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VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

The castle neighbourhood through children's eyes: A study in photography and critical practice

Abstract

This photographic essay presents a photography workshop held in Ankara, Kale Mahallesi (castle neighbourhood), with a group of Romani and Syrian children aged 6 to 13, as part of an ongoing effort by Birlikte Kent (a collective based in Ankara) to create space for dialogue, exchange, and knowledge production. Guided by critical social theory and Freirean notions of conscientisation, the workshop encouraged children to use photography as a method for reflecting on and narrating their urban environment marked by community, gentrification, and displacement. The workshop, which was organised through a collaboration between two collectives, Birlikte Kent (Ankara) and Fotohane Darkroom (Mardin), positions children as 'knowers', supporting them in documenting their personal and collective stories, claiming ownership of their narratives, and bringing attention to conditions of urban transformation and the right to the city. This photo-essay presents 15 photographs taken by three of the participating children.

Keywords

Critical practice, Ankara, community-building, photography, children, gentrification

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Paulo Freire wrote about the right of 'naming the world'. To name the world, is to re-create it. In the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* he discusses this at length as the development of a critical consciousness, an awareness and analysis of social realities. However, not in isolation, nor in silence. As Freire (1972) reminds us, 'human beings are built…in word, in work, in action-reflection' (p.61). The act of naming is intimately connected to a praxis, as he notes, it is reflection *and* action that produce material goods, social institutions, ideas, and concepts.

In a critical pedagogy in the Freirean sense, photography has the potential to become a tool of critical (self)reflection of lived experiences, in articulating oppression and injustice, and developing ideas for re-creation. Photography or 'photovoice' has developed as a specific form of participatory action research method to incite reflexive discussions and social participation for structural change. It is rooted in critical pedagogy, feminist theory, and documentary photography. In this methodology, participants are not subjects but active researchers in the process (Wang and Burris, 1997).

The series of photographs presented in this photo-essay is from a photography workshop held in Kale Mahallesi (castle neighbourhood) of Ankara in January 2025, with a group of children aged 6 to 13 from socially marginalised backgrounds. Organised through a collaboration between two collectives, Birlikte Kent, a volunteer group working toward urban justice in Ankara, and Fotohane Darkroom, a mobile analogue photography project for children and youth on the Turkish, Syrian, and Iraqi borders, this three-day workshop is part of an ongoing initiative designed to create space for dialogue, exchange, and knowledge production about issues affecting the communities living in the neighbourhood. Grounded in critical social theory and Freirean notions of conscientisation, this workshop is about developing critical awareness of one's social reality through reflection and action.

The participating children all live and go to school in Kale Mahallesi located in the Altındağ district of Ankara, which is being slowly, but violently, reconfigured through gentrification. Historically, the inner castle and its surroundings have been populated by non-Muslim communities (Koç, Saraç, and Döne 2024). By the 1920s, this district became a settlement for the poor and immigrant populations living in Ankara due to relatively low rents. Over time, it has become home to Romani communities, predominantly those who were expelled from the Balkans to Turkey through compulsory population exchange (*Ibid*). In the past decade, displacement from Syria has led to a significant number of Syrian families settling in Altındağ, including in and around Kale Mahallesi. More recently, following the fall of the Assad regime, some families have expressed their intentions to return to Syria.

The castle, which gives its name to one of the oldest neighbourhoods in Ankara, is a distinct urban landmark as it remains a place where people continue to live within its inner and outer walls. Over the past two decades, the neighbourhood has become subjected to large-scale urban renewal projects led by local government and TOKI (the housing development administration of Turkey). Under the language of 'development', these projects have functioned as mechanisms to force out local residents as they increase land

value and property prices, making it increasingly unaffordable for long-time residents to remain, and as a result, dispossessing the urban poor of land.

The social and spatial reconfiguration of the neighbourhood driven by infrastructure and urban renewal projects has led to the commercialisation of the neighbourhood, replacing low-income housing with middle-class residential zones, as local shops and homes are replaced with restaurants and souvenir stands (depicted in the photographs below). For the residents who have lived there for long years, this shift signifies a loss of familiarity and communal bonds, as everyday life becomes increasingly alienated. The erosion of the neighbourhood's sense of community (mahalle kültürü), and its destruction of a collective memory of place are forcing more families to relocate. The ongoing displacement is an example of how urban space is commodified, with people no longer in control of their surroundings.

This photography workshop began with the idea of 'naming this world' (Freire, 1972); the everyday life of children as they navigate a changing urban landscape, in the backdrop of cranes tearing down and re-developing homes, as tourists pass through, and as the children play upon the descending slope of the castle. Through the lens of the camera, to etch their presence into their neighbourhoods. For three days, the children gathered in the premises, situated along the castle walls. This workshop recognises children as 'knowers', offering them the space to take ownership of their visual narratives, and express their stories and perspectives, providing insights into their emotions, sense of belonging, and environment, as a method of producing local knowledge. Through photography, they were encouraged to connect more deeply with the neighbourhood.

During the workshops, the children asked: "what should we photograph?" They were introduced to analogue photography by photographer Serbest Salih, co-founder of Fotohane Darkroom, who led the workshops. The children took the cameras with them, which allowed them time and space to experiment. As for what to photograph, encouraged to explore their own perspectives, the children were asked to photograph their surroundings in ways that reflected their own views. Throughout the workshops, we had discussions around the concepts of 'place', not just as a physical location, but as a lived and imagined space, helping the children engage with deeper notions about how we perceive and relate to the environments we inhabit. The children were present in every step of the process, including developing their photographs in the darkroom.

Critical practice is conscious of its effects. Reading and reflecting on the images is as integral to the process as capturing them. Wang and Burris (1997) identify three goals of photovoice: 1) to enable people to record and reflect their community's strengths and concerns, 2) to promote critical dialogue and knowledge, 3) to reach policymakers.

Photographs can be used as a way to discover valid symbols for a community or social group (Boal, 1979). In this way, the photographs will provide a vocabulary for children to voice their perspectives over the course of the next months as we gather for discussions. At the same time, the photographs will be exhibited in a community setting, building space for dialogue, reflection, and (re)creation, encouraging conversations within the neighbourhood about the social changes impacting their lives. Finally, the photographs

will also be part of a symposium bringing together civil society actors in Ankara on the topic of urban poverty and the right to the city.

Below are 20 photographs taken by several of the participating children (Pseudonyms were used).

Photo 1 Photo by Ahmet, 2025

Photo 2 Photo by Yasemin, 2025

Photo 3 Photo by Aya, 2025

Photo 4 Photo by Yasemin, 2025

Photo 5 Photo by Yavuz, 2025

Photo 6 Photo by Yasemin, 2025

Photo 7 Photo by Yusra, 2025

Photo 8 Photo by Mustafa, 2025

Photo 9 Photo by Mustafa, 2025

Photo 10 Photo by Yusra, 2025

Photo 11 Photo by Ali, 2025.

Photo 12 Photo by Ayaz, 2025

Photo 13 Photo by Ahmet, 2025.

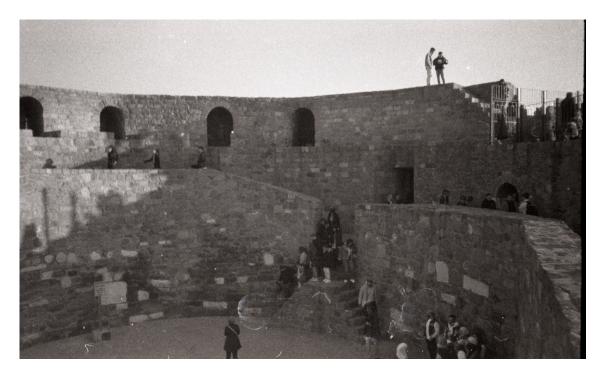**Photo 14** Photo by Ayaz, 2025

Photo 15 Photo by Ali, 2025

Photo 16 Photo by Ali, 2025.

Photo 17 Photo by Ahmet, 2025.

Photo 18 Photo by Ali, 2025

Photo 19 Photo by Yusra, 2025

Photo 20 Photo by Ayaz, 2025

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