

The Rise and Spread of Istanbul's Suburbs

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In October 2007, the Master of Urban Design studio was asked to design a project to the north of Istanbul, along the Black Sea. We travelled to Istanbul, Turkey for ten days to gather research and analysis on both our site and Turkish culture. While traveling to and from our site and Istanbul, we passed housing developments either under construction or recently completed, covering the hillside and valleys, inland from the Bosphorus Strait. During our travels, I took an interest in Istanbul's current housing situation, in particular the mid-rise towers that create no sense of place in the continuously sprawling landscape. The following paper will look at the reasons behind building the mid-rise towers and why the units are immediately occupied, how these new communities are affecting traffic congestion, and finally why these new housing towers are poor examples of street life and a vital community.

The Karakoy community in Istanbul sets the scene for a picturesque town on the edge of the Bosphorus Strait. Karakoy's multi-use urban fabric is reminiscent of the lively streets of Florence, Italy (Photo 1). The locals greet each other on the streets, while people watch from the third and fourth floors of mixed-use apartment houses, which often share a common wall and face the bustle of people moving up and down the street. In contrast, inland from the Bosphorus and away from the human scale streets, Istanbul is building mid-rise housing developments that have lost the traditional street life found near the waterfront.



Photo 1: The narrow, urban streets of Karakoy

These new housing types spreading across Istanbul's inland territory are products of mass housing developments planned for residents who can no longer afford the high rents near the Bosphorus. This paper will address three central questions: (1) Why are these mid-rise housing developments being implemented instead of the traditional housing model, and why are the housing towers immediately occupied as they are built? (2) How are the new housing towers affecting transportation in Istanbul? (3) Why are these new housing models poor examples of street life and a vital community? Istanbul's suburbs, though visually different from America, are faced with many of the same problems. First, I will briefly illustrate the history of the American post-war housing policy for a better understanding of the reasoning behind the housing shift.

In the United States, the suburbs were promoted as a means of enhancing national security by decentralizing cities. Large corporations were moved from central business districts to the outskirts of cities where they could expand on land that was much cheaper per square foot than their city counterparts. As these corporations spread out from cities, expansion was on the forefront of the agenda. Large industries developed manufacturing warehouses as the assembly line was invented in the 1920s. According to Masotti, "The need for land to expand is a primary factor that drives corporate offices, manufacturing and assembly plants, and even athletic teams, out of cities" (1974, 87). As the movement of business continued outward from the city, the image of the single family home became an integral part of the American Dream.

In the United States from the 1920s to the present, the American Dream has been, in part, to own a single-family home. At the end of World War II, the housing needed

for returning military families heightened the urgency for home construction in the homeland. In *The Bulldozer in the Countryside*, Adam Rome states:

The demobilization of 14 million men and women in the armed forces led to a record demand for housing. Everywhere newly married and recently reunited couples keenly desired the space to start families. Yet, because of the turmoil of the Depression and the war, almost a generation had passed with little homebuilding. According to Government estimates, the nation needed 5 million new homes and apartments to satisfy the demand (2001, 18).

In the years to follow, the baby boomer generation continued to seek residence outside cities to fulfill the dream of a house with a yard to come home to after work. In the late 1940s, developer William Levitt produced Levittown near Long Island, which, at the time, was a revolutionary method of homebuilding. Levittown was conceived as a mass-produced housing tract to absorb the post-war shortage. Rome states that, “like Henry Ford, Levitt had found a way to offer ‘the great multitude’ a piece of the good life once reserved for the well-to-do, and the achievement promised to transform the country” (Rome 2001, 19). To entice prospective home buyers the federal government implemented a system to ensure the development of these communities. Thus, the National Housing Act was born in 1934. Adam Rome states, “[T]he most important provision of this act created a mortgage-insurance program that revolutionized the nation’s home finance system. If lenders and builders met a number of conditions, the newly created Federal Housing Administration would guarantee 20-year loans for up to 80 percent of the value of the home” (Rome 2001, 28). Manageable mortgage loans enabled families previously unable to afford property to purchase their first home. The creation of this housing strategy in America in the mid-19th century is similar to what Istanbul is experiencing today.

In Istanbul, the National Housing Authority is offering families affordable mortgage loans where the residents would not pay for 15 years. This mortgage loan system passed last May for affordable, mid- and high-scale housing developments. This new housing subsidy coupled with lower land costs on the Anatolian side of Istanbul—the side east of Istanbul—has been the driving reason for eastward expansion of these suburban developments. Like the United States, Istanbul’s rent is extremely high within the city proper. Families are enticed by the low mortgage loans and the idea of owning a larger home or condo away from the Bosphorus, instead of renting a significantly smaller unit in the city. The traditional housing model, which makes up the dense fabric near the Bosphorus is

no longer affordable for residents entering the housing market. Instead, the mid-rise housing towers far from the Bosphorus, which are becoming popular, add longer commute times to jobs, which remain near the waterfront. Both America and Istanbul suffer from high traffic volumes due to automobile dependency.

In America, the suburbs were built with automobiles assumed as the main mode of travel. Without adequate public transportation networks, there is more than one car per household, which Masotti claims stems from the “suburban mentality of not just one car in every garage, but a car in every garage for each family member older than 16” (Masotti 1974, 192). The automobile inhibits street life and neighborhood interaction. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs states: “[T]raffic arteries, along with parking lots, gas stations and drive-ins, are powerful and insistent instruments of city destruction. To accommodate them, city streets are broken down into loose sprawls, incoherent and vacuous for anyone afoot” (Jacobs 1961, 338). Automobile use leads to a never-ending need for more roads and highways. Jane Jacobs refers to Victor Gruen’s disdain for cars, when she writes “the more space that is provided cars in cities, the greater becomes the need for use of cars, and hence for still more space for them” (Jacobs 1961, 351). Vehicular circulation reduces the space for a walkable sidewalk life where a social hierarchy can take place. America’s traffic problems to and from the suburbs can be compared to Istanbul’s traffic congestion also directly related to an automobile dependent culture.

In Istanbul, these Turkish mid-rise suburbs are springing up around the perimeter of the traditional urban fabric with automobile circulation as their current planning strategy (Photo 2). According to the transportation section of the Istanbul Greater Municipality Metropolitan Planning & Urban Design Center (IMP):

In today’s present climate, transportation and traffic congestion are of major concern for Istanbul. Transportation in Istanbul is insufficient due to a lack of investments, incorrect implementations and uncoordinated decisions. Since all activities in the city are related directly and indirectly to the transportation system, the status and the capacity of the system is mirrored throughout the city as a whole (2006).

Most road widths are too wide to promote pedestrian activity, and most streets running adjacent to the towers are too busy to cross. Many of the residential towers encourage car use by providing underground parking for their residents with a standard of two cars per dwelling unit. A vanpool stops in front of many of the towers and buses people to and from the European side for work, but the vans are



Photo 2: The mid-rise housing towers inland from the Bosphorus.

limited and most people still enter the devastating traffic flow, which bottle-necks each morning at the two bridges spanning the Bosphorus Strait. A transportation plan is an important part of the planning process. According to the IMP, new developments concerning strategic land use plans and thereby considering the interaction of “land use and transportation” should be included in the preliminary planning stages of planning (IMP 2006). Istanbul not only needs a strong transportation plan in the beginning phase of land development, it also needs an extensive strategy to reduce the use of private vehicles. IMP states that:

To develop an appropriate city transportation system, well balanced land use planning, improvement of public transportation and the discouraging of private car usage should be taken into consideration as a whole. However, the development of reliable public transportation has the utmost priority. The reason for this priority is that it is impossible to reduce private car usage without providing efficient public transportation (2006).

In Istanbul, the lack of public transportation options for residents who live in suburban areas forces the residents to use personal vehicles. The use of cars makes Istanbul’s suburbs a poor example of street life and a vital community.

Istanbul’s street culture along the promenade at the edge of the Bosphorus has an urban feel. With that in mind, why are the majority of people moving out of the city to

live in these mid-rise towers, which have lost this sense of vitality? In Montgomery’s 1998 article, “Making a City,” he writes:

Vitality is what distinguishes successful urban areas from the others. It refers to the numbers of people in and around the street (pedestrian flows) across different times of the day and night, the uptake of facilities, the number of cultural events and celebrations over the year, the presence of an active street life, and generally the extent to which a place feels alive or lively (5).

Past Turkish generations populated either the dense urban fabric near the Bosphorus, or lived on farms in the countryside. Why has a borderland been formed between these two housing extremes, and why doesn’t it work as a lively neighborhood culture? In America, a large portion of the baby boomer generation, who grew up in suburbia have chosen to remain in suburbia, because of its aspect of familiarity. Joongsub Kim, in Linda Groat’s 2000 article “Civic Meaning: The Role of Place, Typology and Design Values in Urbanism,” writes that the suburbanites have, “an appreciation for familiar visual qualities that remind them of favorite childhood environments” (23). Nostalgia for the proverbial American suburb stems from the connection between the Baby Boomers and their parents. In contrast, the mass exodus to the suburbs in Istanbul is a new phenomenon due to high rent prices near the Bosphorus and the idea of owning larger dwelling units outside the city. The issue with Istanbul’s new development is the lack of place and personal interaction.

The problem with most suburbs is their lack of place. Hou states, “in treating the public realm as both a physical space and a set of social relationships, it is important to examine the multiple processes embedded in place making” (2003, 3). In addition, Canter’s Model of Place breaks a successful place into three sections: the physical environment, actions, and meaning (1977). Istanbul’s mid-rise housing developments do not sufficiently fulfill any of Canter’s three place-making criteria. The physical environment lacks intimacy and a human scale. The action of pedestrians bustling along the sidewalks and plazas is non-existent because there is no ground floor retail or commercial establishments to instill 24-hour surveillance. And lastly, the meaning of social interaction does not occur in Istanbul’s mid-rise suburbs because they lack density and diversity. These three criteria are examined further below.

First, Istanbul’s housing towers are not designed to exist within an urban environment. Their physical characteristics lack intimacy and human scale both on sidewalks and in nearby open spaces. Jacobs states that, “scale is a combination of the ratio of building height to street width,

relative distance, permeability and the sense of grandeur or intimacy of space” (Jacobs 1994). In Istanbul, these buildings do not maximize the floor area ratio of the land. Therefore, the buildings are spaced far from one another and completely disengaged from the street. If the area between towers was utilized for public space, rather than on-grade parking lots, the neighborhood would start to become a vital place. In addition to the need for public space, a park or plaza between the housing towers should be surrounded by ground floor retail and commercial establishments to create a safe environment caused by high levels of pedestrian activity.

Second, active pedestrians on sidewalks and in plazas establish a 24-hour security system. Istanbul’s new housing towers are often set back from the street, with a fence between the residence and the sidewalk where a guard waits at the entrance. This security surveillance system instills a sense of fear about the street, discouraging residents from leaving the neighborhood without the safety of their cars. Actually, a lively, pedestrian-friendly sidewalk culture is security in itself. Jane Jacobs says the public peace “is kept primarily by an intricate, almost unconscious, network of voluntary controls and standards among the people themselves, and enforced by the people themselves” (1961, 31). The traditional houses closer to the Bosphorus with their close proximity to the sidewalk, and the diversity of uses on the ground floor of each building exude street security. In the suburbs, people tend to use their cars to buy food or other amenities, which are often not within walking distance from their homes. Constant pedestrian movement throughout a space, 24-hours a day constitutes a lively and safe street environment. Pedestrian activity not only creates safe streets, but generates urban environments. Montgomery (1998) states “without activity, there can be no urbanity” (5). If Istanbul implemented these mixed-use principles during the initial stages of the planning process, street activity, and security would increase. Street activity is also achieved through density of residents.

Lastly, the lack of residential density and diversity of ground floor land use in Istanbul’s mid-rise suburbs limits social interaction. The suburbs of Istanbul have no corner markets, or small, family-owned coffee shops. The towers do not have the density or diversity in land use needed to compete with the traditional housing model found closer to the Bosphorus. “The key to sustaining diversity lies in there being, within easy travelling distance, relatively large numbers of people with different tastes and proclivities. In other words, a relatively high population density” (Montgomery 1998, 7). Businesses selling a variety of amenities throughout different times of the day would create social interaction. If Istanbul applied Canter’s Model of Place to the new housing developments away from the Bosphorus, the streets would become a vital place.

Istanbul’s mid-rise suburbs, though different in housing stock and density per square foot compared to those in America, suffer from the same mistakes and shortcomings. By encouraging transit and mixed-use development in the early stages of the Turkish planning process, a lively and safe pedestrian-friendly neighborhood away from the Bosphorus may emerge. This paper has pointed out three main things. First, mid-rise housing developments are implemented instead of the traditional housing model and are immediately occupied because low-mortgage loans offered to potential home buyers are a major incentive for Istanbul residents to move to the suburbs. Second, these new housing towers affect transportation in Istanbul, causing traffic congestion, which otherwise would be alleviated by mass transportation. Third, Istanbul’s suburbs, which offer a poor example of street life and a vital community, would benefit from an integration of uses to create a 24-hour environment. By developing guidelines modeled after urban neighborhoods like Karakoy, communities inland from the Bosphorus can preserve Istanbul’s dense, urban nature.

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