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, Tahribat-ı İspan (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), features none of the rancor that’s made them popular among Istanbul’s dissatisfied political classes. The photograph, in fact, 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.

Zen-G, like any pseudonym, signifies a recreated personal identity, and like many rappers, his empathizes with African American experience. In Pigeons, we get an idea of what this amounts to on an immediate visual level in 2015: Nike sneakers, black skinny jeans, tattoos up and down the arms, and a shaved-in part in short buzzed hair. It’s a strikingly familiar look, one whose popularity in Sulukule is growing by the day. Paine’s series Sulukule Children’s Art Atelier (2015) captures the cultural transition; it shows a neighborhood and its young residents in flux. Their neighborhood beset by forceful change, Sulukule teenagers have responded through art.

While hip-hop culture has slowly crept into the mainstream in many American neighborhoods, it has done so more suddenly in Sulukule. The rapid change invites us to compare past and present. Many young rappers told me that their interest in hip-hop culture began when Sulukule was destroyed, which invites questions: What are the connections between urban change and aesthetic movements? How can visual styles in particular help us understand the transformation of cities growing into hubs of global capital and culture? And what makes hip-hop so popular among youth on the losing side of this expansion?

It would be naïve to suggest that visual semiotics or aesthetics were never channels of communication in Sulukule. But in line with theories concerning advanced capitalist cities, there appears to be a recent shift in both the systematic use and sheer number of visual signifiers. Take the new housing project for example. As Paine’s photograph TOKI Courtyard (2015) shows, its architecture is intricately designed and uniform. The rectangular wood panels, vertically aligned windows, and geometric color contrasts give the development a very schematic and controlled look. Apart from striking an aesthetic dissonance with the working-class neighborhood it borders—whose urban fabric, as in most of Turkey, is unified only by its unsystematic design—these luxury condominiums loom over former Sulukule residents as beacons of institutional discrimination. The housing’s Ottoman-era flourishes, including the wood paneling and protruding bay windows, invoke an era during which Istanbul was the seat of a vast Ottoman imperial power. Critics claimed that this design scheme was a conscious attempt by Turkey’s national housing agency (TOKI) to realign a minority neighborhood under a more normative cultural aesthetic and a heritage of imperial rule.

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 seems 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 of developers in post-Fordist cities 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 ghettoes, as is the case
in Sulukule. Visual renderings of the neighborhood in Tahrird-i-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-

1 PORTFOLIO

ral” in front of the camera, especially when doing so amounts to a

36

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 in-
correctly. 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 said, “Even his mom calls him Zen-G now.”

KEVIN YILDIRIM is a writer living in Istanbul.

NOTES 1 Adam Krims, Music and Urban Geography (New York: Routledge, 2007), xxi. 2 Ibid., xxxi.

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