

THRESHOLDS 40

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THRESHOLDS 40

SOCIO

EDITED BY JONATHAN CRISMAN

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Cambridge, MA

CONTENTS

- 5 EDITORIAL:  
SOCIO-INDEMNITY AND  
OTHER MOTIVES  
— JONATHAN CRISMAN
- 11 CONJURING UTOPIA'S GHOST  
— REINHOLD MARTIN
- 21 LE CORBUSIER, THE BRISE-SOLEIL,  
AND THE SOCIO-CLIMATIC PROJECT  
OF MODERN ARCHITECTURE,  
1929-1963  
— DANIEL A. BARBER
- 33 MOVE ALONG!  
THERE IS NOTHING TO SEE  
— RANIA GHOSN
- 39 FLOW'S SOCIO-SPATIAL  
FORMATION  
— NANA LAST
- 47 COLLECTIVE EQUIPMENTS OF  
POWER: THE ROAD AND THE CITY  
— SIMONE BROTT
- 55 COLLECTIVE FORM:  
THE STATUS OF PUBLIC  
ARCHITECTURE  
— DANA CUFF
- 67 TUKTOYAKTUK: OFFSHORE OIL  
AND A NEW ARCTIC URBANISM  
— PAMELA RITCHOT
- 75 BOUNDARY LINE INFRASTRUCTURE  
— RONALD RAEI
- 83 DISSOLVING THE GREY PERIPHERY  
— NEERAJ BHATIA AND  
ALEXANDER D'HOOGHE
- 91 PARK AS PHILANTHROPY:  
BOW-WOW'S REDEVELOPMENT  
AT MIYASHITA KOEN  
— YOSHIHARU TSUKAMOTO
- 99 MUSSELS IN CONCRETE: A SOCIAL  
ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE  
— ESEN GÖKÇE ÖZDAMAR
- 105 PARTICIPATION AND/OR  
CRITICALITY? THOUGHTS ON AN  
ARCHITECTURAL PRACTICE FOR  
URBAN CHANGE  
— KENNY CUPERS AND  
MARKUS MIESSEN
- 113 THE *SLUIPWEG* AND  
THE HISTORY OF DEATH  
— MARK JARZOMBK

CONTENTS

- 121 EXTRA ROOM:  
WHAT IF WE LIVED IN A  
SOCIETY WHERE OUR EVERY  
THOUGHT WAS PUBLIC?  
— GUNNAR GREEN  
AND BERNHARD  
HOPFENGÄRTNER
- 127 *SCULPTURE FIELD*: FROM THE  
SYMBOLIC TO THE TECTONIC  
— DAN HANDEL
- 135 ON *RADIATION BURN*  
— STEVE KURTZ
- 163 *CAIRO DI SOPRA IN GIÙ*:  
PERSPECTIVE, PHOTOGRAPHY,  
AND THE “EVERYDAY”  
— CHRISTIAN A. HEDRICK
- 175 HUSH  
— STEVEN BECKLY AND  
JONATHAN D. KATZ
- 189 NORCS IN NEW YORK  
— INTERBORO PARTNERS
- 209 UNCOMMON GROUND:  
AETHER, BODY, AND COMMONS  
— ZISSIS KOTIONIS
- 217 EDENS, ISLANDS, ROOMS  
— AMRITA MAHINDROO
- 225 THE PRINCE:  
BJARKE INGELS’S SOCIAL  
CONSPIRACY  
— JUSTIN FOWLER
- 233 BEYOND DOING GOOD:  
CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE AS DESIGN  
PEDAGOGY  
— HANNAH ROSE MENDOZA
- 237 AID, CAPITAL, AND THE  
HUMANITARIAN TRAP  
— JOSEPH M. WATSON
- 245 THE END OF CIVILIZATION  
— DANIEL DAOU
- 255 TOWARD A LAKE ONTARIO CITY  
— DEPARTMENT OF  
UNUSUAL CERTAINTIES
- 263 SOCIOPATHS  
— JIMENEZ LAI

# MUSSELS IN CONCRETE:

A SOCIAL  
ARCHITECTURAL  
PRACTICE

ESEN GÖKÇE ÖZDAMAR

1

*Play in the District* was also installed as a documentary film in exhibitions *In-Between-Arada-Tra and Lives and Works in Istanbul*. See Ays e Orhun Gültekin, ed., *In Between = Arada = Tra* (Istanbul: Visual Arts Directorate, 2010).

2

Arzu Kusaslan, interview with author, 2010.

3

Gültekin, *In Between = Arada = Tra*.

4

Although participatory methods in architecture and urban planning at both the individual and institutional level have been applied in many Western countries since the 1960s, few projects in this tradition have been realized in Turkey.

*Play in the District*, an installation by architect Arzu Kusaslan exhibited in Antoni Muntadas’s “Istanbul In-Between” workshop, addresses questions of public involvement in the urban transformation of Zeytinburnu County, Istanbul.<sup>1</sup> Kusaslan states that one of her primary objectives was to explore the artistic possibilities arising from community involvement.<sup>2</sup> She proposed to transform the neglected ground within the county by the re-activation of textile workshops and the transformation of a neglected alleyway into a playground, revealing the unforeseen potentials of these spaces FIG. 1. With the use of tactile materials in the designated playground street, the textile workshops can recall the former identity of Zeytinburnu as the center of the leather and textile industry as far back as 1453.<sup>3</sup> This aimed to produce urban regeneration as part of Kusaslan’s project.

According to Muntadas, the state of “in-between” in Istanbul was to be approached through individual encounters between the artist and the city. As Kusaslan lives and works in the community, her familiarity with the dynamics of the area enabled her to work closely with the residents to test the effects of the county’s rapid urbanization—and her transformation of an alleyway into a playground compelled participation of neighborhood residents. In the urban landscape of Istanbul, the project showed a promising means to break the static relation between public space and architecture FIG. 2. Kusaslan’s project was an act of architectural social organization that was new to Turkey.<sup>4</sup> Its use of participation could be a prototype for planning in Zeytinburnu County, and serves as a model for urban transformation in Istanbul at large.



FIG. 1— View from the back entrance of the street.



FIG. 2— The video installation of *Play in the District*, in Tophane-i Amire, Istanbul.

## ZEYTINBURNU COUNTY

The first migrants came to Zeytinburnu in the 1950s, and the county became one of the first and largest squatter areas in Istanbul. Even though legislation was passed to prevent *gecekondus*, or slum buildings, in 1960, their rate of construction continued to rise. Additionally, with a rapid population increase from the 1970s onwards, *gecekondus* were

replaced by multi-story, concrete apartment blocks. Erected on informally subdivided land, these blocks lacked infrastructure and public open space. During the construction of these newly erected buildings, speed over quality resulted in the use of materials that could be found easily in the existing area. Mussel shells from the coast of the Marmara Sea were incorporated into the cement mixture to satisfy demand. Despite poor structural capacities, “musselled” buildings became increasingly common. The typical building consisted of a textile workshop on the ground floor and several residences above, and the county was transformed into a bustling, semi-industrial area. Already a dense and congested region, Zeytinburnu was heavily damaged in the 1999 Istanbul earthquake and became a pilot region for the Earthquake Master Plan of Istanbul.<sup>5</sup> During execution of the plan, reinforcement and destruction of buildings occurred simultaneously. Due to the lack of a proper relocation scheme, low-income groups from the region were relocated to other parts of the Marmara Region without infrastructure or means of livelihood.<sup>6</sup> This situation was further exacerbated by the 2003 economic crisis, ultimately affecting more than 300,000 residents.

5  
According to the plan, 14% of buildings and heavily damaged housing units in the county are to be demolished over a 20 year span. See <http://www.ibb.gov.tr>.

6  
Ibid.

7  
One of the dweller-rights activist groups is *Sokaklar Bizim Platform* which aims to increase consciousness on urban life, improve conditions on streets, and support walkable communities.

## THE PARTICIPATION PROCESS

Kusaslan negotiated the feasibility of the project with the Zeytinburnu Municipality Consultant, Vice Mayor, and Mayor. They were enthusiastic about the idea and offered to conduct a poll in collaboration with a sociologist. Kusaslan worked closely with the sociologist as well as a historian, a city planner, and a dweller-rights activist group<sup>7</sup> to design the poll. Along with assistants from the Visual Arts Directorate, Kusaslan presented the project to 287 dwellers in the county FIG. 3. This group constituted a representative sample of Turkish society, including minority groups, making the survey an effective means to understand the effects of urban transformation on Zeytinburnu’s residents.

The Visual Arts Directorate provided a space in their offices for community meetings, but the residents felt uncomfortable in the government setting due to a common fear of urban transformation and relocation regulations. Ultimately, meetings were held in a bakery.<sup>8</sup> In this comfortable setting, those whose voices are often silenced by fear were able to speak publicly through models, drawings, and debates on



FIG. 3— A participant encountering the project.



8

Bakeries, as well as coffeehouses, have a historical social importance for meetings in Turkish society.

9

Feyzan Erkip, "Global Transformations Versus Local Dynamics in Istanbul Planning in a Fragmented Metropolis," *Cities* 17, no. 5 (2000): 374.

urban and housing issues FIG. 4. Despite independent funding, the process was interrupted by the Municipality's decision to withdraw from the project. The Mayor rejected the project based on a 10% abstaining group—which consisted mostly of homemakers who based their decision on influence from their spouses. About 2% of the abstaining group had no children and their decision was based on possible noise from the children in the proposed playground. The remaining 8% was unable to take the poll as they were hesitant about their future. There was speculation, however, that this group, in actuality, was afraid of breaking advantageous connections with the Municipality.



FIG. 4— Community charrette meetings.

## ART, ARCHITECTURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Kusaslan attempted to link dwellers to their environment through political dynamics of the city, and ended up succeeding in exposing a political and cultural narrative on the boundary between the urban and class isolation. Migration and poor planning tends to change urban space, and the processes of relocation tend to exacerbate changes such as class isolation. As Feyzan Erkip states, the 1980s saw the development

of these sorts of new narratives in the urban landscape: "When controlling power over land development and use was transferred to greater and district municipalities, this change was expected to give way to the participation of planning professionals at the local level. Now, it is clear that the new distribution of power between central and local governments made urban land more available for big construction companies instead of squatters."<sup>9</sup> The retraction of the Zeytinburnu Municipality exhibits this narrative, as those with political power voiced support for the project, yet their actions proved contrary.

These narratives demonstrate that the public and, in particular, architects can be marginalized with non-participatory government decision-making. They are not included in the process but, moreover, they *do not desire to be included* in the process. Getting involved is regarded as a loss of time for a hopeless struggle against rules. Here, only a small group of architects become interested in these issues, such as the participants of *Play in the District*. In order to challenge

the slow, top-down relocation process, which has historically resulted in a lack of space for debate, of exchanges of ideas, and of productive friction, architects and artists have installed transient, participatory spaces for gathering as an artistic methodology. In line with Michel de Certeau's notion on the development of a city through its social activity, movement of people, and experience of creative practice,<sup>10</sup> the narrative of "the urban" is shaped by the elements of the urban entity itself.

Similarly, as Turkish architect and art critic Aykut Köksal suggests, the city is not designed and finished but, rather, transitory and temporary. He argues that the city in these circumstances is a non-place,<sup>11</sup> due to variable spatial contexts and multiple realities. The city dynamically reconstructs itself through these flows between autonomous entities, and transforms its elements by articulating them with their changing relation to the whole. Barriers between the autonomous art object and urban space are broken down with contemporary artistic methodologies and with urban modernity. Art has become a tool for interrogative architectural practice. Kusaslan's project demonstrates the diminishing barriers between the built and the unbuilt environment. The roles of planner and dweller blur, reflecting Nicolas Bourriaud's idea of transitivity as the "tangible property of the artwork."<sup>12</sup> The transitivity of the art project creates a more reliable background for approaching the dweller, since it is not perceived as a concrete architectural project. This idea of approaching the spectator by demolishing the boundaries between art and architecture is intrinsic to Kusaslan's project.

In *Play in the District*, the government's legitimating of the lack-of-land protection laws is forced to reconcile with the dwellers observation of irrational urban planning in the county. The contradiction between the government's declaration that an abstaining group opposed urban transformation and the fact that the majority of those living in the area are ignored becomes evident. The project suggests that one way architects and artists can react or oppose abuses of power is through linking art, architecture, and urban planning.

Today, the construction of housing is viewed as the most important tool toward the reconstruction of Istanbul as a global city. Through the construction of housing, the government and developers try to give an identity to new areas. Shortcomings that might be addressed through participation, however, still appears to be politically unfeasible. Furthermore, the city requires more than housing development—it requires a fundamental shift in sociocultural understanding. Urban transformation, detached from social structure, needs to be taken as a new transdisciplinary strategy where the participants

10

Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): 117.

11

Aykut Köksal, "istanbul: Hazır Ba lam," *Sanat Dünyamız* 78 (2000): 91-94.

12

Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (New York: Les Presses Du Reel, 2002): 26. Consider also Bourriaud's notion of "spectator participation" as theorized within art group Fluxus's happenings and performances.

are transformed into *perceivers*. Activist projects, such as *Play in the District*, a beginning for revealing social issues from multiple perspectives—that of the dweller, the planner, and urban authorities. Here, participation is more than an exchange of the roles, but one in which dwellers have the capacity to take a fundamental role in changing their environment.

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- 5 SOCIO-INDEMNITY  
AND OTHER MOTIVES  
— JONATHAN CRISMAN
- 11 CONJURING UTOPIA'S GHOST  
— REINHOLD MARTIN
- 21 LE CORBUSIER, THE BRISE-SOLEIL,  
AND THE SOCIO-CLIMATIC PROJECT  
— DANIEL A. BARBER
- 33 MOVE ALONG!  
THERE IS NOTHING TO SEE  
— RANIA GHOSN
- 39 FLOW'S SOCIO-SPATIAL FORMATION  
— NANA LAST
- 47 COLLECTIVE EQUIPMENTS OF POWER  
— SIMONE BROTT
- 55 COLLECTIVE FORM  
— DANA CUFF
- 67 TUKTOYAKTUK  
— PAMELA RITCHOT
- 75 BOUNDARY LINE INFRASTRUCTURE  
— RONALD RAEI
- 83 DISSOLVING THE GREY PERIPHERY  
— NEERAJ BHATIA AND  
ALEXANDER D'HOOGHE
- 91 PARK AS PHILANTHROPY  
— YOSHIHARU TSUKAMOTO
- 99 MUSSELS IN CONCRETE  
— ESEN GÖKÇE ÖZDAMAR
- 105 PARTICIPATION AND/OR CRITICALITY?  
— KENNY CUPERS AND  
MARKUS MIESSEN
- 113 THE *SLUIPWEG* AND THE  
HISTORY OF DEATH  
— MARK JARZOMBK
- 121 EXTRA ROOM  
— GUNNAR GREEN AND  
BERNHARD HOPFENGÄRTNER
- 127 *SCULPTURE FIELD*  
— DAN HANDEL
- 135 ON *RADIATION BURN*  
— STEVE KURTZ
- 163 *CAIRO DI SOPRA IN GIÙ*  
— CHRISTIAN A. HEDRICK
- 175 HUSH  
— STEVEN BECKLY AND  
JONATHAN D. KATZ
- 189 NORCS IN NEW YORK  
— INTERBORO PARTNERS
- 209 UNCOMMON GROUND  
— ZISSIS KOTIONIS
- 217 EDENS, ISLANDS, ROOMS  
— AMRITA MAHINDROO
- 225 THE PRINCE  
— JUSTIN FOWLER
- 233 BEYOND DOING GOOD  
— HANNAH ROSE MENDOZA
- 237 AID, CAPITAL, AND THE  
HUMANITARIAN TRAP  
— JOSEPH M. WATSON
- 245 THE END OF CIVILIZATION  
— DANIEL DAOU
- 255 TOWARD A LAKE ONTARIO CITY  
— DEPARTMENT OF  
UNUSUAL CERTAINTIES
- 263 SOCIOPATHS  
— JIMENEZ LAI

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