Social design is a much-discussed topic in the context of facilitating change towards social ends. Growing problems in the social and political realm can trigger social change. In the last few years, Kapıdağ, Turkey has been stuck between top-down mass industrialization and longstanding local production dynamics. “Project Kapıdağ: Locality of Production” was emerged from the struggles associated with local production in the region and was realized in collaboration with local organizations, local community and İstanbul Bilgi University Faculty of Architecture. The project aims to pinpoint the assets Kapıdağ for the collective wellbeing of the region and reveal the potential intervention opportunities in the region through mapping out the network of relations between production, materials, public and institutions. In this paper, the project will be examined as research for social design case in complex collaboration. Different proposals that were developed out of this undertaking will be exemplified to discuss issues on the responsive role of the designer in ‘infrastructuring’ social design process. The paper further attempts to demonstrate how the research process can also function as an alignment tool between collaborators to attain objectives and open up possibilities for new collaborations and projects.

Keywords: Research for social design, infrastructuring, collaboration for social design, visual diary

Research for social design

Introduction

Social design is a process where design practices are led by social needs and carried out in collaboration with a variety of societal actors pursuing change for the improvement of social ends (Markussen, 2017; Manzini, 2014; Maze, 2014; Thorpe & Gamman, 2011). The problems caused by fast social and financial changes within an area can lead to an intervention space for social design (Manzini et. al, 2010).

Kapıdağ, where this project was carried out, is a peninsula extending into the southern Marmara region in Turkey (figure 1). Although it was a major tourist destination in Turkey in the 1950s, it has since lost its importance due to a variety of local management issues in time. In addition, because of the new industrial transformation around the region, the Erdek - Kapıdağ Peninsula has been dragged into social, cultural, economic and ecological changes. According to population data of the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUİK), it can be seen that the village population of Erdek has decreased since 1990 (TUİK, 2018). During recent years, companies have purchased many farmlands to establish factories in Erdek Gulf; as a result, several villagers have moved to urban areas in search of new ways of living (Öğdül et. al, 2018). Top-down political reforms of mass-industrialization threaten the socio-technical and ecological balance in the region, which, in turn, endanger local practices developed throughout the years.
One of the project coordinators is a native of Erdek and whose parents still live there; thus, she is a first-hand observer of the changes in Kapıdağ - Erdek. The initial idea of organizing such a workshop and employing the process of research for social design in Kapıdağ arises from this personal urge. The first contact with governmental authorities was made through local acquaintances. Erdek Municipality is also conscious of the situation and the demands of its residents; thus, they want to collaborate with volunteer associations and universities to create opportunities. The project coordinators used the opportunity to organize a workshop in the summer term, and the students participated in the project on a voluntary basis.

‘Project Kapıdağ: Locality of Production’ is a research study in the field of social design aiming to pinpoint the assets of Kapıdağ through engaging in a variety of social practices and things to open up resilient socio-technical and ecological possibilities that will enrich the region’s self-sufficiency. It was realized between local stakeholders and Istanbul Bilgi University, Architecture Faculty members and students between August 14th and August 27th, 2017. Several collaborators were engaged in the process and brought their knowledge and resources to the study. Through ethnographic fieldwork, design students documented and analysed the assets of the region for further generation of ideas.

Figure 1: The geographical location of Kapıdağ Peninsula. Source: https://goo.gl/maps/CrnvRovaXEH2, 2017.

**Infrastructuring Social Design and the Context of Kapıdağ**

‘Infrastructuring’ (Hillgren et al., 2011) approaches social design as an ever-growing process focusing on developing the relationship between different stakeholders to facilitate new networks and resources that might give way to design opportunities. Unlike pre-defined paths, the flexible approach of infrastructuring allows fitting in complex situations and dealing with unexpected inputs as well as the mess inherent to a given social context (Björgvinsson, Ehn & Hillgren, 2012; Hillgren et al., 2011).

Therefore, in Project Kapıdağ, we contextualized the social design process as an open-ended, long-term relationship between different societal groups in the field in order to enrich and extend opportunities and discover assets which could be developed further. In each step of the project, new relations were built and existing ones were deepened. The knowledge and practices of collaborators informed the process to be able to discover existing ‘assets’ (Manzini, 2014; Thorpe & Gamman, 2011). Social design reinterprets these assets in the light of the social and material context to lead up to social change (Binder, Brandt, Ehn & Halse, 2015; Manzini, 2014; Thorpe and Gamman, 2011).

Project Kapıdağ aimed to detect the region’s assets through a social design process taken as open-ended and was divided into different phases, thus building relations with different groups within the field. Kapıdağ is made up of a variety of societal groups with different cultures (though affected by the Convention Concerning the Exchange of Greek and Turkish Populations in 1923) and economic practices (from agriculture to mass industrial manufacturing). Today, the peninsula is inhabited by different ethnic groups—mainly by Turks, Pomaks and Cretans (figure 2). They share the same land while retaining their own rituals, habits and traditions. In time, these people of different backgrounds developed their own means of livelihood by making use of the natural resources of the region. This cultural diversity makes the region’s ecosystem richer and more varied. To be able to explore homogeneities and heterogeneities in the field, the community was thus taken as a network of intertwined relationships between the social and the material, as well as between
humans and non-humans (Binder et al., 2015). Accordingly, research was designed towards discovering and mapping out these relations and making them available for further interventions.

Figure 2: Old photographs of Aunt Zeynep’s mother and father when they first came to Erdek, Turkey, through the population exchange. Photograph: Participant students, 2017.

Research for Social Design in Complex Collaboration

Thorpe and Gamman (2011) define social design problems as ‘wicked’ and note that they require a collaborative process where diverse actors play the role of co-creators to tackle with the complexity of the situation at hand. Because there is not one true answer that would make all human and non-human actors equally satisfied, a collaborative process is needed for all actors to be able to utilize their agency (Thorpe and Gamman, 2011). For example, we—as the coordinator of this project—played a role at the intersection of meeting the educational goals and expectations of local collaborators. We gained experience of conducting fieldwork to students, visualizing data from the field and turning them into ideas; we were also obliged to propose fruitful and applicable ideas in the region.

Although conflating education sensitivities with the needs of a project in a social realm with multiple collaborators outside the university can be tricky, collaboration between the university and the local government is also an important part of the social design process. Collaboration between design schools and local organizations is a fruitful platform for research, as well as for analysing and generating new ideas for social ends (Manzini, Zhong & Baek, 2010). Schools can be centres where new proposals are generated and tested through design research for a positive change. In the meantime, design students can also learn more about social problems, how to address these problems, and ways of developing the skills necessary for acting in sensitive situations (Margolin and Margolin, 2002).

Project Kapıdağ was realized in collaboration with a variety of stakeholders, each of whom brought a different set of ideas to the table. These included the local residents, local independent initiatives (Yesil Valiz Association for Responsible Tourism, Bandırma Mountain Club, Erdek Exchangeee Association), local governmental organizations (Erdek Municipality, Erdek Chamber of Commerce), Istanbul Bilgi University as an institution alongside project coordinators who also authored this paper, and 24 design students from different departments (industrial design, interior design and architecture).

Stages of the Project Kapıdağ: Locality of production

Pre-Project

The research proposal was presented to Erdek Municipality and Erdek Chamber of Commerce four months prior to the start of the project; initial arrangements for accommodation and transportation were then made. To establish the initial contacts with local bodies and people, project coordinators pre-visited the region, meeting and contacting more than 25 local people in the villages. Since the starting point of the project was the pinpointing of existing and potential local income sources within Kapıdağ, coordinators grouped these sources into five main routes after initial visits. These routes included: historical sites, villages, production
facilities, centre and shores, and bazaars. Besides thematic consistency, locational relevancy and convenience of transportation were also taken into consideration while deciding the routes and their contents.

**In-Project**

The research steps of Project Kapidag were planned in the following order: understanding of the area with ethnographic methods; investigation of existing social and production practices; participating in local activities; and dividing the participants into smaller groups in order to reach personal stories for the purpose of deepening the knowledge obtained. Data was collected both via observing on-the-moment interactions between people, as well as by students participating in these interactions. Observation supported by interviews (Blomberg, Giacomi, Mosher & Swenton-Wall, 1993) was the main ethnographic method. The process was also supported through unstructured interviews, note-taking (both written and visual), written sources, videos, photographs and sketching (Barab et al., 2004).

The routes were discovered with design students; they had the first-hand experience and learnt about Kapidag’s villages, sites, agricultural products, hand-made products, and different cultures and practices. Additional information was obtained on the locals’ methods of generating income, the ecological potential of the area, the variety of flora and fauna, the different uses of plants, and the opportunities that the sea brings (i.e. fishing and sea tourism).

At the end of each day, design students were asked to keep ‘visual diaries’ (Blomberg, Burrelland & Guest, 2003) as a means of preparing self-reports in order to be able to handle intense data. They sorted out and categorized the photographs they took according to the practice they were referring to and supported those photographs with texts on what they had learned, accounts of villagers, questions that arose in the field, and their ideas. These diaries also functioned as media for discussion between design students in the process of idea generation (figure 3).

![Figure 3: Scenes from a discussion session in the workroom that the Municipality provided. Photograph: Participant students, 2017](image)

At the end of the first week, all participants came together, and a pool of visual diaries was formed. Each design student began to form both their area of interest as a potential for Kapidag as well as their potential for generating ideas. Next, seven groups of students were formed based on these interests. These seven groups approached Kapidag’s assets from different perspectives and focused on the following: agricultural products; historical sites; cultural diversity; women’s labour; architectural textures; fishery; and activity tourism. While some of the five initial routes were highly inspirational for students, some did not, in the end, trigger enough potential. For example, no ideas emerged from the production facilities route. In this route, participants visited large- and medium-scale production facilities, such as olive and olive oil production, dairy production, and a marble plantation. We believe that, because of these facilities’ highly institutionalized nature and grand scale, students could not envision change within their capabilities. On the other hand, agricultural products, cultural diversity, women’s labour, architectural textures groups were directly affected by what they encountered and observed during the village route. The diversity of cultural and agricultural production and social life in the villages is what students found unique and worth further elaboration.

After these seven groups were formed, the project obtained a more responsive structure. Each group had different needs to acquire deeper knowledge of their subjects. Being able to meet those needs required new collaborations, different paths and time tables. Then, design students as researchers also assumed the role of
facilitators (Thorpe and Gamman, 2011). How these roles were realized within the process will now be explained through a closer look at some of the projects.

- **Cultural Values in Kapıdağ**: The group that was interested in different cultures in Kapıdağ, namely Pomaks and Cretans, contacted Erdek Exchange Association and paid several visits to the area. After gaining trust, they were able to visit some of the exchange participants at home and at work (in offices and bazaars). In this way, they learned about their foods, herbs, alternative healing mixtures, and rituals (figure 4). Students visualized the information they gained and exhibited their drawings at an exhibition. In doing so, they obtained feedback from a wider audience and also interacted with people unaware of these traditions.


The knowledge that was sought was deeply situated in specific locations and groups of people. Thus, reaching even seemingly simple knowledge was challenging because it required strong networks and collaboration. For example, returning to a village for further investigation was a problem due to a lack of transportation facilities and walking paths. Thus, design students needed to get in touch with the people they met in the villages and bazaars so that they could be transported.

The projects of two groups, which focused on Ballıpınar Village, where transportation options were limited, provide insight into the challenges of the research process within situated knowledge. Many coastal villages in Kapıdağ have moved away from agriculture and chosen sea tourism as their main source of income. Ballıpınar, despite being a coastal town, is still a closed community, and their main source of income is agriculture, especially the purple onion (figure 5). The purple onion is very popular in the region and is known for its sweet and juicy taste, durability, healing power and purple colour (even women working in onion cultivation wear a purple skirt, as it does not permit onion stains). All families in the village in one way or another work in onion cultivation, women taking an active part in the production and preparation of onions for sale.
• The lifecycle of the Purple Onion: One of the student groups documented and analysed the journey of the purple onion from soil to the dinner table. They tried to understand and visualize the steps of cultivation, how it was prepared for sale, and what the sales channels and actors involved were. They further proposed a labelling system by printing an onion on textile and showing its inner purple rings. Villagers can use this system to promote and sell their products in the bazaars.

• Ballıpınar Original Architecture: The architectural and rural structure of Ballıpınar is shaped especially in accordance with purple onion production. Every house has an awning (figure 6) made of wood and wicker. Women sit under these awnings, weave the onions by their stems and store them by hanging them from awnings. These awnings also function as social gathering points where women eat and drink together, while men prefer to gather in ‘kahvehanes’. Ballıpınar Village is especially interesting for the nice combination of social and material values. Onion production affects social life, the architectural texture of the village, and even clothing. The group documented the architectural texture, streets and houses of the village and the social and material relations arising from onion production by examining the building techniques and materials used in the houses and awnings by section and detail drawings (Figure 7).

Figure 5: Purple onion, separate and weaved by their stem; Aunt Ayşe from Ballıpınar Village with her purple skirt. Illustration: Participant students, 2017.

Figure 6: An awning used for weaving under and storing onions. Photograph: Participant students, 2017.
Other projects include proposals on different activity themes and routes for tourists and locals; exploring the fish and fisheries culture in the region; women’s handiwork by weaving, crocheting and knitting; and the pattern map for the Temple of Hadrian to assist visitors in understanding the excavation area and discover ancient historical stone structures.

End-project

At the end of Project Kapidağ, a festival was organized with the cooperation of the municipalities and associations around Erdek and Kapidağ. As a result of the two weeks of documentation and analysis, powerful visuals with clear visuality and clarity prepared by the students were exhibited together with activities organized in the district square (Figure 8). The fact that this exhibition was held at the festival dates increased the number of visitors to the district and led the project outputs to be reached by more people.

Design students stayed on and interacted with local people regarding the outcomes. Visual boards became tools for discussion and the exhibition turned into an open forum where people visited and shared their ideas about the place they lived in and gave feedback on the ideas for further development.

Key Learnings and Outcomes

Project Kapidağ is situated as research for social design study that identifies the assets of the region to open up further ideas and possibilities aiming at social change in the region. The seven projects developed by the
students have as a significant strength the ability to make the future of the region more resilient. Not only these seven projects but also the interests of the students and collaborators, created a mutual understanding on social development for the region. These are fruitful initial outcomes for the project, as Kapıdağ Project was planned as the first step of a long-term social development study in the region. In addition, it can be said that an alignment of goals and objectives between different contexts and with different collaborators was achieved. Collaborators agreed to make the Kapıdağ Project a more complex social design engagement for generating ideas towards collective social change in the region.

The next step of the project was planned as a series of workshops for participatory idea generation with local people and collaborators to raise and strengthen awareness of the assets of Kapıdağ. The outputs of the Kapıdağ Project would provide a useful input for this second step. Meetings with the municipality and other organizations were carried out. However, due to political issues on the side of the municipality, these workshop sessions could not be accomplished. In spite of this, this project opened up new collaboration opportunities and future steps turned into new projects in new places. In the 2018 Fall academic term a design studio project was carried out in the city of Bursa (two hours away from Erdek) with a non-governmental organization which was met through Project Kapıdağ. Another design studio project is planned for the 2019 Fall term with the same organization in the town of İzni, an administrative district in Bursa.

As for educational purposes, the researcher-coordinators and participant students of this project gained experience in dealing with real project conditions in situ. Coordinators practiced developing a workshop between educational and governmental issues and sustaining communication between them. Students had experience conducting their own fieldwork, taking different roles within the project as researcher, designer and facilitator, and working and talking with people from different parts of the society. They enhanced their data collection and visualization skills and had a chance to interact with the people who played a significant role in the process. These teachings and gains were the main objectives of the project from the point of view of education.

**Conclusion**

‘Project Kapıdağ: Locality of Production’ was an attempt to ‘draw things together’, to contextualize and reframe existing practices and things in Kapıdağ to ensure regional development while protecting both the socio-technical and ecological environments. It aspires to highlight the local production assets in the area that have the potential to trigger change towards the collective well-being of different social groups. Material engagements of different communities were observed in their unique contexts. Looking at how these assets intertwined in the process of knowledge production allows us to handle the ethnographic field as a design space. This way, design can reconfigure relations between socio-material practices and contexts of use to attain social ends.

Besides being a research phase, Project Kapıdağ also functions as an alignment tool between collaborators. An agreement on the goals and objectives between collaborators is important for conducting a grounded project. It also enables discussion through practice where collaborators learn about each other’s perspectives and ways of working through action. We believe this kind of an introduction through practice in a social design process will avoid any possible power imbalance and competition between organizational logic in further studies that will be longer and more complex. Also, mutual rapport among locals and design students was established. Many villages of Kapıdağ are closed communities; thus, building trust is especially important to be able to obtain knowledge, as this necessitates one-to-one observation and the participation of locals in daily life. Finally, Project Kapıdağ confirmed the researcher-coordinators’ view of the region as a spot rich in cultural and ecological resources while offering diversity in practice and embracing change.

There were also difficulties and constraints encountered during the project. The duration of the project, which was realized through stakeholder in kind aid, was determined as two weeks, so the process was planned as a research phase and ended with the mapping of various possibilities. Although new processes are planned to explore design potentials through the findings, because of the timeout, negative impacts such as a decrease in the momentum, distance from the field, and the change of certain actors can be seen. At this point, as Thorpe and Gammman (2011) state, non-long-term commitments that do not involve the implementation process appear as a constraint to some of the projects proposed by students. Factors determining the duration of the project include the context of the project (summer internship) and limited financial support (again one of the cases listed by Thorpe and Gammman (2011)). Being aware of these constraints, the project coordinators designed the project objectives and questions at a certain level and maturity and set achievable targets. As a
result, the targets were achieved, a fruitful experience for the participants and a promising experience for the stakeholders were provided. This positive and progressive process has been seen as a step towards cooperation between stakeholders and has enabled long-term plans to be made.

As a positive result of the Kapıdağ Project’s mediation tool function, other design studio projects are planned to be carried out in the nearby region amongst similar stakeholders, and it is hoped that the results of research for social design will be taken forward and become design ideas.

References


