Confessions of a 'doorstep researcher': Reflections on a comparative study of displacement experiences

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In many cities, public authorities engage in redevelopment or renewal of disadvantaged neighbourhoods. While the aim is social, physical and economic upgrading of these neighbourhoods, the result is often displacement of local residents. Despite the growing literature on displacement, we know little about how residents experience the process of displacement. This research studies residents' displacement experiences through the analytical lens of accumulation by dispossession. This post looks at the challenges and rewards that come with comparative methods, writes **Bahar Sakızlıoglu**.

In my PhD thesis, 'A comparative Look at Residents' Experiences of Displacement: The Cases of Amsterdam and Istanbul' (Sakızlıoglu 2014b), I investigated how residents experience displacement in neighbourhoods undergoing renewal. In this piece, I will share some of the methodological challenges I faced and concerns I had during my research. I will discuss firstly the theoretical promises of engaging in a comparative (urbanism) practice. After mentioning the difficulties of employing comparative methodology, I will discuss the promises of being a 'doorstep researcher' and how it helps to grasp and map the socio-spatial and temporal divisions. I end this piece with a critique of 'academic sightseeing' in neighbourhoods undergoing urban renewal. For this exercise, my arguments are exemplified primarily through the case of Istanbul with brief references to Amsterdam.

The promise of comparative urbanism: Breaking the conventional thinking

Following the call for comparative urbanism (Robinson 2006, Lees 2012), I analysed two very different cases, Amsterdam and Istanbul, within a single theoretical framework built around the concept of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2005). I carried out my fieldwork in Istanbul first, and my field experiences and findings there shaped the questions and expectations for my fieldwork in Amsterdam. This enabled me to identify some aspects of the displacement process that I might not have observed otherwise. For instance, my observation that authorities in Istanbul used their discretionary and informal power to manage the process of displacement made me ask if such modalities of power could also be found in the rather formal policy environment of Amsterdam.

Istanbul, Turkey
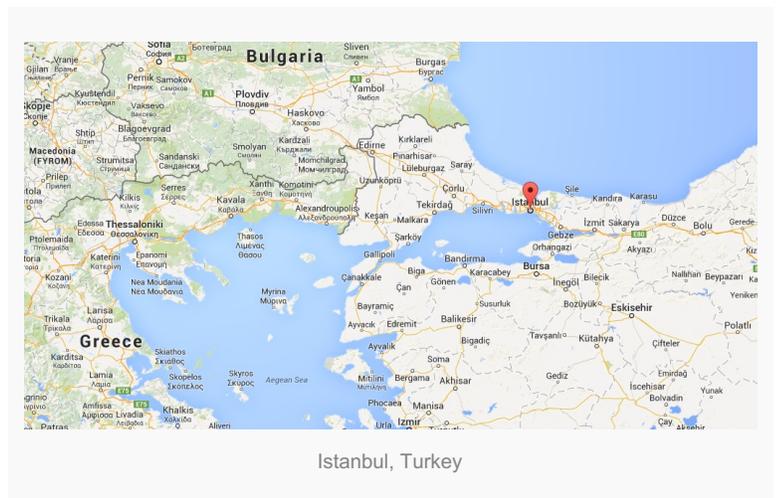
Indeed, I found that many of the residents in Amsterdam did not have regular tenant contracts and were not officially recognised as stakeholders in renewal processes. Housing corporations who are in charge of implementing renewal projects in Amsterdam start renting out vacant flats to temporary renters instead of regular tenants as early as five years before the projected renewal date. These temporary renters are not afforded many renters' rights protections. This deregulation of rent protection through the insertion of temporary renters indicates a 'calculated informality' (Roy 2009: 83) that enables housing corporations to set aside their formal obligations to compensate renters for their displacement. More spaces for informality are created because the allocation of housing to temporary renters is

loosely regulated. These precarious tenants are routinely overlooked in research on the Dutch housing market even though their precariousness aids the smooth operation of displacement through renewal. In regards to question of discretionary and informal power, I could thus shed light on how authorities create and use informality in Amsterdam to manage the process of displacement. This was an interesting comparative exercise that helped break with the conventional thinking that associates informality only to the cities in the Global South.

Indische Buurt, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Employing comparative methodology is easier said than done

Incorporating the most different case study design for my research, I intended to identify similarities between radically different cases. I faced some challenges regarding case selection. Since I analysed displacement as a long-term process, I had to select renewal projects that were at their initial phases to be able to trace the process and residents' experiences of displacement over time. However, this created certain difficulties. First of all, renewal projects were often delayed. The actual displacement might not occur within the scope of a PhD-project. This created an awkward and uncomfortable feeling as I was caught in a situation where I had to wait for displacement to occur. One unexpected finding that emerged from this is that I experienced first-hand how residents suffered from the uncertainty they faced (Sakızlıoglu 2014a). They were reduced to anxious waiting while their houses and neighbourhoods were slowly deteriorating (Sakızlıoglu and Uitermark 2014).
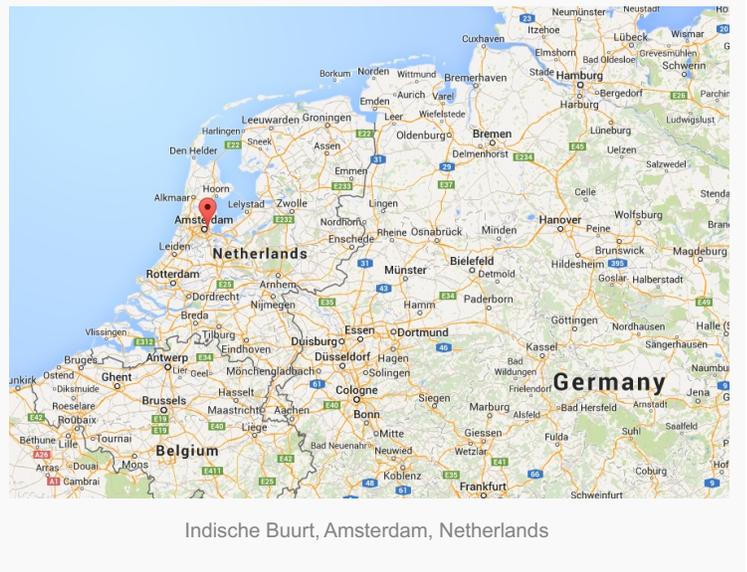
Another challenge, this time a logistical one, is that the scale of renewal was often different in different cities, which made it hard to find projects that were both in their initial phases and comparable. In Istanbul, the scale of renewal was at a neighbourhood level, which was larger than Amsterdam's building-based renewal level. To compensate for this discrepancy regarding the scale of renewal, I selected two projects from Amsterdam. These projects included a renewal project that was in its initial phase and completed project where displacement had already taken place. For the completed project, I had to trace the displacement experiences to get a more in-depth perspective.

Being a 'doorstep researcher'

Disadvantaged neighbourhoods often have active street life that offers invaluable possibilities for researchers to experience and understand everyday life and relations. In Tarlabaşı, my fieldwork site in Istanbul, I participated first in informal gatherings and conversations, spending many days sitting in (front of) different local shops chatting with the shopkeepers, customers and passersby. I could meet many people this way and also observe their daily interactions, contacts and conflicts in a natural setting.

Quite often I sat on the doorsteps, mostly with women while they were knitting, chatting, gossiping, having tea or just chilling out after work. Those would be the times that they would ask me questions rather than vice versa. I learned not only about the practice of using the street as a living room, as a place to meet and chat with neighbours about very elemental aspects of their everyday lives but also about their feelings and experiences about how the pressures of impending displacement affect the way they negotiate the challenges of everyday life. I wrote up my field notes on these encounters that later helped me see the patterns. Being a 'doorstep researcher', as one of my respondents named it, helped me use effectively methodological triangulation to combine in-depth interviewing and participant observations.

However, being a 'doorstep researcher' was a different experience in Indische Buurt, my field work site in Amsterdam. The practices of sitting on the doorsteps and using the streets as living room were not so common in

Indische Buurt. It was not so easy to reach the respondents who were living in two specific renewal block because of building-based renewal in the neighbourhood. In this sense, the participant observations I made in public spaces were mostly concerning the neighbourhood level in contrast to building-level focus I had for my in-depth interviews. I did participant observations in playgrounds, cafes, squares, streets as well as during meetings among Turkish and Moroccan women that took place at private spaces.

Understanding socio-spatial and temporal divisions

What I also found challenging during my research was to grasp and map the socio-spatial and temporal divisions that mark the social life in neighbourhoods. Disadvantaged neighbourhoods are often socio-spatially divided and their use changes during daytime and nighttime. For instance, Tarlabaşı was divided physically between the front line of Tarlabaşı Boulevard and the rest of the neighbourhood down the hill. It had different social places for activities of different groups: a bar and a soccer tournament for African migrants, tea houses for Kurdish residents, hair dressers for trans peoples, churches for Christians, etc. Getting to know about these places and activities as an outsider takes a lot of research time.

Bulldozer as a part everyday life. Istanbul, Turkey (Photo credit: Najla Osseiran, 2011)

Being a doorstep researcher helps to get access to different groups, places and activities, but challenges remain. Firstly, conflicts amongst different groups may affect the access to these groups. During my fieldwork, for instance, I interviewed Aziz, a Turkish shopkeeper who had problems with his Kurdish neighbours (Names of the respondents are changed to keep their anonymity). When he saw that I was also talking to his neighbour, Aziz didn't want to talk to me again and he also advised his Turkish neighbours not to do so. I could overcome problems like these by informing my respondents about my position as a researcher, which requires interviewing different parties who might have problems with each other. Secondly, people in the neighbourhoods might conceal conflicts. Compromises are found to sustain the norms and rituals of living together. These conflicts might not be mentioned to the researcher who is simply a stranger. Here methodological triangulation helps to solve the problem. I used participant observation upon in-depth interviewing, and the participant observation filled in the picture drawn by my in-depth interviews. I came to understand some inconsistencies between what I had been told (during the interviews or informal conversations) and how people actually interact in everyday life.

> *I interviewed an old shopkeeper in the cooling sector yesterday. While I was passing by his shop after a couple of interviews today, he saw me and looking at his watch said 'You are still here? Your time in Tarlabaşı is over. It is already 7 (pm). Now, go ahead to Taksim Square. Come on, be quick!' I was shocked. When I asked the question why he said so, he replied that Tarlabaşı was different in the evenings and added 'be quick!' And apparently that 'different' was not for me. But for whom would it be? Whose neighborhood was Tarlabaşı anyway? (From my research diary, August 2008, Tarlabaşı)*

Besides the socio-spatial divisions, how the neighbourhoods are temporally divided may pose its challenges to the researcher. Tarlabaşı has different faces and users during daytime and nighttime. During day time, street life is animated by activities in textile, cooler ateliers, shoe and wig ateliers as well as small-scale shops that operate for diverse users. At night the street is used for all sorts of 'dirty jobs' for Beyoğlu entertainment center, including prostitution and drug dealing. The dynamics of neighbourhood's social life during daytime was relatively easier for a female researcher to understand and observe. In the beginning it was of course difficult but after building some

familiarity and trust relations with the people of the neighbourhood and especially with women, it became easier to get access. Yet, I was expected to leave the neighbourhood 'before it gets dark' as the above entry in my field research diary shows. I was wondering how the social life would change at nights as the lively streets full of women and kids are taken over by other users at nights. I had some visits to some of my respondents at night and went to the neighbourhood with some male friends, which made it easier for me to have an access to the neighbourhood. Yet, it was not fully possible to participate in the nightlife of the neighbourhoods as a female researcher.

Academic consumption of the neighbourhoods that are under the threat of displacement

> *'Here live our African citizens', the spokesperson of the Tarlabaşı association explained to the curious group of international researchers. He was banging this big iron door which was making a terrible sound. 'They live under very bad conditions', he added. On the third floor, a guy opened the curtain and looked down to check who that was on the door. He then shouted: 'Hey, don't bang the door like that I was scared that it was the police'. The spokesperson made a 'joke' afterwards: 'No, brother, I am not the police. I would then not knock the door but rush in' (From my research diary, June 2008, Tarlabaşı).*

The neighbourhoods undergoing urban transformation are ongoing laboratories of change that offer researchers invaluable opportunities to observe and grasp social, physical and economic transformations. That is why they are a popular destination for field trips – mostly for students, academics and intellectuals – organised by universities and research institutes. These trips are beneficial for the academic community so they may produce the knowledge of these transformations and teach their students. However, these events of 'academic sightseeing' bring about the consumption of the field; that is to say, they produce only superficial relations to these neighbourhoods and to the locals. The visits of academic groups create anxiety in those neighbourhoods that are under the threat of displacement as these strangers are suspected of coming from the municipality, the police or the construction firm. I think academics need to constantly question their position and not consume these areas as the object of academic sightseeing and research. Rather, new practices and ways should be searched to learn interactively from locals and to put the social and cultural capital of academics into the service of local people who are under the threat of dispossession.

I learned three simple and general lessons from the challenges I faced during my PhD journey. The first one is about questioning and reversing the flow of urban theory and knowledge from the Global North to Global South through carrying the research interests, questions one has for the cities in Global South to the ones in developed world. The second is about employing a grounded approach – in other words being a 'doorstep researcher'- is very much-needed to grasp diverse social realities the knowledge of which we, the researchers, produce in our studies. The third is that this grounded approach may also help tackle the questions of how academics position themselves and what roles they have regarding processes of dispossession and contestations to it.

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Acknowledgement

About the author

Bahar Sakızlıoglu did her bachelor study in Business Administration and received her minor degree in Economic Policy at Middle East Technical University (METU), Turkey. During her Masters study in Sociology, she studied the impacts of urban renewal policies in Istanbul. She also served as a research assistant at the Department of Sociology at METU from 2004 to 2007. In 2008, Bahar started her PhD study at the Urban and Regional Research Center at the University of Utrecht, The Netherlands. Her comparative PhD project, which was finalised in 2014, investigates displacement experiences of residents in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Amsterdam and Istanbul. Bahar received three research grants for this study: 1) the Nuffic Huygens Scholarship by The Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science, 2) Foundation of Urban and Regional Research (FURS) Studentship Grant and 3) FURS Research Grant. Among her main research interests are urban and political sociology, uneven urban development, displacement, gentrification and accumulation of dispossession and social movements. She has written papers on politics of gentrification and displacement experiences of disadvantaged groups in restructuring neighbourhoods.

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