The Role of Micro-communities for Urban Challenges: A Case Study of Mardin

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Abstract

This article aims to explain the role of micro-communities that emerged from local and everyday life in Mardin (Turkey), focusing on social, cultural and participatory production practices. In Mardin, tourism threatens to erode the city's unique urban fabric and social cohesion whilst public spaces suffer from underinvestment. Citizens struggle with urbanization challenges that prevent them from creating shared memories and experiences in their daily lives. On the other hand, diverse communities are developing innovative social practices and fostering alternative forms of cooperation engagement that offer promising avenues for commoning. This article aims to examine practices where the approach of urban commoning is used to explore the potential and limitations of these practices in urban production and organization. Whilst these examples demonstrate various micro-community practices, they also underscore the critical role of spontaneous, open-source knowledge and a participatory approach in shaping the extent and character of commoning processes.

Questo articolo si propone di analizzare il ruolo delle micro-comunità emerse dalla vita locale e quotidiana di Mardin (Turchia), concentrandosi sulle pratiche di produzione sociale, culturale e partecipativa. A Mardin, il turismo rischia di erodere il tessuto urbano unico e la coesione sociale della città, mentre gli spazi pubblici soffrono di sottofinanziamento. I cittadini affrontano le sfide dell'urbanizzazione che impediscono loro di creare memorie ed esperienze condivise nella vita quotidiana. D'altro canto, comunità diverse stanno sviluppando innovative pratiche sociali e promuovendo forme alternative di cooperazione che offrono prospettive promettenti per i beni comuni. Questo articolo mira a esaminare casi studio in cui l'approccio dei beni comuni urbani viene utilizzato per esplorare potenzialità e limiti di queste pratiche nella produzione e organizzazione urbana. Sebbene questi esempi dimostrino varie pratiche di micro-comunità, sottolineano anche il ruolo cruciale della conoscenza spontanea e open-source, nonché di un approccio partecipativo nel determinare portata e carattere dei processi di commoning.

Keywords: micro-communities; urban commoning; public space.
Parole Chiave: micro-comunità; commoning urbano; spazio pubblico.

Introduction

Throughout history, Mardin has been at the core of commercial and cultural networks; today, it is one of the most prominent historical and touristic cities in the southeastern region of Turkey. Despite its importance, the ongoing political friction between local and central governance results in the destabilization of municipal service delivery in Mardin. The problems in Mardin reflect not just two contrasting governance approaches but also a deeper political conflict, one that led the central government to dismiss the mayor and replace him with a governor. Consequently, this generates spatial contradictions and inconsistencies in public investment. Key challenges include restrictions on cultural expression, gentrification pressures, and the privatization of public spaces. In this point, micro-communities play an important role in maintaining the vitality of urban life. This study aims to discuss the tactics and practices developed by local communities in response to these challenges within a general framework of the urbanization process.

Virani (2020) suggests to understand communities as made up of a number of micro-communities, such as a local small business group. In another article, Virani (2017) explores micro-communities – small and hyper-small groups of people connected by shared activities, age, neighborhood, ethnic minority status, and etc. For Bailey (2010), micro-community can be exemplified as voluntary and community organisations (quoted by Virani, 2020). According to Amin (2002), micro-communities share same sense of place and urban identity. According to these definitions, groups and initiatives operating in different fields in Mardin can be defined as micro-communities. They are all small-scale groups sharing the same sense of place and urban identity. ˝Dara Cosmos Research Center˝, ˝13 Square Meter Art Collective˝ and ˝Xlab˝ are volunteer-driven initiatives that foster urban development via social projects. Beyond being a small business group, the ˝Soil to Plate Agricultural Development Cooperative˝ supports agriculture through local seed production and sustainable farming methods. The group also aims to promote social integration between different ethnic groups. These micro-communities are bound together by shared activities.

The strategies adopted by central and local governments fail to respond adequately to the opportunities and challenges arising

from paradigm shifts in the city's historical significance. Mardin has great potential with its historical and archaeological richness, agricultural resources and it is still a developing city in terms of population and urbanization. Yet its challenges are growing faster than they can be solved. The main issues include insufficient urban resources and infrastructure, consumption-focused tourism, and profit-driven urban planning. These problems not only deepen urban-public conflict but also prioritize profit-driven development over public needs. The existence of urban planning does not necessarily imply that it prioritize the well-being of the residents. Stavrides (2018) argues that societies are moulded by the geometries of power and this is manifested in Mardin's growth-oriented perspective. This approach tends to homogenize and exploit urban life, perceiving the city predominantly as a mere collection of buildings. Consequently, the city lacks the socio-spatial conditions necessary for residents to create shared memories and experiences in their daily lives, such as places for rest, recreation, and children's play.

Prioritizing tourists over urban residents leads to the gentrification of buildings and the commodification of urban spaces. Thus, an attempt is being made to create a 'museum city' stripped of inhabitants and Old Mardin is being transformed into a 'ghost town'.

«Value in cities is created not only by bricks and concrete, but also by connections to public transport and other public facilities (schools, parks), the presence of cultural venues, entertainment establishments, bars and restaurants, and finally also by intangible things like the 'atmosphere' or 'vibe' in a particular city or neighborhood. That atmosphere, however, is again determined by the people who live there, what they do, by life on the streets and in squares, and so on» (Lijster, Volont and Gielen, 2022: 20).

Some studies frame the city as a common endeavor and argue that commoning can be reshaped its unstable, problematic urbanization trends through enduring, stable, and scalable decision-making structures (Foster and Iaione, 2016; Méndez de Andés, 2024). According to Foster and Iaione (2016), there are different kinds of urban resources, such as a variety of open spaces, infrastructure and public spaces in the city. They conceptualised "co-city" concept to imagine the city as a "infrastructure" in which

a variety of urban actors cooperate and collaborate to govern and steward built, environmental, cultural, and digital goods through contractual or institutionalized a particular partnerships (Foster and Iaione, 2022: 191). Considering Mardin's centralized, top-down urbanization policy outlined above, this co-city approach demands a deeper examination of urban communities and their practices.

«[…] Partnerships involve cooperation and collaboration between civic, social, knowledge, public, and private actors that support the creation and governance of shared and common resources by an identified group of people, a community, vested with the responsibility of maintaining and keeping accessible (or affordable) the resource for future users and generations» (Foster and Iaione, 2022: 191).

This paper illustrates how micro-community practices in Mardin have successfully achieved this through the production of local (traditional) resources and spontaneous actions and activities. These communities occur in different areas and in different ways, such as agricultural development, participatory art, the commoning of knowledge, and social production. According to Federici (2019), community-support agriculture, food co-ops, information sharing, alternative mode of production etc. are more than dikes against the neoliberal assault on our livelihood. Commoning practices are shaped by the specific historical, political and social contexts in which they are embedded (McCay, 2002 cited in Arbell, 2023) in everyday life. For this reason, strengthening them and fostering new collaborations are expected to inspire the creation of new communities while further advancing the concept of commoning. «Such commoning practices are not only about sharing common space but also about experiencing different urban space» (Eynaud, Juan and Money, 2018: 621).
Micro-communities use participatory production processes to reproduce urban space and commons at the level of a local community. In that sense, this paper shows that the aforementioned micro-communities in Mardin gather around the 'social form of commoning' (Euler, 2018). Through the reclamation of public space for collective engagement in participatory practices, participants cultivate new forms of social relations and modes of social interaction shaped by the richness and diversity of common sense. Nonini pointed out that «intellectual and cultural

commons can be created and regenerated only through social exchange and sociability. Often the more intense and frequent the social interactions, the greater the use-value of the intellectual or cultural products that come out of them» (Nonini, 2006: 167). At the same time, each community cultivates sociability in distinct ways. Though socially impactful, such influence remains circumscribed, affecting particular groups rather than transcending age or social strata.

The main questions of this study are: What type of urban environment does Mardin provide for its residents under the destructive impacts of neoliberal urbanization practices? How do micro-communities that perform independently within the city contribute to the discourse on commoning? How do community practices influence urban decision-making and contribute to shared urban governance?

In the first section of this paper, the theoretical and methodological background is given. Public space, participatory production, social practices and everyday life are the concepts that are investigated in more detail. In the second section, an overview of Mardin's public space and urban life is illustrated. In the third section, communities that are the subject of this study are explained, such as "13 Square Meter Art Collective", "Soil to Plate Agricultural Development Cooperative", "Dara Cosmos Research Center" and "Xlab". Besides this, the study conceptualizes the students of Mardin Artuklu University's Department of Architecture as a micro-community. The conclusion summarizes the main contributions of this study and suggests some possible avenues for strengthening the foundation of commons in Mardin.

Theoretical Background

> «To speak of the commons as if it were a natural resource is misleading at best and dangerous at worst – the commons is an activity and if anything, it expresses relationships in society that are inseparable from relationships to nature. It might be better to keep the word as a verb, an activity, rather than as a noun, a substantive» (Linebaugh, 2008: 279 as cited in Venugopal, 2020).

The role of public space in commons studies is controversial. Stavrides (2018) defines the difference between public and common spaces. According to him, public space is the space

that is created and controlled by a specific authority that also establishes the rules. «Urban ordering, the metropolis itself, is a process, a stake, much in the same way that dominant social relations need to be reproduced every day» (Stavrides, 2015: 9). Stavrides (2016) defines commons space as 'threshold spaces', in other words, 'in-between' spaces located neither inside nor outside, public nor private in which «Community's relation to space is multifaceted. It activates practices of care and exchange, processes of production and social reproduction as well as the construction of shared world views» (Stavrides, 2022: 88). The creation of common space does not necessarily imply the complete erasure of borders. Infact, «just like with a musical instrument, such as a violin or guitar, there must be the right degree of openness and closedness, in other words a certain degree of porosity, in order to be able to produce sound at all, and thus to be able to play» (Lijster, Volont and Gielen, 2022: 23).

Venugopal (2020) notes that commoning is an everyday practice. She analyzes some examples of urban commoning from all over the world and emphasizes the importance of common sense. According to her, «commoning is not just a project against commodification and enclosures, but an experience where the participants' habits, perceptions and social relations are transformed» (Venugopal, 2020: 9).

To understand these complex urban realities, it is necessary to investigate social practices in everyday life. These practices play a crucial role in shaping and fostering new forms of resistance. In Stavrides' words, «emergent new forms of resistance are importantly connected to acts that shape urban space in order to create new social bonds and build forms of collective struggle and survival» (Stavrides, 2015: 10). Fournier (2013) pointed out that places where people can develop new forms of sociality, knowledge and cultural exchange are important. Additionally, «they offer a space for the development of relations based on cooperation and sharing rather than appropriation and exclusion» (Ivi: 442). Although the city is ruled by the ordering mechanism, different spatial and social patterns can emerge from people's everyday practices and spontaneous encounters. These dynamics change from city to city and Mardin is an important city because it's home to diverse ethnic and religious groups.

Changing urban patterns are reshaping how communities relate to one another, with the most significant changes occurring in public spaces. The relationship between urban space, social relations, and community practices demonstrates a consistent pattern of mutual influence and dynamic reciprocity in the city.

An overview of Mardin's public space and urban life

This research adopts a mixed method including interview, field research and desk activities. As an academic leading architectural project courses, I work with students to research various urban topics, ensuring our city data remains current each semester. Data on the collectives derives from both firsthand observations and publicly shared documentation. Besides this, the visual materials featured in this article represent a selection of student projects produced during different semesters. Specifically, information about "Daracosmos" was obtained from an interview with Pelin Tan via Zoom. "Xlab" is an organization whose work I have closely followed as part of our architecture faculty's student community. Data on the practices of the "13 Square Meter Art Collective" and "Soil to Plate Agricultural Development Cooperative" were collected through surveys and desk research.

«It is here that the ephemeral qualities of the city are no longer a distant vision of the grand master plan, but instead the minor gestures of claiming the city: a rolled out blanket, the filigree outlines of a future shelter, the meticulously arranged flower pots squatting the sidewalk, faded paint lines on asphalt providing an elusive support structure for the Saturday flea market, the brewing of coffee and shoe shining, clotheslines weaving connections among neighbors across narrow alleys. It is here that day in, day out, the city of commons is being unglamorously but collectively reproduced» (Gruber and Miller, 2016: 256).

Mardin is composed of two parts: Old Mardin (Eski Mardin) or Upper Mardin (Yukarı Mardin, as the citizens of Mardin say) and the New Town (Yenişehir) or Lower Mardin (Aşağı Mardin). The names were influenced by the topography of the region. Old Mardin, officially designated as 1st Degree Urban Protected Area, and New Town, characterized by substantial urbanization during the 90s, are both subject to distinct yet equally neoliberal

urbanization mechanisms. The key urbanization practices of Old Mardin are the tourism and touristic regulations, whereas for New Town, it may be referred to as ¨random urbanization¨. With its traditional houses, madrasahs and churches, Old Mardin has endured to this day by adapting and reinterpreting the medieval building system, urban fabric, and way of life. From domestic practices and neighborhood relations to small-scale commerce and children's street play, the everyday practices of Old Mardin diverge markedly from the rhythms of the New Town. Despite the social and physical differences between these two regions, authorities are attempting to standardize all practices from design resolutions to organization of daily relations underpinned by insufficient resources.
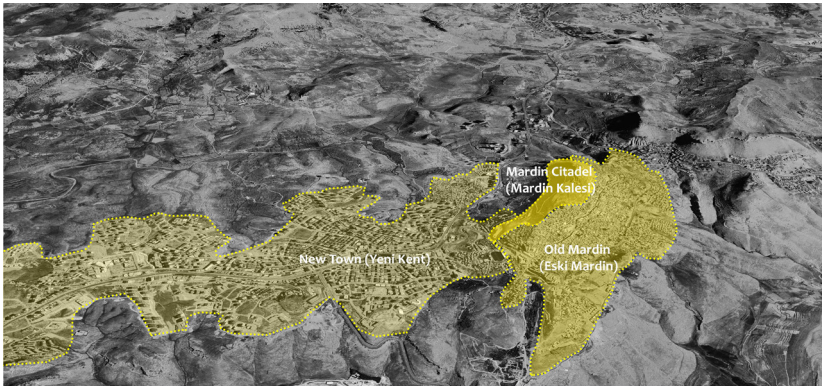

Fig. 1 Edited Google Earth Map illustrating Old Mardin and the New Town. Source: Author and Sibel Çamurdaş.

New Town was designated as a development zone in Mardin (Centre) Master Plan approved in 1985. As part of this plan, Old Mardin was also declared a 1st degree urban protected area. Despite its significance in conserving the historic city center and identifying the New Town as a development zone, this urban master plan did not propose a sufficiently holistic framework. The urban planning process prioritized evacuating Old Mardin's historic center and reducing pressure on it. This resulted in an overconcentration on tourism and service-sector development (Yekbun Aksu and Altınörs Çırak, 2018). The existing master plan that regulates land-use planning has been in use since 2013. On the other hand, the Municipality prepared a report and

criticisms against this plan are prominent even in this report.

«The existing zoning plan demonstrates insufficient capacity to accommodate current migration patterns and projected demographic growth. For planning mechanisms to have substantive impact, they must bridge the gap between normative aspirations and grounded feasibility. Therefore, it is aimed to prepare a new Master Plan» (T.C. Mardin Artuklu Belediyesi, 2019: 130).

Another significant challenge stems from the incongruity between proposed plans and their real-world application. For instance, parcels designated in the implementation development plan as public and social infrastructure zones, including parks, schools and playgrounds, were unexpectedly offered for sale in 2020. By prioritizing piecemeal revisions, these decisions erode planning integrity, privatize communal spaces, and institutionalize extractive practices that disregard public needs.
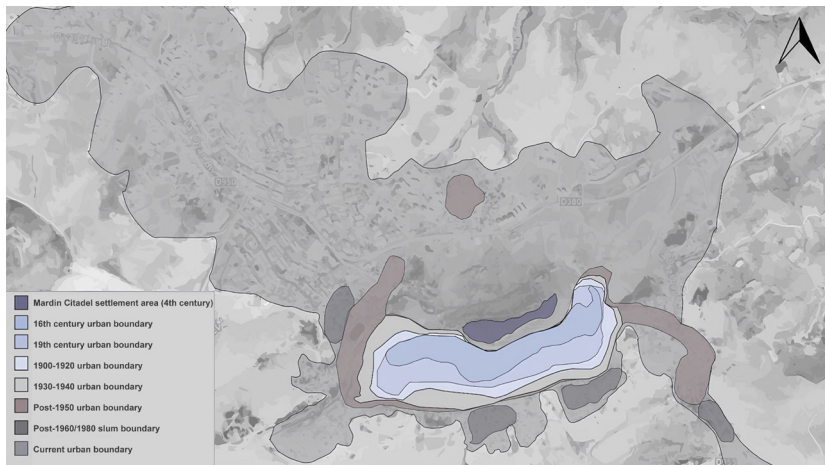

Fig. 2 Historical growth map of Mardin.
Source: Musa Tekin.

The physical 'threshold' space (Stavrides, 2016) of Old Mardin is Diyarbakır Gate. During the Middle Ages, it was named as such because merchants and goods coming from Diyarbakır city entered Mardin through this gate. Although no gate ruins remain from that period, the name "Diyarbakır Gate" is still

in use today. Despite its potential as a threshold between the New and Old Towns, is currently being developed in ways that undermine this opportunity. A shopping center with multi-level parking is currently under construction.
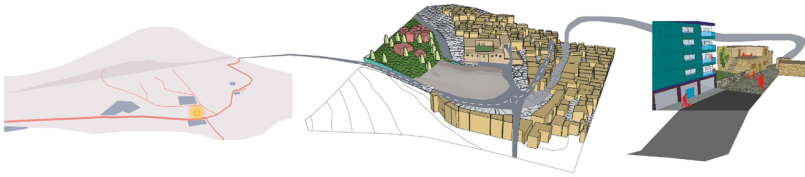

Fig. 3 The model illustrates Diyarbakır Gate as a physical threshold of Old Mardin. Source: Ümit Yılmaz.

The map below shows Diyarbakır Gate (in green) and Cumhuriyet (Republic) Square (in red). Tour buses drop off their passengers at Diyarbakır Gate and tourists walk along First Street which is lined with shops and cafes on both sides. Then they reach Republic Square followed by Government Square at the end of the street. In Republic Square, tourists can take photos in front of the Mardin sign, ride a horse, sit in cafes around the square, or enjoy many other attractions. These activities mirror the generic tourism strategies of many cities and lack local distinctiveness.

USER FLOW DİAGRAM

Fig. 4 User flow diagram of First Street (Birinci Cadde)
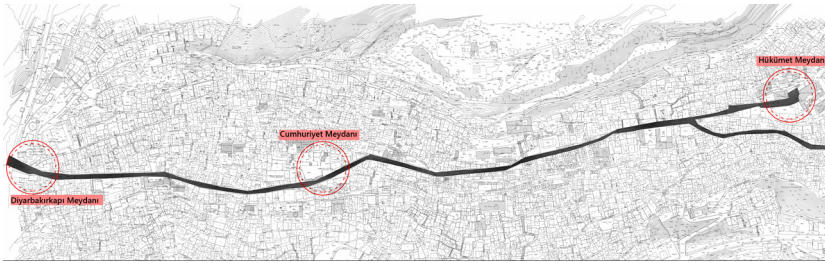Source: Aslan Ekinci.

Fig. 5 First Street ('Birinci Cadde' in black), Diyarbakır Gate (circle on the left), Republic Square ('Cumhuriyet Meydanı' circle on the middle) and Government Square ('Hükümet Meydanı' circle on the right).
Source: Sibel Çamurdaş.

In Figure 5, the black color represents First Street (Birinci Cadde), while three circled areas mark Diyarbakır Gate (on the left), Republic Square (Cumhuriyet Meydanı) and Government Square (Hükümet Meydanı). These squares are notable both as key arrival and gathering points along a tourist route also due to the absence of other squares in the Old City. While Republic Square serves its intended purpose, which means tourism photo plateau, Government Square is currently used as a parking lot, limiting its ability to function as a public space.

Old Mardin has been evolving into a touristic city over the past ten years. The houses around these squares have been converted into tourist attractions such as hotels, cafes, restaurants, etc. Today, numerous traditional houses lining First Street have been transformed into touristic shops. This is the common problem in many neoliberal cities worldwide. Free public spaces in cities are sold to private developers and transformed into spaces of consumption such as corporate coffee chains, bars and restaurants, shopping malls or executive flats (Minton, 2009 as cited in Fournier, 2013). Another important feature is street renovation that was carried out in 2013-2014. During this process, the usage of the buildings on First Street changed, the facades of shops and houses were refurbished, and shop signage and shutters were uniformized. Before standardization, each shop displayed distinctive signage with unique fonts, as can be seen in the photos of Woodworkers' Bazaar and Kayseriye Passage.

Fig. 6 The signages of Woodworkers Bazaar (on the left) and Kayseriye Passage.
Source: The Author.

The most important recent change in the Old Town has been the sudden decision to evacuate historical building (Old Government House), which had been serving as Mardin Artuklu University Department of Architecture from 2012 to 2023. In January 2023, authorities decided to relocate the Department of Architecture from its long-time home, where it had educated students for years. The students' relationship with Old Mardin's traditional urban fabric – including socio-cultural interactions and established connections with local residents – has been deeply impacted.

Fig. 7 Mardin Artuklu University Department of Architecture (former building 2012-2023).
Source: The Author.

While this is the case in the Old Town, in Yenişehir (New Town), the topography is no longer utilized to its full potential, resulting

in random settlements where apartments are built regardless of whether the terrain is either rocky or it is agricultural land. New Town faces the challenges of urban transportation systems, a lack of green areas and public places.

Fig. 8 The construction practices of New Town.
Source: Murat Çağlayan, 2015.

While Old Mardin undergoes the homogenizing effects of tourism, the New Town remains largely neglected, lacking essential urban infrastructure such as squares, walkable streets, and public spaces. Mardin's construction practices disregard crucial urban planning factors, including density, social facilities, parcel setback distances, and transportation needs. Key considerations, such as density, social infrastructure, etc., are often ignored, resulting in a city that lacks basic urban rationality in terms of floor heights, urban facilities, and overall density. One consequence of these urbanization problems is the absence of public spaces designed for social interaction. The New Town, characterized by high-density apartment buildings, limits urban vitality by prioritizing residential function over social and communal needs.

In the light of the data presented which illustrated the realities of Old Mardin and New Town, there is an urgent need for new commoning practices to emerge from within urban and social

life, despite the inherent challenges. As summarized above, while Old Mardin naturally sustains informal social interactions, these emergent community dynamics fail to materialize in the New Town's planned spaces. This dichotomy exemplifies Jacobs' (2017) critique of modernist planning where Old Mardin's sidewalk rhythms persists organically, and the New Town's regulated spaces produce what Sennett (2013) terms 'the fall of public man'.

The following section will investigate the spaces and conditions that facilitate socialization practices and participatory production dynamics and their role in facing urban challenges which are crucial for fostering commoning processes in Mardin.

Potentials of Micro-communities in Mardin

In Mardin, numerous urban needs persist that are not adequately addressed due to rent-seeking urbanization practices, the regulatory mechanisms associated with its status as a touristic city, and the commodification of its social and cultural life. Especially in the last decade, urban regulations have accelerated to transform Old Mardin into a tourist-branded city. The key factor behind this situation was Mardin's inclusion in UNESCO's Tentative World Heritage List in 2000. After that, Old Mardin saw a rapid shift from residential to tourism-centered buildings. On the other hand, Mardin's rapid evolution continued after its UNESCO rejection. The reasons cited in UNESCO's report underscore systemic preservation challenges and problems in Old Mardin. These can be summarized as follows:

«The management organization lacks adequate technical staff and necessary resources. Current challenges include the complete absence of a site management plan and failure to enforce existing conservation zoning requirements. The city faces four critical threats: intense development pressure, inadequate understanding of conservation requirements, widespread poverty, and severe resource constraints» (Çağlayan, 2021: 11).

The documented problems not only persist but escalate, as the divide between preservation needs and development pressures widens alarmingly. These conflicts encompass a spectrum of interventions, including the renovation of streets and the

conversion of traditional houses into restaurants and hotels. Access to non-touristic public spaces in the Old City center may be possible through streets, terraces and connecting areas. These terraces serve as spaces for traditional Mardin activities such as flying kites, hosting gatherings, open-air cinema during summer evenings and flexible areas that facilitated casual interactions and conversations among people. Flying kites is not an activity reserved for festivals but a common practice in Mardin daily life. Especially popular amongst children and teenagers, this socialization practice embodies togetherness and fun.

Fig. 9 The photographs from Mardin Kite Festival, 2018.
Source: Haberturk.com.

While tourism has significantly impacted Old Mardin, its traditional urban fabric, with intricate network of intermediate spaces, streets, and staircases, continues to provide essential spaces for the formation and expression of micro-communities. There are many micro-communities such as "13 Square Meter Art Collective", "Soil to Plate Agricultural Development Cooperative", "Dara Cosmos Research Center", "Xlab", etc., in Mardin. All these communities enrich different dimensions of social life. These might be simple everyday practices such as watching films, flying kites, taking photographs, gathering for food, and cooking. Participatory production is the center of the communities. Besides, all these initiatives operate in Old Mardin for different reasons. For instance, all of the art collectives are gathered in Old Mardin for acting in alleys, abbaras (vaulted alley or arcade), traditional bazaars and shops, etc. While they require the spatial fabric of Old Mardin,

the prevailing sense of solidarity fostered by close proximity remains equally vital. Unlike others, "Dara Cosmos" emerges as an exception. It aims to produce research that fosters unity between Dara village and Dara archeological site. For this reason, it gathers in Dara at various times each year with flexible volunteer groups. In the following paragraphs, these communities will be described in more detail, along with their functioning.

"13Metrekare Art Collective" is an independent organisation established in Old Mardin. Organizing events, holding workshops, hosting art seminars, etc., aiming to create a platform in which people from different backgrounds can come together to share knowledge. The statement below is available on the website of the community:

«In a region which lacks the direct involvement of locals in artistic production, creating this kind of platform is critical for us. 13Metrekare Art Collective is an interdisciplinary organization composing of professional volunteers and students from different fields such as photography, architecture, painting, sculpture, creative drama, linguistics, and anthropology. It takes its name (13 square meters) from its space and dimensions» (Website of "13Metrekare Art Collective"[1]).

Fig. 10 "13Metrekare Art Collective" event posters: "home visit" and "fanzine workshop".
Source: 13metrekare social media account.

1 https://13metrekare.wordpress.com/, consulted on 12/3/2025.

"Dara Cosmos Research Group" has been doing research in the Dara archeological site in Dara village since 2014. Pelin Tan who is a professor at Batman University, some academicians, students, and artists from all over the world, as well as local people, participate and actively research with the team. It aims to protect Dara not only in terms of the archeological ruins but also the village itself (houses, the olive trees, the geomorphological features of Dara, etc.). In the interview with Tan (2023), she summarized the research on the archeological site and its surrounding village:

«The Dara Cosmos Research Team, led by *Hala* (The aunt) from Dara, has been diligently documenting the archaeological site and the village since 2012. Through numerous field visits with national and international scholars, the team has amassed a substantial photographic archive of Dara. Our primary objective is to establish a comprehensive digital archive of these photographs and make it openly accessible to the broader research community. We advocate for a holistic approach for the preservation of Dara, centered on safeguarding the "sense of place", fostering strong community ties among the villagers and supporting the continuation of local production practices» (interview with Tan, 2023).

Fig. 11 Photographs from the meetings held in Dara village.
Source: Dara cosmos social media account.

"Soil to Plate Agricultural Development Cooperative" aims to find the best local seed for the soil that doesn't require water, power or fertilizer since climate change and drought are expected to affect Turkey as well as the rest of the world

in the medium term. Additionally, to multiply this seed for the future, and thus to keep soil and nature alive. Enabling the social integration of Syrian female refugees has been another top priority for this project.

«In the field studies conducted in Mardin and surrounding areas, the neighborhoods, especially in Midyat, Dargeçit, and Savur districts were visited to establish direct contact with small farmers who are self-sufficient but lack financial opportunities. They cannot engage in industrial production due to the nature of their fields, and the ancient seeds utilized like Sonik, Beyaziye, Iskenderi and mostly Sorgül. During the field studies, the 1650kg of local seed available, was purchased from small farmers with the aim of replanting in suitable fields» (Website of "Soil to Plate Agricultural Development Cooperative"[2]).

"Xlab Social" is a social and community platform that was founded by the students of the Architecture Department of Mardin Artuklu University. It is a laboratory that generates both intellectual and physical results through collaborative processes, engaging in discussions, generating discourse, and creative dialogue. *Xlab Social* created an earth library in Kahramanmaraş which was affected by the earthquake in 2023. This project is a collaboration of several initiatives ("*sivildusun*", "*mitost.ev*", "*kolubakollektifi*", "*pocolanaworks*" and "Xlab").

Fig. 12 "Xlab Social designed" and constructed playgrounds and music classrooms in the village schools.
Source: "Xlab" social media account.

2 https://www.topraktantabaga.com.tr/, consulted on 12/1/2025.

Fig. 13 Mud-brick library construction in Kahramanmaraş.
Source: "Xlab" social media account.

This study's final case examines how architecture students formed a micro-community to resist the evacuation of their department building. The students swiftly organized themselves, adopting a participatory decision-making process to establish a clear sequence of actions. The students employed a multifaceted approach to the campaign, including: utilizing social media platforms to disseminate information and updates, producing and publishing videos showcasing their academic activities within the building, engaging in formal meetings with relevant authorities, issuing press releases to garner public support and organizing sit-in protests. Throughout their campaign, the students effectively disseminated their messages and provided significant public support. The students' resistance gained media attention with their struggle featured in several national architectural platforms and local newspapers. Although they could not change the decision to move, they made some achievements. For instance, the department moved to a building whose physical condition is better than the initial plan.

Fig. 14 Students' sit-in protest.
Source: "Artuklu Architecture Student *(mimartuklu)*" social media account.

Food systems in cities, like urban-rural connections, have long been key to commoning. "Soil to Plate" aims to reinforce this connection by partnering with smallholder farmers while simultaneously increasing urban visibility for disadvantaged city residents. This initiative represents a significant effort to establish local food networks as an alternative to proliferating supermarket chains in neoliberal cities – systems that increasingly marginalize small food businesses. While Turkey's first social cooperative, "Soil to Plate" seeks to boost social welfare through member income redistribution, it does not operate as a fully self-organized effort. Its organizational structure – particularly regarding community formation, sustainability, and internal governance – significantly deviates from established commoning principles

and practices. Despite its limitations, this cooperative may inspire the formation of future communities that more fully embody the principles of commoning. In contrast, "13Metrekare Art Collective" demonstrates a strong alignment of shared values and practices that exemplify commoning principles. Street cinema, art sessions, collective memory records, oral history studies, etc., provide participatory production that leads to cultural commoning.

«The culture revolves around practices in which meaning is given to our lives and to our (urban) environment. In other in the practice of commoning there is always an intangible, imaginary or aesthetic moment, in which we sense and make sense of the world in a particular way» (Lijster, Volont and Gielen, 2022: 18).

In addition, "Dara cosmos" and "Xlab Social" represent the knowledge of commoning. Through the dissemination and public sharing of knowledge derived from their professional practices, they create ways of communicating with other groups and communities, co-producing and developing solutions to urban and social problems. "Artuklu Architecture Students" constitute a significant micro-community within the city not only because they preserve the current functioning of the Architecture Department building but also for the intellectual and creative life of the city. They generate innovative ideas and design proposals that address a wide range of urban challenges and dreams throughout their undergraduate architectural education. Located 20 km beyond the urban core, "Dara Cosmos" demonstrates periodic rather than sustained activity and influence. Although it is a visible community for urban activists and Dara people, most people with different interests remain unaware of its existence. This poses a significant barrier to the community's progress and remains one of its most critical weaknesses. All the cases listed above reveal different levels of commoning for the city.
Currently operating as a closed community, it does not aim to have contact with other groups or initiatives. "Xlab" and "13 Metrekare" stand out as bold actors in urban activism to highlight urban issues. They raise awareness by tackling urban challanges and addressing community needs throught collaborative partnerships and interactive workshops. The "Woman's Touch Project", which took place in 2022, is one such initiative. Dilan Demir's *Hallederiiiz* ('we will handle it') installation, installed to protest the collapsed

retaining wall for six years, was among the workshop's most impactful pieces:

«Pedestrians and stray animals remain in danger due to the lack of safety precautions or warning signs. Despite residents' repeated appeals to local authorities, this issue remains unresolved. Due to the constant change of administrators of municipality – even mayors – repair has been constantly postponed and even forgotten with the rhetoric of "we will handle it". [...] What factors have led to these urban ruins in the city? How and when will it be repaired?» (Demir, 2022, "Womens touch Mardin").

Fig. 15 Dilan Demir's installation *Hallederiiiz*.
Source: "Womens Touch Mardin" social media account.

By highlighting urban issues, these initiatives can spark the formation of new communities united around urban activism. On the other hand, primary vulnerabilities are the constrained volunteers and the failure of artistic endeavors to achieve broad integration into everyday practices.

Conclusion

This study aimed to develop a framework for understanding urbanization in Mardin, analyzing how micro-community practices respond to urban and social challenges. The topographical duality of the city also manifests itself in everyday practices and governance approaches. New Town is considered a transient location, requiring minimal economic and urban investment in terms of social infrastructure. In contrast, the Old City undergoes frequent restructuring for tourism, rapidly changing its functions,

and steadily losing its residents. This research highlighted the significance of collaboration among local micro-communities allowing the fostering of new public opportunities and influencing governance mechanisms. community practices are derived from daily practices and collective experience of the citizens. In this article, the importance of cooperation between local micro-communities, in terms of increasing new public opportunities and directing governance mechanisms, has been emphasized. Although their current impact remains limited, each initiative's field of activity plays a crucial role in shaping future urban commoning.

To enhance the livability of the city, it is essential to develop the collaborative capacity among communities of the public. All these micro-communities are based in Old Mardin, where they are practicing. Old Mardin provides various spaces for local communities to gather and interact, whereas the New Town encounters many challenges. How can the New Town create some opportunities to change this? While this study doesn›t focus on the question, the urban practices of social encounters and interactions that define Old Mardin are largely absent in New Town. Consequently, the presence of accessible and inclusive public spaces within the New Town could have facilitated these practices. While subject to regulatory frameworks, public spaces possess the inherent potential to foster social commoning. In the context of Mardin, spatial deprivation of New Town considered a significant obstacle to the emergence of a vibrant and inclusive public life. Like elsewhere, Old Mardin's community spaces are steadily disappearing, tightening the urban fabric and restricting movement. Despite this negative urban picture, the initiative to enrich urban and social life is possible through the efforts of communities.

To sum up, these micro-communities have fostered novel social practices rooted in the local and everyday life of Mardin. The gradual erosion of Old Mardin's unique character due to commercialization and consumption, coupled with the New Town's failure to meet the evolving needs of its residents, significantly influenced the social and cultural organization of young people, students and women in different areas. Since these communities operate in different fields, they lack the motivation to expand or collaborate with others. To illustrate, achieving consensus on

urban challenges or developing cohesive spatial patterns seems unfeasible. "13 Metrekare" and "Xlab" – an art collective of young artists and a student initiative – occasionally collaborate to create participatory art. Every artistic production emerges from Old Mardin's spatial patterns, transforming interventions into the urban fabric into acts of artistic expression. On the other hand, these communities struggle due to their small scale, funding challenges, and isolation from diverse socio-cultural circles.

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