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Everyday transport -
an opportunity for social interaction?

A case study on young professionals in Istanbul

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Abstract

In this paper I analyse the travel behaviour of young professionals in an inner-city neighbourhood of Istanbul with a special focus on social interaction. The paper is based on empirical research I conducted within the scope of my Master thesis from November 2012 to January 2013. The basic attempt is to question the relation between the neighbourhood as a built as well as social environment and the everyday travel behaviour of young professionals.

With regard to transport related social interaction I propose to differentiate between unintended interference, regular interaction with local people and personal contacts. In everyday transport unintended interaction prevails. Regular interaction within the neighbourhood, most importantly with local shop owners, plays a role in the residential choice of young professionals. Personal contact, however, is hardly bound to the neighbourhood. I, therefore, consider the contribution of everyday transport to social interaction within neighbourhoods to be limited.

Neighbourhoods are the surroundings of everyday life, the starting point and end of most everyday trips. I am interested in how neighbourhoods influence travel behaviour and how travel behaviour in turn influences neighbourhoods. In this paper I want to highlight the relation to social interaction within neighbourhoods.

Going to work and university, doing shopping, meeting friends - travelling is a part of everyday life. People both need and want to travel. They travel long distances or just walk around the corner to reach different locations for different purposes. They take buses, metros, taxis and ferries, they drive private cars, ride a bike or walk. Being able to move around means being able to participate in society. The physical movement from one place to another (*travelling*), and the ability to move (*mobility*), are highly relevant for young people.

Young (urban) professionals are a group of society that became increasingly important within the framework of societal processes of pluralisation and a changing economic system. The impact of traditional values and role-models has decreased since the 1960's and the globalised market economy has asked for more and more flexibility. Working routines as well as household types got much more diverse, especially in

bigger cities. People work at different hours, under various forms of contracts and live as singles, married couples, un-married couples, couples with or without children, single parents, blended families and in flat share. Apart from diversification, there was a time shift. People tend to spend a longer time on education. Both, entering the job market and starting a family are postponed. Researchers speak of a prolonged phase of adolescence in comparison to earlier generations (cp. Scheiner 2009: 21). These changes produce various new urban life-styles, some profiting from the flexibility of working hours, others suffering from the resulting insecurity. On the one hand, the characterisation of young urban professionals (*yuppies*) of the 1980's (cp. Kerler 1987) is still surprisingly up to date. On the other hand, the diversification of life-styles brought about new forms of poverty as well (cp. *young urban poor* in Drilling 2004). Stressing the transition from education to labour market as a relevant period in life and avoiding the a priori ascription of a certain profile, in this paper I use the term *young professionals* only.

Mobility and actual travel are a prerequisite to get into contact with various social groups and cultures. They contribute substantially to a young person's independence and enhance his or her life-style options. Young peoples' action space gradually increases (cp. Tully 2002: 13-15). I assume that young professionals are among the most mobile groups in society due to the fact that they have a high number of mandatory trips related to employment, education and housekeeping as well as a high number of trips related to free time activities. To lead a life-style that enables them to work and continue the social life they are used to, they need to travel excessively. By travelling I mean not only distances travelled and time spent travelling, but various forms of interaction with a physical and social environment.

Framework of analysis and methodology

This paper relies on empirical research I conducted in a central neighbourhood in Istanbul within the scope of my Master thesis from November 2012 to January 2013. My general interest is the relation between the urban environment, more precisely the neighbourhood, and individual travel behaviour. The neighbourhood is both, a physical and a social environment.[1]

Analysing the relation between spatial environment and travel behaviour requires background knowledge from different disciplines. I consulted literature from the field of

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[1] In German, the terms *Quartier* (urban quarter) and *Nachbarschaft* (neighbourhood) differentiate more clearly between the physical and the social dimensions. The English term neighbourhood encompasses both dimensions.

urban design and the field of travel behaviour research. The former is represented by urban planner Kevin Lynch (1960) and architect Jan Gehl (2010). With regard to the latter, I took into consideration research from the United States and Germany, most importantly the meta-analyses of Ewing and Cervero (2010) and Handy (2005) as well as the work of Scheiner (2009).

Based on Giddens' *Theory of Structuration* (Giddens 1997) and Scheiner's differentiation between *Verhalten* (behaviour) and *Handeln* (conscious action), I assume that the relation between neighbourhood and travel behaviour is twofold. On the one hand, travel behaviour is rooted in neighbourhoods and shaped by its conditions. On the other hand, neighbourhoods are formed by people's (travel) behaviour. Human behaviour is on the one hand influenced by external conditions and on the other hand contributes to these conditions.

In my case study I applied a mixed methodological approach combining mappings of the spatial environment and qualitative interviews with young professionals. I conducted interviews with eight young professionals aged 23 to 37 living in the surveyed neighbourhood. The interviewees work full- or part-time and some of them study at the same time. None of them has been living in the neighbourhood for more than five years. I superimposed the results of both steps of analysis to specify which aspects of the neighbourhood exert an influence on travel behaviour and which facets of travel behaviour are influenced. Based on the above mentioned literature and research I identified (1) physical characteristics, like street layout and building typologies, (2) opportunities, meaning the availability of shops and services as well as transport infrastructure and destinations accessible from the area, (3) social interaction and (4) personal capabilities as possible groups of aspects influencing the travel behaviour of young professionals. In this paper I lay the focus on the results related to social interaction.

Research site and local context

The research site is Yeldeğirmeni on the Anatolian shore in the inner city of Istanbul (cp. images 1 and 2). Istanbul is in a condition of constant transformation. The overall urban form changes as much as single neighbourhoods. Heavy investments, both, public and private, are made. At the same time, changing political and economic conditions bring about new claims with regard to urban planning as well as new ways of life. I consider transport to be of high relevance with regard to changes in the built environment and changes in the daily routines of life.

img. 1 location research site

img. 2 Yeldeğirmeni seen from the sea

Istanbul is one of the most congested cities in the world.[2] One of the major reasons for congestion is the unequal distribution of population and employment opportunities between the European and the Anatolian shore. 7.5 mio people, about 60% of the overall population, live on the European shore. 4.5 mio, about 40%, live on the Anatolian shore. However, 70% of the employment opportunities are on the European shore compared to 30% on the Anatolian (cp. Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality 2008: 84). An even stronger imbalance is to be found with regard to institutions for higher education, e.g. university campuses, and cultural venues, e.g. museums and galleries. Most of them are located on the European shore concentrated in the district of Beyoğlu north of the Golden Horn and on the historic peninsula (cp. Derviş/Öner 2009: 107, 172-173). Consequently, a lot of people commute between the Asian and the European parts of the city leading to heavy congestion in the mornings and evenings. Crossing the Bosporus becomes a central transportation issue.

Istanbul grew extensively from the 1950's onwards. Informal settlements, called *gecekondu*, contributed largely to the extension of the urban area in this period. In the aftermath of the military coup in 1980 and profound change in the political system globalisation and liberalisation became guiding principles of politics and urban development in Turkey (cp. Kuyucu/Ünsal 2010: 1484). Istanbul became embedded in global networks that affected both, the urban economy and daily urban life. This process led to "growing inequality (...) in terms of incomes, spaces of residence, cultures of consumption and practices of everyday life" (Keyder 2005: 124). Settlement patterns got more diverse and the urban form more fragmented. Gated communities for luxury living were built, predominantly in the north and the public housing authority

[2] Only recently, the producer of navigation systems TomTom released a study ranking Istanbul second most congested city in Europe after Moscow. According to this study, congestion increases travel time in Istanbul by an average of 55%. The average delay of a one hour drive in peak hours even amounts to 64 min. In rush hour, travel time doubles in comparison to when streets are not congested. For a daily commute of only 30 minutes, the study ascertains an annual delay of 118 hours (cp. TomTom 2013: 23).

(TOKI) started to build housing estates in remote locations. The inner city districts that had decayed throughout earlier decades attracted new attention. Around the late 1980's, Istanbul's inner city neighbourhoods, first of all these in central Beyoğlu experienced processes of gentrification (cp. Yücesoy 2008: 37-38). In recent years, excessive transformation took place within the framework of a state-led program for urban transformation (*kentsel dönüşüm*).[3] Interventions are directed towards the transformation of former gecekondu areas and inner city neighbourhoods. Karaman makes it clear that this is not just a continuation of the global city ambition: "The urban transformation agenda differs from a previous era of global city aspirations in its emphasis in the wholesale redevelopment of Istanbul's informal housing, rather than the construction of a few prestige projects" (Karaman 2013: 718). Keyder, in similar manner, observes substantial change in the urban fabric, down to the neighbourhood scale. According to him, "Istanbul is now experiencing the gradual transformation of the neighbourhood fabric where every small street used to boast a grocer, a shop for fresh produce, a haberdashery and various repair shops." (Keyder 2005: 129) The transformation of neighbourhoods, thus, reinforces the fragmentation of urban space and diminishes local supply for daily needs.

Throughout the past decades, new actors got involved in the urban development of Istanbul on behalf of the state, private economy and civil society. Furthermore, it becomes clear that both, the urban form and the citizen's daily lives, have experienced profound change since the 1980's. New conditions on the labour market and changing spatial configurations of the city and within neighbourhoods have made new ways of life both, possible and necessary. The life-style of young professionals, examined within this study, is one of them.

All in all, the imbalance between the shores and concentration of cultural and educational functions as well as labour opportunities in the very city centre and different kinds of disconnected development bring about a rising transport demand. Though Istanbul is a city of neighbourhoods, that so far provided the necessary daily supply, these structures seem to be endangered by the present urban development strategies. Thereby, the present urban transformation bears the risk for a further increase of transport demand. The inner city becomes both, a privileged location in terms of accessibility and a focal point for urban transformation.

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[3] The documentary *Ecomenopolis - city without limits* by Imre Azem (2011) exemplifies the transformation processes in several neighbourhoods leading interviews with several experts. Information available online (http://www.ekumenopolis.net/, last access 03.05.2013).

Travel behaviour of young professionals in relation to the neighbourhood

Yeldeğirmeni, a neighbourhood in central Istanbul, is an area with high accessibility to and from nearly anywhere in the city and a neighbourhood with distinct character. Furthermore, it is an area where many young people live. With regard to physical characteristics, Yeldeğirmeni is a neighbourhood with wavy topography and few open spaces, apart from the sea side. It has distinct borders. In the north and east railways and big streets act as barriers. A street in the south and the sea in the west rather act as connections to adjacent neighbourhoods and the city (cp. overview of the research site in image 3). The building typologies vary within the neighbourhood. There are houses of different age, the oldest ones in the lower areas of the northern part of the neighbourhood. With regard to opportunities there is a wide selection of grocery stores and basic services, but only few opportunities for free time activities or to spend time in open air. In contrast, transport opportunities are numerous. Various transport modes are available and a wide range of destinations is accessible directly from the neighbourhood (cp. image 4).

The connectivity of the street network within the neighbourhood restricts car traffic, but enhances walking. The street layout is in wide parts dominated by parking. The conditions for pedestrians are deficient, e.g. lacking proper pavement, but have recently been improved in some parts of the neighbourhood.[5] As transport stations and stops are located predominantly at the edges of the neighbourhood, walking within the neighbourhood comes along with the use of public transport.

The travel behaviour of young professionals living in the neighbourhood is influenced only slightly by the physical characteristics of the neighbourhood, e.g. street layout or topography. Opportunities, in contrast, have a considerable influence on the travel behaviour of young professionals in Yeldeğirmeni. Strongest is the influence of transport-related opportunities, i.e. destination accessibility and the variety of transport modes. Destination accessibility is a major reason with regard to young professionals' residential choice and a precondition for free mode choice. The variety of transport modes available in Yeldeğirmeni, first of all, influences the travel strategies young professionals apply. For example, it enables them to avoid congested streets and crowded means of transport.

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[5] The district municipality of Kadıköy and Çekül foundation are currently enacting a neighbourhood revitalisation project (cp. Kadıköy Municipality 2011).

img. 3 overview research site

rail   metrobus[4]   bus   sea
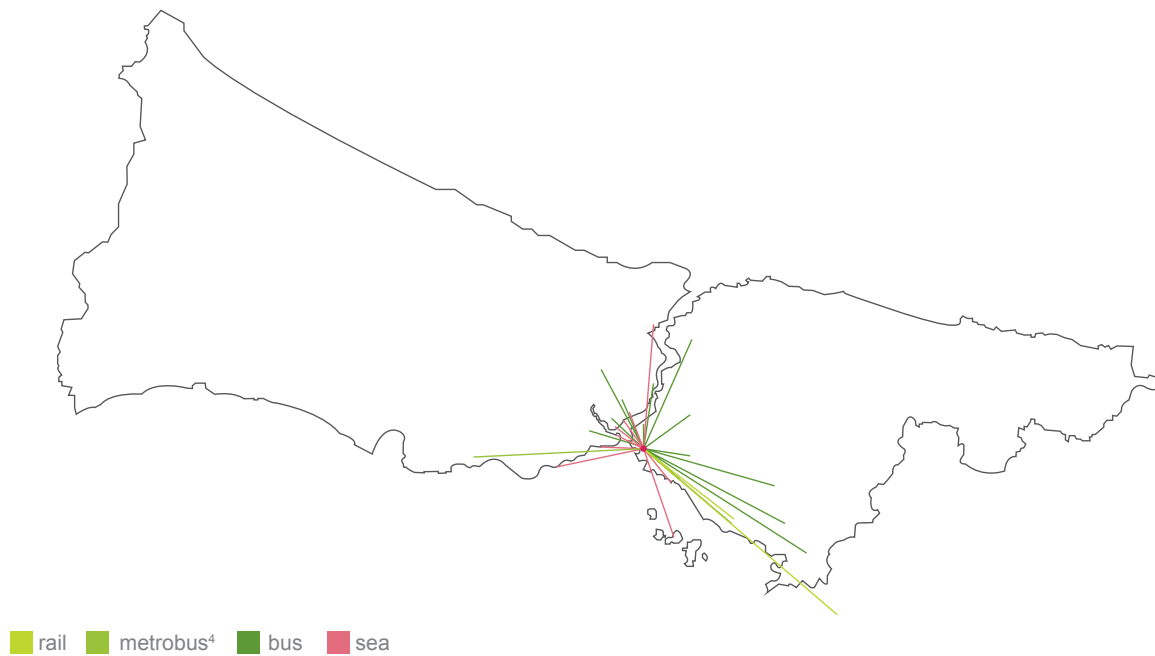
img. 4 destination accessibility by public transportation

[4] The metrobus is the Bus Rapid Transit system in Istanbul.

Among the opportunities within the neighbourhood, those regarding shopping and daily needs are more influential than those regarding free time activities. Young professionals frequently cover daily necessities within the neighbourhood. In contrast, they carry out most free time activities outside the neighbourhood boundaries. They feel a lack of opportunities to meet and spend time in the neighbourhood. The existing offers do not appeal to them. The distribution of employment opportunities is a metropolitan issue and, therefore, barely relevant on the neighbourhood scale. The surveyed group of young professionals commutes up to 45 km to work or university and spends up to 1.5 hours travelling one way.

All in all, young professionals place more emphasis on reaching places than on opportunities in their immediate surroundings. They use existing offers rather coincidentally. They satisfy non-specific needs like grocery shopping in the neighbourhood, but leave it for more specific interests like free-time activities. In addition to long distances travelled for work and education this causes young professionals to not spend much time in their neighbourhood.
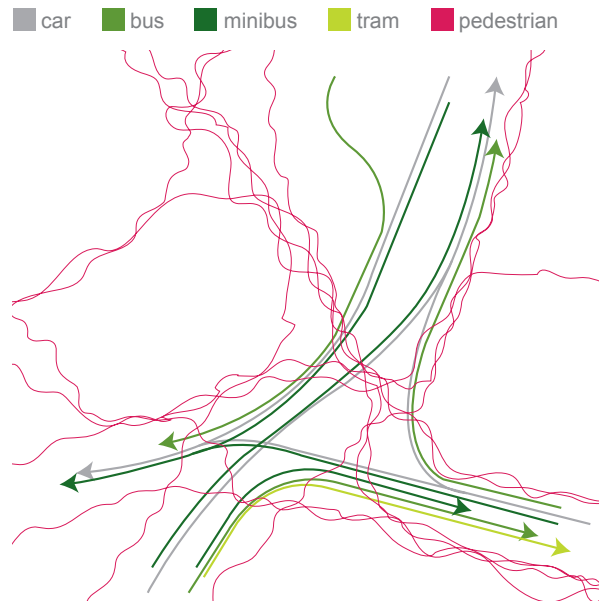
Travelling and social interaction within the neighbourhood

The enacted travel behaviour exerts an influence on the neighbourhood as a social space. Simultaneously social interaction substantially shapes young professionals' travel behaviour. I underline three types of social interaction as most influential with regard to transport: (1) interference with other road users, (2) occasional interaction within the neighbourhood and (3) personal contacts.
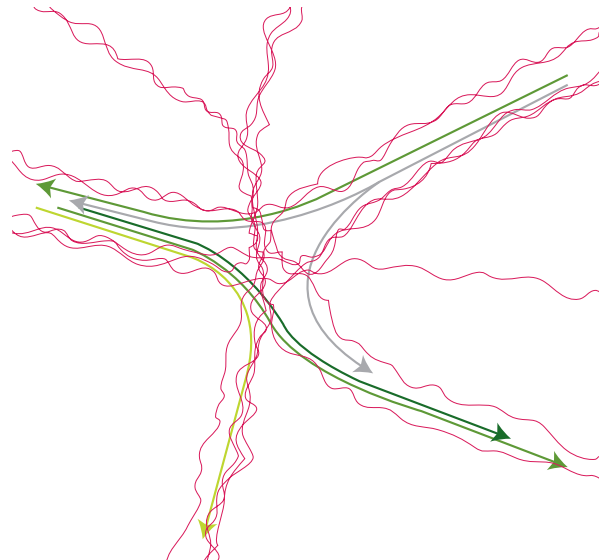
To elucidate the interference between different road users, I analysed several intersections within the neighbourhood. One of them is the intersection of Rıhtım Caddesi and Söğütlüçeşme Caddesi right next to the sea and major ferry piers (cp. image 5). At this spot, Rıhtım Caddesi divides into two separate roads for each direction. Simultaneously, cars and buses come down from Söğütlüçeşme street. While cars coming from the south can only continue along Rıhtım Caddesi, public transport means, i.e. buses, minibuses and *dolmuş*[6], can enter Söğütlüçeşme Caddesi from this direction, sharing their lane with a tram line. There are traffic lights to cross Rıhtım Caddesi and Söğütlüçeşme Caddesi, but none to cross from the southern parts towards the sea side. Consequently, pedestrians cross arbitrarily. They may come to a halt on a refuge between the roads.

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[6] The *dolmuş* is a shared taxi that operates on fixed routes.

A little further up Söğütlüçeşme street, there is the square of the bull. It is a major link between Yeldeğirmeni and the adjacent neighbourhood of Bahariye and it is a focal point, especially for pedestrian travel (cp. image 6). The part of Söğütlüçeşme Caddesi ascending from the metrobus station in the east, is mostly used by cars and buses. When reaching the square, they either continue down to the sea side or turn left towards the Fenerbahçe football stadium. Buses, minibuses and dolmuş ascending from the sea side, can only continue straight on towards the stadium. The tram, in contrast, turns right to the pedestrian area of Bahariye. In total, the square of the bull is shaped by three roads for motorised traffic and three pedestrian streets. Opposite of the pedestrian area of Bahariye, there is the pedestrian area around the shopping street Halitağa Caddesi leading towards the inner parts of Yeldeğirmeni. As the square of the bull is a common meeting place, people cross from any side of it to any other.

Right at the centre of Yeldeğirmeni, at the intersection of Karakolhane Caddesi and Uzun Hafız street, traffic becomes less complex (cp. image 7). Car traffic is allowed from south to north and from west to east only, though traffic does not seem to comply with these regulations. As the streets are small, there are no traffic lights and pedestrians as well as bikes and scooters cross in any possible direction.

car   bus   minibus   tram   pedestrian

img. 5 transport flows at the intersection of Rıhtım Caddesi and Söğütlüçeşme street

img. 6 transport flows at the square of the bull
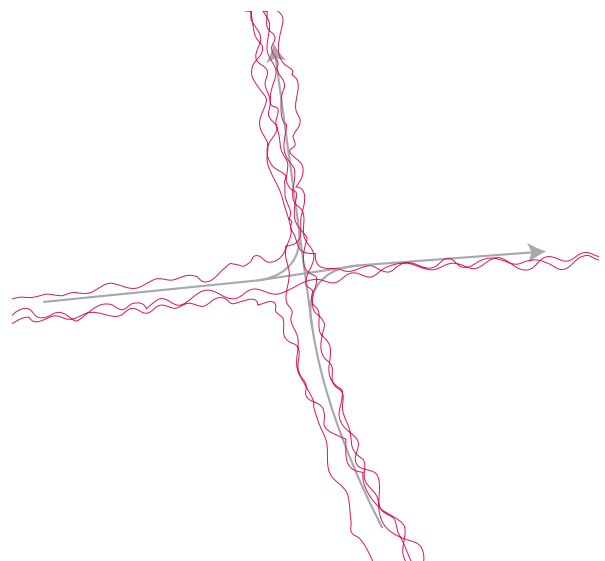
img. 7 transport flows in Karakolhane street

Interference with other road users and other passengers in public transport is relevant in both, mode choice and travel strategies. It has an impact on the attractiveness of routes as well as transport means. Crowdedness and congestion evoke strong aversion. Several interviewees avoid Rıhtım Caddesi, the street along the sea side: "...there is a lot of traffic on the main road, it is unbelievably crowded and you cannot walk and get into a nervous crisis, you begin to tremble because of the nerves. Because people crash into each other while walking." (Person C)[7] Travelling by crowded transport means, like the metrobus, is described in a similar manner: "Especially in rush hour, it becomes impossible to get on the metrobus. In Mecidiyeköy I waited for about fifteen, twenty minutes to go one stop further. It was so crowded and everybody pushed one another to get inside, onto the metrobus. (…) You are already in a situation of pushing and shoving with all the people, no patience left." (Person C)

Most interviewees describe occasional interaction within the neighbourhood and refer to local shop owners as the group of people they interact with most frequently. Person D stresses the positive effect of contact to shop owners: "It is nice to be able to talk to the shop owners. (…) In the evenings we say 'Good evening. How are you?' That's nice. After all, this is a neighbourhood. (...) They talk to you, because they see you every day. They assume you live here and they trust you." Furthermore, exchanging information with people in the streets plays an important role in finding unknown places. Person B describes how she finds an unknown location by asking local shop owners: "I ask. I find places by asking, I mean I don't find them on a map. (...) I ask the people working there for instructions: Do you know this street? How do I get there?"

Furthermore, young professionals emphasise the importance of friends and family. These contacts, however, are usually not bound to the neighbourhood. Most young professionals themselves hardly get involved in the local community. Their personal contacts are usually spread across many different places. Most young professionals do not live with their families, many have moved from the city they grew up or studied in, several went abroad or moved to a different city temporarily. Social networks, consequently, are not space-bound and not at all bound to the neighbourhood. Interestingly, young professionals at the same time seem to long for familiar living environments. They appreciate contact with local shop owners and like observing contact among other inhabitants of the neighbourhood.

Their own travel behaviour, however, does not really support such environments. Due to finishing education and entering the labour market as well as general conditions

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[7] The interviews were conducted in Turkish and translated by the author.

on the labour market, e.g. temporary employment, young professionals change their residential location quite frequently. None of the interviewed young professionals has been living in Yeldeğirmeni for more than five years. Though those living with their families may be expected to build up longer relations, many of the others will probably leave the neighbourhood soon. This contradicts their own notion of the neighbourhood as a place where everybody knows everybody else. Young professionals, in most cases, are not the ones to initiate and maintain the social contact they passively want to experience.

Additionally, most young professionals travel long distances on a daily basis. This is due to specific employment profiles as well as particulate interests for free time activities. Consequently, they do not spend much time in their neighbourhoods. They do, however, spend time walking to and from transport infrastructure. This is the most important occasion for social interaction within the neighbourhood, e.g. when shopping on the way home. Anyhow, many young professionals are in a rush on these daily walks and stress not to want to loose any time: "Actually, I never hang around in the upper parts, I come home directly. I never stop, to be honest. Sometimes, you are focussed on directly going home, or you are focussed to directly go to the metrobus. The basic purpose is to finish that way as soon as possible. You don't look at the surroundings a lot. And you don't loose time there." (Person C) The attention for the environment is low, thus, reducing the likelihood for deeper interaction.

Conclusions

I want to stress that different kinds of interaction have very different effects on the neighbourhood as a social environment:

- Interference with other road users is rather an inevitable form of social interaction in the immediate surrounding. For the interviewees it does not carry the positive connotation of vivid street life, but the negative one of crowdedness and disrespect.
- Interaction with people in the neighbourhood, most prominently shop owners, has a different quality than personal relations. It is rather a routine. However, the act of greeting and occasionally talking evokes a feeling of familiarity and, thus, substantially contributes to satisfaction with the residential location.
- Personal contacts are not necessarily related to the neighbourhood. Meeting friends and family is an important travel purpose and, thus, one of the reasons for young professionals to leave the immediate surrounding.

In conclusion, social interaction comes along with travelling, especially for public transport users. Using public transport causes people to walk through their neighbourhood and to deal with physical contact in crowded transport means. However, in very few cases this interaction takes the quality of personal contact. Interaction between people is not automatically a benefit for the neighbourhood as a social environment. A huge amount of interaction is rather inevitable. Interesting is the contact to local shop owners, that is very relevant though not a very personal relation. This kind of interaction is related to the notion of a neighbourhood as a place where everybody knows everybody else, an idea appreciated by young professionals. However, young professionals' travel behaviour, i.e. their frequent change of residential location as well as the long distances travelled in everyday life, opposes this idea.

Two major questions remain to be answered: How do neighbourhoods as social environments change, when more and more young professionals move in, a process likely to happen in Istanbul's inner city neighbourhoods? And are personal decisions or external constraints more important in shaping the travel behaviour of young professionals?

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