In January 2015, I participated in an international faculty development seminar (IFDS) in Istanbul. Although the seminar provided general knowledge of Turkey, it focused on the history, economy, politics, society, and culture of Istanbul.

As part of the seminar, the participants went on walking lectures to explore and discuss the cultural heritage and historical moments of Istanbul. Instructors from Bilkent University, Koç University, and Sabancı University guided the lectures. Although we took time to understand the history and culture of Istanbul, the seminar also served as an outlet to discuss the contemporary city life in Istanbul and how urban living is linked to the global culture. As a participant in the seminar, I encountered a local perspective and contrasting views on concepts such as the modern city, urbanization, gentrification and locality.

At the time of the seminar, the population of Istanbul was estimated at 16 million and growing. The city's housing and infrastructure were strained under the pressure of 2 million Syrian refugees fleeing war and terrorism. Yet, the Istanbul skyline which is normally made up of churches, mosques, and traditional apartment buildings was also filled with skyscrapers, luxury condos and malls. The neighborhoods in the city were transitioning from traditional to contemporary.

For many Istanbulites, this transition from traditional to contemporary architecture represents a metaphor of change and opportunity to evolve Turkey to a western way of life. For others, development represents a loss of the Istanbul identity and culture. Moreover, for those who have been or may be displaced to make room for new developments, it represents rising uncertainty. This is particularly the case for low income Turkish families, immigrants and refugees that live in informal settlements (Gecekondu).

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We met with a non-profit organization (NGO) that provides free social services to low-income families, immigrants, and refugees living in Gecekondu, the Tariabasi Community Center. During the meeting, the director of the center discussed the way of life in the Gecekondu, the challenges that those living there face on a regular basis, and the real impact of gentrification on the ecosystem on those individuals displaced to government housing. In short: when moved from their networks of people with the same language and customs and into government housing, these individuals lose their support system.

For a different perspective, we also met with government officials at the Beyoğlu Municipality, a district on the European side of Istanbul. It is the arts, entertainment and nightlife center of Istanbul, as well as the highest population concentration in Istanbul. During our meeting, the government officials provided their own perspective on gentrification and urban development in Istanbul, supporting the efforts and stating that: a) citizens from different communities are considered before new development projects are executed, b) new developments benefit the inhabitants of the district, and c) social services assist those transitioning to government housing.

After two weeks in Istanbul, I had started to understand how public and private spaces are formed by political discourse and the emerging lifestyles in the city. These lifestyles serve to represent a larger economic, social, and political transformation. More importantly, the seminar increased my awareness of collaborations between grass-roots community groups and academia serving to address social inequality and the development of sustainable support for low income families in Istanbul.