Into the Gecekondu

Structuring Istanbul's rapid expansion

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1. On the genesis

> "The root cause of urban slumming seems to lie
>
> not in urban poverty but in urban wealth."
>
> *Gita Verma[1]*

1.1 A resume on slums

Favelas, pueblos jóvenes, jhuggi, kombonis, or gecekondu; these shanty towns often known as slums can be found around the globe, on every continent. Even before the explosive growth in megacities due to the Third[2] and Fourth[3] Industrial Revolutions, these structures were commonplace in Europe and the United States preceding the 20th century. This brings into question: "What kind of city produces this housing typology?"

In Planet of Slums[4], Davis hypothesizes that nowadays these structures are largely found in urban areas proclaimed megacities; notably the ones that grew exponentially over the last few decennia. Most modern megacities, defined as metropolitan areas consisting of more than 10 million people, increased their population tenfold over a 50 year time frame[5]. In the book, he likens this growth to that of an amoeba in its tendency to expand seemingly haphazardly, while engulfing any structures in its path. This haphazard expansion is also the presumed agency for the creation of the slums; the rapid increase in population proved to be unmanageable for urbanists and city planners. In turn, this unpredictability led to a continuing scarcity in residences, prompting the new inhabitants of these megacities to create their own structures as a means of survival. Oftentimes this rapid growth did show some method in madness, as most urbanists and city planners started placing factories more along the outskirts or even in the hinterlands of these cities. As the scarcity in housing was clustered especially around the urban centers, the new residents chose to build their new homes towards the direction of these factories – as these were often also their place of work -, eventually engulfing these factories to become a part of the city, as happened with the surrounding settlements as

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[1] Speaking of inequitable land distribution (Verma, 2002)

[2] Otherwise known as the Digital Revolution, characterized by the shift from mechanical technology to digital systems. This Revolution started around the second half of the 20th century (Schoenherr, 2008).

[3] Characterized by the development of Artificial Intelligence (AI), Virtual Reality (VR), and supercomputers (Schwab, 2016).

[4] Written on the effects of urbanization of the world and the subsequent growth in inequality (Davis, 2006).

[5] Some metropolitan areas, such as Seoul, Delhi, and Lagos saw an increase of even more than this in the period of time between 1950 to 2004 (Davis, 2006).

well. This rapid development, however, only serves to create a vicious cycle of further distancing the global poor from the rich.

Despite this, UN-Habitat[6] proposes that urbanization – if done well – actually serves to decrease the percentage of inhabitants living in poverty drastically. This largely means that it becomes paramount to focus on providing adequate infrastructure, as well as enough working and living opportunities for residents; something that is antagonistic to the developments that lead to the formation of these slums.

1.2   Looking towards Istanbul

As a case study, Istanbul provides an interesting perspective; similar to other megacities, Istanbul burst at the seams due to urban migration after the Second World War and spilled into the peri-urban areas. However, the Turkish government has already established that the gecekondu and how they were formed decades ago is no longer viable in this day and age. As such, they have actively started legalizing and upgrading[7] these settlements since the 1980's. Especially the upgrading reached its peak after a new model[8] was proposed in 2003. This model meant upgrading the settlements through demolishing the existing gecekondu and replacing them with new residential units.

As such, this paper hopes to provide insight into the unique situation surrounding the gecekondu on the edges of Istanbul, while also recognizing the potential in these structures; through historical analysis, as well as similar modern case studies.

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[6] Part of their World Cities Report 2016, Urbanization and Development: Emerging Futures (UN-Habitat, 2016).
[7] Amnesty Law No. 2981 provided a legalization process for gecekondu built before November 10, 1985. The 'settler' was able to apply with the local government for land ownership (UN-Habitat, 2014).
[8] Also provided in this model are housing units to slum owners as compensation for their gecekondu homes, while also offering squatters outside of the upgrading area the option to buy a residential unit with affordable long-term payment plans (Uzun et al., 2010).

2. On the development

"Because it is without order, it destroys

our self-confidence and it has 'robbed us

of the power to make our experience coherent.

When visual responses are warped,

visual creativeness is impaired.'"

M. Christine Boyer[9]

2.1 Development of Istanbul's gecekondu

In comparison to other megacities, Istanbul's development of its slums is quite a traditional one, what sets them apart from other such structures however is one simple law: "if the authorities discover the house during the process of construction, it can be summarily demolished; but if the walls and roof are built then long, tedious legal needing are needed to remove the squatters"[10]. This also immediately explains the nomenclature of gecekondu, as its literal meaning is "put up overnight".

As mentioned earlier in regard to slums, the same goes for Istanbul in that the gecekondu provided means of survival for migrants moving towards the city due to increasing periods of droughts, as well as limited opportunities for work in the smaller villages and farmlands. They were often built on land owned by the state, but were denominated 'non-owned' lands, as there were little inspections or control. Up and until the 1960's the gecekondu didn't form any major problems, and were even deemed a "social and economic fact"[11]. After this, the general discourse changed as the increase in gecekondu homes became exponential and was even largely commercialized after the laws of the 1970's[12]. On the rapid expansion of gecekondus during this time period Erman (2011)[13] writes:

"The invasion of land and the construction of gecekondus was not an organized act; it happened by the acts of small groups of relatives and family members. People learned from

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[9] Writing about how the chaotic environment influences our imagination, because it is outside the general 'expectations', and therefore removes the expected grasp on creativity (Boyer, 2006).

[10] As written in Town Planning Review, as part of a case study analysis in Ankara (Drakis-Smith, 1976).

[11] Creating an inventory of different groups within the gecekondu through case studies (Göksu, 1991).

[12] Due to the commercialization of the gecekondu, the income distribution in the urban regions of Turkey also tilted in a new direction, drawing the interest of investors as well (Baslevent & Dayoglu, 2005).

[13] The gecekondu became a social and cultural phenomenon not just for families amongst themselves, but also for colleagues from the factories or quarries, or neighbors (Erman, 2011).

each other (e.g., from their fellow villagers in the city or from their friends at the working place) about the availability of land for gecekondu construction."

As more and more migrants came to the metropolitan area of Istanbul, there were even many cases in which the original residents rented out[14] the extra floor they had build at that point to new migrants, further facilitating the commercialization of gecekondus.

This commercialization of gecekondus reached its apex between the 1980's and 2000's when developers – otherwise known as yapsatçı – started investing in the areas; realizing their potential they often offered gecekondu residents in a certain site one flat to move in to, while building multiple flats on the same site in return[15].

2.2   The gecekondu as a process

The development of gecekondu is described as a slow spread over the landscape and, as such, the different gecekondus and their current states cannot be counted as one whole. The development of these gecekondus themselves almost turned into a living organism, continuously evolving as the years go on.

To be able to truly understand the gecekondu and their inherent characteristics, this paper proposes to see the gecekondu as just that. Not as individually built interventions on the landscape, but as a continuing rolling process of expansion of the inner cities. This proposition stems from the realization that estimates on time periods in the general developments of gecekondu are near impossible to do, as gecekondu continued to be built at a steady rate over the course of nearly 60 years[16]. As the creation of these structures spanned such an extended period of time, the development of these individual gecekondu also followed along this course. To categorize these gecekondus, this paper proposes a four-tier generational structure; first generation for survival, second generation for fortification, third generation for esthetics, and fourth generation for capitalization.

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[14] As commercialization continued, the gecekondu hosted their own economic system and values to a certain degree (Erman, 2011).
[15] These developers have a specific name in Turkey, namely yapsatçı or constructor-seller. This evolution created an increase in wealth to yapsatçı, engineers, and gecekondu residents, albeit at different levels (Erman, 2011).
[16] Counting from the 1940's to the 2000's as this is the period of time that saw the most steadiest increase in squatter homes being built around the globe (Davis, 2006).

3. On the generations

"What is slum in the city landscape is of spontaneous origin.

This very spontaneity makes the definition of slums difficult.

Slums appear to be planless and even antiplan."

Charles J. Stokes[17]

3.1 For survival

The first of the four generations is perhaps also the most obvious one. To be able to survive in a rapidly increasing megacity, a city which eagerness for growth could not be matched by urbanists and developers, people started building their own homes from the ground up. As these structures were largely built as fast as possible, without regards for anything other than building a simple shelter, they were often no more than four walls with a roof, without electricity, kitchen, or infrastructure to speak of[18].

To be able to build their homes, residents used whatever they could find in the inner city; ranging from materials abandoned at building sites to materials oftentimes found in the landfills or waste collection centers.

3.2 For fortification

After the initial building of the gecekondus the secondary step was for fortification. Generally, the structures for survival are no more than hurriedly built wooden or clay brick structures – without mortar – and offer little to no assurance of staying up over a longer period of time. As such, the second step in building a gecekondu home was often either adding stone walls on the inside – in the case of an originally wooden structure – or applying mud to the outside – in the case of an originally clay brick structure – to create the structure that was needed for the gecekondu homes. Entire building teams were dedicated to building these first two steps as fast as possible, as any delay could result in demolition by the police of a wall or two, or even the entire structure[19]. This step often went hand in hand with the process of legalizing the gecekondu, ensuring its long-term survival.

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[17] Speaking of the difficulties in categorizing slums (Stokes, 1962).
[18] Yılmaz (2018) even goes so far as to state that these gecekondus were built by not caring for any well-being, technical, or aesthetical standards at all.
[19] Öğretmen (1957) detailed different types of construction of the gecekondu in Ankara, and noted these were highly similar in nature around the entirety of Turkey.

Next to actively upgrading the home, elementary interventions to infrastructure were also made, changing the cityscape. Residents started to build paths leading up to their own front doors, and created steps wherever needed. These paths generally sprung into existence by residents deciding to literally set the most travelled paths in stone, or whatever else was on hand.

3.3   For aesthetics

After the legalization of the structure, oftentimes residents started to upgrade their homes to be more like the ones they left behind in the countryside; elements like "a poultry coop, a miniature garden, a wood shed, a lavatory (consisting of a roof and a pit), etc."[20] were added to the structures. Additions that can also often be found in this generation are for example fences around the garden area, tiling and paint on the outside of the structures, and the addition of gardening such as trees – specifically ones local to the region of origin of the resident – and flowers.

As these more aesthetical choices were made, the gecekondu regions of the city also became more interesting to government officials and investors. If these formerly dilapidated areas could become much less chaotic in such a short period of time, why not take it one step further? This step further oftentimes proved to be made in terms of infrastructure; roads were improved, along with the electricity net and plumbing as well. These enhancements also created new ways for residents to upgrade their homes, as well as safer ways for them to connect to the existing city grids.

Like mentioned earlier, this generation also started emerging around the period of time that the legalization of gecekondus and even its eventual ownership became a certified legal process. Because owners of the gecekondu were actual owners of the structures and the lands they were built on by this point, a whole new interest in these regions became apparent.

3.4   For capitalization

The fourth, and final, proposed generation of gecekondu is the generation for capitalization. It is in this last phase that two different discourses become apparent. In both cases, the way forward proves to be redevelopment. However, the end results are drastically different.

3.4.1   Growing the neighborhood

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[20] In describing the way of living of a Turkish gecekondu, the different structural adaptations are also mentioned (Yasa, 2018).

In many cases the area is deemed suitable for further expansion, and a traditional redevelopment process is started. As mentioned earlier, oftentimes these redevelopments were spearheaded by yapsatçı[21]. Gecekondu residents were able to buy an apartment in one of the new flats being built with a long-term payment plan, in return for giving up their homes and newly acquired lands. The yapsatçı went around entire neighborhoods all at once, and even if just a couple of residents refused, they were still able to build – and sell – new apartment buildings at large. The local government endorsed this heavily by creating new asphalt roads and moving most – if not all – of the plumbing and electrical infrastructure underground.

3.4.2   Rezoning

The second – and much less often used – tactic is the redevelopment and rezoning of an entire neighborhood; a prime example of this is the Kartal – Pendik Masterplan by Zaha Hadid Architects[22]. In a plan such as this one, the entire area is razed to the ground to make way for an entire new redevelopment. Luckily for the continuation of gecekondu neighborhoods these masterplans only really sprout in areas that are mixed zones of gecekondus and heavy industrial sites.

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[21] Constructor-seller (Erman, 2011).
[22] Masterplan for redevelopment into "a new civic, residential, commercial and transport hub" (Zaha Hadid Architects, 2006).

4. Conclusion

"But if informal urbanism becomes a dead-end street,

won't the poor revolt?."

Mike Davis[23]

4.1 Talking about gecekondu

As mentioned by UN-Habitat (2016): "Urbanization is closely associated with development; slum dwellers will be left behind in this process, if their concerns are not integrated into urban legislation, planning and financing frameworks[24]." In Istanbul a highly interesting shift in regard to the discourse on gecekondu, and per extension slums, is taking place, raising the question of what would happen if cities were to legalize all their informal settlements. This question is one that is still being answered as time goes on, but some interesting preliminary conclusions can already be drawn.

First and foremost it provides the gecekondu residents not only with their own sense of ownership, but also often with a better long-term outlook on life in the gecekondus; whether that's upgrading their original home, or moving to a redeveloped structure.

Secondly, it also offers local governments a chance to upgrade neighborhoods without major investments, because often a lot of work on the neighborhoods itself have already been done by the gecekondu residents.

Finally it also creates a way for gecekondu resident to find a secondary stream of income from the rental of extra rooms – or even extra floors – in their homes. In creating a secondary source of income the financial gap between the gecekondus on the outskirts of the city and the center of the city also become less extreme.

4.2 Reflecting on the gecekondu as a process

This paper has focused on creating a clearer framework with which to measure the development of gecekondus as they exist in the cityscape. To be able to do this, a generational structure was proposed to be able to truly view the gecekondus as a process. One could argue that these generations are not too clear, and even raise the question that the fourth generation might not even be a generation of gecekondu at all. To be able to better understand the different specific etymologies and compositions of these gecekondus, further expansion of the theory is needed.

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[23] Questioning whether or not the current treatment of slums is sufficient for their long-term survival (Davis, 2006).
[24] In their rapport on urbanization and development, specifically speaking about improving the lives of slum dwellers (UN-Habitat, 2016).

Another important aspect to note is that while in the first chapter of this thesis, a comparison was drawn between the gecekondus in Istanbul and different slums throughout the world, the gecekondus are inherently different to such a degree that no further comparisons can be made from the moment of the legalizations of the gecekondus forward.

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