

Notes from a Gecekondu:

From Houses to Homes

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To live we hold a concept of “home.” Our sense of “being-at-home” is loaded with varying personal meanings and cultural implications. While some craft a home, others craft a work place. Others tell stories to each other of home and place. We invent and participate in everyday rituals, not only to talk about our experiences, but also to make a place for ourselves. We respond to our environment, and shape a place where we can exist and express our being-in-the world. Home, work, stories, and rituals are not just containers where we store our experiences, memories, or reflections. More importantly, they entail our efforts, our work to transform spaces into places and organize a relationship amongst them. Through these creations, we travel through space and time.

This study presents everyday accounts of the Uyguntürk family in the neighborhood of Esat Paşa over a two-year period fieldwork on “place-making” in metropolis, both in the literal and metaphorical sense. Cengiz Uyguntürk, as the oldest son, is the main caretaker of the family. In the *pazar*, the market, Cengiz earns his daily bread. He contributes to his home by providing the financial support for his family. Cengiz takes us to his work space, where he transforms his work environment into a meaningful place. He organizes the booths, arranges his wares for sale, and uses verbal artistry in creating his environment. He makes himself “feel right” at home in the world. Work is Cengiz’s home, where he hosts his customers, just as his wife hosts her guests at home, in her personal space.

The fictive kin of the talk in the market is very similar to the real kin of the house. Cengiz accepts his customers as relatives in the market place. The gendered world of social activity is exhibited in different but related forms. While men work and make a symbolic home in the market, the women make home in the house. Work and home, both socially and architecturally, speak a similar language of place making. Neriman Uyguntürk, Cengiz’s wife, provides our first entry to the women’s world through her stories and her actions as wife and mother. For her, home is the domestic space where she performs her housework and takes care of the children.

Our journey into the women’s world continues. We meet Cengiz’s sisters, Halide, Neslihan, Jale, and Meryem Uyguntürk. For Halide, home is the result of her art of housework. For Neslihan, it is her schooling. For Jale it is embroidery, and for Meryem it is painting. In the meantime, the sisters’ interaction with their kin, with the family and the neighbors, became symbolic extensions of home.

The mother of the family, Tamam Uyguntürk, gave me a profound example of home, when she sang a song about their migration from the city. In it, she expressed the outrage that was derived from her separation from her homeland. She has left the village and the “gray-haired” parents behind. In her new home, she makes her song a gift to her guests. Tamam Uyguntürk’s gifts are abundant. They come in the form of hand-knitted socks, shared meals, as well as songs to make her guests feel at home so that she feels home. While Tamam Uyguntürk expresses

her emotions, feelings, and sentiments through songs, Nihat Uyguntürk exemplifies another way of place making. He tells a story in which he reveals the moral side of migration. For Nihat Uyguntürk, home becomes a concept grounded in his feelings and thoughts about the separation from the homeland.

As a folklorist interested in human creativity, tradition, and the continuities of people’s symbolic expressions, I realize that homes, work, stories and rituals are meaningful gateways to the lived experience of human beings. They are ways of place making in a broad sense. It is a creative activity in which people transform any given space into places meaningful to themselves. My primary questions deal not only with the processes of transformation, but also with the implications of place making in poetic and political terms. Would place making give us a new model for looking at the lives of the migrants? The marginalization model puts individuals at the fringes of life—socially, culturally, and economically, and treats them as the objects of a story—is clearly not adequate.

When I looked at some statistics on the gecekondu life, I was struck by the ways in which human beings were reduced to numbers and they were presented in some numeric way. 5.8 people in the homes... Who is that 0.8 person? Was it somebody without an eye? An arm? A voice? I wanted to know how migrants think and feel about themselves. As an ethnographer, I asked myself: how can we talk about migration, a global phenomenon, in “local” terms? How can we possibly make the experiences of the migrants heard without reducing them to numbers? Place making emphasizes agency and production. Despite the elitist discourse, everyday life goes on in the *gecekondu*s.

Similarly, the out-dated East-West model is not sufficient, either, for understanding the communal life and individual creativity in the *gecekondu*s. Spending almost two years in a small-scale neighborhood in Istanbul taught me several lessons. In Esat Pasa not only did I observe the traditional landscape, but I also interacted with the people within that landscape. The experience of Esat Pasa was compelling, because it stood in relation to the larger scheme of Istanbul, the biggest city in Europe and a major city in the developing world. I closely interacted with the migrants and experienced being with them around the buildings they made and inhabited.

The story of the *gecekondu* is the story of the village migrants’ place making, their creative responses to their environments. Place making is an overt expression of the migrants’ own “being.” It is a new way of looking at the migrants’ lives apart from the model of hegemony, resistance, and marginality, all of which label them as subordinated subjects of a discourse, rather than the active producers of agency. Place making expresses a positive critique of the negative implications of modernity, where migrants appropriate a location in the cityscape without giving up their own way.

Both in the field and in my writing, I greatly benefited from my training in vernacular architecture. Studying not only the exteriors, but also the interiors of the buildings, I experienced the *gecekondu*s to be places with strong personalities. To this end, cultural geographer Emyr Estyn Evans' triad of history, habitat, and heritage guided me in analyzing the formation of the personality of a place. All of these variables make a *gecekondu* a place with a strong personality. Mete Turan sees the *gecekondu* as a built environment that may bloom. The *gecekondu* promises a hope for the future.

The *gecekondu* is a reflection of habitat selection, of making a place, given the limited conditions of the space. I am not arguing that the *gecekondu* is the ideal architecture, but with it, migrants created for themselves an environment where they could maneuver in the new locale and create new social patterns. The *gecekondu* houses are successful, innovative responses to the housing needs of the migrants. Through place making, people came to tolerate stress and controlled the social and physical dimensions of their environments.

Architecturally speaking, there is a pattern of change in the *gecekondu* houses. Today, almost every neighborhood presents us with unique characteristics. Not all *gecekondu* houses look the same, nor are they to be understood only from the conglomeration of shacks hastily built on the outskirts of the big cities. Most of the houses no longer have cheap tin roofs or temporary materials in their walls. They are built out of concrete, plastered, and painted. Most have small gardens. When they first came to the city, the migrants built houses overnight, but later on, they obtained a sort of "security" from demolition, they expanded and made additions and renovations to the building.

Paul Oliver has observed that the *gecekondu* houses are emergent vernacular types that bring an optimistic sensibility to the environment. It is in a vernacular process that the attitude of the architect, the materials of the habitat, and the responses of the migrants in relation to the cultural tradition, are expressed. Because of his limitations, both the architect and the dweller of the *gecekondu* has to be creative, by bringing a new interpretation to house building. It is where the elements of the traditional Turkish house are reinterpreted according to the needs of the dweller.

By studying the exteriors and the interiors of these buildings, and listening to the personal narratives of the migrants, I experienced the *gecekondu* to be places with strong personalities that may bloom with the hopes for future. I am not arguing that the *gecekondu* is the ideal architecture, but the *gecekondu* houses are successful and innovative responses to the housing needs of the migrants. With it, migrants create an environment for themselves, through which they can maneuver in the new locale within their new social patterns.

Martin Heidegger is one of the important philosophers who has written on place making. He gives us two important concepts for understanding place making—*building* and *dwelling*. Buildings house people, whereas dwelling involves a process through which the place we exist is transformed into a personal world. Dwelling differs from building, in the same sense that place is different from space.

The transformation of the environment is an important concept for the Norwegian architectural theorist Christian Norberg-Schulz. Through personal observations, reflections, and discoveries, human beings turn a house into a home, where they connect the remote to the near, and shape a niche into a nest. In his conceptualization, the transformed environment contains a *genius loci*, a spirit of the place. He writes, "Humans choose spaces for dwelling, and their history becomes an interaction with landscape, that is with the *genius loci*." Taking a phenomenological stance, he continues, "Without places, human life could not take place, and architecture simply means the creation of meaningful places." Cultural geographer Yi-Fu Tuan calls the emotional result of this transformation, *topophilia*. He argues that the transformation is rich in experience.

Drawing upon the poetic prose of Martin Heidegger and Christian Norberg-Schulz, and especially building upon Yi-Fu Tuan's arguments, I aim to analyze what "place making" tells us about rural migration and living in the city. Tuan emphasizes experience, and he examines the lived space—the immediate social, emotional, practical, and intellectual dimensions of spatial existence. Following Tuan's approach, I explore and describe what it is like to dwell and move within a given place, rather than presenting a systematic and objective account of ideal forms. It is through Tuan's phenomenological approach that I hope to capture the essence of place making in a *gecekondu* neighborhood.

It is this framework in which I attempt to develop an understanding—an understanding which underlines the importance of the transformation of a house into a home. This transformation underlines the human agency, and creates a more democratic history for the people we study with as well as the buildings we write about. The construction of place implies a social grouping—a house, home, and kin. It extends to the patterns of social activity—home and work, as well as symbolic domains, private, communal, and public.

The metaphorical construction of place is as important as the material construction of place. The metaphorical place gives us a more complex view of the "built-environment," where personal place extends beyond social practice and discursive disposition. In the case of the Uyguntürk family, this metaphorical construction embodies various artistic forms. Storytelling, singing, and participating in rituals are forms of building, templates for practice, morality, and existence.

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Ceremonies and rituals are effective tools for use in the creation of social space. In rituals, ties of family, neighborhoods, and kin are created, re-affirmed, or shifted. Ceremonies enable migrants to form a collective memory that will help them craft a sense of togetherness in the alien urban environment. Like place making at home or at work, village migrants produce agency, by telling their stories and performing rituals.

My focus on the houses is two-fold: house building and homemaking. From houses we learn about the built environment, its relation to culture and society. "Vernacular architecture," writes Henry Glassie, "is a great resource for the scholar who wishes to write a more scientific and democratic history and thus provide his readers with a means for understanding their present estate." I believe that the interiors of the homes are as important as sources of information as the exteriors of the houses. Therefore, I look at the vernacular of the *gecekondu* both in terms of the structure of the houses and the decoration of the homes.

Stories and ceremonies represent the other half of my work. Every day we tell stories about ourselves. We traverse places and encounter people through stories. Stories become an especially creative way of communication in a culture like that of Turkey, where most of the interaction and information exchange is still based on the oral tradition. Talking is the national and natural response to everyday events, not just a means to pass the time. The stories I include here, a fraction of what I heard, however, were told for specific purposes. They are the stories people share with each other—and with me—through which their idea of home unfolded. The stories told here are not offered just to illuminate the life of the *gecekondu* dwellers; they are critical commentaries about social life and the modes of expression that get us to the core of human existence.

While houses provided me an important entry for my work, looking at different forms of social interaction opened yet another important gateway for my research. Interaction, or better yet, communication was an important focus in my research, when I tried to look at the different layers of community. In Esat Pasa community exists in multiple layers, but whatever form it takes, “face-to-face” interaction is the key in the formation of community and the subsequent formation of locality.

Social ties, kinship relations—fictive or blood related—stood in relation to architecture. Houses are not just containers of these ties, but they are spaces in which these ties are either produced or maintained, or they become vehicles of expressing these ties at their best. In its first circle, the community includes the family. In its first circle, the community includes the family—as the Uyguntürks put it: people of the house—the *aille*. Family is a basic concept to the home. Usually families live in the same neighborhood, sometimes in the same apartment, as is the case with Cengiz. As the oldest son of the family, Cengiz takes care of his parents and his unmarried siblings, and he lends support to his married siblings. Cengiz says, “We have many relatives in Istanbul. We help each other on the good days and on the bad days. We go and spend time with relatives when there is an illness, accidents, death, or a wedding. We are always together on holidays.”

In the next circle, there are relatives, *akrabalar*, as well as those who are symbolically made into relatives through ritual parenthood. Kinship can exist in different layers, and it occupies a central role in the formation of local communities. The kin can be actual, by blood, or created through rituals, or symbolically developed in social interaction.

The next circle includes people from the same locale, *hemşehri*. A common origin in place is, by far, the most important factor in determining the interactions within the neighborhood and outside. People from the same geographic areas tended to cluster together. Subsequently, the social environment in the *gecekondus*, and the social institution of *hemşehrilik*, provide migrants with an ideological basis for the establishment of trust with non-kin. Furthermore, *hemşehrilik*, like kinship can assist in the formation of patron-client and merchant-customer relationships outside of the neighborhood.

The Uyguntürks consider themselves to be from Kars. They are “Karslı.” Cengiz said, “In addition to the relatives, we have *köylü*.” The *köylü* was the category closest to that of the family, and it referred to people who came from the same village. He continued, “Then we have *hemşehri*,” referring to the people from the neighboring villages, towns, and provinces. Cengiz says, “Our relationship with the *hemşehris* is good, too. Even if he is not from the same village, if you know that he is from Kars, and you go and help him. Say, if I get into a fight or something... My *köylü* would come and side with me. If there is a *hemşehri*, he will support me. If there are one hundred people from Kars there, at least eighty of them will come and help me.”

The next circle of community embraces the neighbors, *komşu*. Among the neighbors, there is an intriguing dynamic. Neighborliness is not always characterized by harmonious interactions. At times, there were serious conflicts. Ties shifted according to mutual interactions and obligations. Different groups, at times, could be in conflict with one another. However, the tension does not remain for too long. People turn to their neighbors on the good days and the bad days. The important thing is that one should be able to interact with the neighbor. You may have a verbal or even a harmless physical fight with your neighbor. You may take the liberty to discipline their children, because in a way, they are yours. You may run errands for your neighbor. You can go and ask for a cup of sugar or a few pinches of salt. You invite your neighbors to your happy events. For the sad ones, no invitation is necessary. They will be there for you, sitting with you, crying with you.

In characterizing neighborliness, gender is an important factor. Most of the men in the neighborhood work in the *pazars*, and interact with their fellow villagers. There are some artisans who work in the neighborhood in their shops. Sometimes, they go to the local *kahve* and interact with their fellow villagers there, taking a break from their

work. While the men in the neighborhood socialize with each other, the women work and socialize among themselves in their homes, or on the porches and balconies, and even on the sidewalks. They chat with one another, while exchanging a pair of knitting needles to try new patterns, or while stuffing a wool mattress together. The younger children are with their mothers when they are small. The older children chase dogs, or they ride one bike, taking turns. At night, they spend time with their fathers.

Working together, women in the neighborhood share stories and pass time. Some women start the daily chores early, beating the carpets on the balcony, cleaning the windows, and sweeping the entrances of their houses. Women take their cushions to their porches and balconies and sit to embroider together. The porch offers a place for casual contact with people, for grouping and regrouping. If there is no porch, sidewalks will be used. People consider sidewalks a part of the house, carrying the idea of communal space into a more public realm, while interacting communally. People socialize in the streets. Streets are used for walking, talking to people, selling goods and other interactions.

Some may still argue that the migrants live at the fringes. However, a closer look will tell us another story. All in all, there are different ways to dwell. The idea of home is based on a particular understanding, in which people find orderliness in accord with the elements around them, and some comfort in relationships of coexistence. As people coexist with their loved ones, the home becomes a way to cope with the estrangement of being in an alien place. Work, home, stories, and rituals are the little quests for attaining something greater. “Peasant life,” writes John Berger, “is a life committed to survival. A peasants’ life moves forward—it is anticipatory. Like planting a tree, milking the cow for butter and cheese.” Migrants in the cities anticipate a future where they can build better lives and expect a brighter future. They want to be the victors of the quest, not the victims of a village in decay.

Today, you have heard a small chunk of information based on my extensive research. I am hoping that the findings I will be presenting will lead the analysts from various disciplines not only to re-evaluate the possible disciplinary gaps to the study of the relationship between people and buildings, but also to reconsider their interpretations of the *gecekondus* experience in Turkey, if not in other areas where internal migration is a central concern among the local and global population.

NOTES

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²Hande A. Birkalan, “Experience of Story Telling and Home Making.” (Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Middle Eastern Studies Association, San Francisco, California, November 24, 1997).

³Part of this doctoral research made possible by the Indiana University International Alumni fund in 1997.

⁴For the importance of the neighborhood studies, please refer to an excellent article by Amos Rapoport: Amos Rapoport. 1983. “Environmental Quality, Metropolitan Areas and Traditional Settlements,” *Habitat International*. (7): 3-4, pp: 37-63.

⁵According to Evans, history consists of the accounts of the past, while habitat refers to the total physical environment. Finally, heritage covers the unwritten parts of history, the prehistoric past, oral traditions and beliefs, language, and crafts. For detailed information, see Emyr Estyn Evans. 1973 *The Personality of Ireland: Habitat, Heritage, and History*. Cambridge: CUP.

⁶Rapoport, *ibid*, p: 43.

⁷For a detailed discussion on *gecekondus* as vernacular architecture see, Hande A. Birkalan. 1998. “Transformations: Gecekondus as Vernacular Architecture” in *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Working Paper Series 109: Culture, Craft, and Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California.

⁸Kemal Karpat. 1974. *The Gecekondu*, p: 15. Kemal Karpat notes that the United Nations names these settlements as "shantytowns, squatter towns, uncontrolled settlements or transitional settlements." Although I see the commonalities among these forms, I certainly believe that a distinction is necessary, for the houses are the products of particular cultures.

⁹Paul Oliver. 1990. "Vernacular Know-How," in *Vernacular Architecture: Paradigms of Environmental Response*. Ed. Mete Turan. Vermont: Gower Publishing Co, pp: 158.

¹⁰For detailed information, see Emyr Estyn Evans, *ibid.*

¹¹Bilgi Denel, *ibid.*

¹²Martin Heidegger, 1971. (Translations and introduction by Albert Hofstadter), "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," in *Poetry, Language and Thought*. New York: Harper & Row, pp: 145-161.

¹³Norberg-Schulz further argues that the "Development of the concept of a place, and of space as a system of places, is therefore a necessary condition for the adaptation to a given environment." In the *genius loci*, "the distinction between outside and inside is of fundamental importance, and it is defined in terms of a new relationship between interior and the exterior space."—Christian Norberg-Schulz. 1980. *Architecture: Meaning and Place*. New York: Rizzoli, pp: 31-33.

¹⁴For detailed analysis see, Yi-Fu Tuan. 1977. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

¹⁵Henry Glassie. 1991. "Vernacular Architecture and Society," in *Vernacular Architecture*. Mete Turan, Ed., p: 280.

¹⁶Henry Glassie, 1983. "The Moral Lore of Folklore," *Folklore Forum*. 16:2, pp: 123-152.

¹⁷Alan Duben, *ibid.*