

# An evaluation of the social impact of spatial and functional changes in a historical urban area: Kuzguncuk

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## Abstract

Due to the values, it has accumulated throughout its long history, which has given it a unique identity, the Kuzguncuk neighbourhood of Istanbul is an exceptional historical urban area that deserves conservation. Today, increasing non-residential activities that are mostly commercial and touristic, together with more significant visitor numbers, have resulted in rapid spatial and functional changes. These changes have come to pose a considerable threat to the natural, built and cultural heritage of the district. Interviews with local people regarding these recent changes revealed that the rising number of commercial activities and visitors are causing the alienation of residents, and are making the maintenance of the traditional identity of the neighbourhood more difficult. This study aims to examine the dimensions of spatial and functional change in Kuzguncuk over recent years, together with an analysis of their effect on the social pattern. It is recommended that precautions should be taken to ensure that changes in Kuzguncuk are only permitted to occur in a controlled manner to minimise any adverse effects.

*Keywords: Urban Heritage, Social change, Cultural, Functional change, Conservation, Kuzguncuk*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Kuzguncuk is a neighbourhood that has a natural environment, a historic built environment and a unique set of socio-cultural characteristics. The settlement is located in the Uskudar district between Paşalimanı and Beylerbeyi (Map.1, 2), and has developed in a northwest-southeast direction in a valley which widens as it approaches the Bosphorus.



**Map 1.** Location of Uskudar in Istanbul, Turkey, **Map 2.** Location of Kuzguncuk in Uskudar

Some sources claim that the former name of Kuzguncuk was “Chrysokeramus” and this name, which means “Golden Tile”, originated from a church which was built by Justinian II (565-578) and which was covered with golden tiles [1]. Another of the claims about the origin of the name is that “Kosinitza” was formerly known as “Kuzguncuk”. According to Evliya Çelebi, this name stems from a man called “Kuzgun Baba” who settled there during the reign of Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror (1451-1481) [2].

The natural environment, location, architectural features and socio-cultural structure of Kuzguncuk make it a particular area which must be conserved. It is located within a Bosphorus Urban Heritage Site in the Front View Zone on the Asian side of Istanbul. Its natural environment includes its situation on the Bosphorus which encompasses groves, monumental trees and green areas; whereas its cultural built environment includes its examples of traditional architecture and monumental buildings as well as an original urban pattern of narrow and stair-lined streets. Finally, it is known as a place where people belonging to three different religions have historically met for worship and is also known as the first Jewish settlement on the Asian side of Istanbul. Today, its socio-cultural structure includes festivals and other examples of intangible cultural heritage such as local and religious ceremonies, and this multi-cultural nature is also regarded as a significant social value.

The lack of broad plains along the shores of the Bosphorus prevented the formation of large settlement areas and gave rise to a small-scale neighbourhood texture. This is widely seen as one of the benefits of the natural environment on the morphology of the area. Kuzguncuk shares this morphology and moreover, retains a certain elegance because of its traditional neighbourhood ambience and the friendly atmosphere between neighbours. These good relationships create a calm, safe feeling which has a pacifying effect on people, and which contributes to a sense of belonging for those who settle there.

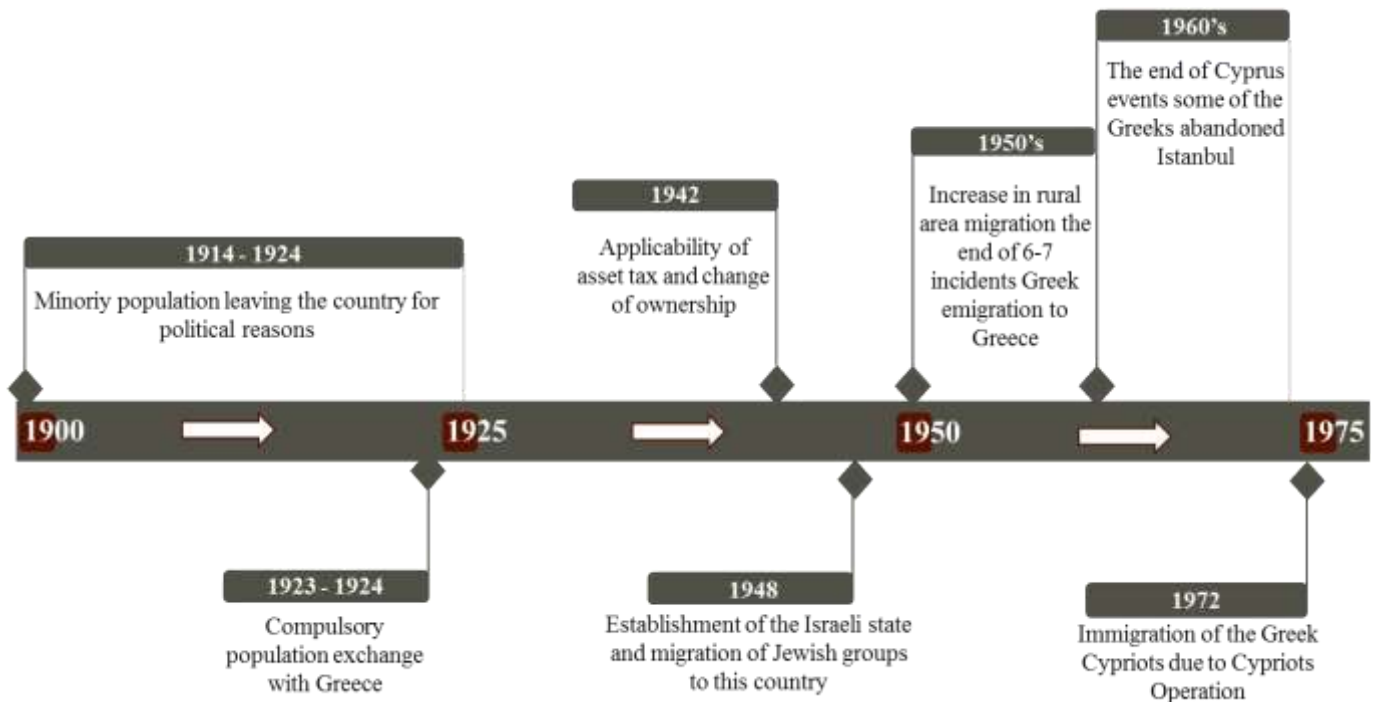
Despite its proximity to a major transportation hub, Kuzguncuk has attracted attention due to its synagogues, churches and mosques, its conserved urban texture and its local identity. However, the neighbourhood has recently entered a period of rapid spatial and functional change, along with rising demand for commercial and touristic facilities. New functions and an increasing number of visitors have increased its attractiveness for commercial activities, and these have come to threaten its natural and cultural heritage. According to interviews with local inhabitants, it was found that the users of the area are not comfortable with the recent changes. In particular, there are worries that the influx of visitors and entrepreneurs will cause the alienation of local people and make it harder to preserve the traditional character of the area.

This study aims to examine the dimensions of the spatial and functional changes observed in Kuzguncuk, to analyse the effects of these change on its social structure, and to draw attention to the precautions that should be taken to prevent damage to its natural, cultural and social values. The study also examines how these effects should be assessed about ensuring the balance between conservation and livability. The study’s findings support the concerns of Kuzguncuk’s local people about the pace and scale of the area’s transformation.

## **2. SOCIAL AND SPATIAL CHANGE IN KUZGUNCUK**

Kuzguncuk was chosen as the study area because it has many spatial and socio-cultural values that require conservation and maintenance but which are disappearing due to changes in usage. The transformation process underway in Kuzguncuk is frequently referred to as “gentrification”. “Gentrification” was first used in 1964 by the sociologist Ruth Glass. It is a concept that explains how the built environment, social structure and the urban identity of an area become subject to

change using the forced resettlement elsewhere of low-income inhabitants during the renovation process. It is a phenomenon which has happened in many urban areas all over the world, especially following the 1980s [3]. The gentrification also started to be experienced in Istanbul after the 1980s and was largely a result of in-migration [4]. Some of the migration waves, mentioned in Figure 1 also occurred in Kuzguncuk, and some of its inhabitants had to move away. One of the impacts of these processes was that although some Istanbul neighbourhoods had a rich historical and cultural



**Figure 1.** Migrations and reasons in Istanbul in the historical period [Produced from 4].

Kuzguncuk also underwent a substantial transformation during the 1950s as a result of the out-migration of minority groups for political reasons. Due to the ownership exchange process and the resulting in-migration of the Muslim community, there have been significant transformations within the district's social structure (Figure 1).

### 2.1. The historical period of the social and physical changes in Kuzguncuk

It is not precisely known when the Kuzguncuk area was first settled, but it is believed that the first settlers were the Byzantines because of the building of the church of Chrysokerasus by Justinian II [5]. In 1794, Inciciyan wrote in “Byzantine Piles” that there were Greek, Jewish and a few Armenians settled in the area, and it is known that when Fatih Sultan Mehmet conquered Istanbul, there were Jews living on both sides of the Golden Horn. After the *Al-Hamra* decree in 1492, the Jews in Spain had to abandon their country, and a large part of this population was given refuge in different regions of the Ottoman Empire, particularly in Istanbul [6].

In the travelogue of Evliya Çelebi, as well as the records and observations of some western travellers from the 16th and 17th centuries, Kuzguncuk was reportedly known as a Jewish settlement. In an article written about Kuzguncuk between 1673 and 1684, it was stated, “Jews cannot go away from the sea everywhere and always settle on the waterfront.” The Jewish criteria for site-selection led to the settlement areas in Kuzguncuk being limited to the interior valley, the lower skirts of the hills and the Bosphorus villages along both shores to produce a linear settlement pattern [7].

Kuzguncuk for European Jews had a unique value, as it was seen as “the last stop before arriving at the Sacred Land” and any Jews who could not travel any further could testify that at least they settled, died and were buried there [8]. Today, the presence of the Jewish cemetery in Kuzguncuk, its active use and the ongoing burial activities all support this interpretation. It is thought that the Armenian population started to settle in Kuzguncuk during the 18th century, and it is known that they had become the majority by the 20th century [9]. According to a census made in 1933, there were 580 households and 4000 residents in Kuzguncuk. The major ethnic groups were Jewish, Greek and Armenian, and 90% of the 4000-head population was not Muslim [10].

However, the political changes that started in Turkey in 1914 accelerated the district’s transition to a Muslim-majority population. These changes included the mass exchange with Greece in 1924, and after 1960, the events in Cyprus and the Cyprus Operation in 1974, many of the remaining Greek Cypriot population left Istanbul. Following these events and migrations, there was a clear Muslim majority, which brought both social and physical transformations [10].

The results of this multi-cultured history can still be seen in the number of Muslim structures or religious buildings such as mosques and “mescits”. Today in Kuzguncuk, there is only one mosque, the New Mosque (1952), however since the end of the 19th century there has been a synagogue, the Beth Yaakov synagogue (1878); three churches, the Surp Krikor Lusavoriç Armenian church (1861), the Ayios Yeorgios Greek Orthodox church (1821) and the Atios Panteleimon church which is situated within a natural green area (1896). There are also two bath-houses. One, the “Mountain Bath” is a ruin, and the other is called the “Small Bath” [10]. In addition, the historical urban texture of Kuzguncuk consists of single houses, row houses, mansions and end-of-the-century apartments dating from the early 20th century and the second half of the 19th century. Traditionally, the buildings are constructed with a masonry ground floor that supports a wooden upper storey. Due to this construction method, many have been destroyed by fire over the years.

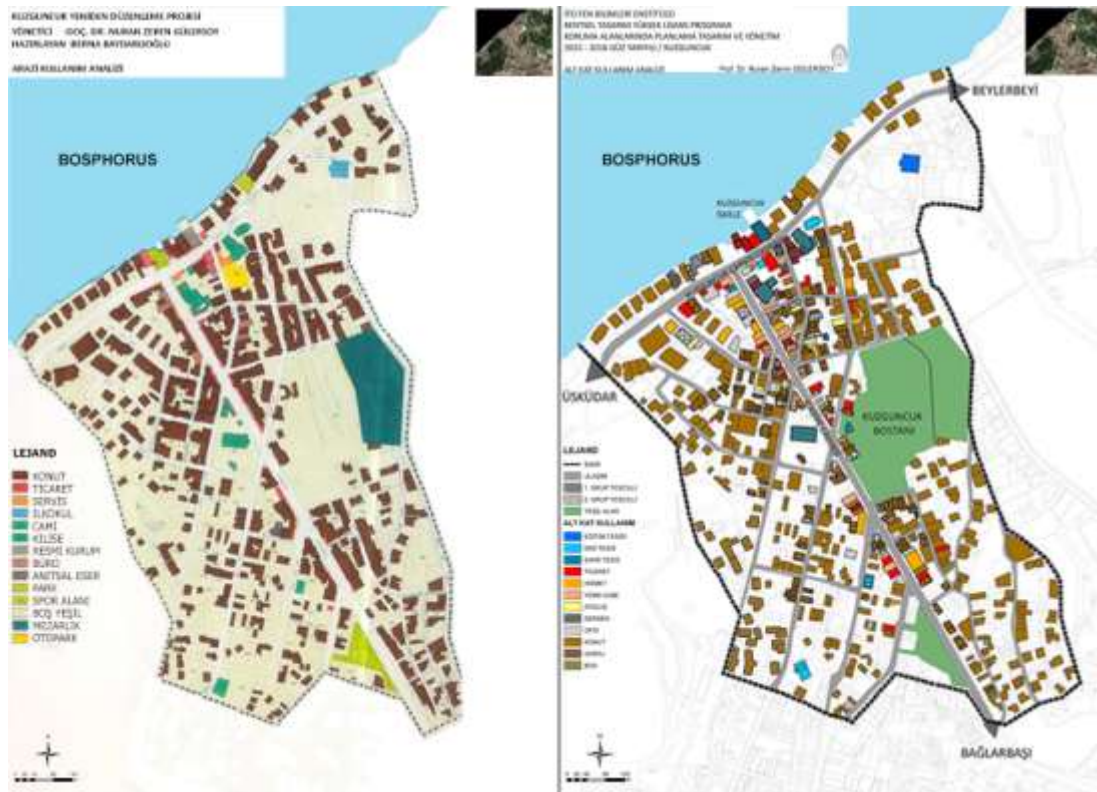
Today, the historical buildings on the waterfront are mostly residential buildings called “yali”. These have 1-2 storeys, rising to 3-4 storeys for those further inland. The residence of Fethi Ahmed Pasha is a magnificent example of this style. It is named after its first owner who was in charge of important state affairs during the reigns of Mahmut II (1808-1839) and Abdülmecit (1839-1861). Today, it is owned by the local municipality and is open to the public [11]. The churches and synagogues of the district also belong to their respective foundations, and many people still use them.

## **2.2. Rehabilitation works of the local community and functional changes**

Kuzguncuk has multi-cultural features and historical structures which make it necessary for it to be protected as an urban conservation site. By the end of the 1970s, the architect, Cengiz Bektaş settled in the area and was instrumental in a rehabilitation program being prepared. After the 1980s, there was an influx of poets, artists, writers, architects and musicians from different cultural groups to the area. This increased both land and property values and changed the land use pattern.

A comparative analysis of the land use of Kuzguncuk in 1992 (Map 3) and 2015 (Map 4) also shows that rehabilitation of neglected buildings while preserving the historical urban texture was carried out. The comparison reveals a high density of residential use buildings on İcadiye, the main street, together with a high concentration of commercial functions only on the ground floors of buildings. In the 2015 analysis, these commercial functions include markets, stationers, boutiques, buffets and grocery stores, while services include tailors, plumbers, photographers, pharmacies, food and beverage stores and entertainment units. However, in the 1992 analysis, food and beverage functions are very rare. Today, distinctive services such as the mosque, the church and other religious structures still exist.





**Map 3.** Ground floor uses analysis in 1992. **Map 4.** Ground floor uses analysis in 2015.

Green areas are another essential element of Kuzguncuk’s urban texture, and there is also a local agricultural site, called the “bostan” (cultivated land), which is one of the area’s unique natural assets. Until 1984, the bostan was operated by the owner of the property, and people could collect as much crop as they needed and leave as much money as they could afford. In 1984, it was transformed into a public picnic area and playground and was maintained by a paid gardener.

After 2000, many decisions about the area have been taken due to the exchange of ownership of the bostan. A construction-site was proposed, but this considered to be a threat to the area and was prevented due to the objections of local people. Today the bostan is operated by civil society. It is open to the public, and a lottery and seed aid are used to support its upkeep. The civil society meets regularly to discuss issues regarding the bostan as well as any neighbourhood problems arising from the recent changes. These efforts are essential indicators of the sense of identity and good relationships that remain within the community.

### 2.3. The effects of recent changes on neighbourhood

Kuzguncuk has experienced rapid development and spatial transformation over the past few years. This change has had both positive and negative spatial and socio-economic consequences for the local identity of Kuzguncuk and its conservation site status. The purpose of this study is to examine the reasons for and evaluate the effects of this change.

Firstly, the preliminary interviews held in the area and the ideas obtained from them were used as a guide for this study. The local people mentioned that there had been changes and transformations in recent years, which have brought in more visitors. However, they are not satisfied with the recent changes, and are worried about the rising number of visitors, which is regarded as the primary cause of specific problems such as increased traffic, illegal and obstructive parking and the alienation of the local populace, as well as posing a more general threat to the traditional identity of the area. It was these concerns that gave direction to this study.

### 2.3.1. Methodology

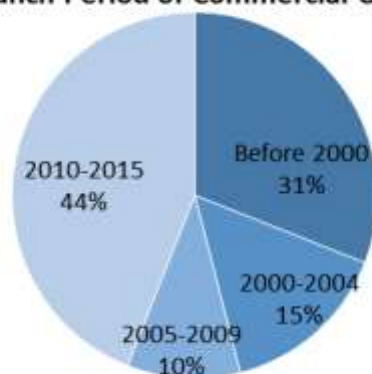
In order to examine the changes experienced in recent years, interviews were conducted with both visitors to the district and the commercial entrepreneurs who are considered responsible for the spatial and functional changes. 59 retail entrepreneurs and 40 visitors were given questionnaires, and these were cross-compared with the land use analysis. The surveys were based on the idea that both alienation and transformation occur due to the influx of new people who use the area for their specific purposes (commercial, artisanal, hospitality, residential, visiting, entertainment, etc.). Spatial maps were prepared for a land-use analysis to produce comparative information. The commercial entrepreneurs’ survey contained the following: “What kind of transformation has taken place in Kuzguncuk in recent years?” “Does this change put pressure on space, both socially and locally?” “Who are the actors?” and “Are the actors of this change the entrepreneurs of commercial units and people who prefer to visit the area for various purposes?”

The survey examined the starting period of the functional change with rates according to years. This was done to establish when the rise in commercial activities occurred, and the type of business which dominates them. It also includes the opinions of retail entrepreneurs regarding Kuzguncuk’s future and their suggestions for a better future for Kuzguncuk. Another aim was to obtain information about whether the commercial entrepreneurs live in Kuzguncuk. Also, visitors were asked about the purpose and frequency of their visits to discover if these run parallel with the rise in commercial activities.

### 2.3.2. Findings and discussion

The results demonstrate that the period between 2010-2015 saw the most significant increase in the number of commercial units. Although 56% (31 out of 59) were opened before 2020, 44% (28 out of 59) of current businesses were opened between 2010-2015 and (Figure 2). This is a significant finding which supports the concerns of the local people about the functional transformation they have witnessed over a relatively short period.

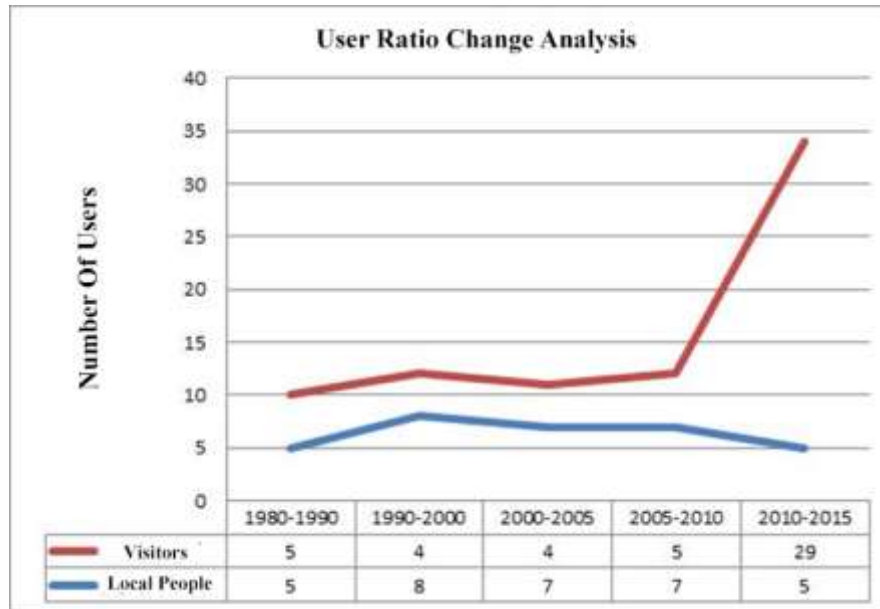
**Launch Period of Commercial Units**



|             | <b>Number</b> | <b>Rate</b> |
|-------------|---------------|-------------|
| Before 2000 | 15            | 31%         |
| 2000 - 2004 | 9             | 15%         |
| 2005 - 2009 | 7             | 10%         |
| 2010 - 2015 | 28            | 44%         |

**Figure 2.** Launch period of commercial units.

It may be assumed that the rise in commercial activities may also show a parallel increase in the number of visitors. According to the survey, most of the first visit dates of weekend tourists occurred after 2010 (Figure 3), which can be interpreted as the visitor numbers and commercial functions being mutually attractive. It is evident that a 70% increase in the number of visitors (29 out of 41) coming to Kuzguncuk from other parts of the city after 2010, would have a significant effect on the increased number of commercial units.



**Figure 3.** User ratio change analysis.

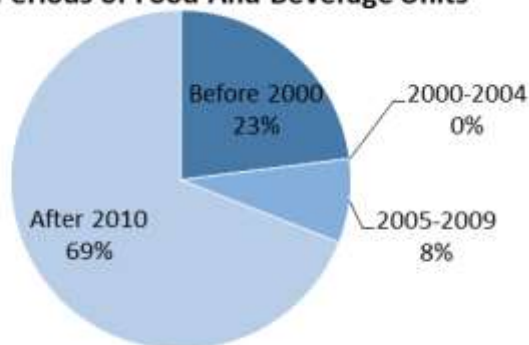
The increased visitor numbers to Kuzguncuk has given much greater importance to food and beverage services such as cafes and restaurants as well as more cultural activities such as art galleries. Today, 41% (24 out of 59) of the commercial activities in the area are food and beverage services (Figure 4). It is evident that this high rate of food and beverage service is not targeted at local people, but rather for incoming visitors.

| Function                   | Piece | Rate |
|----------------------------|-------|------|
| Food and beverage services | 24    | 41%  |
| Local services             | 21    | 36%  |
| Office                     | 10    | 17%  |
| Art                        | 2     | 3%   |
| Association                | 2     | 3%   |
| Total                      | 59    | 100% |

**Figure 4.** Functions of surveyed commercial units

When the launch period of food and beverage are examined, it can be seen that 69% (9 out of 13) started after 2010 (Figure 5). Also, 72% (13 out of 18) of the existing local commercial functions were transformed into new service units after 2010 (Figure 6). Moreover, due to the high demand for commercial enterprises, which rose to 28 (only 18 were opened before 2000), real-estate prices have also recently increased, and interviews with realtors in Kuzguncuk revealed that there is a greater tendency to sell and rent residences to commercial enterprises.

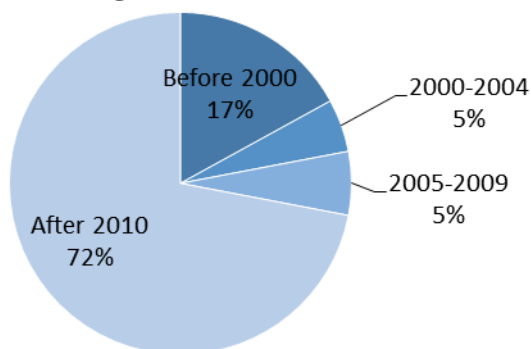
**Launch Periods of Food And Beverage Units**



|             | Number | Rate |
|-------------|--------|------|
| Before 2000 | 3      | 23%  |
| 2000 - 2004 | 0      | 0%   |
| 2005 - 2009 | 1      | 8%   |
| 2010 - 2015 | 9      | 69%  |

**Figure 5.** Launch periods of food and beverage units

**Transformation Rates of Existing Commercial Units to Food and Beverage**



|             | Number | Rate |
|-------------|--------|------|
| Before 2000 | 3      | 17%  |
| 2000 - 2004 | 1      | 5%   |
| 2005 - 2009 | 1      | 5%   |
| 2010 - 2015 | 13     | 72%  |

**Figure 6.** Transformation rates of existing commercial units to food and beverage

The neighbourhood identity and historical texture of Kuzguncuk creates a sense of identity that encourages people who move there to feel that they are local quickly. In the interviews with commercial entrepreneurs living and working there, they introduced themselves as “local”.

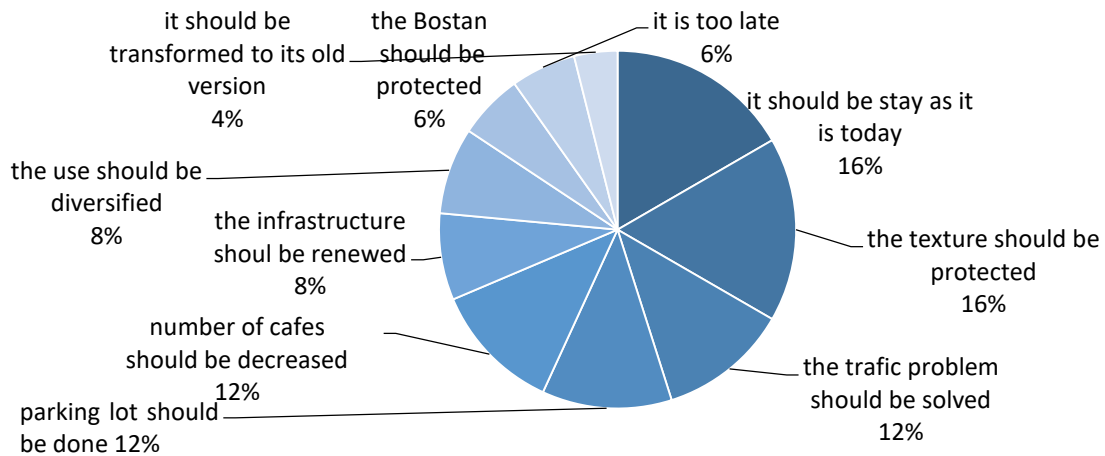
However, many of those who are held responsible for the recent changes came to the district after 2000 (38 out of 59), and 29 arrived between 2010 and 2015.



The functional transformation from residence to service has also brought spatial changes because Kuzguncuk buildings have a small-scale residential typology with a limited capacity for commercial activities. This has led to the rearrangement of the plan layouts of historical buildings in attempts to meet the commercial needs of cafes, restaurants, offices and art galleries. Even with these changes, more than half of the commercial units have functional areas below 50m<sup>2</sup>, and the insufficient enclosed space of the building typologies often results in the tables and chairs of cafes being placed outside, thereby occupying and obstructing the sidewalks. This considerably disrupts pedestrian circulation and restricts accessibility. Moreover, the sidewalks are also subject to illegal and often obstructive parking due to an insufficient number of parking spaces to meet the new level of demand (Picture 1).



**Picture 1.** Kuzguncuk sidewalk occupation and parking problem



|                                               | Number | Rate |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------|------|
| It should stay as it is today                 | 9      | %16  |
| The texture should be protected               | 9      | %16  |
| The traffic problem should be solved          | 6      | %12  |
| The parking lot should be done                | 6      | %12  |
| Number of cafes should be decreased           | 6      | %12  |
| The infrastructure should be renewed          | 4      | %8   |
| The use should be diversified                 | 4      | %8   |
| The Bostan should be protected                | 3      | %6   |
| It is too late                                | 3      | %6   |
| It should be transformed into its old version | 2      | %4   |

**Figure 7.** Respond rates of; "what can be done for Kuzguncuk to have a better future?"

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

For Istanbul, the Bosphorus is a significant symbol of identity. In addition to its unique natural beauty, the Bosphorus has a rich accumulation of historical and cultural values that it inherited from the Byzantine and the Ottoman eras, together with the contributions of the people presently living on its shores (12, 13). Today, many cities and areas are going through tremendously complex technological, economic, social and cultural transformations. Kuzguncuk is a Bosphorus settlement currently facing rapid spatial and functional changes. Throughout history, people from various cultures have lived in Kuzguncuk; some stayed, some left and some were forced to go, but they all left their mark. The calmness of the area is an attraction which has become famous, and as a result of new commercial activities, new people have started to visit. This change and development process has brought more intensity to the demands for more infrastructure and transportation. As a result of the evaluation of the questionnaire, the people who work and live in Kuzguncuk are not comfortable with these changes. As in the previous case of the bostan, it is argued that the protection of public space is necessary, but it seems that this time there is no consciousness of the issue and correspondingly little hope for conservation. People must be better informed so that they can understand why this area should be conserved, and ensuring ongoing civil participation is a major factor. What can be done regarding this is listed as follows:

- Ensuring historical and cultural continuity
- Definition of local identities
- Protection of landscape values
- Raising the conservation awareness of residents and users
- Removal of negative factors such as vehicle traffic, medium-sized production and commercial activities that damage historical texture

It is important factors that local people are made aware of the historical sociological and architectural texture of Kuzguncuk. These will become the inheritance of future generations and will allow them to appreciate the importance and character of the place where they live. The media and existing social associations and institutions in Kuzguncuk could play a significant role in this direction.

The recently-opened commercial units in Kuzguncuk have produced a lively economy that provides income for a significant number of local people, but are widely believed to be the cause of the deterioration of the district's original structure. These commercial units should not be permitted to destroy the authentic ambience, and a balance should be struck to ensure that they are controlled and are compatible with the overall texture of the district.

In Kuzguncuk, people from different religions have lived together and formed deep-rooted bonds over many years. The preservation of these bonds as an essential factor if Kuzguncuk's local identity is to be sustained. It is considered necessary that the local people living in the area should be encouraged by the state not to leave the area. This will ensure the survival of Kuzguncuk's cultural heritage and will also help to preserve the existing neighbourhood environment. By providing social and economic support, they may be dissuaded from selling their properties and moving away.

The surveys and analyses in Kuzguncuk showed that one of the leading problems in the area is that of traffic density and its associated demand for parking space. To minimise the effects of this issue, it will be necessary for the relevant authorities to make a full analysis and to act upon its findings.

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