Position paper
Gated Communities in Gokturk,
Istanbul

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Gated Communities in Istanbul

The studio in which I am graduating is “Public building Studio Istanbul”. The reason why I chose this studio is because it deals with questions: “What is the relation between the public and private”, “What is the border or boundary between these two realms?”. I believe, these are the key questions that architect should address within his practice. Additionally, I find the city of Istanbul very interesting. Processes of urban sprawl, gentrification and immigration and over population which takes part in the development of this “mega city” are highly complex and addressing these global issues offer valuable experience for me as an architect.

Topic of interest

Literally and symbolically, having been on the verge of clashes of geography, cultures and forces, Istanbul as one large urban agglomeration is both the frame and object of study. It already surpassed many conventional definitions in urban vocabulary in terms of size, population, geography and logistics: an urban tissue stretching more than 130 km, population of more than 14 million inhabitants, the density of 2,622 persons per square kilometer and a rate of 10 percent population growth due to immigration…etc. We are witnessing the awe, horror or indifferent familiarity an Istanbul changing rapidly in terms of its spaces, the relations it comprises and its imaginary, as the city has undergone a neoliberal restructuring over the past two decades. Its skies are pierced by ever-taller and multiplying bank, office and residence towers, as well as colossal luxurious hotels. Its urban scape is crowded by shopping malls, restaurants, cafes and night clubs whose numbers are rapidly increasing.

Alongside all these changes, a new residential spatial arrangement is recasting Istanbul’s urban space. Gated residential compounds are proliferating mainly, but not exclusively, in the peripheral areas of the city. The compounds housing the new groups of wealth began to emerge in the mid-1980s. Their numbers skyrocketed only in the late 1990s. According to one estimate, as of 2005 there were more than 650 of these compounds, with the housing stock of 40,000. The growth in the number of gated residential compounds has intensified since 2005. Put differently, Istanbul’s urban scape continues to be littered by new residential compounds trapped behind gates or walls, as well as consumption, leisure and production spaces that are kept under constant surveillance through strict security measures. Hence, what we have at hand is an ongoing gating of the city at large, enclosing new forms of wealth and new forms of relations and non-relations that take shape in between the gates. In these spaces, new forms of living, governance, and social and political relations and non-relations are emerging and taking root.

The new ‘stigmatizing topographic lexicon’ and other technologies of neoliberal urbanism work together to enable and justify ongoing and planned “urban transformation,” “urban renewal,” or “urban rehabilitation” projects that result in the displacing and replacing of new forms of poverty. In other words, in the shadow of the new skyline on Istanbul new spaces of poverty and wealth are emerging in a decidedly and progressively segregated manner. (1)
Problem Statement

I would like to draw attention towards town of Gokturk, which emerges as a new space of urban wealth and a new order in the context of neoliberalizing Istanbul. The reason why I choose to study Gokturk is that phenomena of gated communities are the most represented there. It is the most complete enclave sort of built utopia, severing almost all relations and connections to the city of Istanbul.

Gokturk, a relatively insignificant village at the beginning of the 1990s, located in the northwestern periphery of Istanbul, became a gated town of 16,000 inhabitants in the latter half of the 2000s. The village’s fate changed with the building of roads that connected it with Maslak, the new commercial and financial center of Istanbul, also built in the 1990s. In 1993, Gokturk’s administrative status was upgraded to a belde municipality (should be noted that Gokturk’s administrative status has recently been changed again as part of the restructuring of the municipal administrative structure of Istanbul in early 2008. It has been demoted from a belde municipality to mahalle of the Eyup Municipality). The latter category, a relatively autonomous local administrative structure, opened the area for land development and enabled unbridled and fast growth. The fast growth can unmistakably be traced through population figures. Gokturks population rose from 3,068 in 1990, to 8,693 in 2000, only to double by 2008.

It is not the rapid population growth that renders this place particularly significant, but the structure and characteristics of the population and the space. Gokturk is populated by people whose minimum income is at least 20 times higher than the official minimum wage, whose family structures closely resemble one another, who shop in the same places and eat in the same restaurants, send their children to the same schools, see movies in the same theaters, and spend their weekends engaged in similar activities. Gokturk inhabitants share yet another set of characteristics which actually both render them a distinct sociological group and make their distinctiveness visible. The majority of the inhabitants of Gokturk live in houses with gardens, maintained with the assistance off domestics, gardeners and drivers. These spacious and luxuriously furnished houses are located in housing compounds whose borders are clearly identifiable though physical markers, usually walls. What strengthens the physical markers of separation is the strict surveillance through controls at the gates and security personnel inside the compounds. These physical and spatial attributes are assembled in a particular manner that strictly regulate and limit the relation of these compounds with the outside. They are inward-looking spaces that have decidedly cut themselves off from the outside.

As one approaches Gorturk in the highway, one is taken aback by the sudden appearance of these residential compounds whose effect of artificiality is amplified in their togetherness. The architectural styles of the compounds vary greatly, from the mimicking of Ottoman architecture to minimalist buildings, creating a kitsch look. There are currently five schools (three of which are private), four hospitals (three of which are private), four shopping malls, six supermarkets and 25
restaurants and cafes in the area. Hence, Gokturk is a gated town, despite the absence of actual walls enclosing the development in this entirety.

Working people have flexible working hours that enable them to evade rush hours, and their offices are located either in Nisantasi, Maslak or Levent. Hence they can glide though the Maslak axis to their work places only to directly return to their homes. It is a sort of capsular architecture as Lieven De Couter describes. This according to him is “the architecture of the generic city. The capsule is a device that creates an artificial ambience, which minimizes the communication with the outside by forming its own time – space milieu, an enclosed (artificial) environment. All means of transport beyond a certain level of speed – and here lays the origin of the metaphor – become capsules: the train, the automobile, the airplane…”(2)

While the residents of Gokturk live and circulate in a maze of fortified networks in an increasingly smaller Istanbul, the dominant characteristics of the most of the spaces they use, including their residential compounds, are their anonymity, artificiality and indistinct character. Gokturk’s residential compounds – like the shopping malls, chain restaurants, chain cafes or the chain hairdressers and other places that their residents use – can be described as non-places; places that lack history, do not have distinguishable markers of identity, and perhaps most importantly are places that can be replicated endlessly in different places.(3)

Position

Gokturk is closed of hyper real world, where all the problems seize to exist “It is the dream of each beleaguered city dweller: an apparatus for keeping every urban problem out of sight”. (4) Terms such as public space, privatization, urban community, security, identity and citizenship acquire new meanings within the context of gated communities. Belonging to a city doesn’t make sense anymore, but belonging to a community-one marked by shared lifestyles, property ownership and a sense of belonging-does. Herein is the conflicted definition of gated community in the contemporary global city.

Referring to the topic of interest I choose to embrace the enclosure, instead of negating it by comparing these highly capsular closed-off agglomerations with classical typologies of public spaces. I acknowledge these spaces the way they are and look for architectural qualities they possess if any. The decisions made and processes behind this so called “gating of the city”, I believe is beyond the architects’ reach, in other words there is no way, how we as architects, can influence this on-going gentrification or “gating of the city” as such.

Another reason why I choose to embrace the enclosure is well articulated by Michel De Certeu, he writes “<…>the primary and the literally “fundamental” question: it is the partition of space that structures it. Everything refers in fact to this differentiation which makes possible the isolation and interplay of distinct spaces. From the distinctions that localize objects, from the home (constituted on the basis of the wall) to the journey (constituted on the basis of geographical “elsewhere” or a
cosmological “beyond”), from the functioning of the urban network to that of the rural landscape, there is no spatiality that is not organized by the determination of frontiers. So, the frontier or the border is the most important parameter which defines the distinction between public and private realms.

Research question

I devise my research question: What is “gated” within the Gokturk? How does this notion of “gated” constitute itself? Does this enclosure allow the connection between the private and the public realms? If so, is it only visual connection or also physical one?

Research methodology

In order to answer the above formulated research questions the episteme of typology was applied. Scrutinous built fabrics’ examination revealed three main types of enclosing elements, which are as follows: 1. Human height stone wall with a superimposed barbed wire fence on the top of it, surrounding the enclave of villas; 2. Multiple-layer border (fence, green space, fence, foliage and the stone wall) surrounding the enclave of villas; 3. The Plinth building, enclosing element becomes part of the building acquiring the public functions. This typological analysis was executed to establish the way the wall or the fence forms a border between the public and private domains within the Gokturk. A careful review is given not only to physical form of the fence, but also to parameter of accessibility in terms of visual perception. By making schematic sectional and perspective drawings of gated communities in relation to the street, which I perceive as public domain, a gradient of “enclosure” is defined. Yet revealing the complexities within the border and posing questions of relevance and necessity of the border.

Possible Conclusions

Living in these gated enclaves means that assuming to the most prestigious class identity in Istanbul. While these enclaves are designed and constructed by large investment, construction companies present to this class a privilege life style as well which has not been seen before. This given life style is previously designed, planned and constructed due to the demands and the need of the class. The examination of the elements that compose these gated enclaves, reveals the inner logics of this built utopia, and shows possible breaching points within it. Consequently, this study on notions of enclosure, aims to reveal how the image of Istanbul is being replaced for the dweller of the Gokturk compound. Thus, in a complimenting manner to this built utopia, research should uncover possible points for architectural intervention. Thus, raising yet another question, if public buildings within such enclaves are necessary at all? If yes, will they manage to sustain the utopia, or the collapse will start?
References:


