

# Using Constructional Records as Alternative Sources for Historical Writing

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This paper explores the potential use of constructional records as alternative sources for historical writing. Why is it essential to investigate a site through micro-histories? Can constructional registrations be alternative sources for writing history? In order to answer these questions, the paper will focus on three main parts, namely, historical writing and the need of alternatives, archive for constructional registrations and finally the samples of re-writing.

## HISTORICAL WRITING AND THE NEED OF ALTERNATIVES

It is not possible to transmit experience in the past to today by recovering its reality. We do not possess the entire knowledge of the past, for that reason, all our attempts of re-identification are limited to our ability of looking back from where we position ourselves. As Lowenthal states:

First, no historical account can recover the totality of past events, because their content is virtually infinite. Most information about the past was never recorded at all, and most of the rest was evanescent<sup>7</sup>. As a matter of fact, life is consisted of complex dimensions that are hardly grasped, such as through memories, individualities, collectivities, fictions, anachronism, etc. And secondly, “no account can recover the past as it was, because that past was not an account; it was a set of events and situations. Historical narrative is not a portrait of what happened, but a story about what had happened.

(Lowenthal 1985, p. 214-15)

Therefore, every written history exists as a reflection of personal and social condition of its writer. Lots of relations can be set up and knowledge can be derived starting out from past events, but, the entire meaning of the past cannot be obtained. The contextual condition of historical writing and its strong relation with its writer require a sceptical approach to everything written, but on the other hand these features of writing history expose inventive potentials of the subject. Thus, interrogation of subjectivity always occupies the agenda of historical writing.

Georg Iggers, in his work “Historiography in the Twentieth Century”, with which he discusses the methods of historical research, states that the event oriented position of nineteenth century professional historical writing, has transformed into twentieth century social science oriented historical research and writing. Twentieth century historiography, which was under the influence of social sciences, ranging from structuralism to Marxist class analysis, has criticized traditional

historiography for disregarding the context and focusing on great men and events. On the other hand, twentieth century historiography is criticised for its impersonal approach, like Marxist discourse, centring upon economy and politics (Iggers 2000, p. 3-8).

In the case of Turkey historical writing in the 1930s was affected by nationalistic positivist approach of the French and by nationalistic historical approach of German historians, while adapting to the founding of nation state. Transition into a multi-party democratic regime after 1960s, caused new expansions, but developed as nomothetic instead of ideographic approaches in Turkey, as it also occurred within the rest of the world (Tekeli 1998, p. 11).

Historical research marking the sources of specificities emerged in the second half of twentieth century. These are micro-historical studies supporting or criticizing the processes in macro scales formed of singularities, real people and events or gathered by individual narratives. They intend to relate social transformations to individual existences. In counter with the ideals of modern era based on a single historical time and continuity, together with post-modern critique, daily life culture and pluralism affected the approaches on historical writing. In this approach, it is not only the divergence between different civilizations, but also the pluralism in a single civilization which is intended (Foucault, in Iggers 2000, p. 57).

Virilio in his introduction to “A Landscape of Events” asks the question of “general history or the history of events”? According to him, the scale of values of facts no longer allow simple discrimination between the “general” and the “particular”, the “global” and the “local”. He continues by emphasizing the urgency of “reforming the *whole* dimension of general history so as to make way for the *fractal* history of the limited but precisely located event” (Virilio 2000, p. x). Virilio’s definition of fractal history also defines the situation after the 1970s concerning the perception on history and historical writing.

Transformation in historical writing after 1970 showed that a consistent explanation of the past changes was impossible (Stone 1979, pp. 3-24). In that sense, instead of defining the reasons of change with great social transformations, it is necessary to grasp them within the expectations and wishes of ordinary people. People and spaces are singular forces that are not included in the great narrative, but set up the entire transformation. Consequently, the main idea of this paper is to present these singularities by reviving narrative forms of historical writing and to go beyond the conception of scientific rationalism which is far from individualism. Instead of numerical results, here, the aim is to re-evaluate the knowledge of the past by adding new ones through traces which seem simple and unimportant. Micro-historical studies in Turkey are somewhat abundant recently, such as histories of cities, rural places, people, institutions, single buildings, etc. However, there are not many studies which take a critical look over all these micro-historical studies.

I have to give a brief description of the city through which I will discuss the subject mentioned above. Izmir is a city which was founded 5000 years ago. It became an important harbour city in the

seventeenth century, in the period of Ottoman. Like many other cities in the world, Izmir showed the clues of urbanization and industrialization in the nineteenth century. Construction of the railways, foundation of a regular harbour and urban growth were materialized within the multi-cultural social structure of the city. Especially after the 1860s, the city turned out to be one of the centres of international capital. Ethnic and cultural diversity was clear at that time, such as Turkish, Greek, Armenian, Italian, Austrian, British, French, etc. (Kıray 1972, p. 32, Alim Baran 2003, p. 23). After 1923, that is, in the earlier days of Republic, Turkish cities, which produced institutional and spatial representations of nation-state in modern style, presented other building types in the subsequent stages of modernization. Izmir also developed within a similar social and spatial process. In the beginnings of twentieth century, two basic phenomena took place affecting the structure of the city, mostly in Kordon and the harbour district. Firstly, the great fire in 1922 relating to the war of independence. Great fire caused a big spatial loss in Kordon and accelerated physical transformation. And secondly, social and physical transformations as a result of migrations, as it happened in 1924. After the 1950s, apartment type of building was mostly applied in the city, as a result of rapid urbanization. Examples which are going to be presented today can be evaluated as micro-historical analysis of this period. The reason why the paper focuses on this period is because this historical part of the city, which is mostly lost, is a place that transformed in stages. Increase in building density after demolitions and additions in time, can easily be observed. This particular place, Kordon, has always appeared like a gate to the city for centuries. It continued to be the most prestigious place in the city and has witnessed transformations which have improved its value. By setting out from the importance of this place, written in great narratives, this paper aims to show the spatial history of this place from a different point of view by using alternative sources.

## **ARCHIVE AS A SOURCE OF ALTERNATIVE HISTORICAL WRITING**

It is the material that survives which enables us to comprehend the past and also, every material which gives information about history can be used as a source in historical writing. City museums and archives are new for Turkey, but there are others, such as central, local or institutional archives, where information about the architecture of the city can be supplied. Archives of the Prime Ministry and archives of foundations are central, whereas archives in provinces and counties are local; archives of local governments, legal and private institutions are named, as whole, institutional archives (Martal 2000, p. 250-1). Materials used in this paper are obtained from the archive of the building permits department in the municipality of Izmir (Izmir Konak Belediyesi Yapı İzinleri Müdürlüğü Arsivi) dating from almost 1950s in relation to both the foundation date of municipality and development plan of 1951. Archives of local government are not generally considered a basis for research, but with the great amount of untouched material, they represent a significant base for alternative historical writing and offer the materials of writing history from particularities. As they are not perceived a basis for research, they are not organized with the requirements of a research area. However, there are files containing legal documents, correspondences, petitions documenting

changes for every building parcel in the city. In addition to recording the bureaucratic process of construction, they also give information on the economic, political and sociological environment which are strongly related with the constructional techniques of the time. This kind of information is needed especially for physical environments, which are constantly re-produced, and are in danger of being forgotten if now written about.

Correspondence exists in the files are for:

- Getting permission for constructing a new building
- Getting permission for making refurbishments in an existing building
- Getting the licence for building access
- Renewing permits
- Getting foundation permits
- Learning the conditions of development
- Getting the permission for demolition
- Cancelling seal, etc.

In addition to these documents, it is also possible to find architectural drawings illustrating all the constructional changes within the parcel limits.

These written and illustrated documents give information about constructional techniques, material, and forgotten names of architects, employers, and owners, however their representational character in transmitting meaning is beyond what is simply perceived. Existing people and spaces mentioned in constructional registrations are real forces which generate transformation and yet they are not revealed out in great narratives. Basic functions of these documents are to allow legal process keep continuing, but at the same time they exist as personal correspondences, so they always contain the potential of subjectivity. They have been used as sources to get information about architect names or construction dates, but the documents themselves have not been analysed in terms of sociological, political, cultural or literary qualities until now in Turkey. However, micro-historical studies which have increased for 10 or 15 years in Turkey require the efficient use of these sources.

Micro-historical studies concentrating on a specific place and subject and linking up the knowledge of the local to general (Iggers, p. 112), suggest the existence of reality apart from the canonized historical knowledge. The need of micro-historical knowledge can be explained in several ways. First of all, economical, political, and cultural transformations come into view and become visible by spaces within which we live. Therefore, each spatial unit can be evaluated as an extension of these relations. From another point of view, books on architectural history do not analyse anonymous building types and methods. Unfortunately, architecture of a certain period is presented only by intense single buildings. In other words, most of the buildings which generate entire city are built by architects who are not well-known. Thirdly, architectural end-products which we discuss do not emerge by themselves, but by the demand, accumulations and sometimes by personal relations

of ordinary people. Each has a story and constructional records partly reveal the clues of this unwritten history. Although the correspondences are legal writings, there is the condition of subjectivity in them. They become instruments of grasping the spirit of the period, personal and social relations of the time by way of empathy. In this paper, I want to declare that it is not the imaginative element, but constructional works which are inevitably related with other fields of life and enrich historical knowledge. The approach presented here can be evaluated as a method improving narrative characters of historical writing and indicating the traces of history.

## SAMPLES OF RE-WRITING

### Parcel No: 35 on Building Block No: 1201

Description of documents for mentioned dates are:

29 December 1952: Three-storied building project applied for.

22 July 1953: Development decision for the parcel is stated with a height of 21.80+1 metres.

12 October 1956: Five-storied building project for the parcel is applied for.

18 February 1960: Seven-storied building project for parcel 16 is applied for. The owner was H.E.B. and M.B.

08 November 1960: The owner for parcel 35 applies for habitation licence.

11 August 1972: Ownership for five-storied building is requested.

08.06.1973: Construction of the building is started.

30.12.1994: Construction licence is given for nine-storied building for the project of architect T. Bozoklar.

25 October 1996: The foundation construction of the new building is completed.



Figure 1. Three-storied building project in 1952, plan, façade and section for five-storied building project in 1956.

Even this particular parcel tells us the history of urban space which has taken place since 1950 in Izmir. Under the impact of rapid urbanization, industrialization and migration resulted in a demand for a new type of housing in the city. This period was identified with apartment blocks. Apartments which were three or four storied buildings reached to eight or nine stories in stages. In here, the project of 1952 is shown as one of the modest architectural representations of the time, while the project of 1956 arises with five stories, 1960 with seven stories, 1994 with nine stories.

In the 1950s, middle class lost the opportunity of constructing a building on a single parcel and thus the association of two or more people for constructing an apartment and gaining a single story seemed to be a solution (Tekeli 1998, p. 14). The only way to overcome the deficiencies of capital in constructing apartments was the collaboration of investment capacity. Thus, “land-owners, developers and investor-households acquired specific relational positions in this development process” (Balamir 1996, p.339). Developers initiated this cooperation; the landowners accepted the use of capital for production in return for profit and individual investors and households had participated in production process of capital (Balamir 1996, p. 339). In this way, instead of big capitals, profit was gained through the cooperation of small-scale capital. According to the agreement determined by these actors, ownerships were defined for independent parts and singularity of rights for independent units was made known. The process of appurtenance caused an increase in building construction and investment capacity for housing at the beginning of the 1940s, and in the 1950s. And finally, the institutionalization of the process was realized in 1965 (Balamir 1996, p. 339) under the name of “Flat Ownership” system. After that time, house became a product that could be bought and sold (Ö. Eyüce 1999, p. 37), and the scale was completely changed from two or three stories to eight or nine.

#### **Parcel No: 15 on Building Block No: 1201**

Zeynep Akif Apartment. Description of documents for mentioned dates:

04 January 1960: Development decision for the parcel is stated with a height of 21.80+1 metres in the event of unification of this parcel with the one next to it.

23 February 1960: Extracts from M.S.'s petition explaining the reason why he does not want to unite his parcel with the one next to it. He asks for a new arrangement.

“...parsel 15’de yeniden yapacağım inşaat için 16/7/1958 günü ve 3633 sayılı encümen kararı ile tasdik olunan plana göre 21 sayılı parselle tevhit edildikten sonra bitişik, 7 kat ve 22.80 bina yüksekliği ve ileride imar planlarında bir değişiklik olursa herhangi bir hak iddia edilemez, yalnız proje yapılır, inşaat yapılamaz diye bir imar durumu verilmiştir.

1.Halen bir küçük memurum ailemden kalma bu arsamda kardeşlerimle beraber bir yuva yapmak istiyorum.21 nolu parselle ne manen ve ne de maddeden tevhide imkan olmayan (zira 21 nolu parsel sahibi ecnebi ve gayri müslimdir) bir arsada hiçbir surette anlaşmam.

2.Ana yasa kanunlarına göre arsamda mer'i içidat ve teamüllere göre bir mülk yapmak hakkımdır.

3.Yapı tasarrufları ile kardeşlerimle beraber bir yuvaya sahip olmak amacıyla olduğumuzdan verilen imar durumunun Fen İşleri Müdürlüğünce varılan mutabakata göre yeniden düzenlenerek bir imar durumu verilmesi için yüksek meclise havalesine ve gereken müsaadelerinizi en üstün saygılarımla arz ederim". M. S. Cumhuriyet Bulv No:189.

09 March 1960: M.S.'s demand is rejected by the municipality, because his lot is not big enough to build a seven-storied apartment, so if he does not agree on combining his lot with the other, he will not be allowed to build on it.

05 June 1962: The owner insists on demanding to build an apartment on his own lot although the development plan anticipated the unification.

09 October 1962: Construction is allowed separately for these owners.

26 October 1962: Development decision for the parcel is stated with a height of 22.80 metres.

11 May 1964: Person responsible for the construction of the building is stated as C.A.

13 June 1964: Architectural project illustrates the building with nine stories.

17 January 1969: The title deed of the lot shows that before the construction of the nine-storied building, there was a small masonry house.

22 March 1971: Development decision for the parcel is requested by the owner.

29 September 1972: Person responsible for the construction of the building is stated as R.K.

15 November 1972: Construction of the building begins.

21 December 1972: Foundation permits are given.

1974: End of the construction.

On 10 January 1960, the owner of the parcel number 15 applied to the municipality for his request of constructing a new building on his lot. As an answer, development decision for the parcel was stated with a height of 21.80+1 metres in the event of unifying this parcel with the one next to it. The owner M.S. was not pleased with this proposal and raised an objection against this decision. M.S.'s petition dating 04 Feb 1960, explained the reason why he did not want to unite his parcel as follows: firstly, he believed that he could not get on well with the owner of the other parcel because he/she was a foreigner and non-Muslim. Secondly, he stated that building a property which only belonged to his own and which he could only share it with his brothers, was his legal right. And thirdly, he asked for the arrangement of another development condition for "the idea of possessing a home together with the building savings of him and his brothers". M.S.'s demand was rejected because his lot was not big enough to build an apartment, so if he had not agreed on uniting his lot with the other, he would not have been allowed to build a new seven storied building. The owner

insisted on demanding to build an apartment on his own lot although the development plan anticipated the unification. But, the decision dating 09 September 1962 allowed owners to build separately. This example shows that transition from detached-house to apartment type of building brings social necessities. A detached-house builds up a relation with its context resulting from its autonomous position and controlled neighbourhood relations. His demand of constructing a family apartment is not for to set up a vital partnership. The apartment type of building requires proximity between different social and cultural groups. Thus, social structure acquires a heterogeneous character. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Izmir was a city composed of different ethnic and cultural groups living together, but separately within their territories. New spatial practices change territorial borders. The owner's emphasis on the word "home" confirms that apartment type of building was new for the time and not appreciated by all parts of the society despite its economical profits.

### **Parcel No: 18 on Building Block No: 1201**

Sahil Apartment (Atatürk Street), Sel Apartment (Cumhuriyet Boulevard). Description of documents for mentioned dates:

06 May 1959: Development decision for the parcel is stated with a height of 21.80+1 metres.

28 April 1960: Development decision for the parcel is stated with a height of 18.80 metres.

29 September 1960: Development decision for the parcel is requested.

11 October 1960: Architectural project of the building is confirmed.

12 October 1960: Foundation licence is received by the owner.

09 June 1961: Extracts from the petition of the owner R.M. addressing the governor and the mayor.

"...18 parsel sayılı gayrimenkulün sahibiyim. Bu yer için 1959 yılında aldığım imar durumunda, bina yüksekliği 21.80 olarak verildi. Mevcut binamı yıkarak bina inşa edeceğim için, yaptıracağım projeye esas olmak üzere 1960 yılında tekrar imar durumu istedim. 12.04.1960 tarihli imar durumunda bina yüksekliği yine 21.80 olarak verildi. Bu sebeple, bina projelerimi 21.80 olacak şekilde hazırladım. 13.09.1960 tarihli dilekçe ile de ruhsat almak üzere müracat ettim.

Yapı şubesi servislerince verilen 29.09.1960 tarihli yeni imar durumunda bina yüksekliğinin 18.80'e indirildiği bildirildi.

Sebebini araştırdım, inkılaptan sonra bir ara belediye başkanlığı görevinde bulunan Safa Poyraz'ın, şahsi kanaat ve emirleriyle İzmir'de 21.80 irtifanda inşa edilen bütün binaların



irtifalarını düşürttüğünü öğrendim. Halbuki benden birkaç gün önce ruhsat alanların projeleri 21.80 olarak tasdik edilmiştir.

İmardan gaye bütün bina irtifalarını bir hizaya getirmekse aynı ada içinde 21.80 irtifada bir sürü bina vardır, yine aynı ada içinde natamam 21.80'lik binalar mevcuttur. ...İnşaatım devam etmektedir, mağduriyetimin kaldırılmasını emsalleri gibi 21.80 olarak irtifain tashihini rica ederim”.

16 June 1961: Development decision for the parcel is stated with a height of 18.80 metres.

09 February 1962: Architectural project of the building is confirmed.

26 April 1962: For the project confirmed on 26 April 1962, the person responsible for the construction is stated as J.Halikiopulos.

26 April 1962: Modification licence after the construction of foundations is taken.

30 April 1962: Habitation licence is taken for the block named Sel Apartment by the owner R.M.

12 October 1960: Licence taken on this date shows that the building with eight stories is constructed under healthy and safe conditions.

16 April 1971: Development decisions for the parcels are stated with the height of 21.80 metres and 24.80 metres.

The owner R.M. submits an application to municipality in 1959 to demolish his old building and construct a new one. Construction decision taken in 1960 states that the building height should not be more than 18.80 although the construction had started according to the project appropriate to the previous construction decision which stated the height as 21.80 metres. In the petition addressing the governor and the mayor, the owner R.M. explains the situation. He declares that he searched for the reason why the municipality proposed different building heights in time. According to his explanation it resulted from a change in the charge of mayor and the new one had taken decisions within the frame of his personal convictions. He states that “The main idea of regular development is to put all buildings under the same height” and the buildings around are being constructed with a height of 21.80. For that reason, he requests the correction of decision stated for him and to be appropriate to the other examples. Firstly, historical writing on architecture and the city do not include social behaviours and acceptances like “pointing out likeness”. However, it has an influence on the structure of urban space more than we can imagine. Secondly, this example shows the direct impact of local power on space. There are certain social agents taking part in the production process of space. But mostly, it is the political power acting as hegemonic discourse. Political and ethical discourse determining people’s activities, at the same time decides on the form that characterizes the city. Every ideological and political differentiation finds the ways of expressing itself in urban space. In addition to these comments, there is also a slight detail which is the name of the person responsible for the construction. This small information which I came across for the other parcels

exposes that some focuses of capital have a great impact on the spatial transformation in the city. Only by tracing out this information, another micro-historical analysis can be done for the city.

## CONCLUSION

Constructional activities occurring in a single building are related to a wider scope affected by economical, political and social transformations. Construction is not an area of practice which is isolated from other realities of life. It is a field of activities surrounded by economical, political, social and cultural relations. In daily life, this field of activity operates with a legal process. Information belonging to constructional processes is all recorded as a result of these legal necessities, but at the same time constitute a record of space and time. There are lots of other examples that couldn't be presented here, but it is important to understand the cause of change in urban space, such as the significance of international pacts or being minority in a society. As a result, transformations in macro scale have micro spatial reflections. Setting out from this idea, a constructional record for a single building can be a useful source for writing the spatial history of the city. They help us to comprehend the relation between the unique and the general.

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