

Becoming One with the Neighborhood: Collaborative Art, Space-Making, and Urban Change in Izmir Darağaç

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Kıvanç Kılıncı¹ , Burcak Pasin², and Güzden Varinlioğlu³

Abstract

Darağaç is a former industrial, lower-income neighborhood in Turkey's third-largest city, Izmir. In 2015 several artists settled in the area and started a nonprofit initiative called the Darağaç Collective (DC). DC has since organized numerous art events and exhibitions, receiving considerable interest and publicity. Yet, to date, the changes in Darağaç's material landscapes have been subtle, and the area remains ungentrified, unlike similar examples in Turkey. This article argues that the collaborative art practice spearheaded by DC played a major role in the preservation of the neighborhood's urban texture. The artists became neighbors with the residents, benefited from the expertise of mechanics, and drew inspiration from the site, while the local community has contributed to the production, exhibition, and appreciation of artworks. Thus, art has become a tool for sociability and a catalyst for interpersonal, cultural, and cross-class exchanges, which could offer an alternative route to art-led urban change in Turkey.

Keywords

art-led urban transformation, collaborative art practices, neighborhood, site-specificity, Darağaç Collective (DC), Izmir

On October 5, 2018, the authors of this article found themselves by coincidence at an opening of an art exhibition in Darağaç, a low-income, formerly industrial neighborhood in Izmir's historical Alsancak district. Izmir is Turkey's third-largest city, and its Western frontier is bounded by the Aegean Sea. Alsancak, with its port, is both an economic and cultural hub. This three-day-long exhibition, called *Darağaç III*, was organized through the collaborative efforts of more than 20 artists, some of whom lived in the area, and members of the local community (Figure 1).¹ To us, the event was quite a remarkable experience for a number of reasons: it neither resembled a "typical" art show that addressed a select crowd of art connoisseurs, nor a commercialized art festival taking place in a peripheral neighborhood, where the architecture is reduced to a mere

¹Department of Architecture, Kadir Has University (KHAS), Istanbul, Turkey

²Department of Architecture, Yasar University, Izmir, Turkey

³Department of Architecture, Izmir University of Economics, Izmir, Turkey

Corresponding Author:

Kıvanç Kılıncı, Faculty of Art and Design, Department of Architecture, Kadir Has University (KHAS), Cibali Mah. Kadir Has Cad. Fatih, Istanbul 34083, Turkey.

Email: kivanc.kilinc@khas.edu.tr



Figure 1. Image showing artists, locals, and the audience at Darağaç III, the third major exhibition organized by the Darağaç Collective (DC), October 5–7, 2018.

Source: Courtesy of the Darağaç Collective, 2018.

backdrop. It was, instead, brimming with the energy of young artists, local residents and visitors, and their collaborative spirit: the visitors interacted with the local community as well as exploring the various types and size of artwork hung on the walls, out in the streets, or inside the empty houses and gardens by following a simple guide map. Artists and participants of all ages were happy to share their impressions of the exhibited material. In fact, distinguishing the artists from the audience proved to be a difficult task.

What makes this story even more compelling is the fact that Darağaç is located close to major urban renewal sites in Izmir, where, in the past two decades, some of the old residential areas and industrial complexes have been replaced by luxury housing complexes and shopping malls. It is indeed a well-known story that art and design communities across the world have, at times unwillingly, contributed to the gentrification of formerly industrial and historical city spaces. As the story goes, artists choose a dilapidated neighborhood to settle, drawn by the affordability of rental spaces, the aesthetic appeal of the area or its close location to the city center and to the main attractions. These are usually old industrial districts or downtown areas, which never regained popularity after the loss of manufacturing businesses. But eventually (and perhaps inevitably), artists' so-called "bohemian" lifestyles and the conversion of workshops and warehouses into home studios increase a neighborhood's visibility and make it a potential target for art-led transformation (Zukin, 1982). As countless examples from Turkey and beyond illustrate, such artistic popularity is eventually exploited by building contractors to promote the area for development, raising the prices of both land and property. The result is the forcing out of local businesses, including the informal, creative art scenes that flourish in the very first years of artists' migration to such "marginal" spaces, replaced by upmarket art galleries and businesses populated by urban professionals (Ley, 2003; Zhong, 2016, p. 166).

But how could one avoid falling into such a "vicious cycle?" The outcomes of our research suggest that the contemporary moment in Darağaç signals a counter trend in art-led urban

transformation in Turkey; it has neither been formed as an isolated settlement accessible primarily to the art community, nor has yet become an initiator of gentrification. By situating this particular example within both the international and national context, we demonstrate that in the last five years, the artists formed personal relationships with neighbors, who contributed to the production, exhibition and appreciation of artworks. Through such interactions, the material landscapes of Darağaç have been shaped by cooperation, and the blurring of boundaries between life, art, and craftsmanship. In this article, we argue that the sociability that is likely to be generated by this collaboration among the artists and the residents, along with the art-based economy has a strong potential to create a countertrend to the external pressures of urban development and gentrification clearly seen in the surrounding neighborhoods. To this end, the appropriation of art as a catalyst for interpersonal, cultural, and cross-class exchanges at Darağaç could offer an alternative route to art-led urban change in Turkey.

This article adopts a mixed research method. First, we trace the theoretical framework explicating art-induced urban transformation and the ways in which it can lead to gentrification through an overview of major local and international examples. Second, since October 2018, we have made multiple visits to the site to collect initial data from the neighborhood by means of observations and conducted oral history interviews with the key actors in this collaborative art practice.² We also attended the annual art exhibitions; closely reviewed the local and national news that featured DC since 2016; and examined artists' diverse print and electronic publications, such as exhibition pamphlets and promotional videos. Our article is limited to a specific time period; since the art-led transformation of the neighborhood is still unfolding, additional research would be required for more comprehensive conclusions.

The Darağaç Collective (DC) and the Settlement of the Artists in Darağaç

The Darağaç Collective (DC) is a nonprofit collective formed by a group of artists who live and practice art in the Umurbey Neighborhood in Izmir, Turkey (<https://daragacizmir.blogspot.com/>). Umurbey is a mainly industrial and commercial zone, popularly known as Darağaç, which is close to the southeastern shore of Izmir Bay (Ürük, 2008).³ This diverse neighborhood consists of abandoned factories, warehouses, and residential buildings, mainly two-story, some of which date back to the late 19th and the early 20th century. In *Izmir City Encyclopedia*, Kayın (2013, p. 379, 381) wrote that before the Turkish Republic was established, the area was mostly inhabited by the Greeks, who, with other non-Muslim communities, played a significant role in the city's economy. Beginning from the mid-19th century, they contributed significantly to the region's industrial production.⁴ The city's industrial facilities later became concentrated here because of the location's relative distance from residential areas, and proximity to the railway and sea transportation networks.

Since the mid-19th century, the region further developed through the construction of additional industrial buildings, including state-owned factories, as well as small-scale housing complexes for workers. Some of these new factories were Şark Sanayi (The East Industry) (1924), Elektrik Fabrikası (The Powerplant) (1928), Izmir Pamuk Mensucat Fabrikası (Izmir Cotton Textile Factory) (1932), and Sümerbank Basma Sanayi (Sümerbank Cotton Print Textile Industry) (1953) (Figure 2). Save a few industrial buildings renovated by the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality to serve as a cultural center and a vocational school, most of these complexes have long been vacant. The residential housing stock, a pattern of two-story dwellings, began to take shape as early as the late 1930s (Kayın, 2013, 384) and is still partly in use. The artists rented several of these as residences and studio spaces (Figures 3 and 4).

In the last few years, Darağaç has received considerable interest, both for the contemporary art exhibitions organized by DC, and the local community's active participation in hosting these

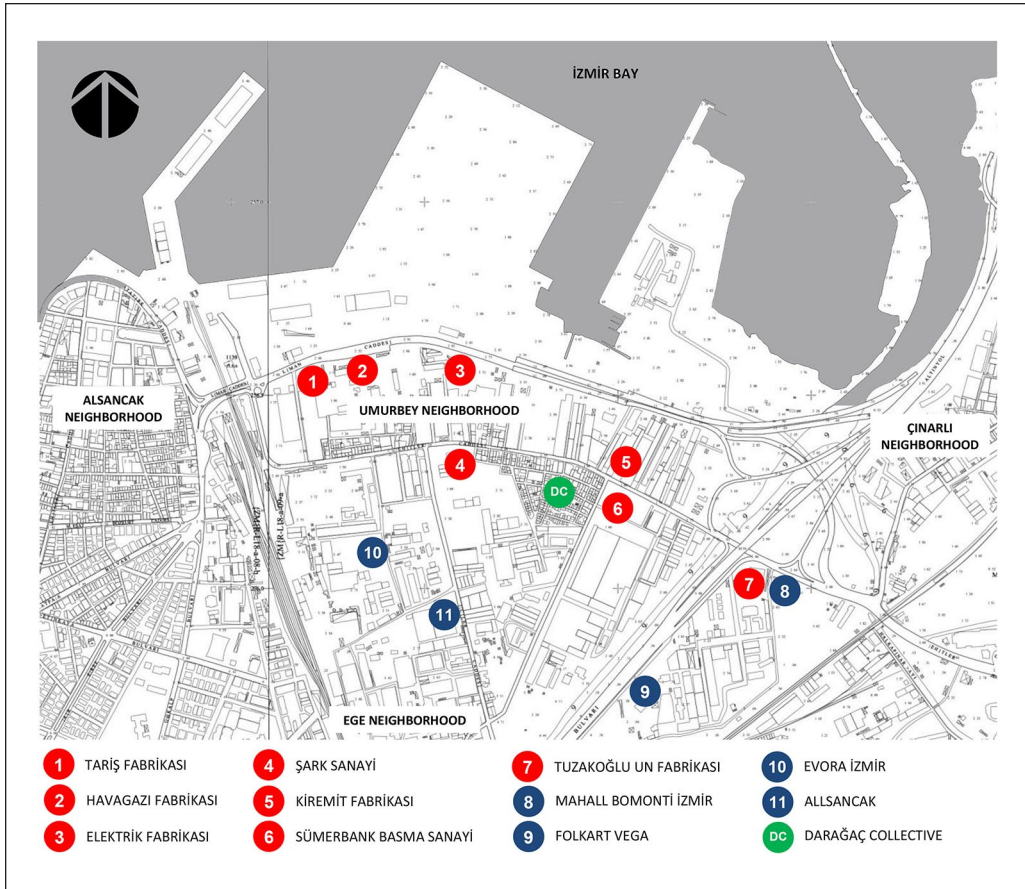


Figure 2. Map showing factories and mixed-use developments in Darağaç region, 2019.

Source: Map prepared by authors.

events. Yet, it was only in 2014 when a group of art students from 9 Eylül University, including Cenkhan Aksoy and Ayşegül Doğan, first visited the neighborhood. The following year, they began renting houses and DC was formed. The first exhibition, open for one day, took place in June 2016 with the collaboration of 15 artists and the local community. In the words of Ali Kanal, a sculptor, graduate student, and resident of Darağaç, the place provided a viable setting for art students, free from conventions found elsewhere. Moreover, the multiauthored, collaborative character of artmaking helped challenge their comfort zones, and allowed their work to reach diverse audiences (Aksoy & Kanal, personal communication, March 22, 2019 and July 3, 2019).

In the meantime, around Darağaç, the large-scale, mixed use residential and shopping mall projects continued to expand. Such developments are symptomatic of a global trend, as contemporary cities have fallen under the spell of neoliberal urban policies and grown to become “patchwork quilt of islands of relative affluence struggling to secure themselves in a sea of spreading squalor and decay” (Harvey, 2000, p. 152). As King argued in *Spaces of Global Cultures* (2004, p. 139), such fragmentation is creating “spatially refeudalized cities.” More importantly for our discussion, the art and entertainment industry has played a major role in the privatization and gentrification of publicly owned and consumed city spaces. The following sections provide glimpses of contemporary examples where “artists’ actions generated urban change,” eventually making them, in Shkuda’s words (2016, “Introduction,” p. 7), “both victims and agents of



Figure 3. View from a street at Darağaç, 2019.

Source: Courtesy of Authors.

gentrification.” We then discuss the main reasons why Darağaç has so far managed to stand out from such examples.

Art as a Cautionary Tale for Urban Development

Critical scholars of urbanism, such as Zukin (1982), Vivant (2010), and Lloyd (2006), have studied the role of art and culture in the gentrification of neighborhoods. The so-called “vicious cycle” usually begins with the attraction of artists to postindustrial city districts with a distinct aesthetic quality and to affordable buildings suitable for conversion to studio spaces with minimal interventions. In Zukin’s words (2009, p. 19), “new cultural production thrives on the jagged edges of uneven development, in areas that have not yet been sanitized or Disneyfied.”⁵ They are soon followed by nonprofit art communities and galleries, which initially act like “free museums,” brimming with the creativity of artists who freely devote their time and energy (Shkuda, 2016, “Chapter 5,” p.1). Lloyd (2006) argues that in these early years, such neighborhoods may go through a revival phase, local businesses benefitting from the new clientele, the crowds attracted to the emerging art, music, and culture scene (pp. 102–104). Local bars and restaurants become local meet points for the socialization of artists “with distinct social and aesthetic dispositions” (p. 102).

Ultimately though, the artists’ and designers’ interest in “marginal” city districts and abandoned industrial buildings adds to their value. Eventually, these are “discovered” by developers and higher end galleries, triggering the opening of private galleries, along with upscale shops, creating an influx of tourists and urban professionals. In short, “artists’ living habits become a



Figure 4. View from an artist's studio in Darağaç, 2019.
Source: Courtesy of Authors.

model for the middle-class" (Shkuda, 2016, "Introduction," p. 3; Zukin, 1982), and new housing developments (such as condominiums) eventually force the eradication of low-income or affordable housing (Lloyd, 2006, pp. 121–122). Artists and local businesses can no longer afford the rents and are largely excluded from the new center. "At this point," writes Zukin (1982, p. 121), "real estate development reasserts its dominance over the arts economy."

Apart from such artist-led, "spontaneous" transformations, the public sector and private developers across the globe have employed several other strategies for the rehabilitation of derelict urban centers via art and the creation of additional revenue for the city. One is rebranding; inviting a famed architect to design a prominent cultural institution, such as a signature museum building. Guggenheim in Bilbao is a renowned example and has since become a model (Zukin, 2009, pp. 15–19). Another major strategy has been to organize art walks or design weeks, which feature art events, and involve artists, curators, students, cultural institutions as well as local businesses.⁶ Although intended to revive downtowns suffering from the loss of businesses and physical decay, the changes sometimes resulted in spiked rents and property prices and altered neighborhood demographics. One major criticism is that such transformations "clouded in a romantic rhetoric of urban diversity" (Keil, 2000, p. 254) often result in inequalities. This widening gap between social classes is repackaged in public discourse as "cosmopolitan culture" to conceal apparent spatial indicators of social inequality (Friedmann, 1986). The newly revitalized districts feature a series of culturally and ethnically "diverse" forms of city attractions, which in theory are open to all. However, because of their high price tag, these spatial clusters cater exclusively to the needs of the new transnational capitalist class.⁷ Indeed, as Miles (1997, p. 64) has

argued, art may play a role in distracting attention from “the social impact of development” by aestheticizing it. So, whether art will work to the advantage of local communities and to “regenerate a locality” depends on a “key political question”: “who controls the process?”

Pockets of Autonomy: Art-Led Urban Transformation in Istanbul

The complexities explained earlier resonate with the growing art and culture scene in Istanbul, Turkey’s major economy and most populated city. So, first we would like to review major sites of art-led urban development in Istanbul in order to shed more light on both the inner dynamics of this process and on the neighborhood under study.

In the historical Cihangir and Galata districts of Istanbul, the past decade witnessed the renewal of old buildings and their conversion to homes and offices. Artists and architects played a major role in this transformation. This gentrification is indicative of increasing demand among middle- and upper-class in Istanbul for an “urban lifestyle,” which, as David Ley (1986; p. 524) argued in another context, is “often identified with a distinct set of values.” The new dwellers prefer to be near arts and culture facilities, and historical heritage sites, which in turn, accelerate the displacement of the locals (Ergun, 2004; p. 399; Uzun, 2013; pp. 245–250). In another district also on the European side of the city, a well-known global firm, Grimshaw Architects recently designed a modern art museum for Arter (2019), a subsidiary of Vehbi Koç Foundation (Arter, n.d.; Yücel, 2020, p. 233). The museum was built in Dolapdere, an economically peripheral neighborhood in the heart of the city and a popular new location for contemporary art galleries.⁸ The long-term effects of art industry on the neighborhood are still unclear. According to its spokespersons, Arter is making an effort to connect with the local community, through the *komsu* (neighbor) category of its membership program.⁹ However, there is a rapid spread of art galleries in the area, and some gallery owners are hoping to attract investors, leading to more upscale restaurants and cafes, tourism development, and the elimination of informal housing (Çapan, 2019; Dosya, 2019, p. 65). As the editors of *Arredamento Mimarlık*, the Turkish architectural magazine that recently covered the art-led transformation of the district, have aptly put it, “art displaces poverty, but does not make it disappear nor cures it; poverty is pushed further off to the city’s outer limits” (Dosya, 2019, p. 60).

The experiences caused by the introduction of influential art and cultural institutions are just beginning in Dolapdere. The results can be seen in their final form in Yeldeğirmeni in Kadıköy, located on the Asian side of Istanbul. The art-led urban transformation of Yeldeğirmeni was initiated by the municipal administration in 2010 (Atasoy, 2011). Civil society organizations and the municipality began sponsoring arts and cultural centers (some of which were acquired through the renovation of historical buildings), as well as murals and street art activities, and political activists settled in the area in “occupy houses.” Yücel (2015, pp. 5–6) argues that all this has subjected Yeldeğirmeni to immense pressure for gentrification. An example of this pressure was a planned commercially organized “art tour” of the district, later canceled due to the art community’s fierce opposition. However, the opening of third wave cafes, restaurants, “retro shops,” and hostels to attract international exchange students continues. Thus, the threat remains of a future in which the neighborhood becomes a popular open air “exhibition” frequented by upper-scale consumers, although it has so far managed to retain a proportion of local dwellers in addition to the frequenters and has not completely lost its original character (Figure 5). In many places across the world, city or central governments follow a similar model: designating certain city districts as “art clusters,” restoring historical buildings, subsidizing gallery space rent, and encouraging artists participation in urban rejuvenation through their practice and community involvement (Park, 2016, pp. 172, 179). Many of these projects have, however, failed in securing the participation of local communities, preventing exclusion, and aligning the interests of the local merchants, the artist community, and the developers or the government representatives.¹⁰



Figure 5. A graffiti work by M-City (on the left) and Sepe and Chazme (on the right) in Yeldeğirmeni, Istanbul, 2014.

Source: Courtesy of Authors, 2019.

The last example is Maslak Atatürk Oto Sanayi 9. Sokak (referred hereafter as the Maslak 9th Street). One could call this site an “art cluster.” It is located in an “Auto-Industry” (*Oto Sanayi*) complex in Maslak, a business district in Istanbul. The complex is composed of a series of identical modern building blocks occupied by car repair shops, showrooms, and sellers of vintage cars. Each block is two-story high and features two parallel rows of shops. The floor plan is elongated to the extent that on the second floor, a “street” emerges in between, hence the name of the 9th street. Different than the other blocks, the 9th street consists of art galleries, artists’ studios, and offices, all of which occupy the second floor (reached through spiraling ramps), while the first floor continues to be occupied by car retail and repair shops (Figure 6(a) and (b)). Such practice became a fashionable trend in the city, particularly in the aftermath of the International Biennials in 2004 and 2007, where abandoned entrepôts, storehouses, and residential buildings were used as exhibition spaces. Most of these were later converted into art galleries, museums, or cultural institutions (Kılınçarslan, personal communication, July 5, 2019).

The location of workshops within an industrial district has proven useful for obtaining artists’ materials and supporting the construction of their works. However, the district is not primarily residential and buildings including the art studios, are empty after working hours. Hence, although the aim was to provide a venue for artists outside typical art spaces, the scope of the interaction has been limited. As a result, various art events, workshops and exhibitions largely failed at relationship-building with the local occupants, attracting instead the art communities in other parts of the city.¹¹ We argue that because of its limited connection to the larger district, the Maslak 9th Street has largely remained an “art-island.”

The City at a Distance: The Contemporary Art Scene in Izmir

A research carried by Hayy Open Space covering the period from 1996–2019 indicates that especially after 2010, most art initiatives in Turkey emerged from collaborations among friends or smaller groups of artists (Open Space Hayy, n.d.).¹² In the past decade, well-branded art



Figure 6. (a, b) The standardized building blocks at Maslak, Istanbul. Entrance floors are used by workshops and the “9th Street” on the upper floor is populated by art studios and galleries. Source: Courtesy of Authors, 2019.

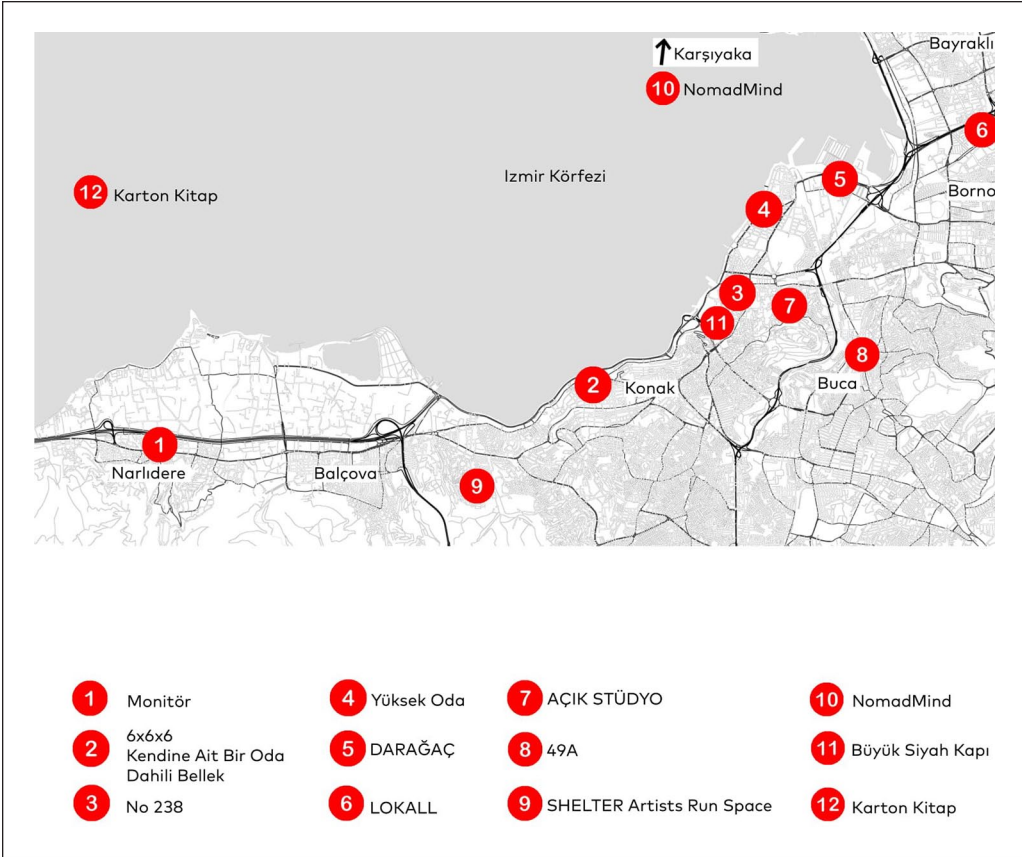


Figure 7. Map showing the contemporary art collectives in Izmir, 2019.

Source: Map prepared by authors.

institutions under the patronage of private companies commissioned modern art museums and sponsored art exhibitions; however, some artists increasingly distanced themselves from this circle of influence, and “organic” and “self-managing” initiatives distanced themselves from corporate frameworks, seeking financial support through international funds or mutual support (Kahya & Ataöv, 2019, p. 1196).

The art scene in contemporary Izmir reflects this trend (Figure 7). What makes it even more visible in Izmir is that, unlike Istanbul, the city has no contemporary art museum or any other landmark art institution, designed by a signature architectural firm.¹³ Nor can the city boast many powerful patrons sponsoring art events and artists; the arts scene has remained rather “local” compared to Ankara, the capital city, which is home to several contemporary art centers and galleries (CerModern, n.d.; Cankaya Kültür Sanat, n.d.), and even more so compared to Istanbul, with its vibrant and internationally connected art and cultural networks and events (Istanbul Modern, n.d.). For many years, artists in Izmir were represented by galleries in Istanbul, and the Istanbul dependent arts scene undermined interest in contemporary art in the city (Sargon, 2016, pp. 51, 56). The local artists had little choice but to make the best of the limited existing connections and bottom-up initiatives that the city could offer. According to Sargon (2016, pp. 8, 43), the contemporary art scene in Izmir is still dominated by local initiatives, individual galleries, and art in residency projects. One may even argue that the lack of an institution eventually proved to be beneficial, prompting the unprecedented flourishing of a more independent-minded,

less-rooted arts scene in the last few years, and what may be called a “useful state of absence” seems to have fueled informal collaborative practices among young artists.

We would argue that the only exception with a potential for creating its own gravitational center in Izmir is Darağaç. Moreover, it has been accompanied by several independent art collectives exploring the potential of the city spaces as site of critical practices with sensitivity to the social context in which art is produced (Kılınçarslan, personal communication, August 6, 2019). We therefore believe that Darağaç will be a trend-setting initiative as a collaborative entity, accompanied by other similar smaller scale endeavors. Further, beyond the local scale, it has the potential to build an alternative model for art-led urban change, diverging from the examples discussed in the previous section.

Darağaç: Building a Collaborative Art Community

If Maslak 9th Street remained an “art island” with limited connection to the local occupants, except for daytime work-related contact, Darağaç is the exact opposite. Our fieldwork has shown that not only has art turned the neighborhood’s major arteries into exhibition spaces at least once a year, but also art has itself become an everyday reality of the place.¹⁴ We would argue that there are three main factors, which have hitherto contributed to the growth of DC as an integral part of the place and its everyday routine: site-specificity; collaborative practice; and close personal relationships formed between neighbors.

“Site-specificity” is one of the oft-repeated keywords by artists in interviews (Aksoy & Kanal, personal communication, July 3, 2019). The first and most obvious point is that most of the artists both live and work in the neighborhood, usually renting entrance level workshop spaces, which are better suited to the needs of an artist’s atelier. But beyond simply occupying the interiors, their work often extends to the streets. Most interiors are not spacious enough for the use of large canvasses or oversize materials, leading to the use of rooftops, the streets, or the available empty lots around the abandoned industrial buildings (Aksoy & Kanal, personal communication, March 22, 2019).¹⁵

This key aspect distinguishes Darağaç from many other participatory art projects in marginalized neighborhoods, such as the Favelas of Brazil (Kosmala, 2016, pp. 63–86). The artists do not simply regard the place as an external site visited only to execute collaborative projects intended for community empowerment. Not only do they actually live and perform in the neighborhood, but their art often incorporates aspects of the site itself—its lived history and present. For instance, in the third exhibition (2018), several artworks referred to the buildings in the area, local car repair workshops as well as personal histories of current and previous occupants (*ara-aç-arağaç-darağaç*, 2018). One such example is the “relief medallion” of Alec Issigonis, designer of Mini Cooper Model No. 1, who is believed to have lived in the neighborhood as a child (Figure 8). Aksoy states that this particular piece was their “first collaborative work” covering all aspects of its production: sketching, acquiring materials (polyester), and molding. Also, for the 2018 exhibition, the artists made an installation reflecting on the personal accounts of the residents, and their childhood memories, which included local horror stories and urban myths (Aksoy, Sonel, Doğan, & local administrator, personal communication, July 23, 2019). Another example of site-specific production is Ali Kanal’s works, which are derived from the place both conceptually, and materially, making use of recycled and found objects. More recently, the increased presence of refugees in Darağaç, and the difficulties they endure on a daily basis, appeared as a theme in several of the artworks and performances (Pasin et al., 2020, p. 83).

The second defining factor is collaborative art practice. Collaboration in Darağaç is an interactive exchange between the artists and local residents, as well as between the artists themselves, and it takes place in diverse forms. First of all, artists learn from the local craftspeople’s expertise in making things. Cenkhan Aksoy, for instance, highlighted that they learned proper welding and



Figure 8. Darağaç Collective, The collaborative artwork “Alec Issigonis Medallion,” 2018.
Source: Courtesy of the Darağaç Collective, 2018.

iron frame making specifically from mechanics. In addition, they have conversations about the artworks and their “curation.” According to the artists, what connects both sides of this dialogue is their role as “producers,” and their collaboration as well as mutual respect, rather than rivalry. It is also important to note here that the artists do not necessarily plan in advance what roles local residents would play, but their collaboration is spontaneous in the natural course of events, i.e., when underpainting the walls or discussing an artwork (Aksoy, Sonel, Doğan, & local administrator, personal communication, July 23, 2019). For instance, in the second exhibition (2017), one of the artists was helped by a local forklift operator to turn a car upside down and situate it at the junction of two streets (Aksoy & Kanal, personal communication, March 22, 2019) (Figure 9). In another instance, repair shop workers asked for artists’ help to paint a motorbike, saying they “would know these things better” (Aksoy, Sonel, Doğan, & local administrator, personal communication, July 23, 2019).

In Darağaç, the collaborative nature of artmaking has enabled the art students and artists to be in direct contact with shop owners, street life, and the neighborhood at large. This has been a transformative process, more subtly and internally experienced, and not explicitly visible or outwardly expressed as in the form of immediate urban transformation (Figures 10 and 11). The whole exchange has an impact on how the people see their own built environment (Kılınçarslan, personal communication, July 5, 2019). It is commonly pointed out that the art appreciation of local residents has significantly grown as they showed curiosity about the meaning conveyed in artworks, and at times, made their own humorously speculative interpretations (Aksoy, Sonel, Doğan, and local administrator, personal communication, July 23, 2019). For instance, one of the interviewees commented that “they started to see more to the artworks and what they were about.” With the changes taking place all around, his son began to develop an interest in graffiti, and practice it in the area, and his wife produced an



Figure 9. Ali Kanal, “Ikram,” 2017.

Source: Courtesy of the Darağaç Collective, 2019.

installation on the wall of his car repair workshop, which was displayed during the fourth annual exhibition held at Darağaç in 2019 (the first craftsman, personal communication, July 23, 2019). Likewise, another interviewee said that he is now “contemplating on the paintings and what they could mean,” and on their underlying “system,” and explains the pieces on the walls to his more inquisitive customers (the second craftsman, personal communication, July 23, 2019).

Yet it is important to ask how this collaboration could extend beyond its main constituents based in the neighborhood. The members of DC are aware of the possible consequences of the ongoing urban renewal projects nearby, which threaten to encroach into the neighborhood in the future. The area’s reputation as unsafe, or as a “poor periphery” (*varoş*), may have continued to protect it from the eyes of investors even after five years of artistic activity (Aksoy, Sonel, Doğan, and local administrator, personal communication, July 23, 2019). More recently, however, because the art events are attracting a greater number of visitors each year, the perception of the area has begun to change; residents began investing in Darağaç with the expectation that their property will gain value in the near future.

For these reasons, the urban policies adopted by the city administration will surely play an important part in shaping Darağaç’s “fate.” The local administration seems to have realized, if rather belatedly, the site’s potential, and art’s potentially transformative role in the revitalization of disadvantaged neighborhoods. One such rare instance of collaboration with the administration occurred when artists from Darağaç volunteered to paint murals for several primary and secondary schools in Izmir, and the event was promoted by the municipality’s social media accounts



Figure 10. A graffiti work by Cem Sonel and Gökhan Tüfekçi, publicizing a local car repair workshop, 2018.

Source: Courtesy of Authors, 2019.



Figure 11. Artists preparing for the Volta Exhibition (June 20–27, 2019), Darağaç.

Source: Courtesy of Authors, 2019.

(İzBB Kültür Sanat, 2021). Another development was the opening of an “entrepreneurship center” at Darağaç, a move dramatically praised by a local newspaper, who announced that “The ill fate of a neighborhood is taking a turn.” It was added that the transformation in this part of the city would contribute to projects developed by young artists across the city, as well as to the youth in the immediate area (İzmir’de bir Mahallenin, 2021). On another occasion, the city mayor, Tunç Soyer, commented that one of his dreams for the district of Alsancak had been to develop the area adjacent to the port (which includes Darağaç), predominantly through encouraging culture and art (Tunç Soyer: Alsancak, 2020).

The third factor is the formation of a close relationship with neighbors.¹⁶ In the aforementioned exhibition, “being neighbors/neighborly” appeared not only as a repeated theme, but also as a shared feeling. This is no surprise, since the artists believe that art should be both “apprehensible” by, and “accessible” to, the local community. In Cem Sonel’s word, in Darağaç, “people from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds are making an effort to sit together and understand each other”; “they are constantly explaining themselves and are learning from one another” (Aksoy, Sonel, Doğan, and local administrator, personal communication, July 23, 2019). In a recent publication designed to promote the exhibitions and other events spearheaded by DC, the editor eloquently reflected on such daily exchanges, describing Darağaç as a place where “routine informal doorstep conversations turn into an art activity, and while residents become artists, artists become audience” (Yavuzcezzar, 2019, p. 6). Through this process, both sides seem to have established an effective channel of communication. For example, the owners’ consent is sought when deciding on walls, open spaces, and buildings for exhibitions, and homeowners are often seen at the exhibitions.¹⁷ The local administrator we interviewed (March 22, 2019) said that she considered the artists as their “children” or “grandchildren,” and that they showed utmost concern and support for public safety during the art events. The artists’ presence, she commented, has “livened up the neighborhood.”¹⁸ The latest collaborative practice enacted between the artists and residents was to organize as an association. DC Association (*Darağaç Kolektifi Derneği*), formed in 2020, brings together artists and designers, car mechanics, shop keepers, as well as the local government administrator (*muhtar*), aiming at a collective transformation of the neighborhood (Aksoy, personal communication, April 24, 2021).

Conclusion: A Subversive Moment in the Making of Art and Urban Space

For the reasons outlined in this article, the neighborhood seems to be at a crossroads, and it is time to revisit the questions raised in the introduction of this article: Will Darağaç transform into another “creative hub,” in Zukin’s words, and become a tool for gentrification causing the displacement of local communities? What will happen when external players, such as policy makers, profit-oriented investors, and contractors intervene? As Rosalyn Deutsche most eloquently put it (1988, p. xx), “severed from its social production, space is . . . fetishized as a physical entity.” As critical scholars have argued, with fewer contributing to its production, and as increasingly privatized, the public space loses its purpose; it is no longer “a self-constituting political sphere,” which stimulates “the richer types of relationships that are possible among strangers who are different to each other” (Sennett in Bridge & Watson, 2005, p. 335). Indeed, with neoliberal urban policies adopted across the globe, the ways in which we traditionally understand public interest have been further hollowed out (Abu-Hamdi, 2016). So, how can Darağaç be saved from being reduced to a mere destination for art tourism, or “entertainment zone,” where art making turns into a spectacle, and a local flavor is preserved merely for a token authenticity? Are we once again trapped in a vicious cycle, in which a rather “generic commercial practice” would ultimately replace the initially flourishing more diverse, creative art scene (Vivant, 2010; Zhong, 2016, p. 167)?

In the absence of “decommodification of housing” (Slater, 2012, 190-191) adopted as an urban policy nationwide, or a market heavily regulated by the central government, the best tactic seems to be to protect the neighborhood from the expansion of luxury residential complexes and the prospects of gentrification. None of the aforementioned policies have yet appeared on the horizon, nor are they likely to in the foreseeable future. So, could the residents earn their livelihood through a local art-based economy in the neighborhood, and thus create an economic model to challenge external urban development at the hands of building contractors and developers? Our argument is not that gentrification will necessarily be halted by the artists’ and residents’ collaborative practices, but we believe that these at least present such possibility, as so far demonstrated by the degree of cooperation and close affiliation.

In this article, we have argued that DC has built a critical practice that allows art to become a tool for the place’s sociability and sustainability. In doing so, we have also highlighted the value of local specificity of neighborhood cultures and economies, as opposed to generalized theories that posit, for instance, the “creative” professionals as the main agents of change in the growth and revitalization of cities (Florida, 2005). In Darağaç, the artists settled therein received no invitation or financial support from authorities, nor was the local community prompted to mingle with them. The interaction was spontaneous and continues this way. It is one of the rare examples in Turkey where artists feel accepted as neighbors, and their “eccentricity” is now part of the neighborhood’s “normal.” Moreover, the artists themselves resist the role of “curators”; they live, produce and put together exhibitions in the same *habitus*, and their work is frequently informed by local cultural subtleties, drawing considerable interest from art circles in Izmir and beyond. Darağaç is therefore a “neighborhood of production” before all else, which, the artists argue, is a common denominator for the locals and themselves alike, irrespective of the end-product (Aksoy and Kanal, personal communication, March 22, 2019). Although it is unclear how much longer this may be sustained, this subversive moment in the artistic, economic, and cultural production of Darağaç’s material landscapes appears to be one of the few alternatives to gentrification, the seemingly inevitable outcome for most art-led urban transformation in Turkey.

Author Note

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ORCID iD

Kıvanç Kılınç  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3521-7184>

Notes

1. For the names of the artists and brief descriptions of the works, please see the Exhibition Brochure, *ara-aç-arağaç-darağaç* (2018).
2. During the site visits, we learned about the neighborhood—its spatial and urban form as well as the location of the artists' studios and repair workshops. The interviewees were four artists, four residents, including two craftspeople whose practice is based in Darağaç, one local administrator, and an academic specialized in independent art initiatives in Izmir. We kept all the interviewees from the neighborhood anonymous. The artists had no objection to their names being cited. All translations into English are by the authors unless stated otherwise.
3. Because the artists call themselves the Darağaç Collective (DC) and Darağaç is a more popularly adopted name given to this area (including Umurbey neighborhood, where the artists are mostly settled), we use Darağaç throughout the essay to refer to this neighborhood.
4. Some of the factories that were opened at this time were the Havagazi (gasworks) factory, Kiremit (roofing-tile) Factory, Tuzakoğlu Un (flour) Factory, and Tariş Factory (specialized in agricultural products such as olive oil).
5. Also, see Andres and Golubchikov (2016).
6. Some well-known examples are the Downtown Los Angeles Art Walk, the Art Night in London, and the Design Week in Helsinki. See, for instance, The Downtown Los Angeles Art Walk (n.d.).
7. For the use of the term transnational capitalist class (TCC), please see Uddin-Khan (2018).
8. These galleries are Dirimart, Evliyagil Dolapdere, Gaia Gallery, and Pilevneli Gallery Dolapdere. According to Nil Nuhoglu from Gaia Gallery, Arter is the main carrier of this transformation, which will be followed by the other art galleries (Dosya, 2019, pp. 69, 71).
9. As part of this program, the residents from the neighboring Yenişehir and Bülbül districts are eligible for free membership. They can attend the exhibitions for free during the year and join activities, educational programs, as well as benefitting from reduced rates at the cafeteria and the bookshop (Dosya, 2019, p. 62).
10. Also, see Lees and Melhuish (2015).
11. As well as exhibitions, courses and tours, musical performances, and social gatherings were organized, which brought art-lovers together. See 9. Sokak (March 22, 2017); *Hurriyet.com.tr* (Otonom İstanbul Sanat Etkinlikleri bugün başlıyor (2019, September 12, 2019).
12. Also, see Kozlu (2011, p. 14).
13. One exception is the city museum project initiated by Yaşar Holding Company, not very far from Darağaç. The project transformed a former industrial building (Tuzakoğlu Flour Factory) into a museum.
14. For the exhibitions that took place in 2018, 2019, and 2020 at Darağaç, see DC's Website and Facebook page: Darağaç (2021, April 23) [Website], <https://www.daragac.com/>; Darağaç (n.d.) [Group Page], https://www.facebook.com/pg/daragacIzmir/about/?ref=page_internal.
15. Furthermore, the site has inspired both local artists and others who are visiting to participate in annual exhibitions.
16. The personal aspect is important for the sustenance of such collaborative practices. In Tophane, Istanbul, for instance, the issue of alcohol consumption in open and gallery spaces led to violent protests and the closing of art galleries in 2010 (Sanat galerisine, 2010, September 22), see *cnnturk* (May 25, 2020). While such "lifestyle" conflicts are more commonly encountered in low-income neighborhoods in other Turkish cities, Darağaç has proven to be a more nuanced example.
17. According to Ayşegül Doğan, artists generally received a warm welcome from the beginning. Locals, as neighbors, were curious about the artworks and later remained open to communication. Aksoy, Sonel, Doğan, and local administrator, personal communication (July 23, 2019); also, one of the interviewed craftspeople commented that "the artists consulted them very often." The first craftspeople, personal communication (July 23, 2019).
18. A similar comment was made by one of the craftspeople whom we interviewed: "The place has been lived up, vitalized by the artists." The first craftspeople, personal communication (July 23, 2019).

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Author Biographies

Kıvanç Kılınç is associate professor at Kadir Has University (KHAS). Received PhD degree (2010) at Binghamton University, SUNY, and Master's degree (2002) at METU. His current research focuses on the transnational connections and their consequences that shaped contemporary social housing practices in the Middle East. Has published extensively in academic journals as well as in edited books and currently serves as managing editor of *the International Journal of Islamic Architecture* (IJIA).

Burkay Pasin received BArch from Middle East Technical University (METU) in 2000, Master's degree in architecture from Dokuz Eylül University (DEU) in 2007, and a PhD degree in architecture from METU in 2014. He is currently an associate professor at Yasar University. His research areas are Turkish architectural design history, gender and space, queer space, and architectural design education.

Güzden Varinlioğlu received BArch from METU (2001), MFA (2003) and PhD (2011) degrees from Bilkent University. Dr Varinlioğlu was a visiting scholar at ITU and UCLA (2011–14), currently works as an associate professor at Izmir University of Economics, and research interests include computational design, digital heritage, and design education.