
Sociology and Architecture in Rural Space: Researching the Built Environment in Two Villages of Turkey¹

Aynur Özüğurlu, Kocaeli University, Department of Philosophy
Gül Köksal, Kocaeli University, Department of Architecture

***Abstract:** This paper is an exploration of the settlement patterns and vernacular types of housing in Saraylı and Orcun villages in Kocaeli, Turkey. Despite the causes in spatial transformation of the region, i.e. rapid industrial development, urbanisation and the 1999 Izmit earthquake, both villages have preserved the traces of vernacular architecture and settlement patterns of which the roots go back to the cultural heritage of ancient Rome and Byzantium. The research, we conducted between 2008 and 2010, was carried out by both sociologists and architects in the field. Its aim was to document and understand continuities and discontinuities in the housing construction and settlement patterns as a matter of dynamic processes in which the built environment arises from economic needs, cultural values and social relations. This paper will discuss the findings of research including the experience of doing research in collaboration of sociology and architecture.*

1. Introduction

In this paper we shall address the vernacular housing styles and settlement patterns in Saraylı and Orcun villages of Gölcük District in Kocaeli, one of the most industrialised provinces of Turkey. Our discussion will cover the experience and outcomes of a research practice that we conducted in both villages in the period 2008-2010 on the basis of cooperation of the disciplines of sociology and architecture. Firstly, we are going to discuss why and how we brought together two different disciplines, particularly with respect to rural space, around a common research problematic. Then we shall deal with how we coped up with our own

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disciplinary constraints including methodology and what the two disciplines learned from each other. And finally, we shall be discuss the outcomes of the research

2. Objectives of the Research and Theoretical Background

Our research mainly aimed at documenting the surviving architectural traces of local housing style and settlement patterns in Saraylı and Orcun villages and analysing these traces with regard to rural social life and its transformations. For us, this objective was also the way of developing architectural approaches respectful to past cultural heritage and contributing to our present day through lessons drawn from its. Hence, our major engagement was to lay bare the still existing potentials of rural space and to develop architectural solutions in conformity with natural and historical heritage by identifying problems and needs emerging as a result of transformations that both villages had undergone.

In line with our objectives, the discipline of architecture is expected to interpret buildings and built environment as a part of economic needs, cultural reproduction and social relations whereas sociology is supposed to make architectural codes an element of social and historical analysis. The question of 'how the mutually reproducing linkage between building culture and spatial formation on the one side and rural life and its transformation on the other is constructed' was the common ground in which each discipline would face its own boundaries and develop its own original contributions. In terms of both sociology and architecture, this question simply suggested that built environment was not neutral; to the contrary it represented an active interpretation of everyday life.

This presupposition meant a challenge to the classical space information of the discipline of architecture based on 'function, style and scale' criteria and therefore to the tradition of architectural analysis which essentially focuses on stylistic and artistic characteristics of buildings and built environment (Friedman, T. A. (1999/2000, Yırtıcı, 2005). As

for sociology, we can say that it is relatively better endowed to address the space as a 'social product' particularly after the contributions of Henri Lefebvre (1991) and David Harvey (1996).¹ Nevertheless, on our part, we had to see the building itself directly as a historical evidence, not merely as a space where human beings lived but also as a part of rural landscape.

Eventually, conceiving social life also as a space production process is an initiative that would significantly blur demarcation lines between disciplines especially when rural settlements and vernacular architecture is concerned. This has its specific reasons as well which are peculiar to vernacular architecture.

2.1. Peculiarity of Vernacular Architecture and Importance of the Villages of Saraylı and Orcun

Mostly conceived as a folkloric element representing ethnic fabric or as 'simple eccentric' structures, vernacular architecture has remained marginal for long years, given the tendency of architectural history concentrate on high-style buildings (Gorth, 1999). The attribution of importance to the traditions of vernacular buildings in terms of architectural knowledge was a tendency that emerged only after the second half of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the architectural importance of these traditions known as 'architecture without architect' (Rudofksy. 1965) has generally received limited attention only devoted to form, function and materials. Such an approach neglecting the social context has resulted in the conceptualisation of vernacular architecture in terms of rural-urban dichotomy combined with traditional-modern dualism. Consequently, vernacular rural buildings sensitive to their ecosystems, built by using hand-made technology and natural materials specific to a given geography have been generally considered as artistic expressions of the stable world of homogenous communities (Vellinga, 2005; Upton, 1993).

¹ The recent socio-spatial studies in Turkey see for example, Öncü and Weyland (2005), Eraydın (derl.) (2006); see also Nalbanoğlu (1998).

However, conceiving vernacular architecture as an ‘authentic’ product belonging to an idealised but lost past is another way of effectively marginalising it (Vellinga, 2005). It is because this understanding necessarily severs the ties between vernacular architecture and rural settlement patterns and future, and attributes to it a content which could possibly have a meaning merely in the context of vacation and tourism pleasures. What is needed, on the other hand, is to be able to construe information on vernacular architecture for our present day. It is one the possible ways to reconstruct human being –nature relationship or a fairer ground, in architectural terms as well.

Saraylı and Orcun villages are spaces with strong ironies in the context of examining the relationship between rural life and rural settlement pattern. On the one hand, the region hosts a significant cultural legacy with its deep historical roots extending to Antic Rome and Byzantine. On the other hand, the same region has been a leading actor in the industrial development of Turkey since the early twentieth century. Deeply rooted history of the villages in both respects offers an opportunity to see how the relationship between ‘past’ and ‘present’ is recorded in space as continuities and ruptures.

The past and present are of course not merely temporal indicators. What we mean by ‘past’ is the spatial context of peasants’ tie with their land as relatively immune from capitalist intervention. Here, vernacular architecture and rural landscape are direct products of not only culture but nature as well. In other words, characteristics and limitations of vernacular ecosystem determine the conditions under which human beings join physical geography.

Considering that intervention to nature is the precondition of production, these conditions also enable human beings to create their own rural landscapes by transforming physical geography. Thus, both agricultural activity that regulates rural life and settlement pattern are embedded, in the ‘past’, in limitations and potentials of vernacular ecosystem.

What we mean by 'present' is the capitalist mode of production that is based on approaching the nature with the motive of profit while going beyond, to the extent possible, constraints deriving from the ecosystem. The typical outcome of capitalist intervention is the severance of peasants' ties with the land or its irreversible transformation (see Henderson, 1998). Thus, in what is 'present' rural space and rural life drifts farther apart from the status of being an organic element of vernacular ecosystem that it belongs to. The spatial organization represented by 'present' should be seen as the expression of this capitalistic penetration capable of transforming rural landscape totally.

Apart from such a unique factor as the Marmara Earthquake of 1999, Saraylı and Orcun villages too are settlements that were under the strong influence of the process of capitalist development and the neoliberal programme in agricultural policies that was introduced after 1980s. The process is such that these two villages have almost completely lost their specific rural economy which once supported the rural space and vernacular architecture. Nevertheless, traces of the history still survive in timber framed houses, century-old plane trees of the village square, forgotten paths or in a door handle.

We believe there are lessons for contemporary architecture that can be drawn from the spatial traces of the past. Hence, we organised our study in methodological terms in a way not only to understand and document the relevant spatial experience but to learn from it as well.

2.2. Research Techniques and Participatory Method in Architectural Practice

For the reasons mentioned above, we implemented our field study open to the active participation of local inhabitants at all stages. As researchers, we particularly kept distant from coding ourselves as the 'thinking' component of the area and rural settlement as 'raw data source' simply waiting to be explored. This methodological approach was particularly necessary in the case of a

discipline such as architecture that enjoys the power of producing new spaces, thus, imposing a specific way of life.

In order to understand the ties between rural economy, life culture and spatial fabric and the effects of present transformations, we conducted in-depth interviews with men and women of different generations, used oral history and observation techniques and had informal talks with children and youth on their future expectations. These were accompanied by discussion sessions in village squares, village coffee houses or orchards in both villages.

3. Tradition of Structural Fabric and Transformations in Saraylı and Orcun Villages

While there is no definite information about earliest settlements in Saraylı and Orcun, archaeological findings suggest that it goes as far back as Roman and Byzantine periods. One of the visible traces of the historical roots is Roman remains which appear to be natural extension of the coffee house that is used by peasants as table. The origins of the present settlement date back to the fourteenth century when the region was occupied by the Ottoman Empire. In nineteenth century, migrants from Georgia, Abkhazia and Mohdi drew the present settlement boundaries of these two villages. There are imprints of the later still in their customs (Galitekin, 2005).

Located on very fertile farmland, Saraylı and Orcun villages enjoyed an agricultural economy so lively to produce for the market both in nineteenth century during the Ottoman era and in the first half of the twentieth century in Republican Turkey. Mainly based on fresh vegetables and fruit, the agricultural production was the main source of luxurious consumption by the Royal kitchen and Ottoman upper classes initially and later by Istanbul bourgeoisie. Indeed, according to a widespread saying, the name 'Saraylı' (Royal) derives from village's status as the producer of crops serving to the taste and nutritional habits of upper classes.

Further, the existence of a distinct type of grapes peculiar to the ecosystem of the region and whose unique taste requires labour-intensive methods supported the market orientation of agricultural production for long years. Since the rugged terrain and the speciality of grapes did not provide much space for the entry of capitalist farming technology, agricultural activity in both villages maintained itself until 1960s on the basis of household labour supplemented by seasonal agricultural workers. As a result of the latter, Saraylı and Orcun villages used to be the destination point of seasonal migrants from both nearby districts and other provinces.

Throughout these years when rural economy maintained its liveliness, it appears that both villages had a rich spatial organisation in terms of non-agricultural services. The existence of service units and facilities rarely observable in a typical Anatolian village with the exception of school building confirms that a rich social life once existed in these locations. These include hair cutting, butchery, dressmaking, shoe repair, hostels and rooms for singles where seasonal agricultural workers stay. It is also understood that now unused village fountains and the public bath in Orcun were once important common spaces that ensured the public visibility of women in particular. Moreover, now transformed into housing areas, large pastures once existed served as natural spaces where young inhabitants were engaged in horseback races and local children played their games.

The old settlement pattern is as if an organic extension of the part of nature that they belong to. Each of the two settlements is organised around a single centre. The centre appears as the location where all streets eventually reach and it is integrated with the mosque yard. Village squares are not only the centres of built environment but also the focal points in rural life. Streets facilitate the movement of pedestrians and horse-drawn carts. Some small streets and dead-ends shared by few houses also function as semi-public areas.

Historical buildings display the features of vernacular architecture generally known as 'Turkish house'. They were generally constructed with timber framed structures filled with earthen blocks, wattle-and-daub, and adobe or timber logs on stone masonry, referred to in Turkish as 'hımış' (see figure 1). On the other hand, in some cases stone masonry is noticed up to ground floor or even first floor level therefore timber framed with aforesaid filling materials were built on stone masonry.



Figure 1: Hımış-style wall with stone infill laid in mud mortar in Saraylı and Orcun villages.

Most of historical buildings dating back to the nineteenth century, these two or three-storey houses have their rather large yards. In past, the ground floor in these houses was used to store foodstuffs and fuel for winter and to keep animals. The first floor has a sofa surrounded by rooms and it is the primary space for domestic life. In the second floor, the sofa opens up to a balcony mostly shaped according to the street it look. As can be inferred from both spaces allocated to animals and rather large yards (on average, given a parcel of land, constructed part has a share of 30% and the remaining 70% in unconstructed) houses are the common spaces of private life and work. Although today not

much is left behind with the exception of few hens observed in some houses, sharing the same living spaces with animals which were once a natural component of the reproduction of labour and growing fruits and vegetables in yards for household consumption indicate the intermingling of daily life and work. While there are few examples surviving to our day, water wells and bakeries found in yards indicate that domestic life once extended to these open spaces as well. Thus, house yards too are arranged to provide some level of privacy and surrounded by walls as boundary to streets.

The old settlement pattern displays a strong sense of division between private and public spaces. All of the old buildings had been built on the basis of such principles as respecting the privacy of neighbours and not blocking also their sun and view. Sensitivity to the potentials and limitations of physical geography is valid also for construction materials used. Since both villages were surrounded by forest mountains adjoining to farmlands, wood is the main construction material. One can also observe the use of plasterboard technique in which a type of local mud was used as paste.

This pattern and way of life we summarised with its basic features underwent two major transformations in the twentieth century. The first was the establishment of the navy shipbuilding premises in Gölcük in 1927, which further developed and began to display its effects starting with 1950s. The second is a composite one: neoliberal policies of the 1980s which opened agriculture to free market dynamics and the 1999 Marmara Earthquake¹.

The Navy Yard whose construction was interrupted during the Second World War became active after the War and brought along rapid migration to the region. Especially

¹ The Marmara Earthquake (also called the Kocaeli Earthquake) of August 17, 1999 killed approximately thirty thousand people. The epicentre was just 200 kilometres east of Istanbul. In Golcuk and Adapazari, two districts of Kocaeli, the earthquake destroyed more than a third of all housing units (2002). From Kandilli Observatory Earthquake Research Institution: <http://193.140.203.16/anasayfa/eanaf.html>.

after 1950 the premises accelerated the extraordinary growth of Gölcük as an urban centre. Further, in villages like Saraylı and Orcun which are closely located to the Navy Yard, wage labour set in very early compared to other Anatolian villages, almost as early as the Republican era itself. Starting from 1936, almost every family in both villages sent one male member to the Navy-Yard to work in auxiliary services. In spite of this, since wage work was of some distance to the life culture of villagers during those years and farming income still maintained its prominence as means of subsistence, the mode of life and settlement based on agricultural activities could be sustained. However, the rapid process of urbanisation in Gölcük destroyed non-agricultural services and associated spatial organisations in the villages by rendering them voidable.

In ensuing years, wage labour maintained its existence as a legacy from fathers to elder male children and made it possible for the third generation, including females, to shift to urban occupations through education and training. Nevertheless, both villages were able to maintain their agricultural income potential until early 1980s. Neoliberal policies liquidating agricultural public expenditure eventually disqualified farming as a means of subsistence (Kendir, 2003). For example viticulture that was the basis of the highly favoured grapes of the region was gradually abandoned since its labour intensive process and high cost was no more sustainable. When the effect of neoliberal policies destroying peasantry and bio-diversity was coupled with the great devastation caused by 1999 Marmara Earthquake, the outcome was a irreversible change in rural life and associated patterns. Because of the earthquake, the vineyards and hazel nut orchards of the villages were expropriated in an unplanned manner by the government and transformed into housing sites (*see figure 2*).

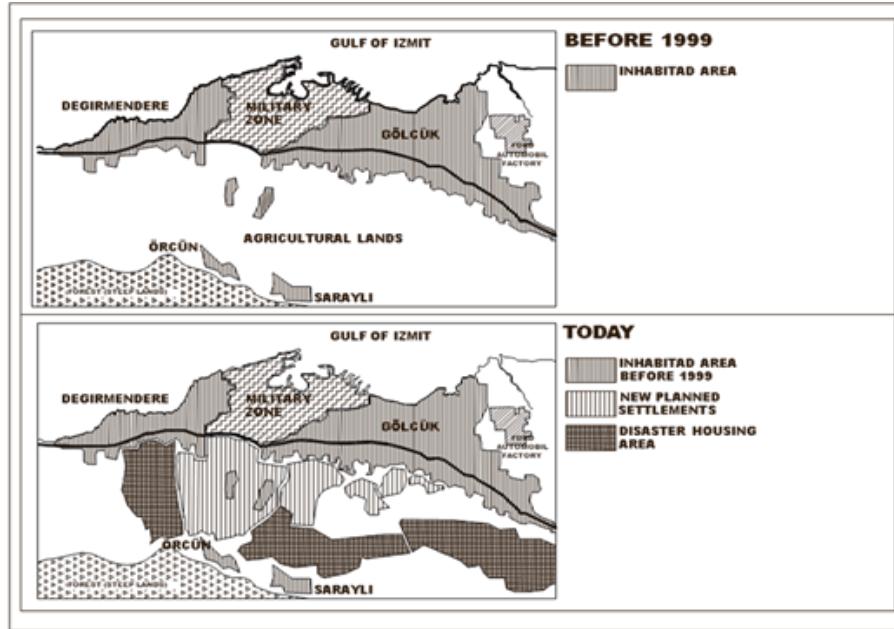


Figure 2: The expropriation of the agricultural lands because of the earthquake between 1999 and 2002. (Source, Kahvecioğlu, 2009).

Today, both villages are entirely confined by the urban centre. What is more, the lost of very fertile agricultural lands still continue, because of that the rest lands have gained urban land-value under the pressure of urban settlement in the periphery of the villages. Also, the vineyards nearby to forest mountains have already been abandoned due to the neoliberal policies.

Today, Saraylı and Orcun have totally lost their character they once had as having a unique agricultural activity that fed the formation of rural space. Farming now practiced mostly in orchards and only at subsistence level can no more support the settlement pattern and architecture. Nevertheless, being closely located to urban services and in a highly industrialised province as Kocaeli, both settlements have not been deserted unlike many other Anatolian villages. In spite of having a relatively high number of households as 650, local population consist mostly of middle age and elderly groups. And, they are now squeezed between their houses built in the nineteenth century and the needs of new urbanised way of life. Since the restoration of these houses which are under protection for the last 20 years is quite

costly, they are either deserted by their owners or still used in their present worn out state. Some of the old buildings were already demolished and turned into concrete structures before their registration (see figure 3 and 4).



Figure 4: Deserted vernacular buildings in Saraylı and Orcun villages.

As a result, there remain only century-old plane trees in the village squares and the dilapidated houses which keep denoting the rural fabric and history. Yet, an architectural environment integrated to natural geography and in conformity with the needs of existing way of life would promise, for its users, a spatial formation not in alienation to the environment and life. It is therefore a matter of concern that vernacular settlements patterns and structures whose past is totally based on this quality are disappearing. Keeping such environments alive means more than their 'preservation by protecting'. Adapting the knowledge represented by vernacular architecture to our present day means establishing a relationship of equity with physical geography. And this is the basic necessity for a humane life.

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