

# The Mystery of Planning in Istanbul: Three Impressions of a Visitor

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## Planners, Cities and the Urban Landscape

Cities are human constructions built up of sequential layers of development - some consciously planned, some less so. Everything in a city is there because someone either put it there, or allowed it to remain there. Film directors are responsible for every single thing you see in a movie. Some (Hollywood) scrutinise every square millimetre and fill it with their chosen imagery. Others (French or Turkish 'New Wave') take a more minimalist approach and let events determine how the final product looks.

It is perhaps rather similar with Planning. At one stage in the twentieth century, when Planners enjoyed their greatest esteem, they aspired to 'comprehensive planning' in minute detail. But outside in the real world, this did not go very far. And since the name 'Le Corbusier' switched from being fashionable (1950s) to being desperately unfashionable (1970s), this 'holistic' approach has become very unfashionable. Modern - or rather Post-Modern - Planners have more modest ambitions. They are generally content to concentrate on small issues and planning that is partial in ways more than one. Prevailing market pressures and governance styles prevent them from aiming at much more.

Over the years, very different forms of Planning have impacted cities, leaving complex overlaid legacies. So when one looks at a city, some of what one sees can be directly attributable to Planning and some can not. Some things 'just are', like birds in the trees, teenagers making a noise in the streets or stray dogs in Beyoglu. Some things are there as the result of some kind of planning decisions, while others are there in spite of some planning decisions. It is not easy to distinguish between them at first glance.

In these terms, Istanbul is a particularly fascinating place. Some of it is beautiful; much more of it is ugly. Many of the beautiful parts seem to be getting uglier, although some are being carefully tidied up, albeit in rather clichéd ways (for example in the use of European Capital of Culture money to repaint minarets in the Historical District). Some new arrivals are attractive enough in their own, rather unoriginal ways. Others are hideous. The question arises: 'what is driving this?' and 'why?'. Some parts clearly bear the mark of serious planning intentions; many more seem to be mistakes, or untouched by planning altogether. There seems no clear unifying logic to the patterns displayed before ones eyes; every view offers up new puzzles.

## Trying to Read Istanbul

It is said that Zaha Hadid studied Kartal by looking out the window of an aeroplane (she then produced a science fiction vision of a mega project that it is inconceivable will ever be built). As a yabancı (foreigner), like me, I wonder what she thought she was looking at. I have visited Istanbul many times, and love just to look at it. Coming from a small city the other side of Europe, the urban landscape of Istanbul is an endless puzzle. The wonderful architectural guide to Istanbul published by the Chamber of Architects is a superb source of information on its planning history and individual buildings and helps in piecing the jigsaw together. But much remains inexplicable.

Take, for example, the view of the European side from a Bosphorus ferryboat. Why are there so many new high-rise buildings shattering the skyline in an apparently meaningless pattern? And why are so many of them so ugly? How did the developers and architects get away with it?

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Or consider the view from a dolmus (minicab). Why are the roads so crowded and the pavements so unfriendly? Why don't Turkish people use road bridges? Won't the city soon grind to a halt, gridlocking and choking itself to 'death by automobile'?

The rapid expansion of the boundaries of Istanbul provokes more questions. Why are there so many new but ordinary (not reinforced) housing developments on the 'earthquake coast'? What motivates people to live in those robotic new tower blocks kilometres away from anywhere, and how do they earn their livings? Why are the planners and builders of developments like Kemer Country not in prison for environmental theft? Some of the answers to these questions may be rather obvious to you. But for an outsider it is hard to see the logic of many of the developments.

Many proposals for future development are even more puzzling. Does anybody apart from those making profits actually want all these mega-projects? Is Zaha Hadid serious or playing a joke on Topbas? Has anyone actually tried to demonstrate the benefits that monstrosities like the Dubai or Sapphire Tower will bring to the city? Why does Istanbul so often seem to be a land-bank for the well-connected and financially well-oiled?

And, why is so much new development backward looking? Istanbul seems to be trying to create a pastiche of 1950s America, when America itself is trying to get away from all that. It is bizarre that while cities in the rest of the world boast about how successful they have been at reducing car use, the mayor of Istanbul boasts about how many new roads he is building. Climate change predictions suggest that Istanbul will be one of the worst hit in Europe, heading for an environmental catastrophe within the next generation or two, unless something is done urgently. Hasn't anyone in the planning world noticed?

Questions of this kind bubble to the surface every time I visit Istanbul. My attempts to answer them have been through three stages.

### **First Impression: Istanbul as Chaos**

The simplest answer is that planning in Istanbul is fiction. The authorities labour hard to produce beautiful detailed maps, but they mean almost nothing, because outside the planning studio developers and local politicians just get on with business as they like it. Planning reflects Turkish society and culture generally. About half the Turkish economy is 'informal', and much of this presumably illegal. This means, in

economic terms at least, that the Turkish state is exceptionally weak (one reason perhaps why it places so much ideological emphasis on nationalism and religious identity). The public sector is underfunded partly because the state does not tax half the activity in the economy. The incoherent character of planning reflects the failure of the Republic over eighty years to establish a strong system of social obligations, civil society, and respect for the law.

It is not poor people who are responsible for the fragile grip of the Turkish state. There is no reason to assume that Turks are naturally any more chaotic than anyone else. The lack of legality, and the power of private social networks, have played into the hands of the advantaged since Ottoman times. The Revolution failed to change it. The problematic nature of urban development in Turkey manifests in the built environment the weaknesses of the political culture.

### **Second Impression: Istanbul as a Careless Palimpsest**

Thinking along these lines leads to the notion that the kaleidoscope presented to the eye by the landscape of Istanbul can be made sense of if we look on it as a partial palimpsest - a painting which has been painted over again and again by different artists creating different pictures.

The first thing any foreigner knows about Istanbul is that it is old. Recent archaeological research is revealing that it is actually much older than has been realised, with traces of civilisations predating the early Greeks by at least a millennium on the Asian side (under Uskudar) and Kadikoy. Istanbul was of course the world's first planned Christian city. The Sultanahmet Mosque is partly built out of material from the Christian Roman palace, much of which still lies underground.

It is not too hard to identify parts where Istanbul's late Ottoman, Republican and more recent 'Neoliberal' history has left distinctive patterns. After a brief flirtation with high Modernism, the architectural and town planning enthusiasms of the early Republic inclined towards Fascist models.<sup>[1]</sup> This led to the destruction of much of the Ottoman legacy (especially wooden buildings) and to the construction of some of the ugliest buildings in Turkey. More recently, the architectural and urban design fashions associated with the 'Neoliberal' era (the one that has just crashed) are also obvious to the eye. Maslakhattan, for example, is clearly a blob of imitative Americana, and deliberately so.<sup>[2]</sup> Dozens of shopping malls look as if they have been imported wholesale from Europe or the US. The

Neoliberal era has added an awful lot of could-be-anywhere architecture and thoughtless design. And much of it was built to last only a short time (unlike projects of the Romans, Byzantines, Ottomans or the early Republicans).

Even more temporary is the layer of paint and pixels that has descended on this and every other city in the last few years so that the way it looks can be changed almost at the touch of a button. Lighting and fireworks have become ubiquitous additions to the urban landscape under Neoliberalism, (echoing in the physical realm the constant change of images that are supposed to characterise modern human identities, or reproducing the diversity of the supermarket counter display). Six million coloured LEDs have turned the Bosphorus Bridge into a permanent light show. The Neoliberal city looks good, if you have mainstream tastes. But sadly not all of the Neoliberal 'layer' has been as temporary as this. The wave of development since the 1980s has left the city with many ugly and unviable legacies. The recession means that many buildings will remain uncompleted and unoccupied.

The short-term thinking behind much of the recent development is particularly evident in the destruction of so many of the few remaining urban green spaces. Partly in response, there has been a growing awareness of conservation and 'Green' issues. But their impact is still very hard to detect. The conservation industry has become important globally because people are increasingly aware that urban history is not merely something for historians - it can be a source of both pleasure and education. 'Popular history' books about cities are best sellers, and a historical sensitivity is nurtured in many cities through new museums that try to go beyond stereotypical notions of 'heritage'. It seems to be one of the peculiarities of Istanbul that its extraordinary historical resources - unique gems of world-historical significance - are underappreciated by locals, and endangered by local government planners who seem to have no understanding or respect. Istanbul has one of the best archaeological museums in the world, for example, although it is never busy and attracts visitors rather than locals. Perhaps the ideological emphasis in education on Islamic and Republican history is partly to blame.

The 'palimpsest' perspective helps make sense of the juxtapositions one constantly finds in Istanbul by pointing to historical explanations. But one of the most distinctive facts about Istanbul is how often this is not available. In February I attended an eye-opening talk as part of a conference hosted by the Istanbul

Chamber of Architects. The speaker carefully itemised building after prominent building, and explained how the origins, funding and planning concerning each were shrouded in secrecy. This suggests that one of the reasons Istanbul is so hard to 'read' is that much of what has happened has been deliberately shrouded in secrecy.

### **Third Impression: Istanbul as a Manifestation of Neo-Ottoman Secrecy**

Every building tells a story, but what exactly is it? From this perspective, Istanbul is a huge detective novel. But in a detective novel, the author gives you enough information to follow the plot and guess the answer. Not so Istanbul. The lecture about illegal skyscrapers revealed something very significant and distinctive.

As in all cities, the most recent 'layer' has been painted in a style familiar to all cities in the Neoliberal era. The latest additions to the urban landscape reflect the global trend for investment to flow to urban 'regeneration' projects, shopping malls, high-rise apartments, entertainment complexes, cultural industries, and so on. But even in these cases, the workings of the market are exceptionally opaque. The lack of public information about major developments is extraordinary from a West European viewpoint, as is the general lack of public concern about it. But it makes sense against the background that almost half of the Turkish economy is 'informal'. Much of what is going on is hidden from view. It is because of the deliberate 'invisibility' of much of the economic life that agencies such as the World Bank or International Monetary Fund perceive Turkey as so much less Neoliberal than other countries influenced by recent policy orthodoxies. Capitalist forces operate in less open ways here than elsewhere.

The 'Neoliberal boom' (just recently ended) gave rise around the world to a new urban middle class. Apparently about half the world's population now consider themselves to fall in the category of 'middle class'. The tastes and spending power of this social group have given rise to new cultural trends and a new service economy. This is as true of Istanbul as any other city. And one effect has been the rise of a fashion for things Ottoman. Ottoman style in architecture, interior design, music and even lingerie has apparently been very popular. Perhaps it is appropriate that this should be happening inside individual buildings. For there seems to have been something distinctively neo-Ottoman about the secrecy obscuring so much of the

dynamics behind the recent development of the urban landscape.

### Theorising the View

Secrecy is incompatible with democratic planning. For nineteenth century romantics, socialists and anarchists, planning was to be a way of bringing decisions that shape people's lives into the public arena. Planning would democratise development. Hitherto the working class had lived in cities built for monarchs or capitalists. Planning would give the working class a say. But other early planning thinkers aimed at a rather less democratic vision, in which they - a Platonic elite able to stand above everyday concerns - would get on with designing "objectively good" buildings and cities which the masses should be grateful to occupy and admire.

The second group won out, thanks to the rise of the state and the subordination of local to central government. Planning and direct democracy parted company as 'democracy' became a justification word applied to nation states (the number of which quadrupled between 1945 and 2000). Planning became an official profession, and planners became technocrats and bureaucrats licensed by (and mainly employed by) the state. They earn their living through the authority to grant or withhold 'state permits' to use land. The result was not only to build a wall of officialdom around the very idea of planning, but also to open up wonderful opportunities for corruption.

For Liberals this meant planning was inherently problematic. Not only did it mean state interference with individual choices, it would be susceptible to powerful elites clubbing together to pursue their private interests. Freedom would be lost to special interest group pressure. For Anarchists, the history of urban planning was one of an opportunity wasted; instead

of being a means for ordinary people to create space for autonomy, it became a tool of ruling class control. For Marxists, this was the inevitable effect of the entrenchment of capitalism as a global force, coercing or seducing people into ordered controllable ranks. Capitalism required that the city be planned for accumulation, not for emancipation. Cities were the projection in space of the divisive but contradictory nature of capitalism. For Postmodernists, the whole idea of emancipation is an illusion anyway. All we ever do is go round and round reinventing ourselves according to one or other discourse or 'social construction'. Planning is the servant of a dominant discourse, but no one is really better than any other.

Each of these grand theories suggests ways in which the urban landscape might be 'decoded'. Planning - both as intention and as outcome - is the social process whereby the dominant powers and perceptions prevailing in a city are translated into tangible impacts on a piece of land and particular groups of people. With this in mind, the physical and visual transformation of Istanbul is perhaps not so puzzling after all. For behind the confusing juxtaposition of images, some fairly familiar processes are at work. The evolution of the urban landscape is a visual expression of changing patterns of inequality of economic opportunity, cultural influence and political power. The patterns change a little, but the inequalities are constantly being reconstructed.

### References

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