

## UCL DPU Project Report

May, 2007

### 'Placing Sulukule: Towards an alternative proposal to conserve the living heritage of Romani Culture.'

#### Executive Summary

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Placing Sulukule is a fieldwork based project carried out by a group of nine students and four members of staff of the MSc Building and Urban Design in Development, from the Development Planning Unit (UCL)<sup>1</sup>. The context of the work is the neighbourhood of Sulukule, now under threat of demolitions due to the 'urgent' urban transformation proposals in the pipeline.

The work in Istanbul took place from April 29th to May 19th, 2007, and concluded with a presentation at a multi-stakeholder meeting hosted by the organising committee of the Istanbul 2010 Cultural Capital of Europe, titled, "Visions of Sulukule in 2010."

#### 1. Background and Context

While new areas of Istanbul are going through massive expansion processes, many older neighbourhoods are currently engaged in transformation and rehabilitation due to pressure for new development, conservation and promotion of heritage sites, and responses to risks of natural disasters. These dynamics are supported by (at times conflicting) legislations, such as the Urban Conservation Law 5266 (2005) for the protection of cultural heritage, and more recently adopted Urban Renewal Law 5366 (2007) and the urgency compulsory purchase act (2006), introducing powerful tools to local governments for redevelopment. The implementation of these policies in the urban landscape create huge opportunities as well as complex and contested situations and conflicts of interests.

Sulukule, which is located along the city walls in the Fatih municipality of Istanbul, is thought to be the oldest known settlement in the world of the Romani people. The community of Sulukule settled in its current location in 1054, when Istanbul was the Byzantine capital. The Sulukule people are well known throughout Turkey, and internationally, for their lively music and dance, and natural ability for entertainment. In the past, the community ran a series of entertainment houses, which were the backbone of the area's economy, however in 1991 the entertainment houses were shut down by the police. Since this time, the economic condition of the community has worsened and many people in the community depend on their neighbours for day-to-day needs.

Under the current version of the proposed development plan for Sulukule, which has been prepared by Fatih Municipality, the Romani neighbourhood is facing the risk of losing both its cultural heritage and the urban fabric that has supported its heritage. The Municipality's

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development plan proposes to replace most of the existing urban fabric with 480 new 'ottoman' style houses, an office building, a cultural centre, a hotel and basement car parking.

This radical transformation being proposed by the municipality has raised questions about the socio - economic consequence on the local community. Discussions with community members and local NGOs reveal that most residents will not be able to afford to live in the new development, nor in the proposed 'relocation' area because it does not fit their level of income. Residents expressed concerns that the new development has not taken into account the tenants' loss of the right to continue living in the same area within the community they belong to. Moreover, others showed concern about the lack of consideration of the new development of the way of living of the local community and how they used the private and public spaces such as streets and open spaces as spaces for interacting with each other.

Despite these issues, Fatih Municipality has positively stated their concern for applying a social development project that takes into consideration the socio-economic aspects of Sulukule. However, the gap between the proposed plan and the needs and aspirations of local community is still large, and for many reasons. The most crucial one is the question of community representation in the planning process, where the traditional mechanism of examining the needs of local community is considered not sufficient in this context. This has led to an unbalanced representation of the local stakeholders needs in comparison to other interests and aspirations in the planning process.

## **2. Aim and objective**

'Placing Sulukule' is about conserving Sulukule and its people in the context of contemporary Istanbul. It wants to put forward a more socially inclusive approach to planning allowing its residents to stay, and being part of the city's urban transformation, with new prospects of improved living conditions and income-generation. The overall objective of this project is to provide ways in which different stakeholders may find a common ground for the people of Sulukule through a participatory approach by:

- proposing guidelines contributing to an alternative local development plan
- proposing a series of pilot projects
- building capacity for different stakeholders involved including the people of Sulukule, NGOs, and the Municipality of Fatih

## **3. Methodology**

To analyse the place and its people, to grasp the interests of different stakeholders and to test our assumptions and proposals, various methodological tools are used, including assets identification, problem tree, stakeholder analysis, mapping, meetings, interviews and presentations, and "Planning for Real" based workshops. This analysis is summarised in a number of key findings. Based on these understandings, eight guidelines that lead towards an alternative Local Development Plan are formulated, for which a set of Priority Action Projects are developed.

The proposals presented in this report are intended as a contribution and starting point for alternative development for Sulukule. These proposals address a new image for Sulukule and promote participatory approach. This document is meant to stimulate the discussion for finding alternative development scenarios by highlighting the potentials and possibility of what could be achieved through multi-stakeholder planning process; a process where a more comprehensive view can help to address problems with the current development plan and help to develop a future for the area based on social inclusion.

#### **4. Findings:**

The following findings are a summary of the rapid assessment of Sulukule:

**4.1. Information Gap:** There is a lack of information regarding socio-economic factors in Sulukule that can shape any development proposals. For example, better information is needed on the numbers of renters or families that are residing in the area and their ability to pay for new houses.

**4.2. Social Stigma:** Romani population have always been stigmatised, not only in Sulukule, but also all over Europe, since they are generally seen to not behave in accordance with mainstream principles and values.

**4.3. History:** In many ways, Sulukule is of historical importance for both Istanbul and the Romani people. There is evidence that the Romani community has been living along the Theodosian walls for more than 1000 years. This area of settlement has been, and still is, a unique place for Romani people and accounts of Istanbul's diverse and rich past.

**4.4. Cultural wealth:** Sulukule population's skills in music and dance are extremely well developed, and their music groups are locally and internationally renowned. Many earn their livelihoods from performing and this has long served as a way to generate income. Since the police ordered the closing of the Sulukule's entertainment houses in early 1990s, the area has been subject to vast economic decline. However many residents in Sulukule are keen to utilise their music skills to increase their incomes through music schools, recording, distribution and performance.

**4.5. Community organisation:** Currently there is a lack of community organization and also a general lack of confidence in the profile of Sulukule as a 'good' neighbourhood. For these reasons the residents feel powerless to interact with the authorities about their future in the area. Even though the community is not well organised to fight against the demolition of their houses, there is a strong sense of community in Sulukule, which is apparent in the way that they trust each other and care for one another. However, in order for an alternate plan to be developed using the participatory approach, mobilisation and the organisation of the community is needed.

**4.6. Livelihoods:** Sulukule is not only residential, but a space that supports many types of businesses, in addition to music. A variety of business activities are spread around: butchers, textile tradesmen, tombstone engravers, mini-markets and cafes, handicraftsmen, musicians, etc.. These economic activities and their social and spatial relations must be recognized, maintained and strengthened under any development plan.

**4.7. Housing:** People are living in poor and overcrowded housing conditions. Several families live in one house sometimes without basic infrastructure. Household structures are complex, and insights need to be gained in how to accommodate this in new urban typologies. Previously demarcated as an 'urban conservation' area, the residents were not allowed to make any changes. Now, an urban transformation area, redevelopment is orchestrated from above, and based on a new set of conditions and rules.

**4.8. Cohabitation:** Both Romani and Non-Romani people are living and working together peacefully in Sulukule. This cohabitation between Romani and Non-Romani people is visible not only in the living spaces at neighbourhood level but also in the commercial activities. This peaceful cohabitation is a culture of social integration to be celebrated and promoted as a good example of the unique living heritage of Istanbul.

**4.9. Heritage Site:** Sulukule is located within the boundaries of the World Heritage Site defined by UNESCO in 1985; this area should be preserved not only for its physical characteristics but its anthropological ones as well. The current Metropolitan Planning Unit plans at the 1:5000 and

1:1000 scales have not considered this boundary and consequently, Fatih Municipality has not included the area within the proposed Development Plan.

**4.10. Open Spaces:** Although very dense in terms of people per hectare, the area is not used to its capacity and there is scope for densification and redevelopment. Three large open areas present important opportunities and have potential to be integrated into an alternative proposal for Sulukule.

Moreover, the 'Romani area' of Sulukule presents an intense use of outdoor living space; people are using the streets with very frequently. In these areas, the streets perform many more functions than merely space for circulation - they are spaces to share and live with neighbours.

**4.11. Lack of communication:** There is currently a lack of communication between Fatih Municipality and the Sulukule community, which needs to be addressed immediately. The community is lacking information about the content of the different proposals currently under consideration in the area and this has produced a feeling of uncertainty about the future among community members. This current problem reflects the need for representation of the perspective of the local community in any proposed development plan.

**4.12. Participatory approach:** The Municipality's current practices are to approach property owners in Sulukule individually in a closed meeting, rather than addressing the residents as a group. This individual meeting tactic does not facilitate a participatory practice nor does it allow for a collective reflection of the needs of local community as group. This problem was highlighted numerous times to us during our workshops and meetings in Sulukule, as residents feel they are being bullied.

Due to the culture, long history of inhabitation, and close knit nature of Sulukule, there is a very good opportunity in Sulukule to implement a truly participatory process for development, which would give the possibility for local community to represent itself. Sulukule could become an example of a positive process of social inclusion and living cultural heritage for Istanbul 2010 European Cultural Capital and for UNESCO.

## **5. Toward a local development plan (LDP):**

An important step towards a Local Development Plan (LPD) is the formulation of its guidelines in a participatory way. These will serve as the framework for actions and proposals in the short, medium and long term. The proposed guidelines for the whole LDP area are:

### **5.1 Guiding Principles for LDP**

#### **5.1.1. Maintaining people in place**

Any proposals or actions have to consider the right of the local community to continue living in the same place where they have been living for over 1000 years, and this must include considerations for both owners and tenants. Eviction has to be avoided because of 1) the negative impact on the local Romani community, since the relocation breaks the social and economic ties and 2) the loss of a cultural asset – a jewel of Istanbul – which can never be recovered nor recreated.

#### **5.1.2. Strengthening capacity of community organization**

Strengthening the capacity of community organization and mobilisation is crucial for Sulukule residents to be able to communicate their needs to the municipality.

#### **5.1.3. Engaging people in local development plans using a participatory process.**

Local community has to be engaged in the planning process through participatory approach that can explore local needs and aspiration directly. This will help to reach more precise definition for problems and opportunities for solutions and to build trusting relationships between the Sulukule residents and local authorities.

#### *5.1.4. Establishing social and cultural links at the community and city level*

The development has to promote social and cultural links between the local community and the rest of Istanbul, highlighting the importance of diversity within metropolitan city sphere. This local community's unique culture has to be seen as a factor that enriches the city culture within the social cohesion.

#### *5.1.5. Encouraging economic activities that sustain livelihoods*

Highlight and include the role of the local economic activities in the future development plans or actions by maintaining the existing ones that serve the needs of the local community. Promote new economic activities that build on the current strengths in music.

#### *5.1.6. Adaptable and affordable housing solutions on site for all residents*

The development proposals of housing solutions must be based on the ability of the local community to access the new development housing schemes. This requires two considerations: First, the level of income for the local communities and what they can afford to pay. Second, the way the local community use the urban spaces and the spaces inside the house.

#### *5.1.7. Transforming unique world heritages into opportunities for local development, for example: the wall, Romani heritage, and the cohabitation of different cultures.*

The location of Sulukule inside the historic peninsula is strategic since this site is part of the world heritage site. This gives the potential for transforming the area into a place to celebrate the cultural heritage that can serve also as a way of income generation for local communities. This mixture of cultural wealth has to be utilized (tangible and intangible) together for better future for the area.

#### *5.1.8. Promoting environmentally sustainable activities*

The development activities have to address their environmental impacts; as well as they can seek the adaptation of the UN Habitat 21 Agenda in Faith Municipality, which has already been implemented in other districts of Istanbul.

### **5.2 Pilot Action Projects**

Following on from the Guiding Principles, various Action Projects are proposed, which need to be implemented in the short term because of the urgent reality of the situation in Sulukule.

These Action Projects contribute to a Priority Action Program, which serves as the platform for proposing a Sulukule local development plan in the long term.

The pilot action projects defined are:

#### *1. Halt Demolition in Hatice Sultan and Neslisah (Sulukule)*

This project sets up a plan to stop demolitions and evictions currently threatening the people of Sulukule using legal grounds. The court case will use legal grounds based on UNESCO's requirement to protect tangible and intangible heritage for the wall area (including Sulukule), and various international charters, laws and covenants to protect human rights, and ethnic minority groups (Romani community in Sulukule).

#### *2. Neslisah Land Development Association*

The community's inability to take one position on the proposed development plan has significantly reduced their capacity to negotiate with authorities. The objective of this project is to create the Neslisah Land Development Association to mobilise the community and strengthen their capacity to negotiate with the municipality on land development issues, engage in property and land management, and access funding for the alternative proposals from funding institutions.

#### *3. Building Community through Multi-Functional Community Space*

This project uses the building of a multifunctional community facility as a means for community building. Hence it is working towards two outcomes: firstly, improved neighbourhood facilities (performance hall, music school, children football club, crèche, etc.) and secondly using the process of building the centre as a means for community development and cultivating solidarity and increasing confidence among the residents.

#### *4. Sulukule Business Development Unit*

The area of Sulukule today is not an inert residential neighbourhood but is rather composed of vibrant streets and economic activities. Based on that, this project aims to strengthen the socio-economic networks which support livelihoods in the area of Sulukule. This is proposed through the set up of the Sulukule Business Unit. This unit will be responsible for identifying existing businesses, and providing advice on management, finance and loan access.

#### *5. Housing Improvement in Sulukule*

To address the poor housing condition, this project puts forward an incremental housing improvement programme, using the people's commitment to improve their housing. Initiated by a "One Street Pilot Project", it starts with the assessment on a plot by plot basis of how housing rehabilitation should proceed. A professional advice centre will facilitate the self-help improvements, technical and financial support, to achieve the long term objective: decent housing on site for all income levels with secured tenure.

#### *6. A Study for Recycling Opportunities*

This project aims to promote a healthier and sustainable living environment for Sulukule and beyond, while strengthening the community and creating income-generating activities. With the objective of forming a community-led recycling business, it would improve Sulukule living standards by eliminating the amount of garbage discarded in empty plots and open spaces. Activities include: awareness raising, education on waste management, exploration of materials available on site for recycling.

#### *7. A study for potential uses of Heritage as a Platform for Local Development*

With the objective of celebrating cultural diversity in Istanbul, this project proposes to explore strategic options of using heritage as a means for local development in Sulukule. The outcome is a portfolio of alternative ways to provide links between Sulukule and the city as a means to overcome social stigmatization and exclusion.

### **Achieving the objective and moving forward**

The 'Placing Sulukule' project tries to put forward an alternative vision for Sulukule, where physical upgrading and improved living conditions are possible through the involvement of an organised community.

The "Visions of Sulukule" discussion panel hosted by the 2010 Istanbul European Capital of Culture Committee on May 17th 2007, created some momentum in the discussions, and has highlighted two opportunities to move forward. Firstly, the urgent need for preparing an alternative local development plan which considers the needs and aspirations of local community members within the planning framework of the Istanbul historic peninsula. Secondly, this can only happen by initiating a multi-stakeholder dialogue engaging all actors to start a negotiation and consensus building process.

For the implementation of the latter, a preliminary agreement was made to set up a multi-stakeholder committee, committing to signing an agreement that would halt demolitions until a consensus was reached. The commitment to the development of alternatives in a participatory

way, would be the starting point for re-thinking the planning approach to urban transformation, not only for Sulukule, but for Istanbul city

### **Report Outline**

Chapter one "Introduction" introduces Sulukule and its development issues, introductory information about the nature of the report and participants and presents the theoretical framework the objectives of this study.

Chapter two highlights issues affecting urban development in Istanbul and Sulukule, portraying the real situation on the ground with the current urban development trends, and describing the municipality's local development plan.

Chapter Three illustrates the methodological framework and the analytical tools used to gather information and finalize the findings. These are; identifying assets; problem tree; identifying stakeholder analysis; mapping; meetings, workshops; and secondary resources.

In Chapter 4, highlights the key findings and provides a summary statements that helped to define the guidelines for the Local Development Plan and to justify the Priority Actions Projects.

Chapter 5 "Towards LDP" outlines the proposals that serves as a platform towards a Local Development Plan for Sulukule, including the Guiding Principles and action projects.

The conclusion highlights the need for a multi-stakeholder committee implemented by Fatih Municipality.