PORTFOLIO

Istanbul Ghettoes

By Stephanie Paine and Kevin Yildirim

Last year, on a very hot June day, I went to the Istanbul neighborhood of Sulukule with photographer Stephanie Paine. For the previous two years I had been a regular visitor to the area, which is a mere ten-minute bus ride from the city’s historic center, and I was eager for Paine to join me and photograph the community. To prepare, I’d been telling her about Sulukule for weeks: the Romani community that has lived there for centuries, the government-led urban renewal project that demolished most of the neighborhood in 2007, the luxury housing development that was built in its place, and most of all, the teenage rappers who were turning Sulukule into Istanbul’s most exciting hip-hop scene.

Within twenty minutes of arriving, we had been whisked up to a rooftop where, from five stories up, plenty of all this was on view—rappers included. Joining us were Zen-G and V-Z from Sulukule’s most famous group, Tahribad-ı İyan (Rebellion of Destruction). Comfortable with photographers after years of media experience, they immediately began posing for Paine’s camera. Since forming in 2008 the group has attracted a strong following. Their songs typically sound aggressive and unsettling, and their lyrics often take aim at those responsible for Sulukule’s demolition. But Paine’s rooftop photo of Zen-G, Pigeons (2015), is peaceful and serene. Having just released a handful of pigeons from their coop, which belonged to a man Zen-G called “Uncle Islam,” the young rapper is crouched down and offering them seeds. Zen-G has a look of calm determination in the photograph, as if his stage name should reference Buddhist meditation and not imposed urban planning.

If we compare this shot with Old Sulukule Street (2015), it is easy to see why opponents took offense at the architectural plan. Layer after layer of this shot reveals a symbiotic relationship between human, street, and nature. Sidewalks seem to double as sitting rooms, clotheslines impede public passage, and trees and plants intrude on everything. If the scene is picturesque, and self-contained as a result, the effect is from residents living in and developing the neighborhood over generations—not imposed urban planning.

As a government initiative to rebuild Sulukule using a consolidated design scheme, the renewal projects falls in line with Adam Krims’s term “integrated aestheticized space.” The phrase denotes a tendency in developers to “coordinate aspects of urban spaces to unified, or complementary, aestheticized purposes.” As a means of encouraging cultural regeneration, tourism, and consumption, integrated aestheticized space has for Krims become a hallmark of capitalist cities. Just as products and services in the digital age derive value from their design and informational content, he writes, so do places. For Krims, design-intensive urban remodeling leads to contained entertainment districts, demarcated retail zones, and ultimately “requires a fundamental and thoroughgoing design and aestheticizing of life in the city.”

But integrated aestheticized space might also apply to a different type of coordinated and design-intensive urban area. It might also describe the tendency among hip-hop artists to visually construct their urban surroundings as ghettos, as is the case...
in Sulukule. Visual renderings of the neighborhood in Tahríbad-ı Isyan’s music videos, for instance, often amount to an incorporat-ed vision in which the neighborhood appears as a desolate urban slum. A film called Wonderland (2013, by Halil Altındere) is the best example; it was screened at the 2013 Istanbul Biennial and was very well received. Much of the video is a far cry from the vi-brant Sulukule seen in Paine’s series. Wonderland uses washed-out colors and images of abandoned buildings to present the neighborhood as bleak and lifeless. This is an aesthetic choice in-formed by the conventions of mainstream hip-hop, and not just a documentarian impulse. While Sulukule is sometimes bleak and has its fair share of abandoned buildings, its aesthetic ghettoiza-tion funnels the disparities of urban life into a relatively homoge-nous expressive form. If the principle of integrated aestheticized space can be used by urban planners to reinvigorate marginal urb-an areas, then it can also be used by artists to reconstruct their neighborhood in culturally relevant terms. In both cases, urban places are constructed as distinctive entities bound by a glob-al aesthetic unity, and the goal is to use design schemes to inject value into an urban area.

Hip-hop’s urban realism encourages an aesthetic rendering then, in art and real life, of both the neighborhood and the indi-vidual. By reimagining Sulukule in line with the run-down neigh-borhoods seen in Hollywood films like 8 Mile (2002, directed by Curtis Hanson) and You Got Served (2004, directed by Chris Stokes), Sulukule teenagers have found a way to overcome the challenges of urban poverty, crime, and traumatic urban renewal. In no other musical culture could abandoned buildings, drug dealers, and ramshackle infrastructure amount to social and cultur-al capital. But they are inspired by solidarity too, because being a rapper or hip-hop dancer in Sulukule means uniting with other op-pressed people. “We’re outcasts,” a young dancer named Gizem told me, “and hip-hop originally started as a revolt, an answer to all the bad things coming from the outside world.” She added that hip-hop is about family and power in numbers, and dance is a way to forge ties.

Gizem’s own contribution is to give weekend dance lessons to younger kids from Sulukule. Before one of these lessons, and af-ter we’d come down from the roof, I watched Paine take portraits of some of the young dancers. First up was Gizem herself. Taken in front of a locked-up storefront, Paine’s portrait shows how hip-hop acculturation can amount to the restyling of a personal look just as it does a neighborhood. I’m referring not only to Gizem’s outfit, which looks authentic and is worn with conviction, but also to her body language. If identifying as an outsider has any neg-ative bearing on her confidence, it is not on display here. She is smiling in the portrait, standing at ease, and flashing a stereotypi-cal gang sign with her left hand. Gizem struck this pose intuitively, with little instruction from Paine. The fluency of her visual style is complemented by a naturalness in front of the camera.

But this raises a question: What does it mean to be a “natu-ral” in front of the camera, especially when doing so amounts to a fluid exhibition of learned behavior? All of the visual signifiers on display in Gizem’s portrait are, after all, appropriations of main-stream hip-hop—the gang signs, the sneakers, the T-shirt. There might be, it follows, a thoughtful, engineered, and even perfor-mative aspect to the person we see in the photograph. But what’s captured so succinctly in this portrait is the futility of thinking that her performative self-construction results in a lesser form of per-sonal identity. What matters more is that these visual signifiers have been consolidated by a strong young woman, who looks radi-ant, happy, and unabashed.

Another one of Paine’s portraits, of a thirteen-year-old stu-dent of Gizem named Yağmur, reveals the consolidation of hip-hop imagery at a more incipient phase. Compared to Gizem, we might notice that Yağmur is standing with more reserve. With arms at her sides, legs together, and head straight, Yağmur’s pos-ture would seem vacant and detached if it didn’t bring to mind the bottled-up energy of a dancer in first position. There’s a vitality and tension to her pose, especially in her bent right leg, which is clad in flower-embroidered denim. It appears as though her spirit is being contained, bringing to mind the staging of composure that children put on for adults with cameras.

In contrast to Gizem’s self-assurance, Yağmur’s constraint makes the “Parental Advisory” image on her crop-top shirt fit-ting. The label is often found on the front of rap albums, meant to warn parents of a record’s explicit lyrical content. On Yağmur’s shirt, the words have been printed with a black-marketer’s typo: the final “v” should of course be a “y.” Yağmur didn’t know what the label referred to or meant, let alone that it was spelled incorrectly. It’s a reminder that the form of imagery can be more important than its content, and that the nuances of globalized cultures can be lost when they materialize locally. What’s more important is the gradual coming together of an authentic and co-herent style, consisting of poise, art, clothes, and style. The packaging of this, as a comparison between the two portraits suggests, seems tied to personal growth and the confidence we grow into as we move from teenagers to young adults.

The T-shirt also reminds us that behind narratives of urban and cultural change are stories of personal becomings. Hip-hop offers Zen-G, Gizem, and Yağmur an expressive form to unleash themselves, to speak their minds, to feel better about their neigh-borhood and their friends, and to construct a more solid commu-nity. Sulukule is now defined by politically charged art and social cohesion, and it seems like a lasting change. I think back to when Zen-G introduced himself to Paine, and she asked, as do most, about the racial undertones of his nickname. “It’s fine,” one of his group mates says, “Even his mom calls him Zen-G now.”

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NOTES

1 Adam Krims, Music and Urban Geography (New York: Routledge, 2007), xxvi. 2 Ibid., xxxii.

See inside cover spread of this issue for Stephanie Paine’s image portfolio.