Informal urban settlements (known as “squatters” or “shanties”) such as the \textit{gecekondu}s in Turkey and the \textit{favelas} in Brazil have appeared as the spatial manifestation of urban poverty in cities in different periods of the 20th century, and have had their particular histories in different social-geographic regions. Urban studies scholars have carried out extensive research on these settlements, focusing on a variety of topics. For example, urban planners were interested in how to normalize these “irregular” settlements, whereas sociologists studied the structural causes of poverty. Some anthropologists focused on questions of gender in shanties, while others researched the potentials for resistance in everyday life in these areas where uneven capitalist development became visible on the urban scale.

Informal settlements, which until twenty years ago used to be studied as an urban sociology phenomenon under headings such as “urban poverty” or “rapid urbanization”, have recently begun to appear in totally different forms in popular culture, contemporary art, and architectural/urban planning approaches. Among architects and planners actively involved in the production of urban space, a new vein is now emerging: some have begun to approach informal settlements in a different light. What used to be studied under headings such as “social problem” or “crude urbanization” – and usually with negative connotations - has recently come to be seen in a positive way – or at least taken as legitimate - by urban professionals with this emerging approach.

For instance the Guatemalan-American architect Teddy Cruz not only organizes tours to the makeshift urban settlements in Tijuana on the US-Mexican border, created using found materials and informal methods by poor people lacking social security; he also places these informal settlements at the center of his architectural philosophy. Cruz emphasizes the flexible, democratic, and creative character of these informal spaces and says he finds inspiration in them. In the words

\footnote{The \textit{gecekondu}s in Turkey have been the subject of such a favorable approach before. As Bülent Batuman also points out, the urban opposition organized around the Chamber of Architects in the 1970s, which employed a socialist approach, regarded the \textit{gecekondu}s as a legitimate urban development, pointing out its positive aspects as a “humane living environment.” See Bülent Batuman (2008), “Organic Intellectuals of Urban Politics? Turkish Urban Professionals as Political Agents, 1960-80”, \textit{Urban Studies} 45 (9), pp. 1925-1946.}
of Nicolai Ouroussoff of the New York Times, Cruz approaches these settlements in Tijuana with “an open mind” and defends them as “a humane model” against the soulless gated communities and the alienating American suburbs. Cruz also uses what he has learned in Tijuana in his own architectural designs. In other words, Cruz elevates informally produced urban spaces to the level of something from which a designer can draw inspiration, and this points to a radical paradigm shift concerning approaches to informal settlements.

Let us consider Rem Koolhaas in juxtaposition to Cruz: since the 1990s Koolhas has been studying non-Western global metropolises and cannot hide his admiration for the spontaneous organization of the urban economy by the inhabitants of Lagos, Nigeria. The informal structure of the city, which at first seemed chaotic to Koolhaas, appears to have enchanted the Dutch architect. Similarly, projects, seminars, research projects entitled “Learning from X [city]” and accompanying tours have rapidly increased in recent years at universities around the world. At departments of architecture and urban planning, such projects instrumentalize or transfer the knowledge gleaned from studying informal settlements into professional practice (just like Teddy Cruz’s approach). For those working in disciplines like urban sociology and anthropology, such field research serves the purpose of questioning and re-evaluating the all too familiar theoretical approaches in urban studies produced usually through West-oriented perspectives. An excellent example of such research is the collaborative blog entitled “Favelissues”, originally started by Adriana Navarro Sertich who during her graduate studies on architecture and urban and regional planning in California went on research trips, but now enriched with the contributions from various researchers of different fields.

Some art practices that emerged at the end of the 1990s and were defined by art historians and critics as “collaborative art” have also shown interest not only in the informal neighborhoods populated by the urban poor but also in social housing sites populated largely by lower class immigrants. Some of these artists collaborated in their art projects with the lower-class immigrants living in immigrant neighborhoods in European cities. Some artists, such as Thomas Hirschhorn,
have preferred to stay away from the “helping the poor” perspective of such projects and strove not to become like “social work” services provided by the state with the aim of solving “social problems” and maintaining social stability and control. Still others went so far as to instrumentalize art to fulfill basic needs. One artist, for example, built a functioning toilet connected to Caracas’s sewage system in order to meet the needs of those living in one of the favelas of the city.⁷

Cases where informal settlements are treated favorably in contemporary art are not limited to collaborative art practices. During the last decade or so, we have seen some contemporary art works that have come very close to turning the gecekondu into aestheticized visual objects to be experienced primarily with the eye (i.e., by seeing), with their social relevance relegated to the background. The work by Oda Projesi entitled Ada (Island), which was exhibited as part of the Istanbul Biennial in 2003, in a sense brought the gecekondu on to the stage. A simulation-gecekondu built out in the backyard of Antrepo together with gecekondu builders was accompanied by a number of other pieces: an ironic advertisement for a “gecekondu for rent” on a billboard on the main street in front of Antrepo, made from a collage of the real estate ads section of a newspaper and simulating the commercial language of the advertisements, along with various events simultaneously taking place in Oda Projesi’s space in Galata, which was still active at the time. In this example, although the artists aimed at highlighting the production process of gecekondu, they could not prevent the production of a spectacle as the unavoidable result of the institutional framework of the biennial. As a matter of fact, Sibel Yardımcı criticized Oda Projesi’s work for having aestheticized the gecekondu.⁸ Yardımcı defined gecekondu as a “social problem” and wrote that Oda Projesi’s work emptied it out of its social contents, turning it into a spectacle, a cultural commodity.⁹ In seven years' time after Ada, Oda Projesi was working this time as part of the Cultural Agents project in the Gülsuyu-Gülensu neighborhood threatened by “urban transformation” and would have to deal with a situation where gecekondu as a social phenomenon was unavoidably in the foreground.

Apart from architecture, urbanism and contemporary art, mass culture is another area where urban...

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⁹ I have discussed the problems that would arise from defining the gecekondu as a “problem” in my Ph.D. dissertation, in the section devoted to Oda Projesi. See Özkân (2008), “The Misuse value of space: spatial practices and the production of space in Istanbul”, Ph.D. Thesis submitted to the University of Rochester (http://hdl.handle.net/1802/6201).
poverty appears before us in different guises. The most striking development in this area involves the recently increasing number of tours called “slum tourism”, organized in poor urban neighborhoods. The forerunners of these tours are to be found in the “slumming” tours of the 19th century; today they are organized especially in cities where structural urban poverty has led to permanent informal settlements such as Cairo or cities in Brazil. As Bianca Freire-Medeiros, the author of Touring Poverty, shows in her research on Rio de Janeiro, these tours point to a new condition that could be called the commodification of urban poverty. What people taking these tours look at, see, and watch is poverty and its spatial counterpart. Such tours not only promise “exotic” experiences to participants; they also serve as a sort of “conscience cleanser” for middle- and upper-class tourists. According to Freire-Medeiros, some of these tourists want to believe they are helping the urban poor with the money they have paid the tour organizers. Some believe they have had unmediated, direct experiences and seen the truth in situ and without any intermediation. Still others stroll around these informal settlements fantasizing they are in a film set.

We are gradually beginning to see signs of “slum tourism” beginning in Istanbul. Is it possible to think of the tours organized for groups of academics and artists to witness the social damage created jointly by the state and the private sector under the rubric of “urban transformation” as a form of academic and cultural tourism? These tours inevitably bear the varying tones of power relationships that emerge between the examiner and the examined. It seems very possible that these will soon turn into a form of mass tourism, involving much greater numbers of people. Suffice it to say that for the time being these tours are on the smaller scale of what may be called boutique tourism, involving select small groups but still organized by a professional tourism firm, and that these tours are already present in Istanbul.

At this point I can’t help but mention the film Slumdog Millionaire and the earlier City of God, both of which could be described as the aestheticization of poverty. Cultural/artistic products catering to the masses, these films employ the aesthetics of advertising to reify and visualize an exceptionally

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difficult social content such as poverty, squalor, and violence. There is undoubtedly a big difference between experiencing a favela firsthand in Rio de Janeiro as a tourist and watching Dharavi, the “colorful” poor neighborhood of Mumbai in Danny Boyle’s film at a movie theater; however, there are also many similarities regarding how a favela is aestheticized and turned into a spectacle. That is exactly what I am trying to point out: that urban poverty is being turned into a commodity and a spectacle that can be aestheticized and consumed, just as in these films and the slum tours.12

Let me also mention that the recent album of Baba Zula is entitled Gecekondu. It must be noted that this constitutes another aspect of the continuing transformation witnessed in the music of Turkey that could be called “the gentrification of arabesque music.” One other aspect is the gentrification of Müslüm Gürses’s music, which leads people to rip their chests with razor blades, and still another aspect is having a belly dancer go on stage at Babylon, the famous jazz club. As for television, we have one of Sinan Çetin’s latest projects, a talk show entitled Gecekondu.13 Could this show be regarded as an effort to locate the living quarters of magandas (the lower-class, “uncultured” urban men, as exhibited in Recep Ivedik films), to identify the places this culture occupies in the city, and to normalize through this identification the culture and the space of the gecekondu?

At the risk of taking too big a step, I would like to talk about another aspect of mass culture, namely, fashion. In her article on the new upper class entertainment venues in Istanbul (2011), Kübra Parmaksızoğlu talks about the new “poorgeoisie” movement that emerged in fashion design in 2009 and manifested itself in the form of poor-looking, torn, jaded designs.14 We learn from Parmaksızoğlu that Izzet Çapa, an avantgarde investor in the world of entertainment in Istanbul, is very much taken by this new movement and plans to open new entertainment venues in Istanbul soon based on the “poorism” theme. At this point poverty is completely emptied of its content and is transformed into a mere theme, a style. Indeed, a similar thing happens when Niyazi Erdoğan, a young fashion designer, takes inspiration (and visual codes) from the arabesque culture of the 1970s...

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12 We find similar processes of spectacle-making in another area of mass consumption, namely, entertainment: the Favela Chic Bar, famous for its “colonial ethnic ambiance” and with branches in London and Paris, is a case in point.

13 Orhan Tekelioğlu has already begun conducting a sociological analysis of this show in one of the articles he has written for the daily Radikal. See Tekelioğlu (2010) “Magandanın önlenemez yükselişi”, Radikal İki, 12 September 2010.

and uses them in his new collection titled “Dolmuş.”\(^{15}\) Stripped off its social meaning in this case is the history of migration in Istanbul in the second half of the 20\(^{th}\) century and the lived experiences of those social actors who made this history.

What do all these signify? What is the meaning of the paradigmatic change regarding urban poverty, which is manifesting itself in material form in the informal settlements? What is the relationship between these signs that have appeared during the last two decades and the processes of gentrification and “urban transformation”? What are the material signs of this non-material paradigm change, which I think is still in the making, in the post-Fordist capitalist period? What does the commodification of poverty correspond to in material culture?

Let me finish by raising some self-reflexive questions: Where do we stand in this picture I have sketched above as academics, researchers and artists,\(^{16}\) who belong to the middle and upper classes in terms of our consumption of “urban culture”, who have sufficient economic and plenty of cultural capital, who enjoy the concomitant amenities of the city and produce critical thinking under these conditions? What is our contribution to this commodification, and how does it come about? What role might we be playing vis-à-vis the production of this ideology? Where do we draw the fine line between criticizing this transformation and contributing to it?

Translated by Tankut Baler


\(^{16}\) Let's face here the fact that the writer as well as the readers of this text are members of this social group of “academics, researchers and artists.”