In the last three decades, cities have become central to the reproduction, mutation and extension of neo-liberal policy experiments. However, they also happen to be the quintessential places where the contestation of neo-liberalism may take place in various forms and intensities. David Harvey (2012) asks, “how else and where else can we come together to articulate our collective cries and demands?,” referring to the crucial positioning of cities in urban movements. And this is exactly what people did in 2011; they came together and tried to raise their voices to construct new forms of solidarity, from Zuccoti Park in New York to the streets of Athens and London. One commonality that lies beneath these various urban resistance movements is the belief that the current materialisation of the capitalist system and its projection as a neo-liberal design for the city is fundamentally flawed.

Istanbul, as one of the largest metropolitan areas in the world, has gone through a radical transformation in the last decade. While the position that the city enjoys on the global arena undoubtedly makes Istanbul a more attractive place to visit and experience for an outsider, the same cannot be said to hold true for the majority of residents, whose rights to their city are challenged by the numerous top-down planning decisions implemented continuously by the Istanbul municipality and the national government. This raises a crucial question: At what cost has the city become a major attraction point?

Neo-liberal policies of the last 20 years, standing out as the major component of the globalisation process Istanbul has experienced, has created an environment where the informal public realm – “crucial for
survival in the over-crowded, under resourced crossroads city” (Sennett 2011) – is eliminated or tremendously weakened on a daily basis. From government-driven, top-down, controversial, gigantic infrastructural projects, to an incredible number of shopping malls standing side by side, and further to the so-called social housing projects (that in many cases destroy historical, poor neighbourhoods to open up space for private real estate developments), as well as the presence of a strong tabula rasa approach, Istanbul embodies the issues of neo-liberal urbanisation in the most extreme ways possible. However, at the same time, these developments generate their own adversaries, and the reactions towards the dominant top-down planning policies are manifested in various forms, ranging from civic platforms, to occupation movements in Istanbul.

One can say that for the most part, Lefebvre’s notion of the Right to the City seems, in the Turkish context, to be strongly associated with resistance movements against urban regeneration projects and evictions of inhabitants. In many of these cases, short term results (such as property ownership, construction opportunities, or bargaining on deals) seem to be the overriding outcome, rather than long term goals that would affect larger segments and collective rights in the city. However, it should be noted that the last decade, especially, saw a growing number of groups and alliances that deal with broader, urban projects. Efforts to alter neighbourhoods and attempts to find a new identity for the city have caused regeneration projects to dominate the agenda of urban movements in Istanbul.

As can be understood from this focus on anti-regeneration, neo-liberalism in Istanbul has been experimented with, modified, implemented and – most importantly – contested in locally specific and uneven ways. In many cities around the world, contestations display contrasting characteristics and interests of different groups while coexisting with emergent neo-liberalism. Thus, in order to understand the correlation between the workings of neo-liberalism and reactions against it in Istanbul, one needs to look beyond neo-liberalism, to see the importance of alternative imaginaries and varied practices.

The cases for this chapter are deliberately selected to reflect the different aspects of current urban movements and resistance in Istanbul. Most of them emerged as direct responses to the Taksim Redevelopment project,
currently implemented by the Istanbul municipality with an ultimate top-down approach in the heart of the city, while others deal with urban transformation schemes taking place in other parts of the city.

**Civic platforms and protests – the Taksim Platform**

The way in which current civic platforms have organised themselves in Istanbul, especially as a response to the Taksim Square Redevelopment project, constitutes a good example of a sub-political entity. The Taksim Platform¹ is a citizens’ initiative that raises objections to the current state of the project, arguing that the project should have gone through more transparent consulting, regulation and supervision phases (Aktar 2012). The platform consists of people from a wide spectrum of fields: concerned citizens, urban planners, architects, lawyers, academics, NGOs, political party representatives, artists and so on. It provides a much-needed political platform where people can put their ideas forward and create political synergy, in itself an extremely curial factor in the contestation of the project.

The Taksim Platform differs from numerous other civic movements in that it is structured as a constructive opposition movement, not merely involved in obstruction or prevention of the project. Platform members work with a group of 150 professors from three universities in the city to come up with alternate plans for making simple adjustments and improvements in the Taksim Square, and the platform slogan reinforces this: “A better project… A better Taksim… A better future.”²

**Herkes icin Mimarlik – Architecture for All**

Independent, student-led organisations that attempt to establish a more holistic, overarching approach to urban issues are increasingly present in Istanbul. *Herkes icin Mimarlik* (Architecture for All), is one of them. It defines itself as “a non-profit and independent architecture organisation based in Istanbul” and its primary goal is “to offer architectural solutions to social problems which are faced in Turkey and beyond and promoting participatory design process in architecture education.”³ The organisation strives to involve students of architecture; however, it also wants to become a diverse platform, where everyone, regardless of background,
is invited to propose inputs. By providing a platform for architectural students to collaborate with experts (and non-experts) from other fields, one hopes to transform the understanding and the practice of the field into a socially constructed one.

The organisation gained increasing recognition after the announcement of the Taksim Redevelopment project. In its first public campaign – entitled Sana Soran oldu mu? (‘Did anyone ask you?’) – it tried to bring attention (and here it followed in the footsteps of the Taksim Platform) to the fact that no one in the city was asked for their opinion on a project concerning one of the most important squares in the city. People, especially young design students, were in the campaign asked to come up with ideas concerning their future visions for the square, ideas that also reflected their understanding of the square and what it has come to mean for them.

_Herkes icin Mimarlik_ has also been organising picnics and concerts every Sunday at the Gezi Park, adjacent to the square, which is currently being destroyed by the municipality to open up space for a shopping mall. The main target of these events has been to point out the park’s unutilized potential and its importance for the city. Each event has included a variety of activities with different artistic groups, such as dance shows, juggler performances, artistic interventions, and even a swap event by an artist collective, thus making the park itself a platform for performing arts. In this way, _Herkes icin Mimarlik_ has generated a new identity for the park, in which people who were not aware of the place have begun to use it continuously and claim ownership by actually just being there.

_Ekumenopolis: A City Without Limits_

In the last few years, Istanbul’s increasing number of shopping malls and the city’s urban transformation projects have gained wider media coverage. Media activism, blogs, digital communication, and cultural artistic events have been vital in the creation of a public sphere that can fight against main populist discourses and urban transformation projects carried out by municipalities. Documentary practice has also been used to portray Istanbul’s urbanisation problems in a project called _Ekumenopolis: A City Without Limits_. This documentary questions not only the neo-liberal transformation of the city itself but the dynamics behind it as well. Its
approach is holistic in the sense that its director, Imre Azem, talks to a wide range of people, including experts, academics, writers, investors, city-dwellers, and community leaders. The movie follows Kasim Aydin in his struggle to find a permanent home for his family after having lost his home in a demolition by TOKI (the Housing Development Administration) three years earlier. The documentary portrays the intriguing processes of commodification of the land, destructive urban transformation, and revanchist projects that basically exclude people like Aydin and send them to TOKI projects in the periphery. The movie also revolves around the potential negative outcomes that the 3rd Bridge on Bosphorus would bring to the city, providing illustrations, animated maps, graphics and impressive aerial views of the city.

A project such as Ekumenopolis becomes essential in contesting neo-liberalism by the method it employs. Complex issues like the neo-liberal city, gentrification, and urban transformation projects are described in the most comprehensible and easily understandable way, making it possible for people who lack extensive knowledge of the urban problems Istanbul is facing to relate to the issues the movie describes. The film’s informal premiére took place as part of the Gezi Park Festivities of Herkes icin Mimarlik, exemplifying the strong solidarity between two different, but related, urban movements. Ekumenopolis: A City Without Limits not only achieves a ‘visual-spatial critique,’ but also pushes its audience to question the transformations happening in their city. This awareness alone is extremely valuable in the discourse of contesting neo-liberalism within the city.

The Kitchen Project

One of the problems that the urban movements encounter in their strivings to achieve urban alternatives to the neo-liberal agenda is the lack of permanent grounds and spaces to be used as meeting points and platforms for activists. The Kitchen Project is a community-based project that tries to provide a permanent solution to this problem. It is run by an Istanbul-based, horizontally organised, activist network, the Migrant Solidarity Network (MSN), which has been active since September 2009. The network considers itself part of the transnational and internation-
alist ‘no border’ movement, defending everyone’s right to unconditional freedom of movement and to dwell wherever they choose. Moreover, the network sees rights to residence, work, health and education as basic rights that everyone should be entitled to, regardless of where they come from or whether they are ‘documented’ or not. In this context, the Kitchen Project is proposed as a space for close interaction between members of the project and migrant groups in Istanbul.

The location chosen for the project is Tarlabasi, an area close to Taksim Square, where the population consists of Roma, internally displaced Kurds, refugees from Iraq, and undocumented African migrants. This area is also included in the so-called Urban Transformation Project, along with 50 other neighbourhoods throughout the city. The space is planned to function as a kitchen, where migrants and local activists come together for cooking and eating together. According to the organisers, the Kitchen Project will serve not only to grow stronger ties between activist groups and the migrants themselves, but also to provide a platform for developing grassroots resistance to displacement. Some of the neighborhoods where the gentrification project is introduced, showed solidarity, organised local protests and resisted neo-liberal urban policies, whereas the others, lacking a platform for self-organisation, were swept away. Learning from these experiences of grassroots resistance in the other neighborhoods, the Kitchen Project intends to open a space of solidarity where different groups can build alliance against the deleterious effects of the gentrification projects.

The Kitchen Project, with its social and inclusive role, is an example worth mentioning in the overall struggle and contestation of the neo-liberalisation of Istanbul. Despite small scale, it goes against the individualistic, profit-based, commercial, and segregating land-use strategies of neo-liberal urbanism. It not only opens up an alternative platform and a counter-public space, but also provides a good example of a ‘soft form’ of activism that creates collectivities on the micro and neighbourhood level (Tan 2011).

**Concluding reflections**

One of the planning experts interviewed in the *Ekumenapolis* project points out that the urban transformations Istanbul is experiencing will most
likely in a very near future result in a city-wide “chaos.” In this context, in an arguably crippled democracy like Turkey’s, how people resist these processes and mobilise to generate alternative practices and imaginaries, will gain crucial importance, regardless of their scale or power. There is no doubt that a Turkish version of the Right to the City needs to emerge rapidly, which could inform the large population of the city about what actually is happening to their city. Although grassroots organisations and urban movements in Istanbul so far have not been very influential in pushing the municipality to revise its plans, there is no doubt that such campaigns will gain more momentum as people of Istanbul start to see the consequences of neo-liberalisation processes with their own eyes. We are witnessing social unrests all over the world against the imbalances and inequalities between different segments of society, and it would be wrong to assume that the Turkish public will be immune to these current news. For this reason, both the Turkish government and the Istanbul municipality need to understand the dynamics of the city and try to integrate perspectives from different segments of the society before it is too late.

Post-Script 2014

In June 2013, Istanbul saw the largest and most influential democratic protest in her history, less than two months after this paper was presented at the “Claiming the City” conference at Uppsala University. As a result of the brutality shown by the police force towards the protesters, what started out as a peaceful protest to save Gezi Park – located next to the Taksim Square – and its trees from destruction, turned into a countrywide movement that rejected the ever increasing autocratic tendencies and actions of the Turkish Government, and mainly of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The Taksim Solidarity Network, which consisted of more than 120 highly varied groups, including the Taksim Platform, played a major role in these events by initiating the protests in the first place, and by acting as the umbrella group throughout. People from different ends of the political spectrum gathered together, without a centralised leadership or political party affiliation, and they raised their voices against issues ranging from environmental ones (including the redevelopment plans over Taksim), to freedom of expression and assembly, as well as the
government’s interference in their lifestyles. In a similar fashion to the Occupy Movement, they formed their own camp at Gezi Park, with tents, medical facility, food distribution, and even a library. Decisions on how to move forward with the protests were taken in public forums, involving all the participants, who profoundly exemplified the characteristics of a direct democracy, and generating what one might even call a commune.

One of the major problems that surround struggling democracies like Turkey’s is the notion that democracy is solely about organising free elections. One could argue that a healthy democracy is, or should be, more than that. Presence of well-established state institutions, checks and balances, free media, but most importantly an effective civic society are the prerequisites needed to make democracy work effectively. In the case of Turkey, the current government has fallen deeply into majoritarianism, with its perverse belief that winning an election gives the governing party the authority to implement anything they want, regardless of any opposing view. On top of this, recent restrictions – though no longer in place – on accessing social media platforms like Twitter and YouTube (of which the former played a major role in establishing communication between the people taking part in last year’s protests) display the signs of a crumbling democracy in Turkey.

Within this stark context, the Gezi protests nevertheless marked a new era for civic and grassroots protests in Turkey. It redefined the notion of democratic participation in politics, especially the part concerning the role people could play in the quest of claiming rights to their city, beyond the casting of votes every fourth year. The young generation, wrongfully assumed to be careless and apolitical, got together, took to the streets, risked their lives in the face of police brutality, and organised collectives to raise their voices in a context where traditional political institutions chronically failed to represent or comprehend the ideals of these people (this is especially true in regards to opposition parties).

One prominent journalist in Turkey described the Gezi protests as the best thing that happened to Turkey in recent times. Needless to say, I strongly share that sentiment in a belief that it profoundly changed people’s perception of urban movements, and inserted the idea that there
is more to democracy than elections. This shift alone is great news for the struggle towards constructing an effectual Right to the City movement.

Notes
1. The word platform in Turkish is used to express the alliances of different groups on a specific topic.

References


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