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Mardin Lockdown Experience: Strategies for a More Tolerant Urban Development

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The COVID-19 crises created a drastic confrontation with our urban, and housing environments. This chapter examines two very different parts of the city of Mardin, Turkey, one modern and one traditional, and how they dealt with the first wave of the pandemic. During the lockdown, the modern part of the city that was primarily developed through generic urban development patterns based on modernist infrastructure, went through a complete paralysis. The insufficiency of living conditions within the apartments and interrupted service provision emerged as the most problematic issues. On the other hand the historic parts of Mardin, built using traditional design, sustained a healthier context, despite lacking many of the comforts of modern living and modern housing. Experiencing these differences in lockdown the old city center's efficiency in dealing with the pandemic, compared with the ineffectiveness of more modern neighborhoods evoked the need to explore the features of our cities that create more self-sufficient, and thus, tolerable living conditions in the COVID-19 era.

The urbanization of Turkey is generally analyzed in three consecutive periods that correspond to major social, political, economic, and spatial transformations: The Early Republican Era of 1920–50, the Post-War era of 1950–80, and the Neoliberal Era of post-1980 (Bozdogan, 2001, Akcan, 2012). The first period 'was a scene for the emergence of the Turkish nation-state and the ambitious modernization efforts of the nationalist elite. The second period corresponds to the post-war era marked by popularization of politics and the unprecedented urban sprawl in Turkish cities, and finally, the post-1980 era reflects the integration of Turkey's economy into the neoliberal world market and the cultural effects of globalization' (Batuman, 2014: 270). The first era was ideologically centered on creating a modern national identity from scratch, liberated from any bonds to the past, including the 600 years of the Ottoman era. Thus, socio-cultural modernization and its urban correspondence utilized Tabula Rasa[1] as a means of that ideology. Starting from the second era, though, with accelerated industrialization, increasing rural-urban migrations, and liberalization in economics, modern urban development could only become an urgent response to the housing problem of vast numbers of migrating populations. Leaving aside design and planning procedures along with the consideration of geography-specific natural, socio-cultural, and economic contexts, a mass sprawl of uniform urban development occurred during this era.

The new settlements of Mardin developed in this context. They are an agglomeration of uniform apartment blocks with standardized apartment units, ungrounded in terms of their relations with the existing local contexts. The old city center, on the other hand, developed for centuries through an accumulated knowledge that emerged through a combination of diverse natural, socio-cultural, and economic parameters specific to certain geographies. The extreme conditions of COVID-19 created an opportunity to realize and observe key features of our environments that appear to be efficient

in dealing with crises. Although modern infrastructure has its benefits, the defects of modern developments came to surface during the first wave of the pandemic, especially due to their disengagement with their local context, resulting in high levels of reliance on service infrastructures. On the other hand, some features of traditional neighborhoods made them more conducive during a time of an immediate crisis, even despite their disadvantages in providing certain comforts of modern living. In this sense, tolerance through self-sufficiency emerged as a key compound that needs to be explored. This chapter aims to examine the efficient features of our living environments in relation to the contingency of city-making processes, in order to develop future visions for design and urban planning.

The city of Mardin: a historical background

Mardin is a historic city in south-east Turkey, on the Syrian border. Developed as a military post of the East Roman Empire, the historic architectural heritage of the city dates back to the 12th, 16th, and 19th centuries (Alioglu, 2000). The old city center was built with traditional stone buildings, terraced on a slope overlooking Mesopotamia Plain. The old city developed organically: interwoven along the topography, with narrow, shaded pathways *snuggling* through. This organic pattern is also manifested in the organic structure of the society built upon kinship, communality, and solidarity.

Geographical restrictions both for urban growth and the penetration of modern urban infrastructure, such as transportation, water, natural gas, and waste-collection, directed new development to the north-western plains in the 1980s (Çağlayan, 2016). Following the general urbanization trends noted earlier, the new settlements of Mardin developed in this period with generic housing estates and individual apartment blocks (Tekeli, 2009, Çağlayan, 2016). After the relocation of the administrative center to these new settlements at the end of the 1990s, they became popular living environments for the

Figure 5.1: Mardin, new settlement and the old city center (Source: author's photograph)

middle and upper classes, who were attracted to, and could afford a modern living (Çağlayan, 2016) (Figure 5.1).This resulted in the desolation of the traditional housing stock in the old city center by the owners. Together with accelerating immigration from rural areas in the late 1990s, the old city was left to middle- and lower-income groups, most of whom were tenants (Tuncer and Aksulu, 1993).

Meanwhile, the old city center was declared a historical preservation site in 1979, and listed in UNESCO's Temporary List of World Heritage in 2000 (Çağlayan, 2016). In parallel to government-let renovations, the housing stock within the neighborhoods was also transformed by user-made additions, resulting in the self-organized and unique architectural environment of today.

The socio-cultural and economic structure of the city has also transformed, especially with migrations. First came the rural-urban migration of the 1990s, which has been followed by an accelerating rate of immigration from Syria since 2011. Due to the existing socio-cultural diversity, lower rents, and prevailing local economics, the old city could absorb the effects of the immigration crisis more effectively. The diverse socio-cultural structure of the city, consisting of Turkish-Arabs, Kurds, and Assyrians, already created a tolerant environment. The ongoing economic structure in the old city of Mardin consisting of small-scale manufacturing workshops and small retailers sustained a flexible economic structure in which

the refugees could take part, making use of their skills and know-how.

As a result of these developments, the new settlement became a more popular destination for more affluent residents, while the old city of Mardin, deprived of the comforts of modern living, and populated highly by lower-income groups, was considered to be a disadvantaged environment. However, COVID-19 reversed the situation in favor of the old city. Although very advantageous in service provision, during the first wave of the pandemic, the new settlement appeared to fail in relieving the psychological effects of the lockdown, such as feelings of imprisonment. The poor quality and generic designs of the apartments in the new settlements, and lack of involvement of natural assets in design and planning processes resulted in a less tolerant urban environment for residents. The old city, on the other hand, has challenging living conditions, such as freezing water, the difficulties of stove heating in winters, and the general lack of municipal services. However, during the pandemic, in provided a healthier and more comfortable living. This was as a result of its tolerant and self-sufficient spatial, socio-cultural, and economic structure.

A tolerant living environment: a comparison of the new settlement and the old city of Mardin

The concept of tolerance is interpreted here as the ability of our cities to cope with the unpredictable conditions created by crises, especially in terms of the immediate response upon the first encounter. In this context, self-sufficiency of the living environment plays a crucial role. In the old city of Mardin, permeability of spatial, socio-cultural, and economic relations emerged as a result of the specific local context, and became the driving force in providing a more self-sufficient and tolerant environment. A comparison of the two different urban settings, the old city and the new settlement of Mardin, in

COVID-19 lockdowns[2] through these concepts would give a valuable insight for further discussions.

The old city center developed through organic patterns and could easily be perceived as a natural extension of the topography. The settlement is tightly interwoven and it is impossible to either identify or extricate *one house* from the whole. Each house consists of rectangular units of varying sizes and functions, organized horizontally following an L- or a U-shape, creating a unique spatial organization. The horizontal and vertical layout of these units through the topography, while forming inner courtyards, *eyvans*,[3] and terraces, also enables permeability in both directions. The *dam* – rooftop – of one unit becomes the terrace of another on the upper part of the slope. The spatial permeability occurs on two levels: first, within the house and second, between the *outside* and the house. Closed, open, or semi-open spaces within the houses – being *out* in the open air, while still staying *inside* the house – appeared to be one of the most important factors in alleviating the effects of the lockdown (Figure 5.2). Compared to the definitive borders of the apartments in the new settlement, where balconies became the only access to fresh air, sunlight, and social contact, the perception of confinement is reduced substantially. This was especially apparent for children who could maintain most of their daily recreation routines *in* and *out* of the house. Spatial permeability also strengthens the already-existing permeability of social relations. Pedestrian-oriented pathways of the old city act as an extension to the houses, or open spaces within the houses create visual and social contact between different households. Disturbing in normal times, generally creating an invasion of privacy, and community pressure on domestic life, visual permeability eased social interaction during the lockdowns. On the other hand, due to their spatial organization and lack in responding to the existing topography, the apartment blocks of the new settlement are unable to provide the possibility of interaction with the surrounding open space (Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.2: Permeability of socio-spatial borders in the Old Settlement of Mardin (Source: author's photographs)

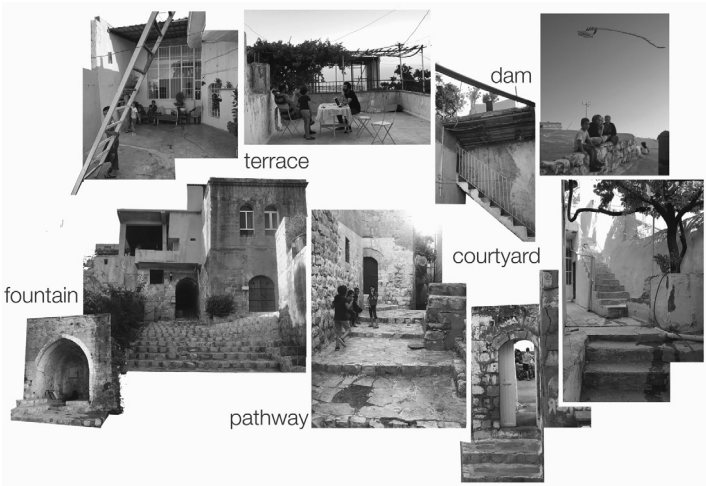

Figure 5.3: New Settlement, built without regard for the local topography (Source: author's photograph)

Another important factor in creating a self-sufficient living is the house's integration to the urban economy. House, *oikos* in ancient Greek, was the core of ancient society and economy (Davies, 1992). In traditional means, the *house* is an *ecological* being, *housing* the family and means of domestic production (Davies, 1992; Cox, 1998). Within the persisting traditional living in the old city of Mardin, the house still maintains this basic role. Due to the living habits and availability of space, the house provides for vegetative and animal production, utilizing the endemic flora and fauna of the region. In comparison, the new settlements of Mardin are detached from land, and therefore connections to domestic food production; as a result, they are far more dependent on services and businesses.

The utilization of natural water resources is another factor in enabling a self-sufficient living. The old city was built on a slope with underground water reserves. Composed of cisterns and wells within the houses, and fountains dispersed throughout the city, this ancient water infrastructure still supplies water for domestic use. In contrast with the new settlement, where drinking water is supplied from the supermarkets, permanent and first-hand access becomes a major relief especially in the first encounter with a crisis like COVID-19.

The self-sufficient living in the old city is also supported by the prevailing local social network and economy. The organic socio-cultural structure that is built upon kinship, solidarity, and strong neighborhood relations creates a sense of communal support in any crisis. On the other hand, the introverted apartment living characteristic of new settlements, generates individuality and appears to be disadvantageous when the support of a communal body becomes a relief. Facilitated by these organic and permeable social relations, prevailing local economics also enables immediate access to basic needs if required: the baker, the butcher, or the grocer are neighbors or an acquaintance of a neighbor. Relying mostly on a high number of national chain stores which operate on

an institutional level instead of personal initiation, the new settlement is less efficient in sustaining the immediate needs of its inhabitants in a crisis.

All these factors that maintain a tolerant urban living depend on the active involvement of citizens in both the processes of city-making and the utilization of the features of an urban environment. Tolerance in an urban sense involves the capacity of our cities for self-organization: a thousand years of practiced ability of humanity to take personal or communal initiation, in creating our social, cultural, political, economic, and urban system in the first place (De Landa, 2003). It is a practiced ability, although active in local contexts, loosened by the service-dependent systems. And it has become one of the main forces in the COVID-19 crisis, performing within the existing system, to empower the self-sufficiency of our living environments.

Conclusion

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, the boundaries of our homes and immediate neighborhoods became the limits of our daily lives. Locked up in our houses, we realized what basics make a living environment healthy in both the physiological and psychological sense: accessibility to fresh air, sunlight, food, natural resources, and social network even in a limited sense. Thus, the necessity of living in urban environments providing for these basics has now become more apparent (see also Hubbard, Chapter Four). The processes of city-making therefore need to be reconsidered to generate urban systems tolerant enough to sustain the basics of living under certain restrictions. In this context, relative self-sufficiency and independence from service infrastructures appear to be vital. A comprehensive and place-specific interpretation of the notion of permeability in spatial, socio-cultural, and economic means necessitate more self-sufficient environments that are grounded in the immanent, accumulated knowledge of the place.

The comparison of the new and the old settlement of Mardin in this sense demonstrates some key features to be involved in more tolerant future urban development strategies: engagement with the topographic conditions and a reconsideration of the definitive borders of apartment blocks to create permeability between the indoor and outdoor spaces; utilization of the existing natural resources; flexible policies for spatial, socio-cultural, and economic organization to allow self-organization, personal, and communal initiation while reducing service-dependency; urban economic development considering and supporting local capacities.

Those limited number of strategies that could vary depending on the local contexts, could make way for a more grounded, thus, tolerant living environment. Perhaps, the main deficiency of urban strategies in Turkey has been the disengagement from the existing local knowledge, and intolerance towards the self-organizational nature of the being. Living through an age of crises, especially this very short period of the one brought about by COVID-19, it becomes an even more urgent task to shift our approach to our living environment. Immanent geographic, socio-cultural, and economic knowledge of a place is accumulated over centuries and emerged and developed through our harmonious *coexistence* with the earth. Ignoring this knowledge is no less than cutting off that vital relationship. Traditional environments, still embodying that knowledge, present us with an opportunity to re-discover and re-evaluate. It is not about praising the traditional, or an impossible restoring of the old. But instead of 'a colossal and shapeless agglomeration' (Lefebvre, 1996: 148), developing *contingent* urban development strategies that are grounded in the existing dynamics of life.

Notes

[1] The concept of Tabula Rasa dates back to Aristotle but with John Locke it has gained its modern interpretation as the philosophical idea of Blank slate (Tournikiotis, 1999) In 20th-century modernism the concept refers

to a fresh start with the 'erasure' and 'rupture' of the existing traditional environment in creating a new urban setting, unleashed from the limiting impositions of the traditional (Kaasa, 2016: 2). Considering the urban history of Turkish Republic, here the concept refers to the generic urban development strategies disengaged from local contexts.

[2] In Turkey, the strict precautions and partial lockdowns of COVID-19 lasted for two and a half months, between March 16 and June 1, 2020.

[3] *Eyvan* is the main semi-open living area of a traditional house, common in the southeast of Turkey. Opening to an inner courtyard or a terrace on one side, and enclosed by rooms of different functions on the other three, eyvan is also the main circulation space of the house.

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