

Zehra Tonbul

Politics of Renovation: Urban Regeneration

The Case of Tarlabaşı, Istanbul

Lecturer, Mardin Artuklu University

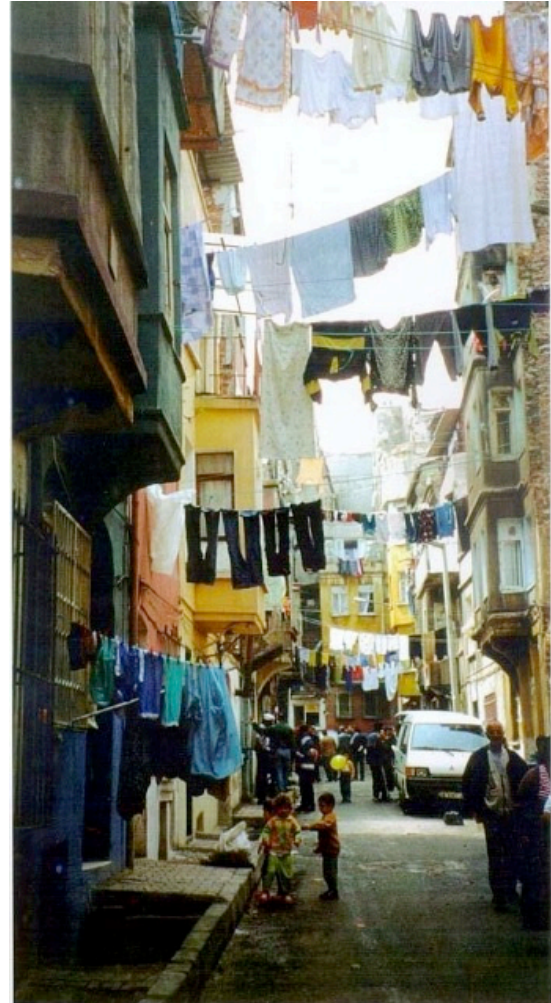
This paper will be examining the process and designs of the “renovation” project of Tarlabaşı, a central historical district in Istanbul, as a representation of the political aspirations, and their economic and social reverberations.

The designs of the nine blocks and their representations serve as metaphors to the politician’s reference to city’s history and culture. The political attitude is characterized by a pursuit for a new social and economic structure at the city center. Thus, the project is termed an urban regeneration. However, as the city’s historical quarters are physically and socially re-structured, both city’s history and culture are reinvented. The historical material serves as a marketing tool to justify the politician’s vision and situation in the society.

One of the buttresses of recent political agenda of the Turkish government has been its construction and renovation projects. The government resources fast-paced projects that range from hydroelectric stations to housing developments and to renovations of historical city quarters. Particularly Istanbul is physically and socially reorganized mainly by the construction and renovation projects in a pace and magnitude that overlooks any long-term decision making processes.

Specifically the city's historical areas have come to serve a socio-political agenda with economic dimensions. The government wishes to "upgrade" the heritage neighborhoods of Istanbul through re-generation projects that involve social gentrification and resettlement. The projects re-situate the present low-income inhabitants at the periphery of the city and in a similar manner also at the periphery of a new social status-quo. Furthermore, the architectural language of the renovations reflects a problem with their use of a make-up history, and seemingly relate to the socio-political aspirations.

Amnesty International produced a report on the forced evictions in Tarlabası recently on July 2011¹. The report deems the evictions as heavy-halted, as it presents accounts of intimidation and threats by the local Beyoğlu municipality and law enforcement officials. Andrew Gardner, Amnesty International's researcher on Turkey emphasizes that these people have not been given adequate notice, have not been consulted, they have not been provided with legal remedies, or offered adequate alternative housing or compensation. This he terms a violation of their human rights.



A view from Tarlabası before the project, photo Alper Ünlü, 2000².

The report does not miss the complimentary part of the "political" resolution of this social and physical change: that the only alternative housing which could be made available by the authorities is on the outskirts of Istanbul, more than two hours away by public transport, and that many Tarlabası residents, who work for very low wages, would find these properties unaffordable, and the cost of commuting back to their jobs in central Istanbul prohibitive.

Such an approach to renovation thus needs to be read as a social restructuring project. The unprivileged poor who have been living in the derelict historical center are forced to

the outskirts of the city, and to be made “invisible.” And, even that apparently is not possible. The representational medium of architecture in this project is telling as to the social and economic aspirations of this regeneration. The architectural projects do not only re-generate the whole neighborhood through re-building and re-functioning, but also provide images of the new city-dweller.

It is first however important to situate Tarlabası’s social and historical background to understand the need to de-situate /demolish it.

The Physical and Socio-Cultural Formation of Tarlabası



Tarlabası region in an aerial-photo

Tarlabası is the name of the neighborhood, situated on Istanbul’s European side, north of the Golden Horn. The region became a prominent

residential site from mid-19th century onwards. It was built as the residential site of middle and lower middle classes of the time, and its architecture developed as a modest version of the architectural style of Pera, the parallel high street of higher classes and Embassies³.

19th century population of Tarlabası consisted of the non-Muslim population of the Ottoman Empire- Greeks and Armenians and the Levantines- the Europeans who settled here. It was a residential neighborhood with small shops, which were managed by Armenians and Greeks.

Yet the First World War, consequent end of the Ottoman Empire and the foundation of the Turkish Republic in its place transformed the social and cultural balances particularly of Istanbul. There was a population exchange between Greece and Turkish Republic in late 1920’s- Greeks who had been living in Anatolia were forced to migrate to mainland Greece, as the Turks who had settled there were forced to migrate back to Anatolia. This change was mainly oriented to the rural population of Anatolia, but surely found reverberating effects in Istanbul. Pera, which had been the heart of the 19th century Europeanized capital of the Ottoman Empire, was then slowly abandoned from its Embassies. Tarlabası, which lived on Pera felt its consequences and Turkish population started to settle in the region from 1930’s onwards⁴.

This was though just the beginning of the many changes on Tarlabası’s social structure. In 1942, during the Second World War, through a capital law, the minorities were required to pay large sums of tax for their properties.

The revenue added up to 80% of total government budget in 1942. It had sound effects and thousands of buildings in Beyoğlu (Pera's new name) and Tarlabaşı were sold, mainly to Turks (67%) and to state offices (30%). Many were also confiscated and sold⁵.

Still more tragic, however, was the provoked and planned upheaval against the minorities of Istanbul on September 6-7 of 1955. Referred in Greek as Σεπτεμβριανά/ Septembriana, on September 6 and 7 of 1955, the houses and shops of mainly Greeks were looted by "unidentified" crowds.

Consequently came further abandonment of Tarlabaşı by the Greeks. Some of the houses were handed over to newcomers to Istanbul from rural Anatolia at low prices, others were left deserted.

Tarlabaşı thus became an invisible center, and a "slum" according to some research, as it provided easy access to the city center and easy-to-get housing⁶.

This marginal, "slum" character of the region was one of the reasons for the 1986 extension of Tarlabaşı Street into an 8-laned boulevard. Advertised as a transportation demand by the mayor of the time, the boulevard caused the demolishing of 370 buildings, 167 of which were registered as historical heritage. This might have been seen as a solution to eradicate the illegal social texture of the area. Yet, the urban texture was thus reaped and Tarlabaşı, was segregated from its social, economic and historical connection, Beyoğlu.



Tarlabaşı Boulevard after the demolition⁷

The boulevard functioned rather as an almost impenetrable line of social segregation and its two sides developed opposite ways. While further investment in Beyoğlu caused it to become a cultural center, Tarlabaşı's "slum" character speeded, as the line of neglect was drawn and definitions were thus more easily made. The neighborhood continued to house new-comers to Istanbul: Kurds who had to evacuate their South-Eastern villagers in 1990s, Romans who had settled here during 1950s in view of making a living through the entertainment and service sectors of the center, travesties and most recently "Africans" seeking refuge in Turkey and in Europe⁸. At the edge of the transit road, the neighborhood transformed into a transit area.

Tarlabaşı thus formed as the site of the invisible, the unprivileged people, who

lived in the abandoned stone buildings of the Greeks. Yet, a social-analysis that was run in the region in 1999 shows that despite and also due to the state of being neglected, the people of the neighborhood formed a bond with each other and thus a vibrant street life⁹. It became a hidden and impenetrable labyrinth of extremities and differences that inspired poets, writers and film-producers¹⁰.

The New Vision

Mainly from 2002 onwards, after the present party-Justice and Development Party- came to power, a new era of social, physical and economic change began. The change was most prominently applied through projects on Istanbul, due to its symbolic and economic potentials: Galata Port, Haydarpaşa Towers, Third Bridge, and sea tunnel from Bosphorus, shopping centers, gated communities, a canal to connect Marmara and Black Sea and also urban renovations of historical areas.

Claire Berlinski's reading of contemporary Istanbul as a "Weimar city" is a related observation of frenzy and restlessness: "a city rich in history and culture, animated by political precariousness and by a recent rupture with the past, vivified by a shocking conflict with mass urbanization and industrialization; a city where sudden liberalization has unleashed the social and political imagination-but where the threat of authoritarian reaction is always in the air." Berlinski reads these traits as a "sign of social dislocation."¹¹

In this background, one of the major urban renovation projects was Tarlabası. In 2005, a law was accepted in the parliament that gave district

municipalities the right to expropriate and renovate neighborhoods.

Beyoğlu Municipality had already envisioned renewing Tarlabası, as it had already become visible, as the economical value of Beyoğlu developed, and it became the major point of economic and cultural attraction in the city. Yet, Tarlabası and its people were not able to fulfill the potential. The municipality thus decided on 9 blocks of buildings on a 2000 square meter area. The project includes the renewal of 278 buildings, 210 of which are registered, with their streets and infrastructure. In 2007, the municipality signed a contract with GAP İnşaat for the application of the project. At the present, the firm runs bargains with owners, deals with court cases and simultaneously has started some of the run-downs.

The public language of the renovation gives clues as to the political, social and economic aspirations behind the project. The municipality from the beginning runs a public campaign advertising the project. It prepared a website which includes aims and the architectural projects¹². The municipality announces three purposes to the project: physical renovation, economic revitalization and social development.

The physical renovation purpose starts with situating the need for a contemporary intervention, through emphasizing the "unhealthiness" and "danger" of today's environment that threaten its "inhabitants." It tells about presenting "them" with greenery, sun and underground parking. Yet the present inhabitants do not have the economic means for such functions. Hence, the concern cannot be "them."

“One of the most important aims of the Tarlabası Renovation Project is to renovate the whole infrastructure and the building stock which is unhealthy and dangerous for their inhabitants. At the same time, it aims on one hand to protect the historical urban texture, on the other to bring the necessities of the age and demands of contemporary life to the buildings and their environs.

As the renovation project brings this historical region of the city its deserved value through both the protective and modern approaches of architects of expertise, it preserves the historical characteristics of the buildings and presents their inhabitants with the necessities of contemporary living- greenery and sun. For all of the houses, underground car parks and pedestrian areas that will accommodate social activities will be created.”

This phrasing rather accommodates the municipality's wish to justify itself in demolishing the present buildings. Yet, the justification is above all academically insufficient, and is against the internationally accepted charters on restoration and renovation.

The municipality announces its second aim as the economic revitalization, and unveils its aim to accommodate the tourism and service sector and uses the words of “quality” and “image,” as part of a marketing language.

“Tarlabası, though it is neighboring very important centers such as Taksim and İstiklal Street, could not partake from the economic and cultural revitalization of these places. Even the buildings on Tarlabası Boulevard could not accommodate big scale economic activities due to high crime rates and image problems caused by the slum characteristics of Tarlabası. This region of great potential is sited in

memories with its empty buildings and dilapidated streets.

The Renovation Project will start a change for the whole region through the value and service based economic activities it will bring to the region. Investments in tourism and qualified service sector will provide revitalization for the project area and its environs. The building quality which will be brought to the site will be an opportunity not just for the project area but also for Tarlabası on the whole.”

The municipality's third aim- the social development- is problematic as a term as to its criteria and its Turkish version rather denotes a radical “social progress.” The content of the aim, on the other hand, rather underlines the vision's rantability and opportunistic concerns.

“Tarlabası Renovation Project, undoubtedly, will trigger a change on the whole of Tarlabası, and will form a first step in integrating this “idle” part to the city. A social plan will be put to practice for the present inhabitants of this neighborhood to partake from this change and to benefit from the value and opportunities, with the participation of Beyoğlu Municipality and related actors.”

The Architectural Language¹³

The project includes the re-design of six blocks within the neighborhood. Each block's design has been allotted to different functions and to different architectural offices. Instead of the historical typology of masonry housing on small plots with back gardens, the projects include functions of the city's re-defined requirements- apart housing, offices, hotels and a shopping mall with underground parking. The small plots of land of the original houses do not live up to the standards

of the images of these functions and hence the area is proposed to be rebuilt. The car infiltrates into the organically formed narrow streets through underground parking and the desired new functions produce their galleries and atriums, through the destruction of whole blocks of registered housing buildings. History melts into a décor and the facades of historical houses remain only as components of the “new” glass/timber façade of the new designs.

The desired image of the neighborhood can be read within the language of these architectural projects. They reverberate the municipality’s rentability and social restructuring project. They dispose the weakly formed society of the unprivileged and also the battered history and culture of the area. In its place, are the images of young men and women, vespas, luxury cars and a re-invention of a new social class.



The Renovation Area

360: The Shopping Center

The building block situated just along the main street is transformed into a high-street shopping centre and office building. The whole building block originally with 29 housing buildings is planned to be run down. The 19th century facades of the existing buildings are rebuilt and re-situated on this new function and language. They compare to a stage set, a make-up reference to history, and a tool of advertisement.



Boulevard Façade of the Shopping Center, Block Design 360

The front facade transforms gradually into the timber-glass language of the new architecture as the original facades’ heights are surpassed. The glass-timber serve to mediate between the reconstructed stone facades and the bulky body of the singular building, a contemporary tool for architectural concern of history.

The projecting elements of the historical facades –*cumbas*—traditionally serve to overlook to the street in three directions and is part of the privacy codes of the house with the street. Yet, in the new design, these projections serve as props in front of the office spaces.

The municipalities aim to provide sun and greenery has been applied here through terraces and potted greenery. Terracing is not part of the language of the historical neighborhood and it reflects upon and changes the character of the street through texture and through its coding.

The streets of Tarlabaşı have been known to be lively through each building’s relation with the street and the culture which formed in front of each threshold. However, the design does not have any door to the streets

other than the central entrance on the boulevard.

The project seems to serve as a shortcut solution to a has-to-do reference to history while meeting the demand for a new image of the city center. The image embarks to clear cut of the slum characteristic of the area.

361: Housing



View from the street and a view from the interior garden, Block Design 361

The building block behind the shopping center is planned as a housing complex. The design lines up to the extents of the block and lives a rectangular terraced garden within its interior. The organic texture of the layout of houses is transformed into a geometric whole. The glass-steel façade defines the architectural texture again with the historical residue of the prop-facades.

The housing accommodates single bedrooms with comparatively large sitting spaces and open kitchens.

Hence, it could be told that the target group is of singles and couples of the envisioned Istanbul metropolitan life.

The relation to the street is again through a singular pedestrian way and the complex works as a whole most likely with security measures. The circulation of the complex works through a number of narrow stairwells that work from the underground parking and they are also the main routes to the interior garden and the terrace roofs. The use of the garden hence is limited through the dependence on the wells and will seemingly function as an image for others and as a view for its users.

Terraces and greenery are the determining elements of the design as the roofs are also terraced green roofs which overlook to the street and define a dominating relation with it.

362: Housing

The third design includes mostly single-bedroom housing, also with two and three bedroom flats. The same decorative approach to historical facades with less ambitious heights is taken, due to an existing Assyrian church.

The plan endeavors to conform to the texture of the neighborhood, also due to the steep slope and the existing first degree registered buildings. It diverts from the previous unified block solutions and presents individual relations with the street and diverse housing types. Yet the need to unify parts of the block into a circulation system working from the underground parking creates a complex labyrinthine structure of inner circulation. The relation to the interior garden is also mainly through this complex circulation system. However, individual

connections from the houses also exist. The project also diverts from other projects by partially eliminating terrace roofs.



View from the street and a view from the interior garden, Block Design 362

363: Offices, Conference Hall, Houses

Another block on a steep slope is designed to accommodate offices, conference hall and houses. The design works as a whole through its dominant entryway with a subsequent square.

The housing is mainly oriented to single families, with few exceptions of 2 –bedroom houses. The plans of houses are very diverse, from compact single-bedrooms to some encompassing 4 floors. Houses are generally of loft-style living with open kitchens and some with open bedrooms. Yet, some houses accommodate hobby rooms, private terraces, large sitting and working spaces. This diversity of spaces and

also the inclusion of office and conference functions create a myriad of circulations, culminating in the glass bridges traverse the inner garden. The stair-wells of this circulation also serve to infill re-built historical façades with their glassed outlooks.

The roof of the complex is terraced and these terraces are used partially by individual houses and there is a single communal terrace which works from a stairwell.



A view from the interior garden, Block Design 363

385-386: Housing



Images and Plan for Block Design 385-386

Here, the design team designed one of a half blocks of residences. Block 386 is divided among two design teams, as the historical building of an Armenian monastery is taken to be a node for division.

The team calls the complex a “residence.” The Turkish form of the word “rezidans,” deviates from its plain English connotation as “home” and is a

term that denotes inner city high-class housing with security. The housing consequentially accommodates one and two bedroom flats.

The team incorporates a cultural function and uses the ground floor as a passageway aligned with a spacious café and an art gallery. This passage is formed through forming a courtyard at one side of an existing street and connecting it with a parallel street.

The design unites the two different blocks below ground through parking and gallery functions and above the passageway; the two blocks are visually connected through glassed galleries which also identify the street as an internal passage of the two blocks.

The two terraces of the design which work from one of the blocks and opens to a parallel street add onlookers to the street. The historical street texture of Tarlabası is thus fractured and replaced with a “contemporary” attitude of circulation.

There is a concern with the height of the new designs, as if it was essential to the problem. In this design, this concern is felt through the designer’s drawing back of the extra floor lines from the historical street line. The terraced roof form a single skyline that further estranges this addition as it forms another block.

The design’s façade concept on the other hand seems to be based on an interpretation of rhythm, a reference to the existing façades.

386: Hotel



View from Tarlabaşı Boulevard, Block Design 386

The other side of the monastery is designed by a different design group, yet the design language is also diverse. Hence, the street silhouette of the monastery will speak of two diverse designs at its two sides, and the sense of continuity which is central to historical neighborhoods will be sacrificed.

The hotel design takes its inspiration from the Parisian Mansard roofs, and parallels the mayor's Champs-Élysées aspiration. The infills to the historical façades once more are of glass.

The hotel is a luxury hotel with its steam-rooms, Turkish baths, massage rooms, underground closed pools, and the like. Yet, the circulation is condensed into long corridors and a single stairwell. This is mainly because the design group does not compromise from a courtyard which provides light to the restaurant floor at the basement and serves as a “view” to the entrance lobby and to individual rooms on upper floors. This courtyard also serves the mutual inquiry for a “green,” “sunny,” and “light” image.

The hotel is closed to the streets surrounding it as would be expected

from its function, with a niche entrance that serves the image of the hotel.

This design too uses terraces as tools of gradual withdrawal from the original height of the block at the rear façade. Yet, compared to the dominant effect of the main street entrance, the terraces seem trivial and also impractical due to their accessibility from the hotel corridor.

387: Housing



Elevations and Plan for Block Design 387

The block facing the monastery, second from the main street is designed to house one-bedroom flats that work from the underground park stairwells and some shops which work from the street. The housing works as a block that is thus closed to the street. And, its alternative-the interior garden-does not seem to have a practicable access that would make it active, as it is again dependent on the stairwells.

The design relates to the image of historical heritage through

interpretations of the original façades: through imitating their projections- “cumba”s- and reverberating their rhythms. And, while it keeps the 19th century facades, it disqualifies the 30’s house for a glass facade.

The design deals with the concern with its extra height through use of gradual reduction in height. This, it does, by using the nine stairwells as cores of nine units of housing and finishing them off at different floor levels. Its skyline hence has its own projections and cavities.

593-594: Housing



Street Elevations for Block Design 593-594

The two blocks that are third from the main street are also designed for housing with single-bedrooms with a few shops which work from the street. The housing is closed inside with its five stairwell cores that work from the underground car park up. The design integrates two sides of an existing street through underground parking and through a shrunk courtyard that disrupts the continuity of the street.

There seems to be no effort to relate to the existing texture apart from the re-built facades. The design does not reflect concerns about its height; on the contrary it feels free to try out

jagged finishes to the block with Deconstructivist aspirations. It employs an 80’s language of balconies in a neighborhood without a balcony culture apart from the French balconies.

Conclusion

Tarlabaşı Renovation Project’s architectural language presents us with representational tools of the municipality’s view of renovation. They provide us signs that let us interpret its nature, the economic and social precedence over design.

The designs operate as images of the official language and thus project folios start out with colored 3-d representations of the new “world.” These images have been advertised through press conferences, exhibitions, interviews and have already become part of the propagandist language of the governor.

The images not only speak of an architectural project, but reflect upon the re-structuring of the social structure in the area. They include a young, busy metropolitan class with luxurious cars and “vespa”s. Generally, comparisons with the existing image are made: an image of neglect and filth is compared with the image of light of glass-steel facades and of clean streets. Light and sun of inner gardens, terraces have been used to contrast the present “dark”ness.

Some are picturesque views of inner gardens, which merge stage-set historical façades with glass, steel, timber and “green”- the contemporary architect’s tools for mildness.

The architects seem to have put the concern for height at the center of their inquiry, yet this adjustment of “respect” to history is almost immoral.

The ICOMOS 1987 Washington Charter defines the “ethical” framework for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas¹⁴. Tarlabası project is a result of a political decision that bypasses the involvement of the public, let alone the residents, as opposed to the charter’s note, “the participation and the involvement of the residents are essential for the success of the conservation programme and should be encouraged. The conservation of historic towns and urban areas concerns their residents first of all.”

Tarlabası’s present de-situation, with its de-situated initial owners, with the de-situated present owners, and with its rupture from Pera, is with this project flattened in to a stage-set.

To say the least, the designer’s view of historical heritage as façade is a metaphor of the political view of history as an image. As a stage-set, it now serves the political aspirations of the governors who, through using this stage, wish to upgrade their own political and social status in society. The image recreates the politician’s situation, and at the same time is an un-existing social re-construction.

As the city’s historical quarters are physically and socially re-structured, both city’s history and its culture are reinvented. The historical material- the houses and the neighborhoods- are redefined to justify the new ruling class’ vision and situation in the society.

End Notes

1. Amnesty International, “Turkey Urged To Halt Heavy-Handed Evictions In Istanbul,” Amnesty

International (accessed August 31, 2011).

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/turkey-urged-halt-heavy-handed-evictions-istanbul-2011-07-18>

2. Alper Ünlü, Zehra Tonbul and others, *Rehabilitation Project for the Slum Areas of Beyoğlu in the Context of Adaptation Programs to the European Union*, prepared for Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality, Istanbul Technical University Urbanism Atelier, 2004.
3. Murat Belge, “Galata ve Pera,” in *Istanbul Gezi Rehberi*, ed. Ayşen Anadol(Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1997), 193-210, 243.
4. Behzat Üsdiken, “Tarlabası” in *Dünden Bugüne İstanbul Ansiklopedisi*, Vol 7(İstanbul: Ana Basım A.Ş., 1994), 217-218.
5. Ayhan Aktar, *Varlık Vergisi ve Türkleştirme Politikaları*(İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2000), 264.
6. Alper Ünlü and others, 3-4., Vedia Dökmeci and Hale Çıracı, *Tarihsel Gelişim Süreci İçinde Beyoğlu*, İstanbul: Türkiye Turing ve Otomobil Kurumu Yayınları, 1990).
7. Atilla Dorsay, *Benim Beyoğlum* (İstanbul: Çağdaş Yayıncılık, 1991), 10.
8. Romans are known to sell flowers at the main street and recently they have been gathering waste paper, storing them at basement floors in Tarlabası to resell them to recycling centers. For a in depth observation of Tarlabası and the African refugees, please refer to the article Jean-François Pérouse, “Émergence et résorption annoncées d’un territoire de transit international au coeur d’Istanbul : le cas de Tarlabası (1987-2007),”

Maghreb-Machrek, no. 199, Spring 2009: 85-11.

9. Social analysis is included in the rehabilitation proposal of Alper Ünlü and others.
10. İlhan Berk, a renowned Turkish poet, has described Tarlabası as a labyrinth of streets.

Metin Kaçan's 1990 biographical novel "Ağır Roman"- "Heavy Novel" is a novel of a "slum Don Quixote," who lives in Tarlabası. The book's back cover includes a description of the neighborhood: "The world is a big urban jungle. It is the world of a social segment of people, who in spite of living in a cultural metropolis, does not communicate with it. They are the products of the decay in the system; pimps, prostitutes, thieves, dealers and police." (Metin Kaçan, Ağır Roman (Istanbul: Metis Yayınları, 1990) The book is filmed on 1996.

11. Claire Berlinski, "Weimar Istanbul: Dread and exhilaration in a city on the verge of political catastrophe," City Journal, vol. 20 no. 4, Autumn 2010

http://www.city-journal.org/2010/20_4_weimar-city.html

12. Beyoğlu Municipality, "Tarlabası Yenileniyor,"

<http://www.tarlabasiyenileniyor.com/default.aspx> (accessed August 2011)

13. The images are taken from the municipality's website. Beyoğlu Municipality, "Tarlabası Yenileniyor,"

http://www.tarlabasiyenileniyor.com/proje_hakkinda/fy_default.aspx?SectionId=1325 (accessed August 2011)

14. ICOMOS, "Charter for the Conservation of Historic Towns and Urban Areas (Washington Charter - 1987),"

http://www.international.icomos.org/charters/towns_e.htm (accessed October 1, 2011)