2005 when the year of construction is considered. There is a total of 21,090 (see Figure 5) housing units in only 15 housing units in the district. This study shows that approximately 92% of the population in the Atakent neighbourhood lives in gated communities.

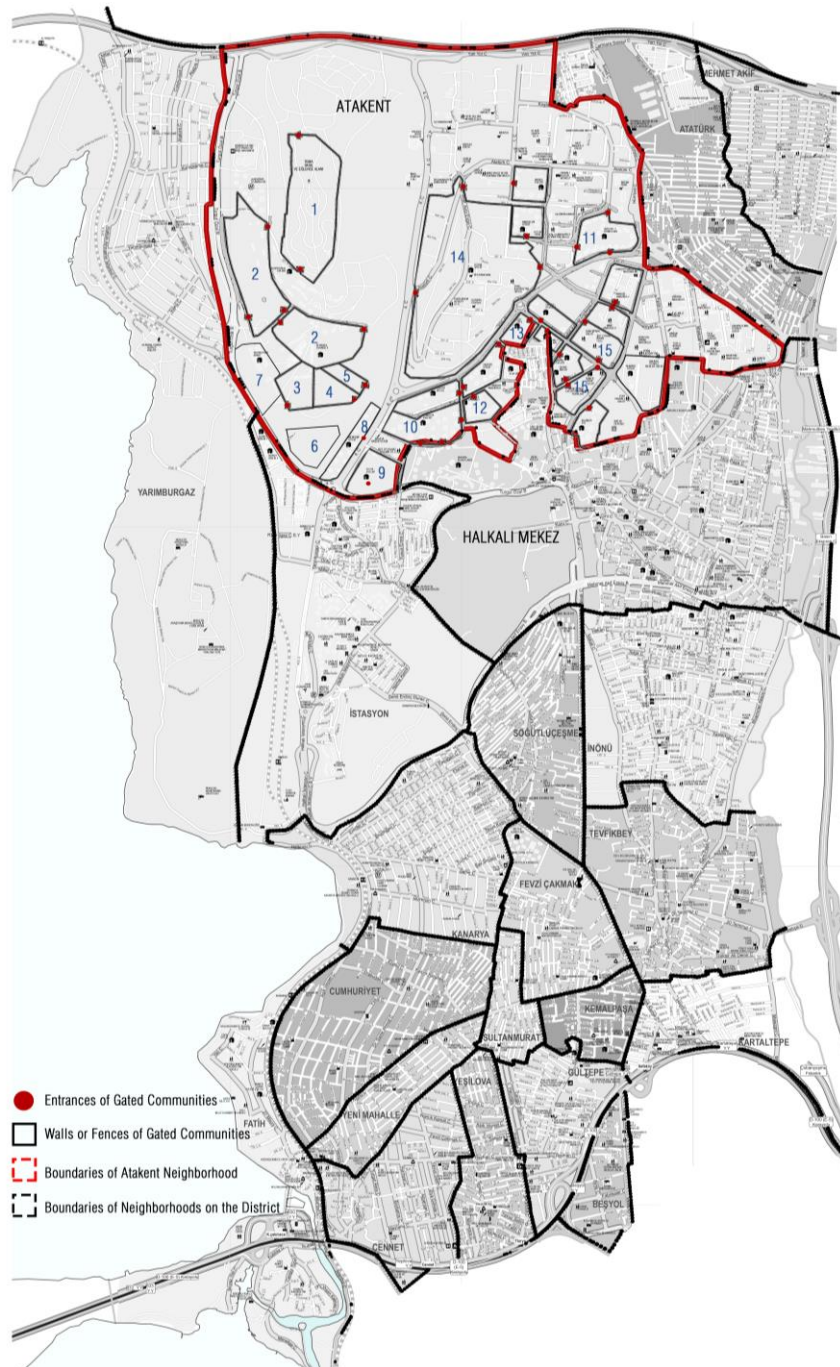


Figure 3. Map of Atakent gated community, Istanbul. The border of neighbourhoods is shown by a thick black line, walls are shown by thin black lines and gates are shown by red dots.

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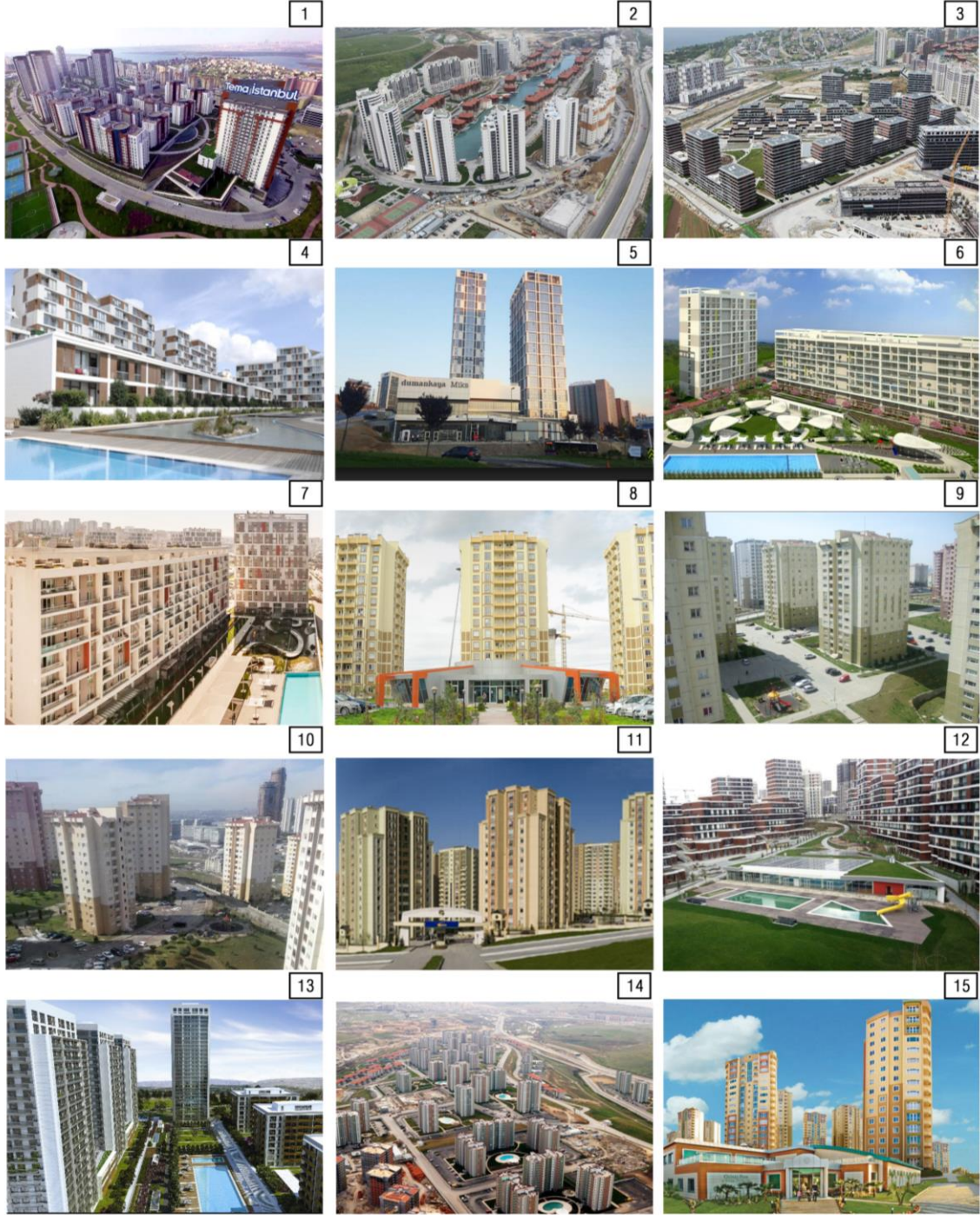


Figure 4. Physical appearances of Gated Communities.

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	BRAND OF GATED COMMUNITIES	YEAR OF CONSTRUCTION	HOUSE UNITS
1	Tema Istanbul	2005	3.531
2	Bosporus City	2017	2.796
3	Istanbul Lounge2	2017	605
4	Dumankaya Konsept Halkali	2014	833
5	Dumankaya Miks	2014	657
6	Soyak Evostar	2013	1.000
7	Soyak Park Aparts	2014	1.121
8	Menekse Evleri	2006	784
9	Fulya Evleri	2006	1.108
10	Manolya EVleri	2007	1.480
11	Avrupa Konutlari 1	2006	1.368
12	Istanbul Lounge	2017	757
13	Elite City	2017	590
14	Soyak Olimpik Kent	2007	3.592
15	Gunes Park Evleri	2008	868
	TOTAL		21.090

Figure 5. Branded Gated Communities on the neighbourhood.

Privacy is one of the main features of the Atakent gated communities. In this neighbourhood, residential areas are enclosed by fences and several manned gates control the entrance. Security guards check entrances and exits 24 hours per day, 7 days per week. Any workers or visitors other than residents are asked for the reason for their visit. All facilities are located inside such communities and their use is restricted to residents and their visitors. As seen in Figure 3, the gated communities are surrounded by walls and with a few entrances (see red dots in Figure 3). Designed in this way, gated communities become structures entirely independent of the urban tissue. Integration with the city is fragile when we consider spatial connectivity.

The boundaries of gated communities are designed to separate insider from outsider, which creates tension between the two. Sardar claims that gated communities are a shining example of how not to provide security for a community, but rather to enhance and spread total insecurity by generating dysfunctional relationships. Studies have shown that societies marked by increasing equity have less to fear from internal social tensions.¹⁷ Neighbourhoods with this characteristic are typified by communities that separate and demystify each other. In addition, note that people living in the centre of Atakent form a heterogeneous community, whereas the gated communities tend to form homogenous communities.

Spatial scale is another crucial feature of gated communities. Their desire to allow ambulatory access to social facilities within their boundaries limits their scale. In this case, the size and proximity make public spaces inside their boundaries accessible by walking. Some scholars claim that scale creates deeper ties between neighbours because of densification.¹⁸ By obliging people to use the same common areas, they remain in constant communication with each other. The problem arises when we consider the neighbourhood scale, as seen in Figure 3, where no common public facilities are available. Thus, the social interaction in these communities is limited over the larger scale. The design elements that form the urban tissue in this case are primarily walls, entrances and highways.

The common structures, places and facilities within gated communities are managed by committees chosen by the titleholders. These committees also decide the management style. They are independent of the municipality and are responsible for providing services and security, the maintenance of the infrastructure and the implementation and supervision of the conduct of the housing complexes. In addition, users are actively involved in maintaining a physically healthy environment. Thus, the gated communities have an autonomous administration, which contributes positively to the environmental sustainability within the borders of the gated communities.

IDENTITY IN BRANDED GATED COMMUNITIES

Anderson is seeking answers to a question that most works on nationalist political movements did not ask: “what is the thing that pushes the humanitarian to kill other people, even to hate them?”¹⁹ The author treats the concept of the nation as an imagined community that takes the place of ancient congregations such as dynastic realm and religion. He is explaining the base combiner of sociological entities and how it transformed into the concept of nation. According to Anderson, three institutions were the census, the map, and the museum profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion. In order to create national identity, collective memory has been evolved, selected or handed down in many aspects of life such as language, art, press, institutions, architecture and urban spaces. In the first time “identity” is associated with a limited geographical area, national identity and territorial form, and the nation became dominant mode of place identity.²⁰

The term used to designate the place identity that emerged within the past two decades, has the more focused significance of ‘place,’ ‘people’ and ‘meaning’.²¹ Jenkins underlines that while the place can be based on recognizable physical features e.g. slope, orientation, vistas, there are also many tangible meanings and memories come by personal and highly individual reactions. He associated the fact that the design of space is more relational than subjective. According to Jenkins, in place identity, there is a relation based on similarity, and a relation based on differences.²² How individuals define their identity by defining who they are similar to and who they are different from, are the same how to place identity considered.²³ Place identities are formed through emotions, meanings, experiences, memories and actions and growth by the social entities in which they placed. While referring to the identity of the place, the importance of cultural identity of the local community emphasized by Park, physical and sentimental distances reinforce each other, and the influences of local population distribution combined with the forces of class and race in the evolution of the social organization.²⁴ In this case, community reshapes the environment and gives an identity to the place. In a natural process, the identity of the community transforms the physical place and creates a natural boundary in the city. The identity of the place is defined within this process, which grows out of the community that it contains. A mutual interaction thus exists between cultural identity and identity of place.

‘People identify with the places they live and identify places as different’.²⁵ With this quote, Adam claims that two aspects of identity work in opposition to one another. Whereas a new or transformed building or place may be highly distinctive or identifiable, it may undermine the particular character of a place that the community regards as a critical part of its identity. Conversely, that same distinctiveness may reinforce or even create an enhanced sense of identity.²⁶

Architects and urban designers have been the mainstay of creating a place identity and modern inhabitants have come in search of unique identities. This approach has been most used in residential areas where the sense of belonging is an issue.

Gated communities are thus becoming prime examples for developers to examine how place and community create an identity, which is marketed as a branding strategy to future residents. Methods used for branding include creating a manifesto and logo, publishing a magazine, providing a unique physical environment and offering a particular social activity or a different lifestyle (see Figure 4).

The Venice-Istanbul gated-community project is another example of a branded gated community with an artificial concept (see Figure 6). With an architectural footprint taken exactly from that of Venice, the project purports to offer a living experience similar to that available in Venice, Italy. The project imitates Venice with its historical texture, water canals and architectural aesthetics. St. Mark’s Campanile, which is one of the most recognisable symbols of Venice, is recreated in the centre of the project area as the primary visual feature. In addition, residents can travel through canals in gondolas whose drivers wear the same costume as their Venetian counterparts. The project manager claims that ‘at Via Port Venezia you will truly experience the perfect Venetian life you see in movies. Cafe settings, you can pass enjoyable hours with your friends and family when you wish, and luxury restaurants will bring the flavour of Venice into your lives.’²⁷

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Unlike gated communities, identity is being branded in real estate as a theme that imitates western cities. This artificial process had been starting by this application. Consumers purchase their houses to live alien lifestyles within an alien environment. China has even gone one step further by creating extensive themed communities that replicate identifiable western prototypes. Bosker underlines that developers recreate not only the superficial appearance of historical western cities, but also the ‘feel’ (i.e. the atmosphere and experiential colour) of the originals through such devices as foreign names, signage and lifestyle amenities. In such communities, millions of China’s new economic elites shop in markets selling western foods, dine in western restaurants, navigate streets bearing western names, congregate in parks and squares with monuments to heroes of western culture and celebrate festivals and holidays lifted from alien traditions.³⁰ It would appear that the real estate market in China is on the same path to branded gated communities as in Turkey.

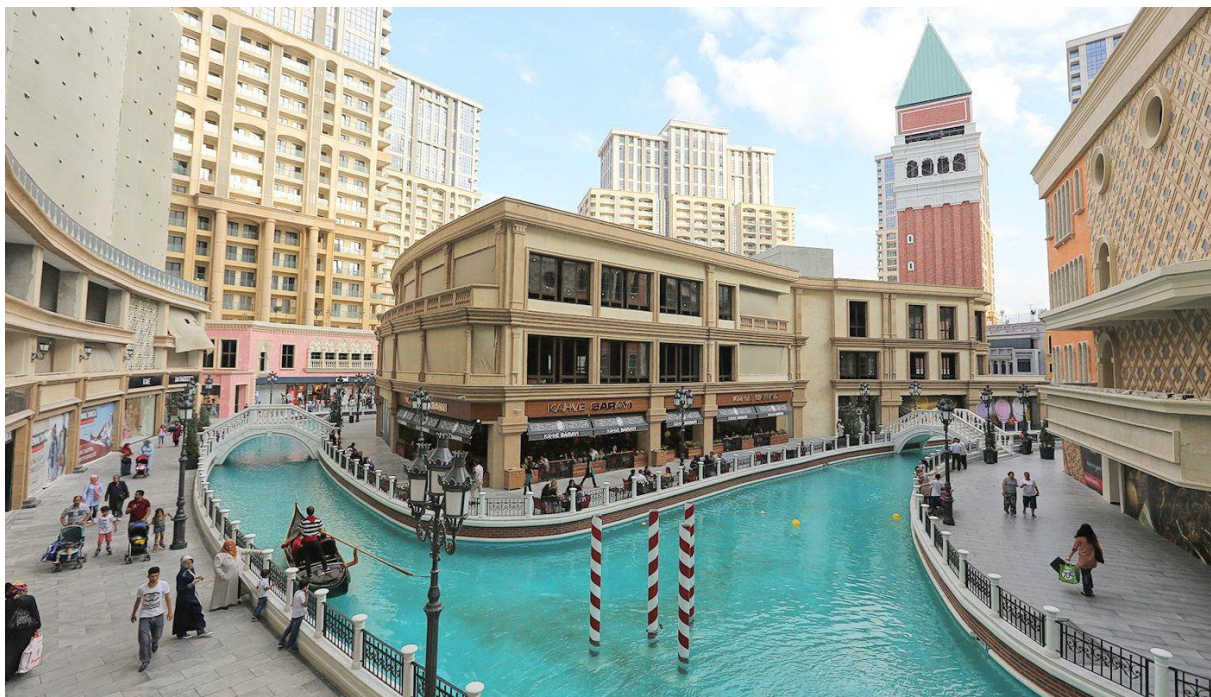


Figure 6. View of the gated community of Venice-Istanbul

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CONCLUDING

The image of gated communities as imagined by urban designers or planners does not always match the traditions of the target audience. Through their introverted social and physical structures, gated communities develop ‘artificial identities’ for themselves detached from the identity of their host city. Branded communities in Istanbul strive to incorporate a set of parameters related to their reputation. For instance, as each brand targets a specific group in society, it naturally creates an untold image to the perspective consumers. These sets of parameters create a collective community consciousness as they belong to similar societal group, traditions and even the expected etiquettes of its members to be in line with that of the brand image. Apart from these factors tied up with the image, the community members themselves share a sense of cohesion towards their responsibilities to their community. Brand loyalty reaches another level as members take allegiance with the brand of their choice and are willing to go out of the way in order to protect the image.

A result of the present case study is that each branded gated community tends to create their own identity. The primary factor behind this independence from the rest of the city is the physical limit (i.e. walls) constructed around the housing complex. In branded gated communities, these boundaries become social borders, despite being envisaged only as physical borders.

Gated communities have greatly damaged the urban fabric and development of Istanbul and have negatively impacted the lifestyle of city residents. These communities are not planned or designed to integrate into the surrounding urban areas, both spatially and socially. As a result, both environmental and cultural sustainability are degraded at the district level.

The most destructive gated communities are those with developer-created identity communities. In branded gated communities, social structure, lifestyle and values are made subservient to marketing strategy. Branding is becoming a new way to identify the place and community as a whole. The concept of sustainability must be considered for preservation of the characteristics that make every place a unique cultural environment with specific architectural constructions, rather than a formless group of imitations with artificial identities.

In this article, the concept of identity was examined from the viewpoint of social and physical sustainability. Finally, this study shows that the tendency to create identity via gated communities causes social and physical segregation at both the neighbourhood and the city scale.

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