

Grand Manner alla Turca: Istanbul's Territorial Appropriations

"People are sometimes too simplistic when they think that everything can be solved by saying, for example, that thinking about infrastructure already entails taking into account its surroundings; it is sometimes said, for instance, that any infrastructure should take its surroundings into account; but perhaps the surroundings of an infrastructure are sometimes more important and more difficult than the infrastructure itself."¹

A VIEW FROM THE CENTER

Renowned travelers to 19th century Constantinople rarely found what they were looking for. Mark Twain was disappointed as he walked the city's congested streets negating the "noble" panorama he admired from the ship.² Far more interested in the landscape and the flora of the Bosphorus strait, Herman Melville's accounts indicate a clear preference for the water as opposed to the streets.³ In 1911, when young Charles-Edouard Jeanneret arranged to arrive in Istanbul by boat, he planned to cast his first gaze on the city from this privileged viewpoint on the strait.⁴ Jeanneret's obsessive sketching of the silhouette and the geographic "trinity," of *Pera*, *Stamboul*, *Scutari* -Galata/Beyoglu, the historic peninsula and the Anatolian/Asian side- points to his continued fascination with the distanced panorama. To be sure, the stark contrast between the spacious void of the strait and the tightly packed urban fabric occupying its three constituent landmasses is the product of the last 60 years. However, the hollow center/dense fabric duality was already at work from the 19th century onward, as the city struggled with the difficulties of congestion and modernization.

Fin-de-siècle Istanbul featured a limited number of urban gaps: few unbuilt slopes, wooded cemeteries, and gardens of religious and state properties. These spaces were visible only as part of a panorama from the distant shore, thanks to the overgrown vegetation that they contained.⁵ The lack of direct perspectives and clearances made it impossible for the subject to view such spaces as part of one's trajectory. Along the shoreline, there was a continuous land strip of varying width, wrapping around the tightly packed neighborhoods. The southern face of the peninsula was where the city "thinned out" into a landscape of orchards and vegetable gardens.⁶ Along the Golden Horn, shipment operations and commercial uses claimed the waterfront,

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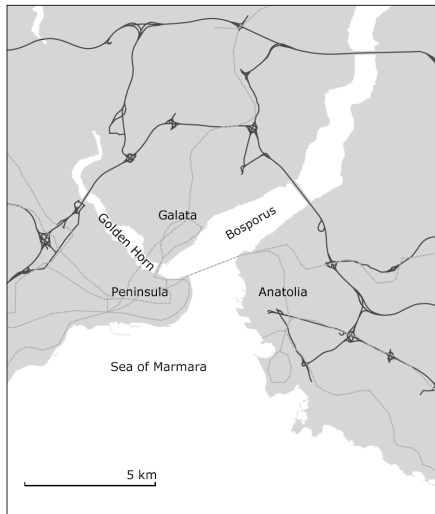


Figure 1: Key map (by author)

rendering the entrance of the inlet “chaotic” and “dirty”.⁷ In the residential districts, smaller voids were mostly contained within religious complexes, except for a few ad hoc gaps accessible via extremely narrow streets.

Large fires permanently destroyed the city of wood, allowing opportunities to modify this urban labyrinth. Pockets of regularized blocks were built in the latter half of the century, featuring masonry structures and streets of consistent width without dead ends. However, these pockets still had to adapt to the topography and incorporate many large and small *waqf* structures, i.e. endowed charitable institutions of religious nature, which dotted the terrain. These challenges made the Beaux-Arts repertoire of urban forms difficult to implement. Desperately seeking to westernize itself, the city enlisted a rotating cast of European planners and architects. For example, the urban schemes of the French architect Joseph-Antoine Bouvard, the inspector-general at the City of Paris and one of the most prominent figures to visit the city at the time, featured wide boulevards and large public squares that disregarded the contours of the terrain and the irregular angles of the existing monuments.⁸ These proposals were some of the first attempts to embed large urban forms and structures on/within the challenging topography. However, ambitious infrastructural agendas proposed in some of these “grand schemes” were tall orders, both technically and financially, for a state in decline. “Western style” structures at the building scale did appear in parts of the city, while the transportation proposals, such as subway systems, rail and vehicular bridges, and underwater tunnels were mostly disregarded.

Later in the 20th century, another French urbanist, Henri Prost, took on these urban challenges in a more realistic manner with “environmental hygiene, transportation and aesthetics” as the core planning principles.⁹ His work from 1936 to 1951 was the most transformative and comprehensive planning exercise the city had seen. Unfortunately, selective application of his plans through the 1950’s failed to produce a cohesive urban structure to match his ambitions. At the same time, both through the plan’s own mechanisms and its subsequent aggressive interpretations by others, large chunks of residential districts were wiped out in order to provide vehicular connections to the expanding city outside the walls.¹⁰ Two of these routes, Millet and Vatan streets intersect Ataturk Boulevard, a major north south axis, in the center of the peninsula. All heavily-used routes, their connecting ramps became increasingly more complex, forming a legible gap in the fabric.¹¹

Some of the most interesting bits in Prost’s Istanbul projects were the strategically located and highly specific proposals for key infrastructural links and nodes. These unimplemented projects incorporated various public uses as they mitigated the topography and provided connections with the larger scale: a viaduct doubling as a parking garage, an intermodal station doubling as a public terrace, etc. These were imaginative attempts to carve out public spaces providing panoramic views of the city’s “incomparable landscape.”¹² The fact that he was the first to codify a plan protecting the silhouette of the peninsula underlines his sensitivity to the city’s geography.



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Nevertheless, the Prost plan failed to adequately address the impending densification and expansion of Istanbul. The concentric configuration was reinforced in the following decades based on ideas derived from his plan. The core density remained persistent with a pattern of minor dominance shifts, always within close proximity to the Golden Horn. As the city hastily continued to build its face, made visible by its contours, and found ways to build higher on its once low density or unbuilt slopes surrounding the core city, it lost many of the territorial voids that once connected the valleys and inland terrain with the water. Small developers handled much of this frenetic building activity well into the 1980's.¹³ These developers maximized or often exceeded the already high allowable floor area ratios by exploiting regulatory loopholes and topographic opportunities. As a culmination of concurrent densification and sprawl, Deyan Sudjic observes, once one is away from the water, the city is "as brutal and ugly as any metropolis undergoing the trauma of warp speed urbanisation"¹⁴

Therefore, Istanbul's spatial composition can be characterized by the clash of its urban development with the topography and the conflict between the city's desire to configure itself concentrically despite the absence of a connective center. Continuous ridges, slopes and valleys of the three constituent landmasses have dictated the placement of its monuments and routes. The strait and the inlet have been major obstacles to maintain the peninsula as the geometric and functional center of the metropolitan area. Murat Guvenc, a planning scholar, suggests that the strait is too wide to easily bridge over, but the two sides are close enough to function as a single city.¹⁵ Without the presence of a stable planning mechanism to direct the city's growth in a consistent manner, Istanbul's development mechanisms have,

Figure 2: Existing and proposed development areas in the 2009 Spatial Development Plan (by author)



Figure 3: A TOKI housing complex
(courtesy of Pablo Martinez Muniz –
Fragmentpolis, 2009)

consciously or unconsciously, tried in vain to stitch this tripartite geography into a unified territory with a dominant center. Many infrastructural interventions have been of a reactionary nature, addressing urban deficiencies in isolation, thus, replicating these ailments elsewhere in the city.

DECENTRALIZATION ATTEMPTS AND INFRASTRUCTURE

From the 1960's on, the hills at the fringes of the city were increasingly occupied with informal settlements, and by the early 2000's, many of these districts were given a legal standing. Today, according to certain estimates, half of the city's building stock was once illegal to a degree.¹⁶ However, this expansion hardly led to a polycentric model, as the peripheral districts failed to generate viable business uses to sustain themselves, due to a lack of policy initiatives.¹⁷ Therefore, the central districts saw further surges in peak density levels and continued to draw an ever-increasing number of commuters. Today, the rate of decline in density levels, as one moves away from the center, is considerably steep and the residential density numbers are the highest in Europe.¹⁸ These urban trends have led to the formulation of key policies at the municipal level, with an explicit aim to decentralize the city.

The Istanbul Spatial Development Plan, guiding development since 2006 and formally approved in 2009, projected dilution of the core densities by stretching the city along a lateral axis toward new housing-led high density settlements located to the east and west of the city. Strategic port, shipment and industrial areas would be located at the fringes, while the development toward the north would be suppressed. The plan also presented a containment strategy for much of the legalized informal districts and demolition/rehabilitation of many more, in order to protect the water basins and the forestlands to the north.¹⁹

This lateral development model required construction of new routes extending the existing transportation infrastructure. The main backbone of this improved system is an underwater rail tunnel named *Marmaray*, scheduled for completion in 2013. Crossing under the Bosphorus strait, it will bring 1.7 million passengers per day into the historic peninsula. A project of national importance, the tunnel will finally connect the separate rail systems on the Anatolian and European sides. Connected to this network are an expanding subway system and a *metrobus* line linking the city's three land-masses with a large arc.

Many of these interventions required, and were boosted by, policy changes at the national level. Since 2002, a single political party has ruled both the national and metropolitan administrations leading to an alignment of aspirations toward promoting Istanbul as a world city.²⁰ In 2004, the national government formulated two laws allowing administrative appropriation of the surrounding provinces by the metropolitan government. Today, Istanbul's metropolitan and provincial borders are one and the same, granting Istanbul a privilege that most other world megalopolises lack: the decision-making authority for directing growth and management of its resources at a territorial scale.²¹

The Mass Housing Administration of Turkey (TOKI) has been instrumental in the building of this territory. Established in 1984 for the purpose of “making adequate shelter available, accessible and affordable,”²² the agency took on a major role in the construction of not only housing, urban renewal and development projects, but many other public facilities as well, such as schools, hospitals and government buildings. A semi-autonomous body under the prime minister’s office,²³ TOKI’s major impact on Turkey’s landscape has been a topic of extensive scholarship. With a 2005 national law granting sweeping authority to the local governments to initiate urban renewal projects, TOKI’s presence within the city centers increased. The law also allowed expropriation of properties from the current owners if they failed to complete the mandated

REALITY ON THE GROUND

Landing in Istanbul’s Ataturk International Airport today offers a good overview of the periphery of this expanding megalopolis. Granted, the view of urban fringes from a few thousand feet up is hardly forgiving in any major city: low-income housing quarters, strategic zones for industrial operations and the supporting infrastructure, generic commercial developments and major highways are common to such outlying areas. Nevertheless, in the case of Istanbul, the density of closely packed mid-rise residential buildings is a particularly striking sight. Also present in the view are clusters of identical housing slabs and towers, placed in rigid serial patterns or following invisible topographic contours captured within their irregular development boundaries: ungrounded, stubby constructions with poorly defined spaces in between. To the north of the airport, a zone of light industrial structures cuts through the fabric toward the Trans-European Motorway. Further north and northwest, one can get a sense of the macro-topography and the three major valleys that define the landform of the European half. These valleys represent the city’s last-ditch efforts at preserving water and forest resources: disconnected, under siege by informal settlements and inadequate for the size of the city. The overall development pattern presents a picture of voluntary sprawl rather than a conscious attempt to compose a polycentric territory. These floating constructions present no overall pattern or a discernible figure suggestive of a decisive engagement with the terrain.

This haphazard expansion has failed to challenge the centrality of the peninsula, as the actual development tendencies have differed from the proposed determinate diagram of a lateral city model proposed in the master plan. Density of the central city remained high, thanks largely to a tourism boom, renewal projects, and skyrocketing real estate values. Meanwhile, the business axis has continued to develop further north, away from the core, populated with high-rise office structures. This axis meets a zone of high-end residential districts, gated communities, shopping centers, as well as several university campuses. A number of elite residential and institutional settlements on both sides of the strait now form an arc, where a third bridge is proposed. Despite the fact that this bridge was not included in the 2009 master plan, the



central government recently requested bids for its design and construction, a decision that will cause further sprawl into the forestlands.²⁴ As the city expands outward, it builds major gaps within the existing fabric to accommodate infrastructural nodes, intersections, and links in response to the increased transportation needs between the core and the periphery. As the decentralization policies falter, more commuting, more intermodal exchange stations, more bypasses with their up and down ramps are becoming ubiquitous landscape elements. As it becomes more and more difficult to divert, slow down or dilute the transportation loads, subterranean and viaduct options are becoming viable despite their high cost. To deal with the topographical problems, Istanbul has been hastily building tunnels under the city, two of which are complete and five more are in the works. The sheer monumentality of these structures is reinforced further by their clearance requirements, connecting ramps and supports. Such features produce a distancing effect, granting these monolithic formations an aura of 21st century grand manner, in their contrast with the surrounding fabric. The environmental, security and monitoring systems they require to properly function, such as large fans, illuminated display and warning signals, add a high tech hint to the spectacle of driving under the “capital of three empires.”

These linear infrastructures are designed to solve narrowly defined engineering problems in a manner that disregards the ground. They make no formal attempt to mediate their scale with the city. Round cross-section tunnels jutting out from the hillsides, large concrete panels, and hefty earthquake-proof pillars holding up elevated roadways, are all part of a complex system that makes the city function without the traces of an apparent structure or legibility. Similar to the effects of the new building regulations in the 19th century that transformed the “city of wood” into a hardened crust, Istanbul is going through another phase of transforming its topography, this time by producing new grounds by building above or below, with the implicit goal of *avoiding* the difficult terrain.

EMBRACING TERRITORIAL SCALE: CASE OF YENIKAPI

The symmetrical composition of the 2009 plan decisively positions the historic peninsula as the geometric center of the city once more. This highly dense and fragile landmass will have to act as a bridge between the eastern and western poles of the city, when the above-mentioned Marmaray rail tunnel connects with multiple subway, light rail and ferry routes at the south shore of the peninsula in 2013. Yet another absence in the 2009 plan, a parallel underwater vehicular tunnel, named *Eurasia*, is also under construction with a projected completion date of 2015. This tunnel will bring 120,000 cars per day into the peninsula, further increasing peak density levels.

Istanbul has been unprepared to address this impending intersection of routes, leading to a Gordian knot scenario. It is a fair analogy to think of the peninsula as a hollowed out landform, pierced through by a number of tunnels under the cherished monuments of the city. The recent case of the *Metro Bridge*, connecting the subway lines between the north and south of the Golden Horn is a good example. The bridge over the inlet is quite elevated due to the topography and the technical requirements of the subway

Figure 4: Kagithane-Piyalepasa Tunnel
(user: Deniztumer / Wikimedia commons / public domain)



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system.²⁵ As it enters the peninsula and intersects with the terrain, the tunnel proceeds in a worryingly close path to the Suleymaniye Complex, the most important Ottoman monument in the city. This line will continue on to the south and link with the above-mentioned transportation lines at the Yenikapi transfer point, a major intermodal station.

The city held a competition in 2012, seeking solutions for connecting these rail lines constructed at different elevations. In our competition entry,²⁶ we sought to contain and organize the passenger loads within a *big room* built into the topography, in order to avoid putting further pressure on the city ground. This space would incorporate a variety of diverse programs while connecting the district with the transportation lines under a single roof that acts as a large public plane at grade. This plane gently rises southward over multiple infrastructural barriers, such as a suburban rail line too costly to locate underground, and offers expanded water views. As such, it provides the peninsula with a large public ground that could accommodate many uses, in visual contact with the Sea of Marmara. The strategic use of the topography and existing infrastructure components allow for a heightened awareness of the city's geography from this large public clearing, complementing the surrounding dense fabric with much breathing room.

Sola-Morales reminds us that, "distance or separation is not the only thing that characterizes belonging."²⁷ Despite the efficiency required in planning the periphery, he suggests, a "positive periphery" is possible if we avoid conceptualizing distances as "merely a question of defense." The "figurative capacity" and "environmental and scenic rationality" of these distances can drive the territorial organization, as opposed to relying on static voids.²⁸

As Istanbul treats its larger environment as *negative periphery* to the precious center, and allows it to be taken over haphazardly by discordant public and private development agents, it is failing to compose a cohesive territory. In terms of process, the periphery acts as the home of the dislocated and the poor, as well as the displaced industries, furthering the negative connotations. In terms of form, without the presence of *territorial fixes*, the

Figure 5: Yenikapi Transfer Point and Archeopark Competition proposal - aerial view (courtesy of Hashim Sarkis Studios, Mimarlar and Han Tumertekin)



geometry of the periphery remains abstract and illegible against the compact crust of the center. By relying solely on *tried and true* building types with small footprints and linear structures on point supports, the city avoids engagement with the terrain, treating it as a neutral background.

At the same time, Istanbul's obsessive drive to re-center itself, both as form and process, and its reluctant claim on the periphery are splintering the core city, as the modern mobility requirements continue to carve out spaces of unfamiliar scales. If territory is the inevitable and *promising* setting of the contemporary metropolis, as we understand it to be, Istanbul has to learn to adapt to this unfamiliar scale, both in its outlying geography and within *the city* itself. I would further argue that there should be a level of similarity to the set of design operations and opportunistic *modifications*, to borrow Vittorio Gregotti's term, employed in both settings, where rich urban experiences and the perception of the city's "incomparable landscape" can be made possible. ♦

ENDNOTES

1. Manuel de Sola-Morales, "Against the Universal Metropolis," in *A Matter of Things* (Rotterdam: NAI, 2008), 155.
2. Kim Fortuny, *American Writers in Istanbul: Melville, Twain, Hemingway, Dos Passos, Bowles, Algren, Baldwin, and Settle* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2009) 30.
3. Herman Melville, *Journal of a Visit to Europe and the Levant* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 93.
4. Le Corbusier (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret), *Journey to the East* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987), 88-89.
5. It was in fact quite common for the religious complexes to feature overgrown plantings that overwhelmed the central monuments themselves. Even at the height of classic Istanbul from 16th century to 17th century, many of the imperial complexes were mixed in with trees of various types planted in a pastoral manner. The depictions of European artists from the 16th century on show a pattern of dense but porous settlements that floated in an overgrown landscape.
6. Zeynep Celik, *The Remaking of Istanbul: Portrait of an Ottoman City in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1993), 3-4.
7. Ibid., 73.
8. Zeynep Celik, "Two projects for 'fin-de-siècle' Istanbul," *Rassegna* 72 (1997): 73.
9. Cana Bilsel, "Henri Prost's Planning Works in Istanbul (1936-1951): Transforming the Structure of a City through Master Plans and Urban Operations," in *From the Imperial Capital to the Republican Modern City: Henri Prost's Planning of Istanbul 1936-1951*, eds. Cana Bilsel and Pierre Pinon (Istanbul: Istanbul Research Institute, 2010), 116.
10. Ibid., 151.
11. Dogan Kuban, *Istanbul, An Urban History: Byzantium, Constantinopolis, Istanbul* (Istanbul: Economic and Social History Foundation of Turkey, 1996), 427.
12. Cana Bilsel, "Remodeling the Imperial Capital in the Early Republican Era: the Representation of History in Henri Prost's Planning of Istanbul," in *Power and Culture: Identity, Ideology, Representation*, eds. Jonathan Osmond and Ausma Cimdina (Pisa: Plus-Pisa University Press, 2007), 105.
13. İlhan Tekeli, "Cities in Modern Turkey," in *Istanbul, City of Intersections/Urban Age Istanbul Conference* (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2009), 16.
14. Deyan Sudjic, "The City Too big to Fail," *ibid.*, 3.
15. "Yenikapı Yarışmasının Ardından," Vimeo video, 2:18:27, posted by user: Arkitera, May 5, 2012, <http://vimeo.com/42400791>. Bosphorus and Fatih bridges both have a length of about 1.5 km, very close to Golden Gate Bridge's main span at 1.7 km.
16. Çağlar Keyder, "Istanbul into the 21st Century," in *Orienting Istanbul: Cultural Capital of Europe?*, eds. Deniz Göktürk, Levent Soysal, and İpek Türeli (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 30. Subsequently, with a 2004 regulation, a "zero-tolerance" approach was adopted against new informal constructions. See Tuna Kuyucu and Özlem Ünsal, "'Urban Transformation' as State-led Property Transfer: An Analysis of Two Cases of Urban Renewal in Istanbul," *Urban Studies* vol. 47 no. 7 (2010), 1484.
17. Planning scholar İlhan Tekeli points out that the city officials could have been more strategic in appropriating and incorporating these developments into the city fabric by developing policies similar to those for the regulation of the *dolmuş* system, an informal sector that made up for the lack of public transportation in various parts of the city. See İlhan Tekeli, *Istanbul ve Ankara için Kent İçi Ulaşım Tarihi Yazıları* (Istanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları: 2009).
18. Istanbul: *City of Intersections*, 28, 38.
19. Neyran Turan, "Towards an Ecological Urbanism for Istanbul," eds A. Sorensen and J. Okata, *Megacities: Urban Form, Governance, and Sustainability* (Tokyo, New York: Springer, 2011), 226.
20. Keyder, "Istanbul," 28.
21. Turan, "Towards an Ecological," 226.
22. "An Overview Of The Main Principles Underlying Housing Policy In Turkey," TOKİ, accessed Nov 19, 2012, <http://www.toki.gov.tr>.
23. TOKİ's website states that "TOKİ reports directly to the Prime Minister's Office" and as such, "its well-established non-profit business model avoids many of the common pitfalls of institutionalized bureaucracy." "A Strong Foundation Of Economic Fundamentals," TOKİ, accessed Nov 19, 2012, in <http://www.toki.gov.tr>.
24. During the process leading to the construction of the first bridge over the Bosphorus, many planners argued that such a lateral connection would fortify the central city's stronghold over the territory and increase the future demand for parallel routes. The bridge would itself form a bottleneck right after its completion, these planners argued, and require the construction of a second bridge to offset its load further north. They urged the government to consider expanding the existing ferry connections between the two sides, an adequate solution at the time in terms of numbers, while promoting mixed-use districts on the Asian half of the city. The fact that, 25 years after the construction of the Bosphorus Bridge, a new bridge was built to the north and now a third bridge is required to relieve the load of the second bridge, shows their foresight. See Tekeli, *Istanbul ve Ankara*, 104.
25. The *Metro Bridge* has been a subject of heated public exchange as it has a detrimental effect on the historic silhouette, leading to concerns of UNESCO action to exclude some areas of peninsula from the world heritage sites list.
26. Competition entry was developed in collaboration with the offices of Hashim Sarkis and Han Tumertekin.
27. Sola-Morales, "Against the," 163.
28. Manuel de Sola-Morales, "Territories Without a Model," in *A Matter of Things* (Rotterdam: NAI, 2008), 172.