

# **Sustainable aspects of traditional Ottoman neighbourhoods in modern Turkish urban settlements**

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## **Abstract**

Ottoman settlements have nature and human originated concepts, both physically and socially. The smallest unit of the Ottoman urban settlement is the quarter which has an organic texture. It can also be defined as an administrative and social unit. The houses of the rich and the poor were located next to each other and dwellings of a neighbourhood had always had the responsibility of helping and protecting each other with close neighbourhood relations. The existence of public participation in social organizations including humanistic values can be realised. The feeling of belonging had raised the environmental quality both physically and socially. The rapid and dense growth of cities and socio-cultural transformation of the society from traditional to modern have destroyed the neighbourhood order. As the dwellers of them have no common backgrounds and cultures, the relations get weakened. People who live in these modern settlements have not felt themselves belonging to the place and neighbourhood relations have weakened, and as the responsibility of protecting and watching each other has disappeared the crime rate at the common spaces of the settlements has increased. The neighbourhoods of the rich and the poor have been entirely separated. Some of them are designed using the traditional forms which cannot be defined as sustainability of traditional socio-cultural values which are independent from changing life styles. Sustainable aspects of traditional Ottoman neighborhoods in modern Turkish settlements with their physical and socio-cultural environmental features will be examined in this paper.

*Keywords: sustainability, neighbourhood, traditional Ottoman settlement, modern Turkish settlement.*



## 1 Introduction

Sustainability is the capacity to endure, which includes policies and programs that integrate social, environmental, and economic elements. The sustainability of neighbourhoods, which is the subject of this paper is involved in social dimension which includes peace, security, social justice, human relationship to nature and human settlements (wikipedia.org [1]).

Culture is gradually emerging out of the realm of social sustainability. UNESCO defined the cultural dimension of community development as being “the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions and beliefs”. Cultural sustainability means change occurs in a way that respects cultural values. Sustainability must include an understanding of culture as well as of the place in which it occurs (www.creativecity.ca [2]).

Traditional Ottoman settlement is a synthesis of nomadic and semi-nomadic, Islamic and Anatolian cultures with its sustainable cultural values. This synthesis affected their view of life, nature, place, beliefs, social relations and family and settlement organizations.

## 2 Features of traditional Ottoman neighbourhood

Ottoman cities had three main functions as housing, market and religious centres (Cerasi [3]). It is a character of traditional Turkish settlements that the dwelling and shopping areas are completely separate. Housing texture in Ottoman period was divided into small communities which are called as neighbourhood and were detached from market places (Kuban [4]). The houses in a neighbourhood were built around a religious complex. The characters of a neighbourhood have common features with the settlement of nomadic tribes. As each nomadic tribe created their separate neighbourhoods, they were interrelated tightly both socially and physically. Each neighbourhood inhabited around a central square, a spring or a religious centre separate from others (Kucukerman [5]).

The nomadic worldview has great influences in forming the character of traditional Ottoman town. According to nomadic worldview, the temporariness of life and the material, respect to nature and human were the main principles, so they preferred the natural environment to the artificial one (Koca and Karasozen [6]). They built their houses with temporary materials such as wood and mud brick while using stone and brick for the monumental buildings. As the continuity of their nomadic traditions, they created a nature-oriented environment with green gardens. Any of the houses cut another one's sight and sunlight and shows respect to each other. Each building is unique itself as a part of the whole. As the physical structure of the land, climate, building methods and materials change, the main principals of the settlements does not change.

The effect of Anatolia on traditional Ottoman neighbourhood was mainly at physical features with use of local materials and building techniques by local



builders. On the other hand, the tissue of traditional Ottoman towns is affected from nomadic culture and devoid of rational order. The arrays of houses with spontaneously formed plans create narrow, irregular and picturesque road structures which lead to the centre and blind alleys as the extensions of main axes. There were no roads before the houses had been built and they were formed naturally and spontaneously. Although it hasn't got a rational worldview of an organized society, this tissue has been appeared by a functional and organic development (Kuban [4]) (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Traditional Turkish neighbourhood.

Neighbourhood in the Ottoman system can be defined as an administrative and social unit (Cadirci [7]). The houses of the rich and the poor were located next to each other and were not distinguished from each other as location and building principles except for the dimensions and building details of the houses. Dwellings of a neighbourhood had always had the responsibility of helping and protecting each other with close neighbourhood relations (Koca and Karasozen [6]).

Islamic culture also had effects on traditional neighbourhoods with its family organisation, understanding of privacy and position of women. They had patriarchal system and lived as large families. Privacy of women and family life shaped both the settlement and house planning with introverted life style by the effects of Islamic culture. Public and private spaces of the settlement were absolutely separated, thus the ground floor walls form a distinct barrier between the interior and exterior, in some cases having a fortress-like impregnability. It opened to the outside visually only by projecting bay windows of the upper floors covered with lattices. As the garden was used as an open space of the house for women, they also had high walls combining with the ground floor walls (Kucukerman [5]). The access to the house was indirectly from the garden and the threshold between public and private spaces was the garden gate until the Western effects in 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Koca and Karasozen [6]).

### 3 Formation of modern and squatter settlements

Westernisation movement of the Ottoman Empire had started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and also affected the urban form. New building types, new architectural styles and new urban spaces had been added to the city life such as regular streets, passages and apartment buildings. Houses of traditional settlements became more extroverted with their ground floor windows and direct accesses to the houses. The foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 gave acceleration to the modernisation process. The earliest urban plans of Turkish cities had been started to be made with regular boulevards and streets, squares, parks and modern buildings. Modernisation project of the Republic has not only affected its physical image but also its social structure. Secular system decreased the role of religion and the position of women has changed. Life styles became more extroverted, large families split and transformed into nuclear families. While modernism was being internalized by people who live in cities, traditional culture has been kept on at rural areas of the country (Koca and Karasozen [6]).

Beginning from the 1950s, migration from rural areas to cities started and caused deterioration on both physical and social environments, especially in big cities. The need for housing, which appeared as a consequence of dense immigration, led to an uncontrolled and unforeseen physical growth through the squatters of cities. This illegal growth has reflections from traditional texture of rural areas with their spontaneously developed irregular texture. As a negative result of their having legality and having permission for multi-storey buildings later on, some of these settlements which have a close location to the city centre have been transformed into low-quality apartment houses without physical and socio-cultural infrastructure (Koca and Karasozen [6]) (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Squatter neighbourhood.

Residents of the squatter houses usually prefer having a house among the people from their home towns or villages and built their houses collectively, so that they have strong neighbourhood relations. They live as large families and continued the patriarchal family system and introverted life style. The second and third generations are under the control of the first generation members who have succeeded in becoming house owners. The houses have flexibility. It is seen that the house can be extended horizontally by adding rooms to the garden or additional stories can be added as the youngsters get married and families get larger later on. For that reason, these houses usually have no roof or no external plaster, and always look incomplete (Senyapili [8]). Since the residents can only afford the very basic needs of houses, they don't pay any attention to the standards of outdoors. It can be said that the early examples of the squatter settlements had traditional effects. Even though they are single or two-storey houses and have gardens, they are denser than the traditional (Senyapili [8]).

People who migrated from rural areas and continued traditional culture have not only brought their spatial understanding but also traditional life style with them, creating new cultural problems in addition to inadequate physical conditions. It was a culture of transition from being traditional to modern and from being peasant to citizen. Their overpopulation is the main factor that slows down the process to become urbanized and creates a new culture in between. They both cannot internalize the urban culture and continue the traditional values completely.

In planned areas, modern settlements started to appear completely different from traditional texture. People adopted quickly and preferred modern houses to the traditional ones for their facilities and better building and comfort standards. Modern settlements appeared in different ways. One of them was by demolishing the traditional buildings and building the modern multi-storey ones instead of them before the conservation act at the 1980's. The other one is the production of mass housing by the government or private sector on the planned areas. Both implementations have supplied an important number of housing stocks while deteriorating the traditional tissue and social life (Koca and Karasozen [6]) (Figure 3).

The unity of the traditional settlements and each building being unique in itself produced a common language and variety, now replaced with ordinary and monotonous settlements. As these new settlements are not nature and human oriented, environments have less green areas and less respect to each other's view and sunlight as the planning decisions of these settlements are not given by the users but by the contractors and planners. The traditional neighbourhood organization has also deteriorated at the new settlements. As the dwellers of these new neighbourhoods have no common backgrounds and cultures, the relations between them get weakened. As people who live in these modern settlements have not felt themselves belong to the place, it has turned to a neighbourhood that people do not know each other on the contrary to the traditional neighbourhoods. As the responsibility of protecting and watching each other has disappeared, the crime rate at the common spaces of the settlements has increased. The neighbourhoods of the rich and the poor have been separated absolutely. The socio-economic and cultural difference of people





Figure 3: Modern neighbourhood.

from various sub-cultures has been so deep that it is impossible to be integrated in modern settlements different from the unity of traditional neighbourhoods. The homogenous structure of traditional culture replaced with the heterogeneous structure of modern culture (Koca and Karasozen [6]).

#### 4 Conclusion

Cultural change is inevitable for development of societies and it is impossible to rebuild the traditional in modernity as the modernity rejects the traditional. On the other hand, it is a problem that the positive traditional values not being transferred to the latter generations. Adopting positive aspects of traditional settlements to the present and future society is an important dimension of cultural sustainability. As the family structure and understanding of privacy have changed in modern Turkish society, positive socio-cultural sustainable aspects of traditional Ottoman neighbourhoods in modern Turkish urban settlements can be determined as follows:

- Respect to nature and humans, ( houses do not cut off another one's sight and sunlight and shows respect to each other, buildings fit human scale)
- Nature-oriented environment (tissue fits topography, green gardens)
- Use of local materials
- Good neighbourhood relations
- Sense of belonging
- Self-control for security
- Each building being unique itself as a part of the whole (not being monotonous as modern settlements)

Squatter neighbourhoods have the potential of sustainability of traditional values with these positive features above as a traditional society trying to adapt to modern urban life. Self-help building process and flexibility of houses are the additional social values as sustainability. The problem is their having negative physical conditions and being out of legal process or lack of laws suitable to sustainability. Modern neighbourhoods are devoid of achieving the positive sustainable social values of the traditional settlements existing in squatter settlements although their high standards of designed environments. Integrating the positive aspects of the traditional and the modern neighbourhoods will be the most appropriate solution for sustainability.

## References

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