

Investigating the Causes of Delays in Occupancy Permit Issuance

S. Zeynep Doğan-Erdoğan, H. Murat Günaydın, Aysu Demirciye
Department of Architecture, İzmir Institute of Technology, İzmir, Turkey
sevgidogan@iyte.edu.tr, muratgunaydin@iyte.edu.tr, aysudemirciye@iyte.edu.tr

Abstract

The processes of administration and enforcement of building codes and regulations have become very cumbersome. Getting a building or an occupancy permit is complex, time consuming and involves many stakeholders. It mostly leads to unwarranted delays, increased project costs, and needless frustration and aggravation. The methodology and findings of a study conducted in İzmir, with analysis of the causes of delays in occupancy permit issuance and exploration of ways for making the regulatory system more result-oriented, are presented.

The study first sets out a flow diagram showing the regular procedure and the related offices/desks for obtaining occupancy permit from the Housing Department of Konak Municipality in İzmir, Turkey. Then selected projects and their rejection letters are thoroughly examined in terms of their delay times and rejection reasons. An average total delay time of 97 days is recorded for obtaining an occupancy permit. Incomplete document submission required after building supervision in situ is listed as the most frequent rejection and delay reason in the occupancy permit issuance process. Finally, in Konak Municipality in İzmir, interviews are done with all involved parties -the officials of the occupancy permit office of the municipality, the inspectors of the construction inspection firms (CIF) and project owners (or architects). The three parties listed their typical concerns and complaints regarding the occupancy permit process and made recommendations to decrease the total delay time.

Keywords

Occupancy permit, Delay causes

1. Introduction

To increase effectiveness and efficiency in the public sector of Turkey, recent survey results demonstrate that the public services need to be more fully supported by new emerging technologies and more fully equipped with new methods to streamline the bureaucratic processes. (Turkish Industrialist' and Businessmen's Association, 2002). The processes of administration and enforcement of building codes and regulations as well need a current situation analysis and recommendations for improvement.

Occupancy permit process in Turkey from application to issuance requires a series of related activities to be carried out at the Municipality. Occupancy permit is issued when a building is considered suitable to occupy from a health and safety point of view. Occupancy permits signify that the municipality officials and CIF inspectors have done all the required inspections and approved the suitability of your building work.

Figure 1 shows the flow diagram of obtaining an occupancy permit. It explains the municipality related process in detail. Application for an occupancy permit requires the submission of a number of official documents to the municipality. The most common rejection reason for occupancy permit applications is the missing or incomplete document submission to the Housing Department. Documents to be filed in the first step to be qualified for permit application are firstly the report coming from the construction inspection firms declaring to have had at least 80% progress payment and secondly the structural approval, including thermal insulation standards.

Occupancy permit application data of this study come from the Housing Department of Konak Municipality, Izmir, Turkey. Application dates range from January 15th to June 1st, 2008. Applications cover various construction types from new to old buildings with office or residency types and even restoration projects. Total number of rejection letters for these applications is 110. 62 of them are for new constructed buildings. 10 of these 62 applications can not be taken into consideration due to the lack of the two documents which are needed to be qualified for permit application, mentioned above. Remaining 52 rejection letters belong to 47 new building construction projects. Further examining of each file showed that there exists 3 rejection letters belonging to the selected projects exceeding the specified collection date of June 1st, 2008. These 3 rejection letters are added to the 52 existing letters. Thus the total number of rejection letters becomes 55. Finally, 47 projects with 55 rejection letters are thoroughly examined in terms of their delay times and rejection reasons. 55 rejection letters include 276 rejection reasons in 15 rejection types. These 15 rejection types are grouped under 4 categories and listed in Table 1 according to their frequency in rejection letters:

1. Missing and/or incomplete documents required after building supervision in situ
2. Missing and/or incomplete documents required for application
3. Construction not appropriate to architectural design project
4. Missing and/or incomplete official document in the archive file

Table 1: Reasons for Rejection and Pending of Occupancy Permit Applications

No:	Rejection Reasons	Total #
1.	Missing and/ or incomplete documents required after building supervision in situ	213
1.1.	Debtless document for sanitation tax payment	34
1.2.	Report from project owners/designers	33
1.3.	Report from construction inspection firm	32
1.4.	Application document of construction inspection firm for 100% progress payment	32
1.5.	Receipt of legal dues to tax office	30
1.6.	Related photographs of building	29
1.7.	Approval letter of the directorate of civil defense	15
1.8.	Approval letter of financial services for parking lot debt discharging	8
2.	Missing and/ or incomplete documents required for application	41
2.1.	Approval letter of the department of fire authority	14
2.2.	Examination and TSE standards approval letter/file for elevator projects	10
2.3.	Approval letter of the department of social security administration (SSA) for payment of taxes	10
2.4.	Approval letter of the department of telecom services and distribution inc. com	5
2.5.	Approval letter of the department of city water supply & sewage administration	2
3.	Construction not appropriate to architectural design project	20
4.	Missing and/ or incomplete official document in the archive file	2
4.1	Approval letter of the city electric distribution inc. com.	2

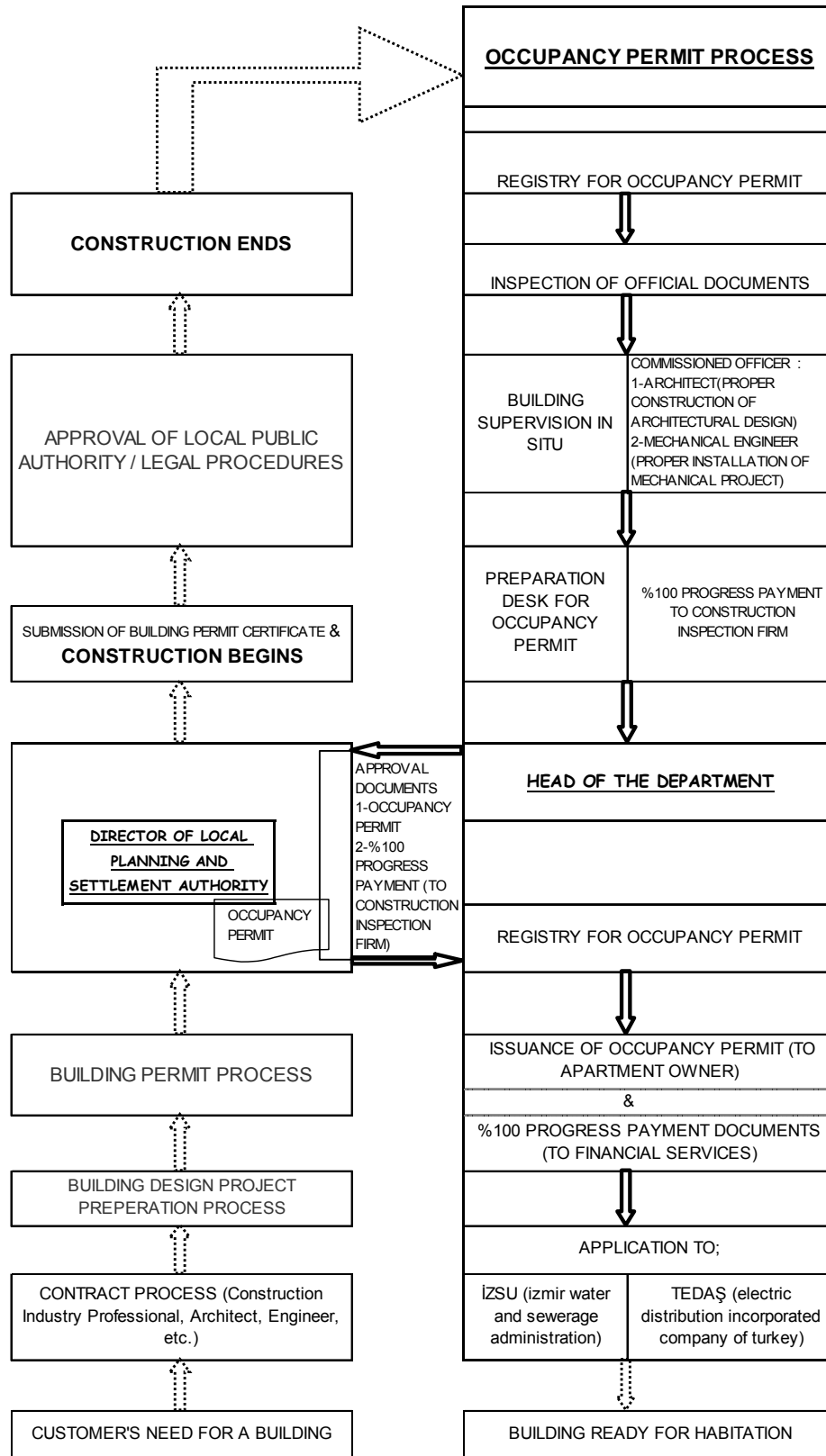


Figure 1: Flow Diagram for Occupancy Permit Processes at Municipalities

2. Delay Causes

Reasons for rejection and pending of occupancy permit applications are grouped under four categories. These four categories mainly depend on missing or incomplete documents required for the process. Below brief explanations for the required documents and the rejection reasons of the occupancy permit applications are included (İzmir Metropolitan Municipality, Branch Office of Public Housing, 2002).

2.1 Documents Required After Building Supervision in Situ

These are the documents required to be submitted to the municipality after the municipality officials' approval regarding the inspection of the building in situ.

1. Debtless document for sanitation tax payment is the document given by the tax administration declaring that the applicant has no tax debt. This document is accompanied by an affidavit specifying that the construction has already finished and ready to be applied for an occupancy permit.
2. Receipt of legal fees to tax office states that the required legal fee has already been paid and the building is ready to be applied for an occupancy permit.
3. Report from project owners/designers is the document signed by the project owner, civil, mechanical and electrical engineers approving that the subject building is inspected thoroughly and it is fully regardful of the related (architectural, civil mechanical and electrical) projects with no disobeying part determined.
4. Report from construction inspection firm states the appropriateness of the construction to the lately announced permit requirements, to the regulations of the Institute of Turkish Standards, to the related technical and scientific necessities; and to the regulations for elevators and the application project of the subject elevator submitted. This report is prepared, signed and stamped by the architect, civil, mechanical and electrical engineers and the authorized person of the Construction Inspection Firm.

Four documents explained briefly above are the most common incomplete or missing documents causing the occupancy permit applications to get rejected and delayed. Continued below are the other documents:

5. Application document of construction inspection firm for 100% progress payment: This document refers to the application of the construction inspection firm for the payment of the inspection service beginning after plastering stage and ending with occupancy. This payment corresponds to the 20% of the total inspection cost. When the proper application of the architectural design project is approved by the architects of the municipality, the payment to be made to the construction inspection firm is also approved over the new web-based building audit commission system. The failure of the confirmation stops the payment process which leads to a missing document for the applicant.
6. Related photographs of the building include photographs of all the facades of the building and, if exists, the parking lot, the terrace views and the mechanical pressurization units.
7. Approval letter of the directorate of civil defense declare that the building has been inspected in-situ and the arrangement of the refuge is proper to the submitted application project.
8. Approval letter of financial services for parking lot debt discharging is due to the written contract made with the project owner during the building permit process. Project owner pays by installments and presents his no-debt letter after the approved inspection of the building in situ.

2.2 Documents Required for Application

These are the second most common missing or incomplete documents in occupancy permit processes. These documents are required to be submitted to the municipality for the application of an occupancy permit. Brief descriptions of these documents are given below:

1. Approval letter of the department of fire authority states that the fire detection, extinction and evacuation project is applied accordingly and appropriate to all regulations.
2. Approval file for the appropriateness of the elevator project to the regulations of the Turkish Institute of Standards: It is an approval file submitted to the municipality by the elevator firm. The electrical and mechanical engineers of the municipality carry out the in-situ inspection of the elevator in accordance with the submitted file. Found appropriate, they sign and approve the necessary permit documents and transfer them to the related desks. Finally signed by the head of the local planning and settlement authority, elevator service and occupancy permits of the building are submitted to the building owner.
3. Approval letter of the department of social security administration declares that the project owners have made necessary payments for taxes charged for construction workers.
4. Approval letter of the department of telecom services and distribution inc. com. declares that the application of the mechanical project is proper to the technical specifications required by Turkish Telecom Services.
5. Approval letter of the department of city water supply and sewage administration declares that the water supply installation and the domestic and storm sewage disposal units' connection procedure is approved.

2.3 Construction not Appropriate to Architectural Design Project

During the in-situ inspection, adaptation of the architectural design project is confirmed. Constructions not appropriate to the submitted design projects are declined at this step. This is the third ranked rejection and delay reason in the process of occupancy permit issuance.

2.4 Document to Obtain from the Archive File

The archive file of each building is checked by the officials, as soon as its permit application is made. Archive files include a letter from the city electric distribution inc.com. approving the legal requirement of the construction of a new electrical power distribution unit or declaring the adequacy of the existing electrical power units.

3. Time Data on the Occupancy Permit Process

47 project files analyzed for their delay causes are also investigated for their delay durations. The delay periods of the mentioned projects are checked and listed. The total duration of a file starting from the day of its 1st application for occupancy permit until the issuance day of its permit are calculated. Total and average delay time records for occupancy permit issuance of the examined projects are shown in Table 2. The earliest application date among the application files is January 3rd and the latest check regarding the files' progression is made on November 22, 2008.

Two types of delays are determined in the process. First type is the delay caused by the municipalities' internal activities which correspond to the direct treatment time by permit officials. Second type is the delay caused by the external activities of the applicant which corresponds to the files' waiting time for applicants' supplements. In the first type, there rules a standard waiting period of 30 days offered by the municipality in order for the missing documents to be completed for the first applications (Table 1). If the building owner fails to compile the missing documents within 30 days, a 2nd application for occupancy permit to the occupancy permit department of the municipality is required.

Among the analyzed 47 rejected projects, the fastest issuance of an occupancy permit lasts 50 days and the slowest issuance of an occupancy permit lasts 214 days. Table 3 shows the pending reasons of three files with maximum total delay and pending reasons of three files with minimum total delay. The fastest

permit issued file lacks total of 7 documents required for first application and required after building supervision in-situ (Table 3). Therefore, the file has a delay of 34 days at the municipality. After getting the rejected file, the applicant compiles the missing documents in 6 days and applies for the occupancy permit again. He gets the issuance after 10 days of his final application (Table 2).

The slowest permit issued file is first delayed for 8 reasons (Table 3). Then the second delay reason occurs as a result of the failure of the new web-based building audit commission system (a system error in the service costs of construction inspection firm). This causes a 145-day delay between its occupancy permit issuance and the final permit application (Table 2). This technological error causes a missing document to be submitted after building supervision in-situ and listed as in Table 3.

Table 2: Total Delay Records for Occupancy Permit Issuance

	Delay Type 1	Delay Type 2	Delay Type 1	Delay Type 2	Delay Type 1	Total Delay
File #	Duration (days) Between 1 st Rej. ¹ and 1 st App.	Duration (days) Between 2 nd App. and 1 st Rej.	Duration (days) Between 2 nd Rej. and 2 st App.	Duration (days) Between Final App. and 1 st or 2 nd Rej.	Duration (days) Between Issuance and Final App.	Duration (days) Between Issuance and 1 st App.
1	29	33	7	0	145	214
2	31	96	33	17	19	196
3	29			118	23	170
4	31	10	35	15	79	170
5	36			47	50	133
6	59			35	29	123
...
43	31			24	9	64
44	36			6	22	64
45	46			6	7	59
46	32			3	22	57
47	34			6	10	50
Ave.	35	28	28	33	29	99

¹The abbreviation Rej. refers to rejection; the abbreviation App. refers to application.

Table 3: Pending Reasons of Three Files with Maximum Total Delay and Pending Reasons of Three Files with Minimum Total Delay

Reasons for Rejection & Pending of Max. and Min. Delayed Files	Max. Total Delay (days)						Min. Total Delay (days)					
	214		196		170		59		57		50	
	1 st rej.	2 nd rej.	1 st rej.	2 nd rej.	1 st rej.	2 nd rej.	1 st rej.	2 nd rej.	1 st rej.	2 nd rej.	1 st rej.	2 nd rej.
	Number of Reasons											
1. Documents required after building supervision in situ	5	1	4	2	6	5	5	0	3	0	6	0
2. Documents required for application	2	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
3. Construction not appropriate to architectural design project	1	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
4. Documents to obtain from the archive file	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

4. Interview Results

Nine professionals involved in the process are interviewed in order to further analyze the delay reasons. Three professionals (two architects and one civil engineer) from the Municipality’s occupancy permit office, three officials from the most employed three Construction Inspection Firms and three architects as project owners following the permit application process are interviewed. Interview questions are prepared to investigate the delay causes of occupancy permit issuance and to evaluate the suggestions of three different parties involved in the process. Each group of attendants is interviewed with similar questions particular to their positions in the process. Regarding the answers to the interview questions, common complaints about the delay causes of occupancy permit issuance and common suggestions for streamlining the occupancy permit issuance process are summarized:

The interviewed architects and the civil engineer from the occupancy permit office of the municipality mainly complained about the inappropriateness of the building constructions to the architectural design projects submitted. This is the third most common reason listed among the delay causes for rejection and pending of occupancy permit applications (Table 1). Another common complaint of the municipality officials is about the applications made with incomplete or missing documents. Table 1 lists this reason at second place among the reasons for rejection and pending of occupancy permit applications. Given that the municipality officials strongly suggest that before applying for occupancy permit issuance, CIFs should be assigned to do the in-situ examination of the buildings and confirm the acceptable adaptation of the architectural design project. By this way any improper application of project on site can be detected by the CIF prior to permit application and this will surely shorten the permit issuance process. The second suggestion of the municipality officials is to bring together all the related branch offices of the municipality for the ease and quickness of applicant’s document gathering during the application process. Finally the municipality workers’ agreed that providing an information desk for occupancy permit issuance branch could speed up the application process by directing the applications to proper desks and offices timely.

The answers of the inspectors of the CIF to the interview questions are evaluated as well. It is found out that inspectors’ real concern is about the inadequate number of officials they think to be working at the occupancy permit branch of the municipality. The inspectors also complain about the late transfer of the documents between the municipality’s desks. Finally, they also focus on the delays caused by the computerized construction inspection system. They suggest municipalities should get equipped with latest

technological improvements more often. Finally a self-criticism is made by the inspectors which suggest that the CIF workers should follow the application files under their responsibility punctually with more care.

The interview answers of the project owners (architects) show that there is no one common complaint; however there are various complaints and suggestions. One architect is pleased with the CIFs, one is not and the other is neutral. They all explain the CIF are founded by the architects who were not in practice at all and thus in the early times couldn't manage to solve various problems resulted from the application process. After gaining enough experience, two project owners/architects state that the practice of the firms has got better. Some project owners also complain about the slow bureaucratic process at the municipality. They commonly criticize that for one application file, they are almost obliged to visit the municipality averagely 20 times. Architects also explain that the file distribution process is too long and although the examined files are ready in six days, another six days are needed to get them signed by the managers. They sum up that the bureaucratic signing and transferring of documents last as long as the examination and approval process of the documents in the file. Their common suggestion is to increase the number of officials at the occupancy permit office of the municipalities having overload as in this case.

5. Conclusion

The occupancy permit process in Konak Municipality, İzmir, Turkey is examined. Occupancy permit applications are analyzed in terms of their delay causes and times. The missing and/or incomplete documents required after building supervision in situ and particularly the debtless documents for sanitation tax payments are found to be the first and most common reasons leading to the delay and rejection of occupancy permit applications. The most delayed occupancy permit issuances are resulted from mostly the delays caused by the external activities of the applicant; while the minimum delayed applications are resulted from the delays caused by the municipalities' internal activities. However, the most delayed application file with 214 days duration is the victim of a technological system error. This supports the recent opinion research about public administration reform declaring that the public services need to be more fully equipped with the latest technological developments (Turkish Industrialist' and Businessmen's Association, 2002).

The stakeholders of the occupancy permit process are interviewed to evaluate the complaints and suggestions referring to the process. The municipality workers mainly complain about the inappropriateness of the building constructions to the architectural design projects submitted and suggest that before applying for occupancy permit issuance, CIF should be assigned to do the in-situ examination of the buildings and confirm the acceptable adaptation of the architectural design project. The CIF' inspectors complain about the inadequate number of officials they think to be working at the occupancy permit branch of the municipality and suggest that the municipalities should use more officials and more technological developments. The project owners also complain about municipality officials and suggested an increase in the number of officials at the occupancy permit office of the municipalities having overload as in this case; although the recent opinion about public administration reform focus on the unnecessary number of officials in the public service (Turkish Industrialist' and Businessmen's Association, 2002).

Analyzing the stakeholders' views and the process, authors believe that the technological developments and the web-based computerized systems might help to decrease the problematic complexity level of the current occupancy permit issuance process. Municipalities might refer to the business process reengineering methods and seek for a leaner process for occupancy permits. For instance, not accepting any application files with any missing documents seems to be a simple but effective starting point and can lead further study and investigation.

6. References

- Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association (2002). The Opinion Research for Public Administration Reform, Publication of the Turkish Industrialists' and Businessmen's Association, Turkey.
- İzmir Metropolitan Municipality, Department of Public Housing, Branch Office of Public Housing (2002). Building Bylaws of İzmir Metropolitan Municipality, Ena News Agency, Turkey.
- İzmir Konak Municipality Official Web Site. (2008). Required paperwork for occupancy permits. Online at <http://www.konak.bel.tr/index.asp?page=hizmetler&sub=yapikullanma>. Accessed on November 1, 2008.