

Assessment of the Urban and Tourism Development In the Fener-Balat Districts

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Abstract

Fener and Balat districts are located on the historic peninsula of Istanbul, Turkey. Rehabilitation programme of those districts is the first work in Istanbul after UNESCO has declared it as a world heritage site in 1985. The aim of the programme is to improve the living conditions of the inhabitants of Balat and Fener.

Buildings and environment of Balat and Fener, that a great part consists of traditional dwellings, demonstrate many problems of decay and dereliction. Occupiers of those buildings are the ones, who have low incomes. In the past years, this historic area took attention of the visitors like other historic quarters in Istanbul by the influence of the rehabilitation programme and world heritage site status. And these districts meet to tourism.

But tourism can be a threat for historic areas without a proper urban planning. The aim of this paper is to demonstrate the impacts of the tourism and recent urban planning in those historic districts and find a balance between urbanism and tourism.

Keywords: Fener, Balat, world heritage, traditional dwellings, gentrification.

Introduction

The Fener – Balat district, among the oldest residential districts of Istanbul, has witnessed all kinds of changes that can exemplify all the historical periods of urban policy development. Inhabited mainly by the Jewish and Greek minorities during the Ottoman period, the district suffered destructive earthquakes and fires in the 19th century. Later, the district became an industrial area, which attracted a large number of migrant workers, so the population profile changed. The district then went through a period of non-industrialization, which began to impoverish the people who had come to the district to work. In the 1990s, after the rediscovery of the historical value of the area, new policies were put into effect for the rehabilitation of the Fener – Balat district and its historical buildings.

Meanwhile, tourism began to develop in the district after it was declared a World Heritage Site. However, this growing tourism potential of the district has not been a leading criterion for urban planning in any of the rehabilitation and renovation projects implemented in the district. The rehabilitation project focused mainly on preserving the historical texture and restoring historical buildings while the renovation project aimed at improving the coastal strip, creating spaces for tourism and integrating historical buildings without taking into account their architectural qualities.

This study compiles information about the history of the Fener – Balat district, its current urban and architectural environment, and the processes it has gone through with or without the contribution of the rehabilitation and restoration projects. In the light of this information, the study aims to suggest an urban planning concept that will strengthen the tourism aspect of the district while ensuring sustainability. It also aims to determine the points that must be taken into consideration while developing new rehabilitation or renovation projects.



Figure 1-2. Current settlement pattern in Fener-Balat

History of the Region

Fener and Balat districts are located in the Historical Peninsula, in the region stretching between the Golden Horn in the south and the Byzantine city walls in the west. Fener and Balat, which were once the focal point of the social and cultural lives of Greek, Jewish and Armenian minorities, now host a Muslim population, many of whom have migrated from other cities and rural areas and do not have enough economic resources for the preservation of the architectural structures, and for the renovation and maintenance of the old buildings.

Fener

Because the Greek Patriarchate and the Orthodox Church are situated in Fener, this district had always been a region where the Greek population concentrated since the Byzantine period. With its cut-stone houses and richly decorated building facades, Fener became a district preferred by the elite and the bourgeoisie in the 17th century.

In the 18th century, aristocratic Greek families began to build wooden or stone houses around the Patriarchate. However, the settlement pattern changed significantly in the 19th century when eminent families of Fener left the district and moved to villages along the Bosphorus such as Tarabya, Kuruçeşme and Arnavutköy. The remaining population in the district, which was made up of civil servants, craftsmen and small merchants, settled in the rows of houses built on plots that became vacant after the fire. Towards the end of the 19th century, a fundamental change began to take place in the demographic structure of the district with the first wave of migration to bourgeois districts such as The Prince Islands, Kadıköy and Şişli. Nevertheless, Fener remained a Greek district until 1960s. After the second wave of migration in the 1960s, when Greeks left the country in large numbers, the district was settled by a low-income population particularly from the Black Sea Region.

The southern part of the Golden Horn, including Fener, witnessed significant physical changes after 1980. Many of the remaining 18th-century stone houses and the buildings along the Golden Horn including the Balat Port were destroyed as part of a large-scale program led by the Mayor of the time, and unfortunately, only a few historical buildings outside the coastal city walls survived this destruction.

Balat

Balat has a historical importance especially for Istanbul's Jews. Macedonian Jews, who were brought to the city after the conquest of Istanbul, and the Jews who immigrated from Spain were placed in the district. Apart from a small Armenian community living in the district, Balat had always been a Jewish district since the Byzantine period.

Following the earthquake of 1894 and the fires that deeply affected the architecture of the district, the demographic structure also changed significantly. After the second half of the 19th century, the richest residents left the district and moved to Galata, where Jewish institutions including the Chief Rabbinate and important synagogues are still situated today. In the 20th century, especially after the establishment of Israel, about a quarter of the population of Balat left the district. Following this period, the Jewish community in Balat became a minority, and a new wave of migration from the Black Sea Region greatly changed the face of the district. After the 1960s, the Jewish residents of the district whose economic conditions improved moved to Şişli. The working class population who were attracted to the district by job opportunities and lower rents changed the social structure of Balat.

Urban and Architectural Environment

Today, Fener and Balat districts are squeezed between the Byzantine city walls in the north and the slopes stretching in the south. Although the districts have been given a "site area" status, this has not been sufficiently emphasized. The visual qualities of the protected area can be observed clearly as one climbs up the slopes. Some streets have a view all the way down to the Golden Horn thanks to the Balat and Fener gateways that constitute a gap in the city walls.

In the north, there is a transit road that follows the Golden Horn coastline and connects to the peripheral highway. In the west, there are several monuments such as churches, mosques and a bath. In the south, there are taller and more recently constructed buildings. In the northwest, there are buildings in a big yard surrounded by high walls (The Jerusalem Patriarchate), which belong to the Christian community. In the East, there are taller and newer buildings and land belonging to the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate.



Figure 3-4. Recently constructed buildings and the transit road between Golden Horn and Fener-Balat district

The urban structure of the district is very typical of the parcellation after fire. In fact, the fires that raged in the city in the 19th century caused the urban structure to change to a great extent. A new type of housing that radically separated with the Ottoman period, namely, rows of houses became prevalent in Balat and Fener as they better met the security needs against disasters. These are adjacent buildings running along the road, built on small narrow plots, separated by fire-protection walls, with entrances above the street level.

Because the ownership of the buildings is shared, and because the plots are almost completely used for construction, it is a very dense urban space. There are few interior courtyards. Public spaces are limited. There are no playgrounds or parks for children. The parks along the Golden Horn can not meet the need because they have insufficient lighting and a busy street with fast-moving traffic must be crossed to reach them. The height-width proportion of the streets and lack of public spaces gives the impression that the district is quite enclosed. There is hardly any vegetation.

The Urban and Tourism Development in the Fener-Balat District

Fener and Balat districts have survived since Byzantium. They became more important especially after the conquest of Istanbul by the Ottomans. This area, which was inhabited mainly by the Jewish and Greek minorities during the Ottoman period, lost its importance after the 19th century. The main reasons for this change were the decrease of commercial activity along the Golden Horn, the 1894 earthquake, recurrent fires in the area and the emergence of other trendy districts such as Hasköy, Ortaköy and especially Galata and Pera as more attractive and better-quality residential districts.

The coastal region of the district changed mainly due to the decision of Henry Prost, an urban planner, to bring industry to the district in the 1930s. This caused the historical houses inhabited by the Greek population to be replaced by ateliers and factories.

Along with the changes in the physical appearance of the district, the social structure has also changed. The district was abandoned by its Jewish and Greek residents due to the Wealth Tax Law of 1942 and the September 6-7 events in 1955. The growing industry created the need for labour, and immigrants from Anatolia began to settle in the houses abandoned by the minorities. The district continued to be a mainly industrial area until the 1980s, when the Golden Horn cleaning project was started by the Mayor of the time.

After the 1980s, the Fener – Balat district was settled by forced immigrants from Eastern and Southeastern Anatolia. These forced immigrants had no villages or hometowns that they could go back to, no jobs waiting for them, and no savings. Their choice of Fener-Balat as their new home can be explained by the cheap rents and the possibility of finding jobs in the city centre. Those who arrived after 1980 usually work in informal jobs and there is a very high unemployment rate among them.

The process which began with the non-industrialization of the Golden Horn in the 1980s entered a new phase during the Habitat Summit hosted by Istanbul in 1996, and the idea of rehabilitation of Fener and Balat districts was proposed.

The European Commission, the municipality of Fatih, the French Institute of Anatolian Studies and UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) conducted a feasibility study in 1997 and 1998 for the rehabilitation of the Fener and Balat district, with the participation of Fener and Balat Societies. This study aimed to support not only the rehabilitation of the buildings, but also the rehabilitation of the social structure by proposing feasible solutions to the housing problem in the historical texture. In this way, it aimed to improve the living standards of the poor residents as well as their social status and health conditions without forcing them to leave their homes. In other words, this study became an urban rehabilitation project with a social responsibility.

The study was also planned as a pilot project for the social rehabilitation programs which proposed the active participation of the inhabitants. As a result of the study, a report called The Rehabilitation of Balat and Fener Districts (the 1998 Report) was prepared.

In 1998, a program that was designed based on this feasibility study was included in the European Union – Mediterranean Partners (MEDA) Programs which are financed by the European Union. The first step towards the implementation of the Program was taken in 2000, when a financial agreement was signed between the European Union, the municipality of Fatih, and the Treasury Counselorship of the Republic of Turkey, followed by the allocation of a 7 million Euro grant to the Program. The Fener Balat Rehabilitation Project was planned on four different levels: The restoration of the buildings, the renovation of a social center and the Balat *Carsi*, and solid waste management. The main aim of the project was primarily to finance the restoration of the buildings with the grant money provided by the European Union to benefit the residents who lived in the district for a long time and who were also planning to live there in the future, but did not have the means to restore their buildings. The restoration process included various stages such as reviewing the municipal plans, determining the architectural and social evaluation criteria, evaluating the applicants based on the defined criteria and deciding which buildings will be restored, reviewing their construction licenses, preparing projects, getting approval from the Conservation Council and getting permission for construction, preparing tender documents to determine the contractor firms that will carry out the restoration, announcing the tenders, coordinating, inspecting and approving the construction work, and checking the progress bills.

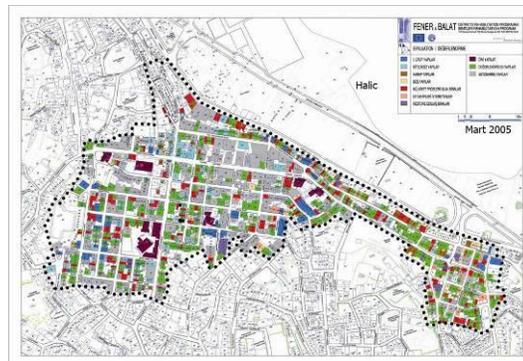


Figure 5. Fener-Balat Rehabilitation Plan

The Technical Support Team began its work in 2003 and the rehabilitation project was completed in 2008. When the results of the applications of the rehabilitation project are examined, it can be seen that the restoration aspect of the project did not reach the targeted 200 renovations due to budget and time constraints; 121 buildings were restored and two social centres were rehabilitated in the process. The solid waste management aspect of the project could only be carried out for a short period of time. The target to provide jobs to the unemployed in the district during the restoration period could never be achieved.

This period was also the beginning of the gentrification period of Fener – Balat, as the district came to be in demand by a different income group. The growing interest in spaces with historical qualities that started around 2000 also affected the Fener – Balat region, and it was declared a renovation area in 2006 based on Act Number 5366 “for the sustainable use of downgraded historical real estate through protection by renewal”. Using an uncommon method, the region was divided into different sections which would be assigned to different offices determined by the project coordinator so that different projects would be obtained. The aim was to create a district that would serve as an “architectural exhibition” as a result of the work of different architects.

Planning in the quarter scale was made as a result of a very long design process participated by each office, specialists from different disciplines and the Conservation Council. While each office worked on their own block, designs in the regional scale were developed after long arguments among city planners, art and architecture historians, sociologists and specialists from other disciplines. It is reported that the existing heights were retained in design, and only the un-registered buildings were re-interpreted, but still the existing heights were not exceeded in their design.

The preliminary project plan was approved on December 27, 2007. The completion date for the project was determined as September 3, 2010. However, the project has still not been completed.

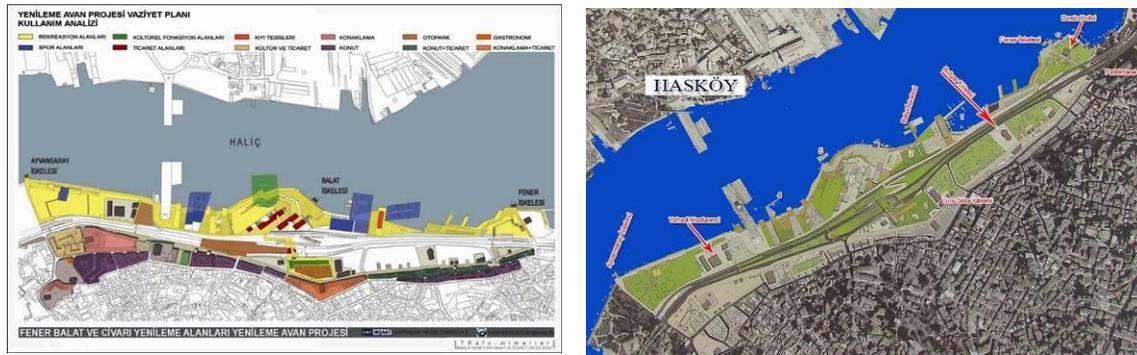


Figure 6-7. Fener-Balat Renovation Plan

The Fener-Balat Renovation Project is also the biggest urban transformation project developed until today in terms of its area. The area that the Fener-Balat Renovation Project covers is 279.345,91 square meters, and it is made up of a total of 59 blocks and 909 plots. The Project consists mainly of two regions, namely, the green areas along the coast and the residential areas containing housing and commercial buildings.

The Project aims to join the buildings on the coastal strip to obtain various spaces, to remove the sports facilities along the shore, to construct new buildings with various functions inside the parks, and to establish a marina on the coastal strip.

The Restoration Project was decided to be approached on the basis of blocks of buildings rather than on the basis of plots because of the intricacy of the plot structure in the residential area and the difficulty to find development solutions for very small plots. This would mean joining the interior spaces of buildings that are on the same block. This practise has been criticised as the existing structural qualities in a historical area should not be changed and the historical qualities should be protected.

It is predicted that, when the project is completed, most of the owners of the buildings will not be the people who have lived there for years, but people who have newly acquired the deeds from those who could not afford to pay the contribution payments to the project.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The Fener – Balat Rehabilitation and Renovation Projects have problems concerning the administrative and legal aspects, infrastructure, socio-psychological aspects, cost, and sustainability.

The Fener – Balat Restoration Project involves the risk of becoming a project which will result in greater injustice for a greater number of people than the Rehabilitation Project. Ownership rights, which were taken into account during the Rehabilitation Project are given less attention in this project, so it is feared

that more residents will have to be displaced. Transfer of ownership is the method chosen in this project. Owners who were indirectly affected or who sometimes even had advantages during the Rehabilitation Project are predicted to suffer serious injustice during the Restoration Project. What needs to be done is to continue the implementation of the Fener Balat Rehabilitation Project, to repair the district with long-term, non-interest government loans, and to gain the district into a tourism centre.



Figure 8-9. Current ruined historical buildings in Fener-Balat

This district is one of the regions of Istanbul that is proposed to be developed in terms of tourism because of its historical, natural, cultural and urban potentials. The potentials of the district are quite significant both on national and international scale, and if developed, it will provide an important economic input to the city and to the region. In this respect, points that must be taken into consideration when designing a new project are listed below:

-A preliminary Project Plan should be prepared for the entire region, and all the interrelated components should be figured out in this preliminary project.

-In many developed countries, architectural works constitute the greatest tourism attraction, so architectural tours are an important and indispensable part of city tourism programs. On the other hand, events related to architecture make up another important part of architectural tourism. Many cities have become significant tourist centres with architectural exhibitions, workshops and conferences. Similarly, in this region, in addition to the development of the available historical texture, the new buildings that will be built along the coastal strip should primarily be planned as venues that can host architectural events. The location of these buildings should be determined in advance on the preliminary project.

- Two foundations that are likely to make a positive contribution to the region have been established in the last five years. The first of these is the Riva Foundation, which was established in Balat in 2007 to make high quality contributions to the fields of education, culture and art/design. The second is the “TSKF Balat Cultural House”, which was established in 2010. The buildings of both of these foundations were selected from among typical examples of classical Balat architecture and restored. Assuming that these foundations will have a positive contribution to the local residents and to the development of tourism in the area, more of them should be established.

- Activities directed towards residential areas, trade, services and craftsmanship should be allowed only if they are harmless and non-polluting.
- All kinds of harmful and polluting activities, especially garages, store houses, wholesalers, industry, underground and above-ground car parks and temporary constructions should be banned. The city walls should be repaired and illegal buildings should be removed.
- Public facilities should be renewed, increased and completed to meet the demand. The condition of the urban texture should be examined in terms of the social and technical facilities to meet the standards. The required social facilities (educational and health facilities, open/green areas, playgrounds, sports facilities, religious facilities etc) should be determined, and these should be built beginning with the most urgent ones.
- One-way streets should be built to ease pedestrian and vehicle traffic, and car parks should be built for the local residents and visitors.
- Renovation and rehabilitation projects should be directed towards the needs of those who are currently living in the region, and they should be planned with their participation. The character of the buildings should be protected in principle. Financial, technical and labor contributions should be obtained from the public, and public awareness must be raised concerning the protection of the historical environment. This can be more easily achieved under the leadership of non-governmental organizations and with the cooperation of the Municipality.
- Damage threatening the structure of the buildings should be eliminated as soon as possible with the implementation of urgent programs.
- Green areas, proper lighting, crossroads and squares should be arranged, and the value of the city wall gates should be exposed.
- Renewal should be applicable gradually and in stages. The basic standard adopted in the first stage should allow additions in later stages. Small-scale improvements should be made to the urban structure by making fewer demolitions, by creating green areas in the middle of the blocks, and by arranging building facades and fire protection walls.
- The small plots and the existing ownership structure should be retained.
- The infrastructure should be improved.

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