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What is This?
‘Urban Transformation’ as State-led Property Transfer: An Analysis of Two Cases of Urban Renewal in Istanbul

Tuna Kuyucu and Özlem Ünsal

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Abstract

Since 2001, there has been a radical shift in the governance of urban land and housing markets in Turkey from a ‘populist’ to a ‘neo-liberal’ mode. Large ‘urban transformation projects’ (UTPs) are the main mechanisms through which a neo-liberal system is instituted in incompletely commodified urban areas. By analysing two UTPs implemented in an informal housing zone and an inner-city slum in Istanbul, the paper discusses the motivations behind, the socioeconomic consequences of and grassroots resistance movements to the new urban regime. The analysis shows that the UTPs predominantly aim at physical and demographic upgrading of their respective areas rather than improving the living conditions of existing inhabitants, thus instigating a process of property transfer and displacement. It also demonstrates that the property/tenure structure of an area plays the most important role in determining the form and effectiveness of grassroots movements against the UTPs.

Introduction

On 26 March 2008, about 1000 people from Başbüyük, a politically conservative gecekondu neighbourhood in the Maltepe district, gathered outside the municipality to protest the ‘gecekondu transformation project’ implemented in their neighbourhood. It was the first time that this conservative population, who overwhelmingly voted for the ruling Justice and Development Party (JDP), had participated in such a public demonstration. A group of residents, dressed in White as if attending a funeral ceremony, carried signs that read “Our neighbourhood is our pride”, “We will resist until we die” and “Başbüyük will be a grave for the MHA”. Next to them, a group of women chanted “Fikri! Don’t cross the line, don’t test our patience”. Later on, the spokesperson of the Istanbul neighbourhood Associations Platform, delivered a press statement, criticising the transformation
projects because “their real aim is displacing poor working classes from their neighbourhoods that they formed with so much sweat and labour, and market their living areas to the rich”. When he finished his speech, the angry crowd rallied through the streets of Maltepe, chanting slogans as people around cast them puzzled looks. When they reached the local JDP building, emotions peaked and everyone shouted, “Başbüyük belongs to us and it always will”.

Two months after this incident, on 22 May, the mayor of the Beşiktaş Municipality, the Minister of Tourism and Culture and the representatives of the GAP Construction Company were strolling along Istiklal Avenue together with a group of journalists towards an art gallery. The mayor and the minister would take short rests during the walk, gaze at the art-nouveau buildings lining the avenue and discuss their architecture. When they reached the gallery, the journalists started analysing the architectural drawings and the model of a project on exhibit. Fifteen minutes later, the Mayor of Istanbul was to give a press conference on the Tarlabası Renewal Project that aims to renew 278 historical buildings in 9 blocks of the Tarlabası neighbourhood. Not even a kilometre away was the office of the Tarlabası Neighbourhood Association where volunteer lawyers were filing documents to take the project to court. They argued that the project breaches rules regarding participation and openness as specified in law no. 5366 and violates the rights of owners and tenants in the area. One lawyer said

These kinds of projects must serve the public and must be based on good intentions, but this certainly isn’t the case in what they want to do with our lives here.

An old lady who had lived her whole life in Tarlabası told the lawyers that she had just received an eviction letter, a day after she agreed to sell her building to the developer.

What is taking place in Başbüyük and Tarlabası (see Figure 1) signals a radical transition in the governance of urban housing markets in Istanbul from a populist to a neo-liberal mode (Bartu-Candan and Kolluoglu, 2008). In this paper, we analyse the motivations behind and consequences of this transition to a fully capitalist urban regime by focusing on two ‘urban transformation projects’ (UTPs). These large renewal programmes are the primary mechanisms by which a capitalist logic is imposed on urban land and housing markets, especially in incompletely commodified informal housing areas and ‘rundown’ inner-city neighbourhoods. By redefining property rules and market dynamics, the UTPs achieve two major goals: physical and demographic ‘upgrading’ of particular localities within the city and the construction of a neo-liberal regime of governance that no longer tolerates the legal ambiguities and the incompletely commodified market structure characterising these areas.

These radical interventions into urban space disproportionately benefit a coalition of urban developers, credit institutions, local and central state actors and the politically and economically stronger inhabitants of these areas, whose interests lie in the institutionalisation of a neo-liberal urban regime. Yet this process pushes into the capitalist market a highly vulnerable population, whose livelihood depends on populist redistributive mechanisms. Our case studies demonstrate that, in the absence of social policies enforced by the state and/or other forms of non-state welfare distribution, the consequences of this ‘forced marketisation’ will result in increased displacement and dispossession of the urban poor and heightened levels of spatial and socioeconomic segregation.

In addition to showing the disruptive impacts of this new regime, our study also illustrates the myriad tactics, ranging from setting up barricades to waging legal battles, that the
inhabitants of these neighbourhoods use to contest the UTPs. Because both cases are still at the implementation stage, we cannot conclusively demonstrate how these contestations will exactly determine the outcomes. However, our observations show that, even when the resistance movements fail to halt the projects, they still alter their implementation in important ways. By comparing the movements in the two neighbourhoods, we conclude that the most important determinant of the form and strength of resistance is the existing property/tenure structure in the area. In both neighbourhoods, the collective resistance movements gradually evolved into bargaining with project implementers for personal gain. Yet, while this bargaining process has intensified the divisions among Başbüyük inhabitants, none of whom is a formal owner, a unified front against the project is sustained in Tarlabası, which is a formal/legal settlement. The more fragile nature of resistance in Başbüyük makes the project’s implementation easier compared with the Tarlabası case, where the inhabitants show a greater resilience in defending their property rights. These significant differences between our cases show that neo-liberal restructurings are never pre-determined; their implementation and outcomes depend on local dynamics and power constellations (Leitner et al., 2007; Brenner and Theodore, 2002). Our focus on the micro-level interactions between state authorities, developers and residents captures the contested and contingent nature of these processes.

Methodology and Data

Our research is based on fieldwork conducted in Başbüyük and Tarlabası between
October 2007 and November 2008. In both neighbourhoods, we attended numerous community meetings and public demonstrations, interviewed the leaders and lawyers of neighbourhood associations and conducted in-depth interviews with 30 residents from each area. Additionally, we interviewed municipal officials in Beşiktaş and Kadıköy, including the deputy mayor of the former and the director of the zoning department of the latter municipality; the project co-ordinator at GAP; and an expert hired by Beşiktaş municipality to act as a mediator between the residents and GAP. We also interviewed the presidents of Istanbul Chamber of Urban Planners and Chamber of Architects, professional groups highly critical of the UTPs. To learn how developers approach the UTPs, we interviewed the CEO of a real estate investment trust. Finally, we analysed the municipal plans and other documentary material about the projects and surveyed news articles in the national media about UTPs.

Three factors motivated our case study selection: First, to provide a comprehensive analysis of how low-income housing areas are being ‘neo-liberalised’, we included a case from each of the two types of UTP currently implemented in Istanbul. The first type is implemented in historical and natural ‘protection zones’ (Tarlabaşı); the other in ‘derelict’ and ‘obsolescent’ areas in the rest of the city (Başbüyük). Secondly, to assess the effects of different tenure structures on the implementation of the projects and on the patterns of resistance, we selected Başbüyük, which is a gecekondu area with no de jure owners and Tarlabası, a formal settlement with high tenancy rates. The final reason relates to the timing of these projects: because both are still at the implementation stage, they provide invaluable information about how UTPs are executed, how the authorities negotiate with different stakeholders and how the inhabitants respond to the on-going processes. Focusing on completed projects would not have allowed us to observe on-the-ground negotiations and conflicts.

**UTPs as Neo-liberal Market-making Tools**

The complex relationship between neo-liberalisation and urban transformations has received remarkable attention since the 1980s (Hackworth, 2007; Moulaert et al., 2003; Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Harvey, 1989; Logan and Molotch, 1987). Mostly focusing on global cities of advanced capitalist states, this literature shows how the imperatives of capital in a post-industrial economy generate new forms of urban segregation and inequality (Sassen, 2001; Knox and Taylor, 1995). As urban space becomes one of the most profitable sources of investment and as cities adopt aggressive place-marketing strategies to attract capital, it becomes very difficult for the urban poor to survive in their living spaces due to increased real estate values. Numerous case studies demonstrate that these processes lead to widespread displacement and the conversion of such areas into commercial and/or high-end residential districts (Blomley, 2004; Nappi-Choulet, 2006; Smith, 2002; Weber, 2002). These developments signal a definite shift from the Keynesian welfare policies of the previous era to a neo-liberal regime that seeks to extend market forces to all domains of social life (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). This also necessitates a new form of governance, where local governments assume entrepreneurial roles directly or through partnerships with private actors (Miraftab, 2004; Weber, 2002).

Large redevelopment projects have an important role in this regime shift as they open to investment, mostly through direct state action, highly profitable spaces (such as old industrial zones, waterfronts and inner-city slums) that have not been economically fully exploited. As Moulaert et al. argue, ‘mega-projects’
have become one of the most visible and ubiquitous urban revitalisation strategies pursued by cities in search of economic growth and competitiveness, [making them] the mechanisms par excellence through which globalisation becomes urbanised (Moulaert et al., 2003, pp. 2–3).

Existing research on such projects has shown that they have highly unequal socioeconomic consequences for different groups: while generating fast returns for investors and local governments, they also instigate strong dynamics of displacement and dispossession for disadvantaged communities (Moulaert et al., 2003; Lehrer and Laidley, 2008). These processes have even more dramatic effects in the comparatively understudied megapoles of developing countries, where large tracts of land, inhabited by legally and socioeconomically vulnerable populations and regulated by populist market dynamics, are being redefined through radical legal and economic reforms. The remaking of market rules, property relations and zoning regulations in such areas triggers an alarming process of property transfer, whereby the property of weaker actors is legally appropriated by capitalist developers, by local and central state agencies and by stronger players within informal markets, who are able to employ their economic and political capital to secure major gains (Roy, 2004; Sajor, 2003; Thirkell, 1996). In many megapoles, it is now appropriate to speak of an urban regime change, where a populist regime is superseded by a neo-liberal one, which no longer tolerates informal markets and populist strategies of rent (re)distribution.

As is well documented by the voluminous literature on Third World urbanisation, it was through populist urban regimes, based on the incomplete commodification of land and the partial application of property and zoning rules, that these cities expanded geographically and demographically (Fernandez and Varley, 1998; Gilbert and Gugler, 1982). In the absence of a formal social housing policy, the informal market became the only mechanism through which growing urban populations could be absorbed. This particular solution to the ‘housing problem’ was also extensively used in Istanbul, where housing provision to low-income groups relied on legalising unauthorised land appropriations and inner-city squatting (Senyapılı, 2000; Keyder, 2000; Buğra, 1998; Erder, 1996; Tekeli, 1992; Öncü, 1988). The retroactive extension of ownership rights to occupiers via several ‘building amnesties’ helped to sustain a populist coalition between industrialists in need of cheap labour, political parties seeking loyalty and lower-class urbanites in search of affordable housing. In fact, informal land/housing markets had very significant redistributive effects in Turkey, without which a much higher level of inequality would have emerged (Başlevent and Dayıoğlu, 2005). However, their gradual commercialisation also led to the solidification of a lucrative, yet hierarchical market structure, where those with economic and/or social capital enjoy the benefits of populist mechanisms while the majority are left unprotected in quasi-legal markets (Buğra, 1998; İşık and Pınarçılıoglu, 2002).

What has ended this populist regime of housing provision is the emergence of new powerful actors—i.e. large developers, real estate investment trusts and various state agencies—whose interests lie in the transition to a fully commodified market in which exchange-rights prevail over use rights and private property rules are strictly enforced. In Istanbul, the serious shortage of serviceable land makes those areas that have been incompletely integrated into capitalist circuits during the populist era increasingly more attractive to these new actors (Keyder, 2000). Gecekondu zones and inner-city slums, in this context, become prime targets for large projects. Since such projects are risky due to big start-up investments and uncertain future returns, private capital usually demands the
involvement of public agencies in order to mitigate risk (Miraftab, 2004).

*Gecekondu* and inner-city slums are particularly attractive for urban redevelopment for two reasons: legal ambiguities in their property regimes and their perceived status as centres of crime, blight and decay. UTPs enable radical interventions that purportedly aim to ‘fix’ the socioeconomic problems and formalise the ambiguous property structure in these areas. It is no coincidence that the Turkish prime minister, during a speech delivered at the Mass Housing Agency in 2006, referred to UTPs as surgical tools that can remove the “tumours that have surrounded our cities”12 Even though the ability of UTPs to solve social and legal problems is debatable, their power to eradicate a pre-existing market structure and impose a new market order is beyond contention. By creating new property rules, exchange mechanisms and physical spaces, these projects institute a neo-liberal system in socioeconomically and legally vulnerable areas. Ironically, what made possible the survival of the poor in such areas—i.e. informal and extra-legal solutions to housing—becomes the rationale behind the remaking of these areas.

The Construction of a Neo-liberal Land and Housing Market in Turkey

In Istanbul, the transition to a neo-liberal urban regime started after the 1980 *coup d’état*, which also marks the beginning of economic liberalisation in Turkey (Öniş, 1991). Under the mayorship of Bedrettin Dalan (1984–89), turning Istanbul into a ‘world city’ became the main goal of the newly empowered metropolitan municipality, which undertook massive infrastructural investments and development projects to this end (Keyder and Öncü, 1994; Bezmez, 2008; Ekinci, 1994; Öktem, 2005). ‘Big capital’ rapidly entered the real estate sector, leading to the proliferation of high-rise office buildings, mass housing projects, malls, gated communities, luxury hotels and new transport networks (Geniş, 2007; Bartu-Candan and Kolluoğlu, 2008; Öncü, 1988). This ‘global city project’ gained momentum after the break-up of the Soviet Union and the fast liberalisation of ex-socialist economies (Yükseker, 2007).

Despite rapid economic liberalisation and urban restructuring during the 1980s and 1990s, a fully neo-liberal system was not instituted until 2001, the year in which Turkey went through its worst economic crisis (Cizre and Yeldan, 2005). The greatest obstacle posed to institutionalising such a system was the continuation of populist mechanisms in land/housing markets. The existence of a dynamic informal market meant that large tracts of land with vast potentials of rent, both in *gecekondu* areas and inner-city slums, remained outside capitalist circuits. Despite the rent potential, no political party dared to terminate such a vibrant channel of vote-seeking and wealth redistribution. It was the wreckage of a major accumulation crisis—the 2001 economic crash—that brought populism to a definite end. With a series of legal/institutional reforms, the ruling JDP radically restructured the governance of real estate markets in Turkey, with very important consequences for Istanbul’s socioeconomic geography.

The first set of reforms concern the prevailing *gecekondu* policy. With the passage of the new Criminal Code in 2004 (Law No. 5237), *gecekondu* construction was made, for the first time, a criminal offence to be punished by five years in prison, clearly showing the government’s ‘zero-tolerance’ approach. *Gecekondu* demolitions, which had been rare in Istanbul, speeded up afterwards; between 2004 and 2008, 11,543 units in Istanbul were demolished, a record high for any period.13 Then in 2005 the new Municipality Law was passed (Law No. 5393), authorising district municipalities to implement ‘transformation projects’ in derelict, obsolescent and unsafe
(due to natural disasters) parts of cities. These projects, which would be executed through a partnership with the Mass Housing Administration, would renew the existing building stock through a ‘demolish/rebuild’ method and transfer the ‘rightful owners’ (which excludes tenants) into public housing projects. Because of their precarious physical, legal and economic status, gecekondu zones became ideal targets of ‘transformation’.

In addition to reforming the gecekondu regime, the JDP also radically restructured the MHA, making it the most powerful real estate developer in the country and the most influential actor in constructing a neo-liberal regime. As a result of numerous legal reforms passed between 2002 and 2008, the MHA became the sole agency to regulate the zoning and sale of almost all state-owned urban land (excluding military land). These reforms authorised the MHA to construct ‘for-profit’ housing on state land either by its own subsidiary firms or through public–private partnerships, in order to raise revenues for public housing construction. Furthermore, the MHA acquired the power of making planning/zoning revisions in gecekondu transformation zones and the right to expropriate property in these areas. With these vast regulatory and financial powers, the MHA is accomplishing two crucial goals: constructing a formal land/housing market for low-income households and privatising valuable state-owned land.

A third area of reform concerns the regulation of ‘historical and natural protection zones’, which have been insufficiently integrated into capitalist markets due to special ‘protection laws’ (such as Law No, 2863). With the passage of Law No. 5366 in 2005, district municipalities became authorised to implement regeneration projects in ‘derelict’ and ‘obsolescent’ areas within protection zones. Similar to other cities, historical ‘inner-city’ zones in Istanbul experienced rapid downfall and are mostly inhabited by vulnerable populations unable to meet their housing needs elsewhere. The new law makes it possible to restore existing buildings in these areas, or to demolish-and-rebuild them in accordance with the general historical characteristics and development potentials of the area. The authority to designate a ‘renewal zone’ rests with municipalities which have the right to implement the projects through a partnership with the MHA or with private developers.

Finally, in 2007, the JDP passed another crucial law (Law No, 5582) restructuring the housing finance sector, which had traditionally been weak and insufficiently institutionalised in Turkey (Gürleşel, 2006; Öncü, 1988). Use of housing credits has been extraordinarily low in a country with very high rates of homeownership. Such an underdeveloped financing mechanism is a serious impediment to a capitalist urban regime. The new law institutionalised the ‘mortgage system’, which is expected to provide a major impetus to the housing finance sector. Although this is a big step towards neo-liberalisation, high inflation and interest rates exclude most lower-income citizens from participating in mortgage markets. Those unable to enter the private credit market can, however, obtain housing through the MHA, which provides state-subsidised credit to lower-income consumers.

In sum, these reforms have laid the foundations of a fully formalised and commodified urban regime that creates vast opportunities for state agencies, private developers and credit institutions. By eradicating the earlier redistribution mechanisms, they have fundamentally altered the populist relationship between the legally and economically vulnerable urbanites and the state. UTPs are prime instruments in implementing this new regime, especially in incompletely commodified gecekondu and inner-city slum areas. The rest of our article focuses on the implementation of UTPs, demonstrates their major shortcomings and discusses the various resistance tactics developed by those who are subject to such interventions.
Mapping Başıbüyük and Tarlabası

A close look at the socioeconomic and physical geography of the two neighbourhoods reveals their high potential for rent-generation. Başıbüyük, to start with, is a poor working-class neighbourhood situated on a high hill in the Maltepe district, commanding a spectacular view. Maltepe remained one of the most important industrial zones of Istanbul’s Asian side until the mid 1990s (Tekeli, 1992). Having attracted a migrant population from central and north-eastern Turkey since the 1960s, the population of Başıbüyük rose to about 20,000 in 2007 (TURKSTAT, 2008). What made Başıbüyük a suitable settlement for migrants was the availability of vacant state-owned land and the proximity to factories in the region. Even though the neighbourhood has received municipal services and infrastructure since the 1970s, the inhabitants could not obtain formal land titles and/or building permits, making all buildings in Başıbüyük illegal.

Two factors have complicated the property structure in Başıbüyük. First, most inhabitants have actually purchased their lands from third parties in the informal market with state acceptance and/or involvement, which makes them believe that they should be eligible for formal ownership. Secondly, about half of the 990 buildings in the project area have tapu tahsis documents, obtained in the 1980s with amnesty acts that successive governments had passed. These documents confer to gecekondu ‘owners’ a de facto use right, thus providing them with some legality. As a result, a highly ambiguous and confusing property regime emerged in Başıbüyük, where half of the inhabitants are ‘occupiers’ with no rights whereas the other half are de facto owners of their land, on which they have built illegal dwellings. In addition, an unknown number of tenants reside in this legally ambiguous area. This legal complexity is one of the most important legitimating tools used by the municipality in the implementation of a renewal project in Başıbüyük.

Geographically, Başıbüyük is no longer a peripheral settlement. As a result of the expansion of the city and the transformation of its economy since the 1980s, it has become a poor gecekondu area located in a thriving real estate zone that has been attracting major investments geared towards the upper classes. With significant reserves of unused land, the Maltepe district has been marked as a potential development area in the master plan of Istanbul, making it a prime site for up-market residential projects. The district is in close proximity to Kartal, another old industrial zone, soon to be turned into a central business district (with office buildings, luxurious housing, hotels and a marina) by the renowned architect Zaha Hadid. The NarCity and KIPTAŞ housing blocks, constructed for upper-middle-class consumer groups; a private university and several major transport networks are some of the developments surrounding Başıbüyük today.

Tarlabaşı, on the other hand, is like the missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle in Taksim, the social and cultural hub of Istanbul. Despite the neighbourhood’s proximity to the Taksim area and its protection by special zoning regulations since 1993 because of its 19th century housing stock, it has been undergoing a rapid process of socioeconomic and physical decline. The ‘ghettoisation’ and radical dereliction of Tarlabası are triggered by two major historical incidents: the deportation of its non-Muslim residents in 1964 and the demolition of more than 300 Levantine buildings for the construction of today’s Tarlabası Boulevard by Dalan in 1986 (Ekinci, 1994; Çeçener, 1995). Cut off from the social and economic flow of Taksim, Tarlabası entered a phase of degradation, as socioeconomic downfall also triggered physical dereliction. The decline of exchange values in Tarlabası after the ‘Dalan demolitions’ speeded up the ‘slummification’ of the area, which, by the mid 1990s, had become a low-cost living zone for internally displaced Kurds, undocumented immigrants and various
marginalised groups. The neighbourhood’s downfall became even more striking as the surrounding areas like Cihangir, Galata and Talimhane became gentrified and attracted major investments (Behar and İslam, 2006). In the middle of these, Tarlabası has remained as an inner-city slum, inhabited by disadvantaged transient populations.

The predominant tenure structure in Tarlabası, despite its slum-like characteristics, is de jure ownership. The buildings that used to be owned by non-Muslims until 1964 were transferred to a new landlord class under the auspices of the state after the expulsion of these minorities. Rural migrants mostly benefited from this process by either purchasing the buildings from their official care-takers (kayyum) or extralegally appropriating them and becoming legal ‘owners’ retroactively. Following this process of property transfer, a lucrative rental market emerged in the area, where the new owners rented out dwellings to low-income groups, either formally or informally. According to research conducted in the project area, 75 per cent of the inhabitants are tenants, 20 per cent are property owners and the remaining 5 per cent are occupiers (Kentsel Strateji A.Ş., 2008).

Based on the 1990 and 2000 national surveys, the populations in both neighbourhoods are ‘significantly below’ the Istanbul average on educational attainment, income, job security and status of occupation (Güvenç, 2005). The majority of Başıbüyük residents only finished primary school and there is also a sizeable illiterate population. In Tarlabasi, the illiterate population, which has greatly increased since 1990, constitutes an even larger percentage. Most of the Başıbüyük inhabitants work in the construction and (informal) manufacturing sectors, but there also exists a growing population working in low-end service jobs. In Tarlabası, however, the majority work in low-end service jobs, with minimal social security. Services represent the dominant sector in Tarlabası because of its proximity to Taksim, where the concentration of entertainment centres generates low-paid jobs such as waitressing, cleaning or dish washing. A mixture of small privately owned businesses such as grocery stores and textile workshops and marginal jobs such as refuse collection and prostitution exist alongside the service sector.

Implementation of the Projects

The Başıbüyük and Tarlabası projects represent the two types of UTP currently being implemented in Istanbul. Despite their similarities, there are important differences in their particular goals, implementing actors and distinct processes. The Başıbüyük UTP is a ‘gecekondu transformation project’, which is enabled by the new municipality law and implemented through a partnership between the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, Maltepe municipality and the MHA. Accepted in February 2006, it aims to demolish gecekondu on 400 dönüm in the neighbourhood and transfer the ‘rightful owners’ to apartment blocks built by the MHA within the neighbourhood. Currently, six of these blocks are being built, on a 35-hectare site which had been used as a park by the inhabitants (see Figure 2).

Each building consists of 50 flats of 80 square metres (www.maltepe.bel.tr). ‘Rightful owners’, who exclude tenants, are given the option to ‘purchase’ these flats with state-subsidised credit to be paid in 15 years. Because their existing homes are illegal, they are offered a ‘demolition value’, determined by the Ministry of Public Works and Resettlement, for their existing units, rather than the full value of the land and the building. In most cases, the demolition value constitutes one-quarter of the value of the new apartments.

Since its acceptance, the project has generated a strong negative reaction among the population, resulting in the formation of a neighbourhood association to lead the resistance. This strong resistance becomes more interesting given the fact that Başıbüyük is a
conservative neighbourhood with no tradition of political mobilisation. The municipality, in response to the collective mobilisation, started formal negotiations with the association in May 2008. Currently, bargaining for a fair price for *gecekondu* continues, while the construction of the new blocks advances (see Figure 3). The association also initiated a legal battle in October 2008 against the project, arguing that it violates public interest, principles of urban planning and rules of democratic governance. In December, the Administrative Court found the association’s arguments to be valid and ordered the temporary halting of the project. Despite the court order, the construction continues.

The Tarlabası UTP, as distinct from the Başibuyuk case, is based on Law No. 5366. Following the designation of 278 buildings in 9 blocks as a renewal zone in February 2006, the site was put out to tender by the Beyoğlu municipality and a private developer, GAP, took the bid in April 2007 (see Figures 4 and 5).

The project, designed by nine Turkish ‘star architects’, promises to revitalise the area by turning it into a residential, tourist and commercial centre. In its efforts to protect the historical significance of the area, the project preserves the façades of the historical buildings. Property owners are offered either 42 per cent of their ‘existing’ property after the project’s completion, or full monetary compensation for their property’s current value. The size of apartments to be built range from 35 to 75 square metres, too small for the majority of Tarlabası’s households. Although tenants were initially excluded, they have become eligible to purchase MHA units built in Kayabaşı, 35 km away.

The owners and tenants responded to the project terms by establishing a neighbourhood association in March 2008 to defend their rights. Because Law No. 5366 rests on the principles of ‘fair negotiation’ and ‘participation’ of residents in decision-making, official talks between GAP and the neighbourhood association started in February 2008. However, the association withdrew from the talks in July 2008 as a result of inadequate financial compensation and lack of transparency in project implementation. Demonstrating a remarkable efficiency in mobilisation, the association now represents the majority of residents in the area and is considering joining the Chamber of Architects in their legal

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**Figure 2.** The Başibuyuk construction site on March 2008, before construction started.
fight against the project. GAP, however, has been able to purchase only 20 per cent of the buildings and is currently unable to pursue negotiations, which causes serious delays in project implementation.

**Shortcomings of State-led UTPs**

There are three major shortcomings in the implementation of these projects that raise serious questions about their overall legitimacy and their consequences. First, no objective criteria exist in the Municipality
Law or in Law No. 5366 to designate areas as ‘transformation zones’, apart from some vague references to ‘blight’, ‘earthquake risk’ and ‘obsolescence’. This ambiguity raises serious doubts about why particular areas are labelled as such. For example, two municipal officials that gave us a tour of Başlıbüyük constantly showed us low-quality housing units in order to prove that this is in fact a ‘social and physical blight zone’. When we asked what makes the area ‘blighted’, they failed to give any concrete data and referred to the widespread poverty and informality in the area as indicators of ‘blight’. Similarly, in a lecture delivered to a group of foreign planners, the deputy mayor of Maltepe labelled Başlıbüyük as a ‘social decay zone’, without providing any proof other than the existence of informal housing units. In Tarlabası, negative labelling of the population is even more widespread, as the neighbourhood is home to highly marginalised populations. Yet, no concrete data regarding ‘blight’ and ‘decay’ were provided in the project brochures, in public speeches or during the in-depth interviews we conducted with officials.

The almost complete exclusion of residents from decision-making processes is a second major problem. In both cases, residents have become informed of the projects after the fact. Our interviews revealed that their initial source of information was usually coincidental encounters with third persons, not public authorities. In Başlıbüyük, for example, the news broke when a resident working at the municipality happened to see some documents in relation to the protocol signed by the initiating actors of the project (Express, 2008/05). In Tarlabası, details of the project were unveiled only after a property owner consulted his lawyer about offers made by the municipality on the possible transfer of his building to the municipality. Prior to this, the residents had only been briefed by the municipality in 2006 about the possible rehabilitation of Tarlabası with the use of World Bank credit. Both in Başlıbüyük and Tarlabası, time allowed for legal objections had already expired when the news reached the residents.

The exclusion of inhabitants from decision-making means that their opinions and needs had not been considered in the devising of the projects. In fact, our interviews with officials reveal that what they view as ‘participation’ is the inhabitants’ acceptance of, or objection to, the projects after their official approval. Whereas the inclusion of residents to project development has never even been a matter of discussion in Başlıbüyük, GAP relies on the feasible demands of property owners in Tarlabası, whom they try to negotiate with individually. Both situations result from the complete lack of models for participation in the relevant laws. This situation negatively impacts the trust relations between residents and state officials. Lack of information on the part of inhabitants also contributes to the spread of rumours reinforcing anxieties. For example, no one in Başlıbüyük knows how the land cleared from gecekondu will be developed, which raises fears that luxury villas will replace their homes.

Finally, these projects suffer from a total lack of social projects and economic programmes for the inhabitants, creating a serious risk of displacement, dispossession and geographical relocation of poverty. The fact that the two municipalities failed to conduct comprehensive surveys about the urgent needs of these vulnerable groups prior to the projects shows that the projects are not designed to improve inhabitants’ living conditions. When we asked a municipal official from the Maltepe municipality if such a survey was conducted in Başlıbüyük, she said

No, we didn’t, which was a mistake on our part. But we’re learning these things as we go along. Now we have an information bureau open to everyone; we go to the neighbourhood frequently to convince people that the project is good for them ... But, you also should be aware that this is the first project of its sort in Turkey and we didn’t have any examples to learn from.
Even though the municipalities emphasise the ‘social’ aspects of the projects in various forums, there are no concrete programmes developed to improve living conditions of current residents. When the deputy mayor of Maltepe was asked, during a meeting with a group of foreign planners, what type of employment-generating programmes they have developed for inhabitants, he answered by saying that Başbüyük does not need any such programmes because it does not have an employment problem. For an hour, he argued why this project should be seen as a ‘social’ one without mentioning a single programme devised for inhabitants. In the case of Tarlabası, however, GAP offers a capacity building programme (CBP) that envisages the training of residents to work as construction workers in the UTP and to find employment in service jobs that will be generated in the area. The CBP was developed by an ‘urban consultancy agency’, which also conducted a detailed survey in the project area after the acceptance of the general framework of the project. In light of these facts, it is clear that public authorities have largely failed to formulate social policies for the existing populations of these areas. Neither the project in Başbüyük, nor the CBP in Tarlabası is effective in responding to people’s fundamental needs like education, health care and employment.

Due to these major shortcomings, we are deeply concerned that the UTPs will deepen poverty and instigate major displacement of existing populations from their neighbourhoods (Bartu-Candan and Kolluoğlu, 2008). In fact, this is a definite outcome for tenants in both areas, who are mostly excluded from the projects. In Tarlabası, where resistance continues and certain gains are expected, tenants have already started moving to other neighbourhoods where they will not face the threat of ‘transformation’. We also predict that a substantial percentage of ‘owners’ will also leave their neighbourhoods once real estate values rise as a result of the projects. In Başbüyük, for example, many inhabitants fear that they will be unable to pay the monthly instalments of the new units and afford the formalised household economy. In several interviews, residents stated that they will sell their new unit and use the cash to build a gecekondu somewhere else.

Question of Resistance: Property and Violence as Threats to Mobilisation

Large redevelopment projects, as we have argued so far, are highly effective tools in remaking urban real estate markets and restructuring urban spaces. However, the particular ways in which they transform urban areas are still determined, to a great extent, by the existing power constellations, institutional structures and market dynamics prevailing in these areas (Brenner and Theodore, 2002). In other words, localised responses to neoliberal dynamics leave their imprint on the outcome of these processes in complex and highly contingent ways. Even though this sounds like a truism, there are surprisingly few empirical studies on how local dynamics, institutions and contestations shape neoliberalising processes (Leitner et al., 2007). Our detailed analysis of the highly localised resistance strategies developed by residents and of bargaining between residents, private developers and municipal authorities aims to fill in this gap.

One of the most interesting and theoretically puzzling aspect of the UTPs we have analysed is their potential both to instigate and to hamper grassroots resistance. Our findings reveal that, in both of our cases, the strategies municipalities and their public/private partners have used to boost urban rent and redefine property structures quickly transformed the strong collective movements formed against the projects into bargaining processes for personal gain. Despite this general similarity, however, the tactics that project executors used had very different
impacts on the movements that emerged in the two neighbourhoods. In Başbüyük, an established gecekondu neighbourhood with strong social networks, the implementation of the UTP generated a swift and powerful resistance movement, which lost its fervour with an equally surprising speed. A large number of the residents have already agreed to, or are seriously considering accepting, the project terms. In contrast, in Tarlabası, a neighbourhood with relatively lower degrees of solidarity, the resistance movement has not experienced such a loss of power. Rather, the association has successfully mobilised almost all residents, including tenants, against the project. Furthermore, due to the highly effective tactics that the association developed in fighting GAP, the company agreed to revise project details in significant ways, such as agreeing to provide financial support to displaced tenants and providing more space in the project area for small businesses.

These differences can be explained by the different property/tenure structure in the two neighbourhoods and the level of violence used by the state in the implementation of the project. To start with the latter, the strength with which Başbüyük residents initially acted against the project spurred a high degree of violence by the state. For example, because the residents had put up barricades around the construction site, it was only after the deployment of more than 1000 fully armed riot police that the work machines could enter the site. The neighbourhood has been under ‘police siege’ since then and a 24-hour presence police force protects the construction site and controls all entry ways into the area. Since the stationing of the police in the area, violent confrontations between the police and inhabitants have occurred, injuring several inhabitants including children. Even though the level of violence and surveillance decreased after official negotiations with the municipality began in May, a permanent police force remains in Başbüyük. The open and frequent use of state violence cripples mobilisation and generates an unequal bargaining structure, one we call ‘bargaining under the shadow of violence’, which seriously weakens the position of the residents.

In Tarlabası, however, there is no comparable use of state violence, mainly because this UTP does not involve the clearing of an area for construction. Unlike Başbüyük, where converting a local park into a construction site instigated the conflict, such overt measures that might spark off violence are not being taken. Moreover, the state–private partnership in Tarlabası (Beyoğlu municipality and the GAP) also acts as an obstacle to the open use of violence. Since it won the bid, GAP has engaged in an intensive public relations campaign to convince both the residents and the larger public that the project is implemented in a participatory and democratic fashion.

More important in determining collective mobilisation is the prevailing property/tenure structure in these areas. The ambiguous property regime that characterises Başbüyük—where about half of the existing units have no titles, while the other half have tapu-tahsis documents—creates a very strong impediment to sustained collective resistance against the project. In the absence of legal guarantees to their property, the residents (especially those with no documents) have a strong incentive to accept the municipality’s offers. The municipality effectively uses people’s legal vulnerability and tenure insecurity to persuade them to sign the deals. Furthermore, the existing legal complexity also creates deep divides between those with tapu-tahsis documents and the ‘occupiers’. Because the former group has some level of legal security, they are more eager to resist the project and are better equipped to refuse municipal offers. Occupiers, in contrast, are more willing to partake in the project and receive an MHA unit, that can be liquidated in the market.

These structural obstacles to sustained mobilisation became very apparent after formal
bargaining started between the municipality and the association in May 2008. Since then, the appetite for private gain has weakened the collective ‘right-to-housing’-based movement, resulting in more residents agreeing to the project. The movement lost power especially after the municipality decided to increase the ‘demolition price’ for existing dwellings. The bargaining also made the rift between occupiers and tapu-tahsis holders very apparent. In the several neighbourhood meetings we attended since May, the main point of contention concerned the main beneficiaries of the resistance. The occupiers argue that the resistance strategies, including a legal battle that was recently won, only benefit those with tapu-tahsis documents. The following dialogue between the association’s president and an occupier clearly captures the divide between the two groups

P: We’re fighting for everyone’s benefit, for everyone living in Başıbüyük.

O: But, you need to understand, I don’t have any rights, any papers ... Unlike you, I’m just an occupier. I’ve nothing. When MHA comes to take my home, why would they even bargain or negotiate with me ... So, I’ll agree to the project ... My gecekondu now is worth nothing, but if I get one of the MHA flats, I can then sell it for at least 100,000.

Such rifts, caused by Başıbüyük’s property structure, make it easier for the municipality to convince more residents to accept project terms.

In Tarlabası, a different tenure structure exists, making possible a more effective resistance. Following the expulsion of non-Muslims from Tarlabası, a massive property transfer took place that created a new landlord class, who became de jure owners of the property. Since then, Tarlabası has become a secure source of income for the new landlords and an affordable residential area for low-income tenants. The UTP, which excludes the tenants and offers to owners only 42 per cent of their existing property, generated a strong reaction from both groups whose economic interests now converged. As one property owner stated

We know that these buildings will cost millions of dollars once the project is over. Why are property owners not given a share from that value and are forced to accept the ridiculous amounts offered? Or why are they being offered 35–55-square-metre flats in return for their 5–6 storey buildings? ... Isn’t this unfair?

Tenants are also keenly aware that they will be displaced as a result of the project, which will significantly increase rents in the area.

To turn these negative sentiments into an effective movement against the UTP, a group of owners formed an association on February 2008. Thanks to the efforts of a particularly adept community organiser, Erdal Aybek, and three volunteer lawyers, the association succeeded in collecting more than 200 letters of attorney from owners. Accumulation of these letters still continues, reinforcing the representativeness of the association. Equally important, many tenants have also joined the movement, which has strengthened the position of the association in its negotiations with GAP and conferred upon it more legitimacy among the public. The following words of one tenant, a transvestite sex worker who has lived in her apartment for eight years, is common among others

I’m confident that my landlord and the association will defend my cause together with theirs. He keeps me up-to-date with what’s happening and we discuss the matter frequently. We share the same perspective: they should get what they deserve and so should I.

It is also common for tenants to attend meetings organised by GAP on the side of their landlords.

The first significant result of this mobilisation was the inclusion of the association in the
official talks between the municipality and GAP as a third party in March 2008. The legal guarantee that a formal title gives to owners makes them stronger in the bargainings with GAP and the municipality, compared with the informal occupants of Ba¸sıbüyük. For example, after GAP pledged to make some revisions to project terms as a result of the negotiations, the association found these revisions insufficient and left the bargaining table. Following the termination of talks, the association effectively prevented individual negotiations between residents and the representatives of the other side, a process that seriously weakened the movement in Ba¸sıbüyük. By blocking the signing of the deals, the association has so far succeeded in suspending the project. Furthermore, as a result of this resistance, GAP has agreed to provide temporary financial assistance to tenants who choose to purchase MHA units in Kayaba¸sı.

Despite the association’s success so far in defending the rights of all residents, we suspect that the coalition between owners and tenants is a fragile one, likely to dissolve if owners can secure more gains. In an area with such high rates of tenancy and absentee landlordism, we fear that, as the association wins at the bargaining table, tenants will inevitably be displaced. This (paradoxical) situation is also acknowledged by Mr Aybek, who in our first interview strongly emphasised that no one (including tenants) will be forced to leave Tarlaba¸sı, but changed this discourse in one of our subsequent interviews.

When we first found out about the project, it was too late to take it to the court. People were worried that they’d suddenly lose their properties that they worked so hard to acquire. Under these circumstances, I mean if they are really going to kick us out, we’ve no chance other than fighting until we get what we deserve.

The fact that the association has not yet joined the Chamber of Architects in their lawsuit against the project also shows that it wants to put as much pressure as possible on the municipality and GAP in order to secure maximum gains rather than protecting everyone’s right to housing in the area.

To sum up, we argue that the form and strength of collective mobilisation are significant variables in shaping how the projects are implemented and in determining their social and economic consequences. Our cases show that effective and sustained resistance movements, especially when joining forces with supralocal organisations, can challenge these top–down impositions and bring about important gains (see also Eckstein, 1990). Yet, as Castells argues, movements for collective consumption goods in low-income communities tend to be fragile and short-lived, due to important structural impediments to movement-building (Castells, 1983). The resistance movements we have observed were particularly threatened by a lack of movement building experience, state violence and, most importantly, by the appetite for private gain that UTPs instigate among certain inhabitants, which intensifies the divisions already existing in these communities. The impact of this ‘collective action problem’ is intensified when people have no legal guarantees to their property, as in Ba¸sıbüyük. When residents start pursuing short-term private interests at the expense of long-term collective goals, it becomes much easier for project executors to take over their property and implement the project.

**Conclusion**

The mounting infrastructural and socio-economic problems caused by Istanbul’s unplanned and unregulated growth makes radical interventions into the built environment in the form of ‘renewal’ or ‘transformation’ projects a necessity, especially given the major earthquake threat the city faces. The current UTPs implemented in the city, however, seem unlikely to accomplish their stated
goals—i.e. eradicating poor-quality housing, creating a more sustainable and livable urban environment, and improving the lives of the urban poor. Rather, these radical state-led interventions into urban space and land/housing markets act as tools for ‘marketing’ certain potential rent-zones to stronger actors. They are mostly concerned with the physical and demographic upgrading and beautification of their respective areas to increase real estate values, which makes it difficult for current ‘users’ to remain in the area.

As our analysis of two UTPs demonstrates, the project executors make full use of the legal, coercive and financial powers of the state forcefully to transfer property from legally and socioeconomically vulnerable urbanites to stronger ‘urban entrepreneurs’ like the GAP or the MHA. Therefore, urban renewal policies, as they are currently implemented, are likely to create widespread dispossession and displacement. The unconstrained involvement of the state in this process poses serious ethical questions. Nothing captures these concerns better than the words of one of our informants from the Başbüyük neighbourhood:

Mr Erdoğan [the prime minister] was talking about starting a visa procedure for those who want to move to Istanbul. Soon he won’t have to come up with such inventions since these UTPs will force people to go back to their villages.

Because they are not supported by any kind of social or employment-generating programmes, the UTPs are likely to cause gentrification and population transfer.

Finally, our analysis documents the various tactics of resistance developed by those who are subject to ‘transformation’ in order to protect their interests against public and private agents. As we have shown, these grassroots movements face numerous challenges for sustained mobilisation such as state violence, lack of experience, internal divisions and the divide-and-rule tactics of project implementers. Despite all these obstacles, however, they have achieved some important gains and have shaped the projects in critical ways. The most significant gain was won as we were completing this article. On 15 November 2008, we attended a community meeting in Başbüyük, the purpose of which was to inform the residents of a legal victory that the association has won against the MHA and the municipality. As a result of the concerted efforts of the association’s volunteer lawyer and various NGOs, the 5th Administrative Court of Istanbul ordered the Başbüyük UTP to be stopped because “it violates conceptions of public good, principles of urban planning and rules of democratic governance.”38 This is a major legal victory that is likely to set a precedent for other projects. In the meantime, in Tarlabas, the metropolitan municipality has initiated a major reassessment of the project, mainly because of the association’s uncompromising attitude. In both cases, without the swift mobilisation of the residents and the creative strategies used by the associations, the gains would have been impossible. It is our hope that these struggles pave the ground for the implementation of a more democratic, egalitarian and inclusionary ‘urban transformation’ agenda, which would strive for the social, economic and political empowerment of inhabitants in addition to physical upgrading and rent-seeking.

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Notes

1. Gecekondu is the Turkish word for squatter housing. It literally means ‘landed overnight’. 
2. The JDP got 72 per cent of the votes in Başbüyük in the 2004 local elections and 55 per cent in the 2007 general elections. 
3. MHA, the Mass Housing Administration, is the governmental agency responsible for the provisioning of public housing. It also is a central actor in the implementation of UTPs, as we discuss later in the paper. 
4. Fikri Köse is the mayor of Maltepe from the ruling JDP. 
5. Formed in 2006 with 21 neighbourhood associations, the platform aims to form a unified front against demolitions and displacement caused by UTPs. 
6. The GAP Construction Company won the tender for the renewal project in Tarlabası and is currently implementing it. It is part of the Çalık Holding Group, famously known for its close ties to the ruling JDP. The son-in-law of the Prime Minister is the CEO of Çalık Holding. 
7. The association was formed in March 2008, in response to the Tarlabası Transformation Project. 
8. Law for the Protection of Dilapidated Historical and Cultural Real Estate through Protection by Renewal, enacted in 2005. It constitutes the legal basis for the renewal project in Tarlabası. 
9. The tenure structure in Başbüyük is complex. Around half of the inhabitants are ‘occupiers’ with no legal claims to their land, whereas the rest have ‘use-rights’, recognised by the state, that they have acquired after 1984. We discuss this in more detail later in the paper. 
10. These two case studies are part of our individual research projects. One of us researches the transformation of informal housing markets under neo-liberalisation. The Başbüyük case is part of this research, which also focuses on the Ayazma-Tepeüstü UTP, implemented in the Küçükçekmece district. The other studies the transformations in the ‘historical protection zone’ in the past five years, focusing closely on the Tarlabası and Sulukule UTPs. 
11. The existing research on the long-term profitability and sustainability of such mega-projects yields mixed and inconclusive results. Despite this reality, however, they remain highly popular among ‘growth coalitions’. 
13. The authors thank Cem Bico for providing this figure. 
14. Founded in 1984 to provide affordable housing and to regulate rapid urbanisation, the MHA played a very important role in Istanbul’s urban expansion during the 1980s and 1990s, mostly through providing credit to housing co-operatives. For a detailed discussion, see Burkay (2006). 
16. Since 2003, 65,808,239 square metres of land have been transferred to MHA ownership, with no cost (Radikal, 27 May 2008). Between 2003 and 2008, the MHA constructed about 340,000 housing units, 50,000 of which are in Istanbul, 317 trade centres and 30 hospitals, in addition to numerous other structures (www.toki.gov.tr) 
17. Private actors in the market have started to raise serious concerns about this overpowered state agency. The CEO of a REIT whom we interviewed argued that, by dominating the sector, MHA is violating free-market principles and hurting the interests of private firms. When asked why the MHA is so active in the construction sector, our interviewee said, off the record, “How many votes do you think are won with the sale of those cheap apartment units?”. 
18. See note 7. 
19. As of 2001, housing credits amounted to US$800 million, constituting 0.75 per cent of GNP (www.tcmb.gov.tr). By 2005, they increased to 5 per cent. Just to give some figures of comparison: in Greece, housing credits constitute 15 per cent of GNP, in Italy 13.3 per cent and in Spain 42 per cent. 
20. Some 59 per cent and 57 per cent of households own their dwellings in Turkey and Istanbul respectively. These numbers are inflated due to gecekondu ownership (Turkish Statistics Institute (TURKSTAT), 2000).
21. The primary mechanism of homeownership in Turkey is using one's own funds, borrowing from friends/relatives or gecekondu construction. Research by TURKSTAT (2004) shows that 63 per cent of respondents used their own funds, 23 per cent borrowed, 8 per cent joined co-operatives and only 3 per cent used bank credits to buy housing.

22. According to the zoning law, a tapu tahsis document guarantees a future de jure property right, either to the property that they 'own' or to another dwelling built elsewhere. If a gecekondu area receives a formal plan, then the tapu tahsis documents may be turned into formal tapus (deeds).

23. The 2008 report of Colliers International focuses on the vast potential of the area for private developers, particularly emphasising 'gecekondu transformation projects' and unused factory buildings as the strengths of this region.

24. In 1964, a large number of Greek nationals and ethnically Greek citizens of Turkey were forced to leave the country, in the midst of a political crisis between Greece and Turkey. See Akar and Demir (1994) for more details.

25. According to the 2000 census, south-eastern Anatolians, the majority of whom are Kurdish, constitute the the largest group in Tarlabası.

26. In Talimhane, a neighbourhood adjacent to Tarlabası that became a hotel quarter, the value of buildings increased to US$3,000,000 (Yeni Şafak, 13 August 2007).

27. In Başköyük, only 18 per cent of the population completed a stage higher than primary school and 22 per cent do not even hold a primary school diploma. Nine per cent of the neighbourhood is illiterate, with women making up 80 per cent of the illiterate (TURKSTAT, 2000).

28. The inflow of large numbers of internally displaced Kurds to Tarlabası, some of whom do not speak any Turkish, is an important reason for the high rates of illiteracy in the area.

29. What is interesting in this category is the predominance of female workers, whose numbers substantially increased between 1990 and 2000, showing the feminisation of low-end service jobs.

30. One survey conducted in Tarlabası in 2008 reveals that 64 per cent of the residents lack social security (Kentsel Strateji, 2008). We predict the percentage to be higher than this.

31. Roughly 400,000 square metres. This constitutes about half of the neighbourhood.

32. The total number of MHA blocks to be built in the area is unknown. The project will be implemented in consecutive stages, meaning that as gecekondu are demolished, new buildings will be constructed on cleared plots.

33. According to the project catalogue, the project comprises 52 per cent residential, 12 per cent commercial, 17 per cent tourist and 14 per cent office buildings.

34. This meeting took place on 7 November 2008. One of the authors acted as an interpreter for the group.


36. In their research examining another UTP implemented in Istanbul, Bartu-Candan and Kolluoğlu extensively document the processes of displacement and the relocation of poverty triggered by UTPs. They show that a substantial amount of those relocated to public housing units from a poor gecekondu area are selling their units due to economic hardship and moving to more marginalised locations.


38. Case No. 2007/1203.

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