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Missing opportunities and lost values in urban space: Reclaiming resilience

Introduction

Agricultural landscape and urban fabric have been intertwined in İstanbul for centuries. The city, a self-reliant and resilient whole (Barthel,S., Sörlin,S., & Ljungkvist,J. 2010), with its water sources and fertile agrarian fields, has lost its agricultural areas on the city's outskirts and within the urban fabric due to rapid and mass urbanization and population growth. Can we compensate for such losses within a new framework in a dynamic and developing environment? My primary purpose in this paper is to narrate the social and physical transformation of an area in the city between 1970 and 2022 through various representation tools such as maps, now and then photographs, and drawings; to discuss existing and lost values and resilience opportunities to mitigate negative consequences of urban development and global effects in the context of livability.

Can this neighborhood, which has lost its character and productive landscape as a sustainable and accessible environment with vehicles and low-profile structures lining its streets, be re-gained? While the disruption of sustainable continuity is linked with physical and social deterioration, can the city's social-ecological memory be restored? Can the negative consequences of the wrong decisions that caused all these losses be compensated? Besides presenting observational and research findings about the transformation of the urban space, I also briefly discuss resilience in traditional and contemporary senses within the context.

Livability is generally associated with sustainability and is used to evaluate the environmental and spatiotemporal quality of urban space. We know that the concept of livability varies from society to society or culture to culture and only partially coincides with the idea of sustainability. (Wiryomartono, B.2020). The characteristics of a livable community widely include a sense of safety, good public schools, well-paying jobs, access to food, parks, green spaces, spatial features, cultural amenities, and walkability.(Rakow, D:A., et.al.2020:9)

Nevertheless, when looking at the case through the question of how an urban space should be or the lens of quality of life, one can agree on some of the commonly acknowledged characteristics of a livable environment. We do not have social research on the environmental or spatial satisfaction of the neighborhood inhabitants in question or an objective study on whether the environment is a livable urban space. However, when the spatial features and clues about life in the 70s and before are evaluated, we see that some elements shown as the characteristics of the livable environment exist in this place. For example, the balanced ratio between the green and built environment, a pedestrian-centered living and spatial organization, easy access to unprocessed food and integration of agriculture into urban space, a vivid street life,

a mix-use environment, the proximity of activity areas in a wide variety, the urban environment within the natural setting where water and soil are multi-way fertile that allows work and recreation to be intertwined, a symbiotic urban space where animals, plants, and people live together – an environment where the human scale is at the center (low-rise constructions, proximity of environmental elements), easy access to clean drinking water, accessible health, and education services and having a strong Gestalt quality.

As I stated, this paper aims not to bring out a romantic approach that carries a nostalgic longing and lament for the missed opportunities in an existing urban environment. The study, on the contrary, is an attempt to "remember" what is valuable in the long term and to question whether an urban environment that has lost many values; witnessed the negative consequences of seemingly inaccurate planning & design decisions and implementations still has the potential to become a human and nature-oriented place again in the changing scale, conjuncture, and context. A narrative based on revisiting the site and past personal experiences, now and then pictures, photographs, and maps are the primary tools for remembering and representing the urban space.

Urban Form

The place lies in the middle of a major settlement on the Asian side of Istanbul. It is a neighborhood with a modest scale where middle-class families mostly live(Fig.1); the primary transportation network passes through; two important landmarks, two complexes designed by architect Sinan, situated at both ends of the main transportation axe. On both sides of the cobblestone paved road, 2-3 story buildings lined with shops at the ground level and houses on the upper level. Behind the buildings on both sides along the main road stretched the gardens with fruit trees and the urban gardens adjacent, namely bostans, a typical spatial quality peculiar to the old urban fabric in Istanbul, which played an essential role in the city's resilience. Beyond the private gardens, the organic street layout, frequently seen in medieval and traditional settlements, expands and becomes square in some places, widening, which is another element contributing to the main characteristics of the place.

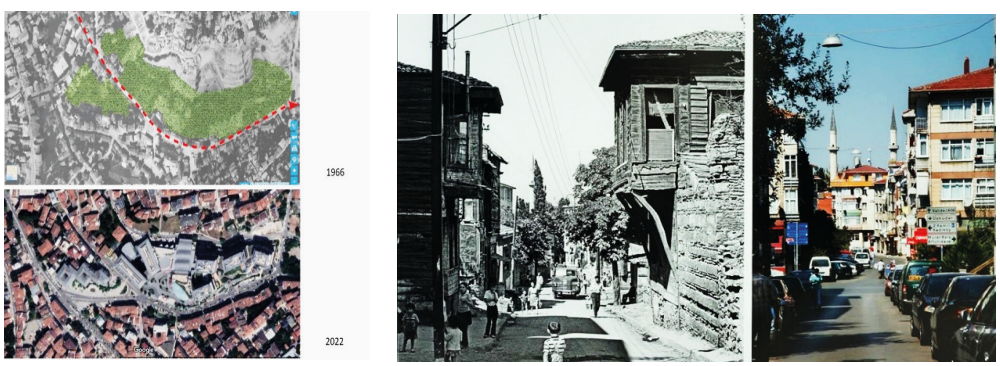

Fig. 01. Now and than maps and photograhs of the neighbourhood
Source: https://sehirharitasi.ibb.gov.tr/ and Photos by Reha Günay.

Environmental, architectural and human scale

The modest scale of buildings with the hip roof not exceeding 2-3 floors, roads, trees, and other plants and animals interacted with the human scale, contributing to a responsive environment. Almost all urban functions, from housing to education and recreation, were within walking distance, allowing people to move into the urban space in a series of uninterrupted experiences. In the neighborhood where wooden structures were the majority, it was possible to see brick masonry buildings and modern low-rise buildings here and there.

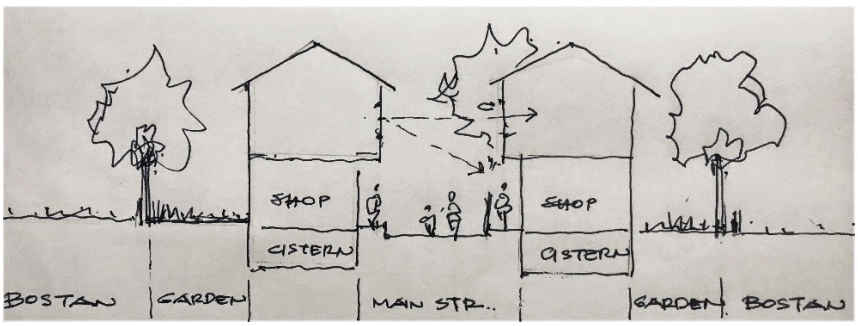

Fig. 02. The typical section reveals the modest scale of the environment

A green element was unintentionally included in every perspective: a tree or a garden. The low-rise structures, including schools and other public buildings, allowed the built environment and nature to coexist proportionally. The vertical and horizontal perceptible dimensions of urban space and architectures, their human-scale nature, simple spatial organization, and street layout laid the foundations for the, arguably in a particular perspective, humane socio-spatial relationships. (see Fig.02)

Street Life, movement, the sensory experience &activity

The street was a place for communication, learning, and teaching, where men, women, and children of all ages lived together and interacted. At street level, the mix-use space consisted of rows of buildings on both sides, including grocery stores, greengrocers, two tailors, two butchers, a hardware store, a bakery, and other shops. The women who watched the street through the window of their flat could chat from window to window thanks to the scale of the street and the proximity. Life had a distinct rhythm that varied according to days, weeks, months, and seasons.

The cultural, natural, and economic values within the existing urban pattern that have significance in the city's "social-ecological memory" are indisputable. The shuttering sounds of shops in the mornings, the sounds of roosters, the increasing and decreasing footsteps of those who go to work and school, the sounds of people and conversations heard in the calming space during the day, the sound of a radio that is on from a distance, the talks of the shopkeepers and vendors, the calls to prayer from the minarets, the sounds of bells coming from the churches nearby, the sounds of

children returning home from school on foot, the footsteps of the workers returning in the evening, the smell of food and bread that surrounds the place, the people, the plants, animals and the buildings along with a small number of cars and carts, different smells brought by the weather, the scent of flowers, the smell of the sea from time to time, created a strong sense of place where the rhythm of life and the rhythm of nature coincided on the same interface. The tobacco factory and warehouses on the waterfront, educational and shopping facilities, and the town hall were some workplaces close to the settlement that provided main employment opportunities.

Green space and water culture

Until the end of the 70s, urban gardens (bostans) were scattered among the built environment, the rooted water culture based on sensory experiences, elements, and traditions such as cisterns of the houses collecting the rainwater, wells, fountains on the streets, creeks, pools and the sea and fisheries, large green backyards, and animal husbandry extending into the city made a significant contribution to daily life by shortening the distance between food sources and living areas in the city. The superposition of Pervititch Insurence maps with the satellite map reveals agricultural areas lost in the intervening years (Fig. 2).

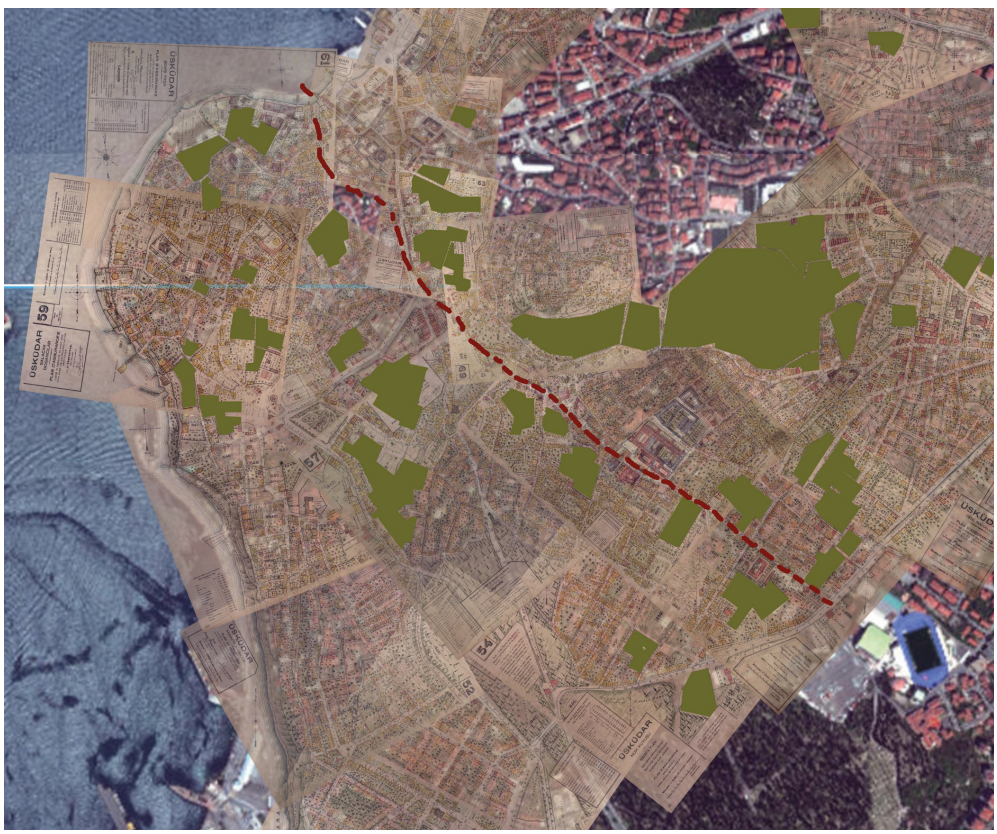

Fig. 03. Superposed maps reveal the productive green areas lost.
Source: https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/1872 (Jack Pervititch maps) and https://sehirharitasi.ibb.gov.tr/ (satellite map)

Pervititch Insurance maps prepared between 1920-45 and aerial photographs up to the 70s show that green spaces dominate the urban environment so powerfully that the image of the place reflects a character between urban and rural. The extensive gardens of the houses, the gardens that followed them, the groves, the vast meadows, the green slopes, the plots emptied of wooden buildings and old buildings, and the large cemeteries constituted these green spaces. The only park in the modern sense was designed in the early 20th century in town. There were extensive promenades and many sandy beaches on the Bosphorus's shores and the Marmara Sea. Fishing, swimming, and fruit picking were among the natural hobbies of many people. Access to clean drinking water was not a problem in the urban space due to the fountains on almost every corner that lasted from the Ottoman Period until recently.

Integration to disruption

From the Byzantine and Ottoman periods to the early Republican era, Istanbul, which was a resilient and self-sufficient city with its agricultural activities and water culture integrated with the built environment, lost this feature to a great extent by losing its agricultural areas in consequence of planning decisions, unplanned implementations, intensive development, migration, and global effects. The same negativities occurred in the urban pattern in question, one of the central districts of the city. Since the decision-makers who emulated modern cities couldn't develop original solutions peculiar to the rooted resilient nature of the town. Consequently, the socio-ecological structure of the urban space and the memory that contains valuable knowledge on an integrated urban life has also been lost. The last green areas on the city's outskirts are the only chance to be evaluated for integrating agricultural activities into urban life. The opportunity to gain this feature for the town, as is, seems very difficult in the central locations. Yet for long years, the city of Istanbul has carried the economic burden of the whole country in the Republican era so far, which still needs to be alleviated with the inclusion of broader planning decisions.

Proximity, similarity, and simplicity of the buildings created a strong sense of Gestalt (Norberg-Schulz, C., 2000), which is weakened by the construction of new roads, large-scale structures, and the loss of productive green areas and integration.

Ecosystems are constantly evolving… with slow and fast changes at small and large scales…As a heuristic or guiding concept, resilience refers to the ability of an ecosystem to withstand and absorb change to prevailing environmental conditions and, following these change-induced events, to return to a recognizable steady state…in which the system retains most of its structures, functions, and feedbacks… (Lister, N-M,L., 2016: 312,313)

Resilience, in its narrower perspective, means" bouncing back" to a normal state. In this case, the change in the urban space deviates from its routes of adaptive cycle -and shifts to another direction which necessitates strong collaboration between research and policies to be developed aiming at long-term sustainability (ibid). Reclaiming resilience requires getting back first to the normal adaptive cycle. It needs intentional and comprehensive effort.

Conclusion

In this paper, I briefly share the story of the transformation of a specific urban pattern I experienced through narratives, maps, and now and then photographs. The urban environment in question has lost the positive qualities it has previously sheltered, such as agricultural areas and urban textures with distinct characters, due to various reasons such as migration and displacement, global effects, and dense urban development. Besides tangible values, the urban memory's consistency and cultural continuity are severely damaged.

Today, Istanbul, which has ceased to be a city with precise form and edges that could be defined, has become a megacity with blurry edges. The period when the city was described as resilient was mainly a Holosenic era when the city's borders and production areas were more evident and static. In the 20th century, technology, industrialization, and urbanization did not develop as rapidly as in the West, which unintentionally ensured the preservation of the rural elements of resilience for a while that existed in the city's genes. Although Modernism entered urban life in the 50s with new boulevards and multi-story buildings, these implementations were on such a scale as insufficient to eliminate the city's rural features. The acceleration of migration from the rural environments to the city in the 70s resulted in replacements, the addition of new people, roads, coastal roads, and means of transportation for the town. In this period, the rural-urban character of the city disappeared along with the urban textures shaping it. The city's macro-scale social, economic, and cultural change has led to micro-scale cell changes. Over time, the city has been filled with anonymous images, ordinary residential buildings, and new and accelerated commercial activities and mobility. The disappearance of the agricultural areas of the city, which are the memory depots, and the deterioration of the urban texture have led to ruptures between the qualities of the old and new patterns. Authenticity has given way to superficial artificiality. Aside from the memories, the documents that reveal this situation are comparative photographs and maps, in which this is most evident. While the urban population continues to live with various difficulties within the overwhelming scale of the city, consisting of new and multiple textures, changing scale, and urban identity. Considering that socio-economic relations are established more centered on trade and consumption than production and the change in urban space with no comparison, fully retrospective solutions appear unrealistic. The question: "Is there a possibility for the city, or at least for the certain urban fragments, to regain a resilient nature within the new dynamic context?" seems more realistic, which will be the central theme for further research.

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