

Urban characteristics of Istanbul: Problem or potential?

Ipek YUREKLI, Arda INCEOGLU

Istanbul Technical University, Faculty of Architecture, Istanbul, TURKEY

Received: September 2009 Final Acceptance: December 2010

Abstract:

In Turkey there is a general consensus on the evaluation of the urban environment. The general public as well as intellectual and academic circles will agree that something needs to be done in order to stop and then reverse the processes that destruct the city. On the other hand, urban life of Istanbul is flourishing in terms of variety and intensity, competing with major global metropolises. In other words, there are considerable tensions between the 'urban culture' of the city and the ideals of its citizens.

This paper focuses firstly on the analysis of the characteristics of Istanbul and then proposes a new perspective of understanding. This new perspective considers these characteristics as potential design and planning principles for future implementations. There is an urgent need for new perspectives on Istanbul as well as design approaches originating from these perspectives. This need arises from stereotypical methods to the understanding and design of the city. This paper tries to define the characteristics of Istanbul beyond these stereotypes. Urban characteristics of Istanbul are defined as continuous change, contradictions, incompleteness, ambiguity, heterogeneity and being unpossessed. Design approaches appropriate for stable, consistent, closed, definite, homogenous and possessed cities would not be appropriate for this city. When working for this city, the designer must be aware of the characteristics of Istanbul, allow for plurality and provide flexibility and open-endedness - even randomness if necessary. A new architecture, which can relate to its location and is unique, can be likely through this approach. The intensity and flexibility of uses within various public spaces of the city actually presents the potential for an energetic and humane architecture. Finally a design proposal based on the mentioned characteristics is discussed. This proposal presents a possible new way of integrating 'planning' and 'spontaneity'.

Keywords: *Istanbul, urban character, plurality, planning, spontaneity.*

1. Prejudices and stereotypes

To the right, Galata, her foreground a forest of masts and flags; above Galata, Pera, the imposing shapes of her European palaces outlined against the sky; in front, the bridge connecting the two banks, across

which flow continually two opposite, many hued streams of life; to the left, Stambul, scattered over her seven hills, each crowned with a gigantic mosque with its leaden dome and gilded pinnacle... the sky, in which are blended together the most delicate shades of blue and silver, throws everything into marvelous relief, while the water, of a sapphire blue and dotted over with little purple buoys, reflects the minarets in long trembling lines of white; the cupolas glisten in the sunlight; all that mass of vegetation sways and palpitates in the morning air... to deny this is the most beautiful sight on earth would be churlish indeed, as ungrateful toward God as it would be unjust to his creation; and it is certain that anything more beautiful would surpass mankind's powers of enjoyment.'

Edmondo de Amicis's first impression of İstanbul, (Çelik, 1993).

Istanbul is a city that is able to carry the weight of the mythology generated by its own glorious past. It is also one of the few cities that manage to exist next to, above of and in-between history due to the strength of its contemporary life. An accumulation of layers, rhythms, lives, textures and topography simultaneously create the character of this city. It is unavoidable that the romantic image; before and after a visit; in the minds of travelers of Istanbul will be insufficient to represent this enormous metropolis. Eco (1999) defines Istanbul as 'one of the cities one can understand gradually only if approached without fears and prejudices'.

It is inevitable that in a new city an alien gaze will search for known images. Eldem (1996) makes a similar observation: *'Even travelers of the most benign intentions find it extremely difficult, because of the obstacles they encounter in establishing a relation directly with the local residents, to observe the city with a new eye, which requires peeling away what has been recounted by a majority of those who have come before them and the members of certain established intermediary circles.'* Simultaneously, this search also expects a city structure that does not change to a great extent. Such a change would result in images incongruent with the stereotype followed by dissatisfaction. Expecting from a dynamic and huge metropolis such as Istanbul not to change is a natural result of the voyeuristic mode of tourism. That mode prefers to view cities isolated from their profane daily lives, or worse, reduces daily life to a visual performance. Stereotypes on any place can become disturbing for its inhabitants as clichés separated from their context. Said (1978) defines orientalism as 'a western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient' as a result of similar frustrations. In the case of Istanbul the orientalist perspective does not have much to say on daily, non-touristy Istanbul. Perspectives that will go beyond these stereotypical understandings of Istanbul are necessary.

2. Characteristics of Istanbul

Kuper (2003) mentions how his stereotype of Turkey 'hot sun, hot people' has changed because of the very cold weather on his first visit in the month of March to a snow-covered Istanbul; consequently changing his approach towards its people as well. Most prejudices are destined for annihilation. Western-generated images of the Orient exemplify such prejudices. On the other hand, the speed of change of Istanbul in social, economic, political and physical aspects is so fast and intensive to redeem any analysis incorrect very quickly. 'Change' is one of the major and unchanging characteristics of this city.

The distinction between the concepts of temporary – permanent and their spatial reflections are quite unique in Istanbul. Unlike other places, this distinction is ambiguous and their boundaries are blurry. Besides, temporal usage of both public and private space is very common to unexpected extents: Figure 1 shows a daily scene from early 19th century Harem, illustrating temporal usage of space at the very top of social hierarchy.

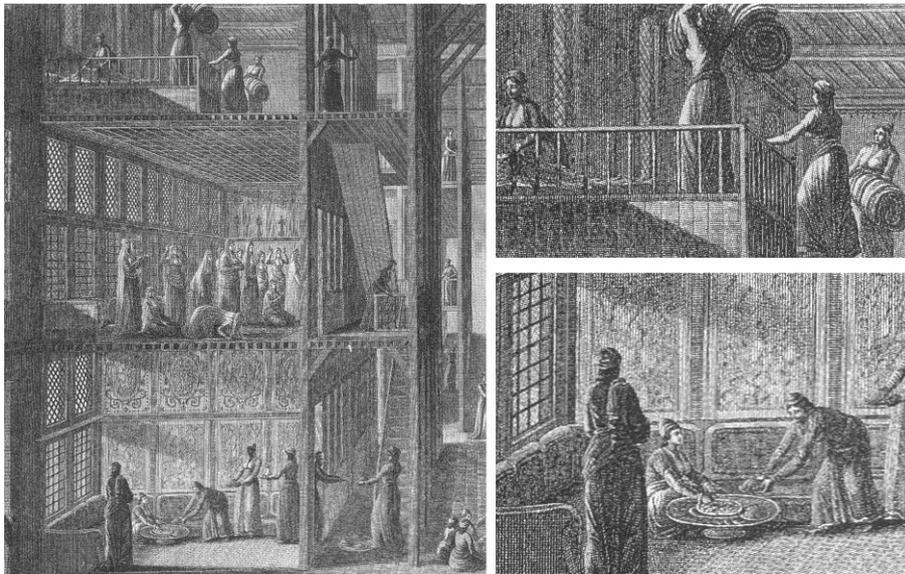


Figure 1. Melling's (1819) drawing of Topkapi Palace, a section from the Harem (Kuban, 1996). Details showing the temporal usage of interior space, even in the imperial palace.

First detail shows ladies setting up beds for the night, carrying rolls of mattresses out of closets and laying them on the barren floor. The reverse process takes place in the morning and repeats every day. Second detail shows ladies preparing for dinner. The low table is actually not a static table; it is a *sini*, a large tray placed on supports. The tray is brought in for dinner and then taken out after it is finished. It is striking to see all the equipment used for these two well-established human activities are transitory even in the palace. Once the mattress and tray are away, there is no indication of what has occurred in this room.

It should also be noted that in Istanbul major religious buildings are made of masonry, whereas most houses were made of timber. As Corbusier noted, houses for the heavenly inhabitants of the city are permanent but their counterparts for earthly inhabitants are transitory (Tanju, 2003). (Figure 2)

Today it is useless and inadequate to look for the Istanbul that has 'a harmonious structure without contradictions' as depicted by Le Corbusier in 'Journey to the East'. Today's Istanbul strives with its 'contradictions'. Simultaneously being both-this-and-that is a characteristic of Istanbul stemming



Figure 2. Le Corbusier, silhouette of Istanbul, from 'Journey to the East'.

from its very origin. *'Constantinople, as a new Christian city, represented both an end and a beginning; the end of the Pagan Roman Empire and the beginning of the Christian Roman Empire.'* (Downey, 1960, 1991). Today the harsh and chaotic side of Istanbul as a center of trade and production is in very close proximity to its calm and relaxing side. The major recreational area of the city, the Bosphorus is also a major international seaway.

Richness and poverty; chaos of a metropolis and calm of a village are literally side-by-side in Istanbul. It is interesting to discover that this duality has been a characteristic of Istanbul since its very origin. *'There were in general no fashionable quarters in Constantinople, and the visitor could see wealthy establishments flanked by modest or even poor houses.'* (Downey, 1960, 1991). It is possible to observe that phenomenon in 19th century photographs of the city as well, as described by Çelik (1993) *'The image the city presented when viewed from the Sea of Marmara was deceptive – a fact that every traveler discovered as soon as he landed on the shore. Istanbul was run-down and neglected.'* Generations educated by continuous statements on how a past not experienced was better, more beautiful and more orderly have a hard time in comprehending the contradiction between the nostalgia for that old Istanbul and the poverty and incompleteness of the same city reflected in photographs.

'Incompleteness' can be evaluated as an enormous potential for design as well as the experience of the city allowing possibilities beyond closed and finite city systems. As a result, an architectural approach ahead of the decisions of the designer(s) becomes a possibility; which is in close association with the daily and the ordinary; and based on the 'event.'

Connah (2000) suggests that exactly as literature or poetry, architectural 'events' let us to derive meanings from the world and the environment around us. Events allow us to perceive our location and time. According to Virilio (2000) world history and time with all its meanings are landscapes of events; as they are the events that make up the history and they are the events that we largely remember. Architecture is an event, resulting from the intersection of forces capable of situating an object that is partially signifying (de Sola-Morales, 1997). Products of architecture become meaningful by the events they contain, and in a way, begin to exist. The term 'eventful architecture' by Tschumi (1994) belongs to the architectural literature already. According to Tschumi events must be distinguished from the program. Whereas 'program' encompasses expected uses and behaviors, 'event', on the contrary, includes the unexpected; it may release the hidden potentialities in a program, location and situation (Tschumi, 1994). As an interesting example for an attempt to relate architectural design on events we can look at Lerner Student Center in Columbia University. Tschumi located mailboxes of the students at the core of the building, expecting this area to become a location for informal and unplanned interaction due to frequent usage. In other words, he was generating a space for potential events to occur. However, the same location became quite an empty area after the completion of the building, since at that time the students started to use e-mail much more frequently to communicate. Events include surprises for everyone, and they are only partially computable. This truth can lead architecture much beyond the levels its designer has expected or calculated for. According to Karatani (1995) too, architecture is based on 'events' and thus has a character of being unpredictable and ambiguous.

'Ambiguity' influences Istanbul by its climate, the possibility of a large earthquake, multiple systems overlapping not necessarily in a meaningful fashion, delays, cancellations, dislocations, different perceptions. As a consequence of the continuous change in concepts, blurring of definitions, integration and overlapping of categories with each other and similar conditions in today's world the concept of absolute truth loses its validity and capacity. Instead of borders and boundaries, interfaces become more crucial, and the need for flexible structures that are adaptable to ambiguous situations emerge.

Stressing the unpredictable, uncertain and ambiguous nature of architecture, Karatani gives the example of a game where 'we play and make up the rules as we go along' of Wittgenstein. Parallels are drawn between architecture and mathematics because of the impossibility of predicting the result. Architecture is unpredictable because it has many differing participants and it is not an independent construct. The architect faces various participants as 'the others', in that respect the architect encounters the unknown. There will be different rules for each participant. Since architecture is a mode of communication it cannot contain predefined and common rules (Karatani, 1995). Architecture is an open-ended system with its abundant variables and ambiguities. Agrest (1991) proposes that architecture exists in the indeterminate and transitory state between the realm of 'design' as a closed system and 'non-design' as a system generated by differing cultural systems. The concept of 'non-plan', as widely discussed in the 1960's, explaining the impossibility of integrating architecture into large-scale planning due to the influence and demands of ordinary people and their daily lives unavoidably belongs to architecture (Hughes, Sadler, 2000).

The terms 'unitary urbanism' and 'principle of disorientation' set forth by Constant (1960) to describe his New Babylon project (Figure 3) can be interpreted as manifestoes celebrating the ambiguous nature of cities. *'The static constructions of architects and town planners are thrown away. Everybody becomes an architect, practicing a never-ending, all embracing 'unitary urbanism'. Nothing will be fixed. The new urbanism exists in time; it is the activation of the temporary, the emergent and transitory, the changeable, the volatile, the variable, the immediately fulfilling and satisfying.'* There is a striking parallel between New Babylon as Constant describes it and today's Istanbul. All concepts New Babylon is based upon are basic elements of the character of Istanbul. These concepts, on the other hand, generally have negative connotations for both popular and intellectual public in Turkey in the context of cities. It is possible to speculate that Istanbul is actually New Babylon, without anybody noticing it and not fulfilling related potentials. *'The old sense of orientation within a clear spatial order gives way to a pervasive principle of disorientation. The opportunity of disorientation will increase the potential for exploration and so promote a highly intensive use of the space. As a result of this intensification, space and time will be placed in a new, dynamic relationship.'* (Constant Nieuwenhuys, 1973) (Wigley, 1998).

'Heterogeneity' embedded within the nature of Istanbul becomes particularly evident in man-made elements. *'Aside from foreign visitors, the residents of Constantinople were themselves of mixed origin, just as the empire itself had been cosmopolitan from the beginning. It was characteristic of the city that some of its leading figures had not been born there.'* (Downey, 1960, 1991). The same is true for Istanbul of 20th century, with few exceptions; most

leading figures of the city in the last fifty years have been immigrants. *'Except the commercial center, where people of different religions and ethnic groups worked side-by-side, the neighborhoods of Istanbul were ethnically organized in 19th century. Muslims, the largest group, lived in the central part of the peninsula; Armenians, Greeks, and Jews were concentrated along the shores.'* (Çelik, 1993). Istanbul does not have districts or neighborhoods divided by ethnicity or religion anymore, however it has many areas where people from the same area have emigrated. People living in close proximity of other emigrants from the same region is actually one of the main characteristics of illegal settlements that have spread up at the perimeters of the city in the second half of 20th century.



Figure 3. *New Babylon by Constant.*

Istanbul has always been a city of emigrants. It should be of no surprise that illegal and squatter settlements cover extensive areas in various parts of the city. Social, economic and political problems associated with this phenomenon aside, squatter settlements can be analyzed for their architectural potential. Ribbeck (1993) emphasizes the rationality of informal settlements in various parts of the world. *'Completely in contrast to usual notions, modern spontaneous settlements of the urban periphery are subject to extremely rational patterns of arrangement. It appears that the informal modernism of peripheral architecture has often found an informal style, which is closely related to the principles of early modernism.'* (Ribbeck, 1993). Besides being strikingly rational, this 'architecture' is very spontaneous, economic, brings together contradictory elements and allows people to utilize their energies to create a habitat for themselves. Since there are various definitions of illegality and informality, it is impossible to quote a single figure about the percentage of illegal housing: according to definition the figure varies between 30%-60%. Such a large amount makes those settlements a defining aspect of the characteristics of a city.

Today, being a citizen of Istanbul is accepted as a super-identity. Even more, it can be suggested that it is not accepted as an identity. Citizens of Istanbul, when asked about the city they are from (they belong to), generally refer to the original locations their families or they emigrated from. Even second or third generation immigrants coming from all various locations of Anatolia or areas once belonged to the Ottoman Empire prefer to define themselves according to these original and 'old' identities instead of preferring to become citizens of Istanbul.

Istanbul being an 'unpossessed' city and also a city bringing together people of plentiful origins stems back hundreds of years. According to Orhan Pamuk, even at times of isolation from the rest of the world, citizens of Istanbul have felt alienated. 'According to the point of view, the city feels either too eastern or too western to its people, creating a feeling of uneasiness and an anxiety of un-belonging to the city.' (Pamuk, 2003). Thus, Istanbul remains unpossessed, since no one claims its possession.

After those discussions, the characteristics of the city of Istanbul can be described as:

- continuous change,
- temporary usage of space,
- contradictions,
- incompleteness,
- ambiguity,
- heterogeneity,
- being unpossessed

It should be evident that design approaches appropriate for stable, permanent, consistent, closed, definite, homogenous and possessed cities will not be proper for this city. Besides, the designer must also face the weight of the history that instinctively tries to conserve in opposition with the drive to create a new layer within a multi-layered city. When working for Istanbul, the designer must be aware of those characteristics, allow for plurality, provide flexibility and open-endedness, even randomness if necessary.

3. Public spaces and planning

There is a significant potential for open-air uses in Istanbul. Having four seasons and a mild climate, various outdoors activities are possible for the most of the year. Open public spaces, public squares, both shores of Bosphorus and street markets are used by citizens extensively. It is striking, however, that any of major public spaces are neither designed nor planned.

Overall definitive characteristics of Istanbul are also applicable to its poorly organized open public spaces, in particular for its public squares used around the clock by a large number of people. In a metropolis like Istanbul, public squares generally have a multi-layered characteristic, with a multiplicity of phenomena overlapping continuously. Taksim, Kadıköy, Eminönü, Beyazıt are such places (Figures 4, 5). Taksim for example, is a center of culture, art, rehabilitation, information, shopping and it is also a traffic junction, a meeting point and a celebration place simultaneously which is being used day and night (Figure 6).



Figure 4. *Eminönü Square. Public space as a junction of cross-roads.*



Figure 5. *Eminönü Square. Public space as shopping market.*



Figure 6. *Taksim Square. Tens of thousands of people per day cross it, pass by it, go to it. Public space as the junction of various events.*

4. Spontaneous planning – Is it possible?

In the design of open-air activity structures for the Istanbul UIA Congress the team of Yürekli, İnceoğlu and Aslan utilized the characteristics outlined before as design principles. The project was awarded the 3rd prize in the national design competition. The design attempts to use the characteristics as outlined in the paper with the potentials of open air public spaces of the city.

The design is flexible; instead of a single product a system that can adopt itself to its geographical and cultural surroundings is designed. The structure can host different activities related to time of day, users and location. Figure 7 illustrates different parts that can be brought together according to the site necessities: a structural framework; open and enclosed spaces; exhibition surfaces; projection surfaces; a vertical park element consisting of vines; children play elements. Activities other than UIA related events are welcome too, actually all citizen involvement is encouraged. Daily activities such as children playgrounds are integrated into the design to relate the system to the daily life of the city. The design is by its definition incomplete: the system is open-ended and needs to be changed, modified, re-designed to accommodate various activities. The design suggests a different approach to architectural planning and design, that is strongly based on the characteristics of Istanbul: an incomplete, open ended system that can be transformed without losing its character by its users. Thus the resulting design is never fixed and frozen as well as dictated solely by the architect, but it is a consensus solidified by different people.

It is flexible and adoptable; its configuration is open to 'continuous change' according to its location. The functions in and around the design are not fixed and change at different times of the day, creating a 'temporary usage of space'. Allowing formal and informal usages the design welcomes 'contradictions'. The design also welcomes adaptation by its users, thus it is 'incomplete', there is no one single correct way of utilizing it. Since the design contains open, semi-open and enclosed spaces it embraces 'ambiguity'. The design is also 'heterogeneous', is has a multiplicity of materials, constructions and forms. Finally, it does not belong to any institution or individual; it is 'unpossessed' as the city it is located in.

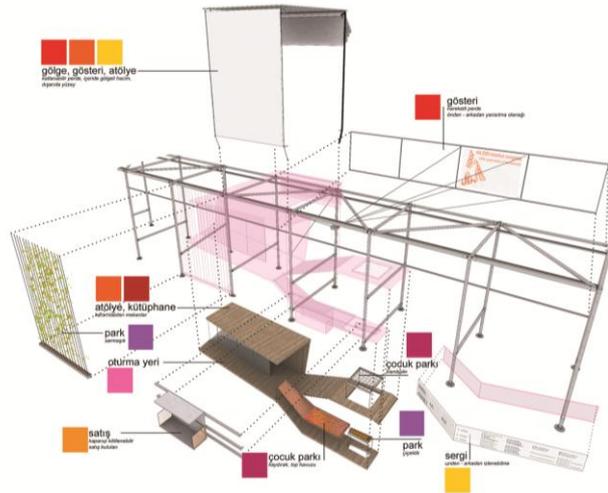


Figure 7. The System



Figure 8. One possible configuration of the System.

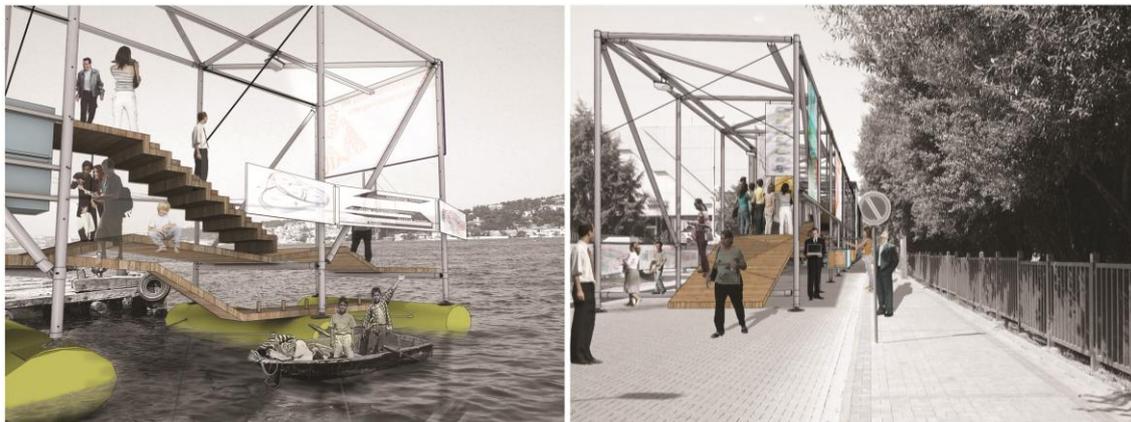


Figure 9. Different locations – different layouts.

us, then it may be possible to use the things we have been fighting against to our advantage and develop more positive and constructive approaches in design and planning.

The intention of this paper is to contribute to the discussion of the urban environment based on a more positive understanding. It is true that although there are serious problems related to the quality of the physical environment in Turkey, these problems do not always necessitate or result in a lower quality of the urban life. We believe that there are inherent problems with our current evaluation system outlined above. Such a system of evaluating urban environments closes down all possibilities of utilizing the potentials stemming from the unique character of urban environments, considering all potentially fruitful mechanisms as disturbances that need to be changed and regularized in order to achieve an environment with a higher quality.

Architects, planners and institutions working for Istanbul need to re-evaluate their value systems particularly for urban design to be able to utilize the enormous potential the city offers to designers. Such a new approach may include aspects such as continuous change, temporal usage of space, contradictions, incompleteness, ambiguity, heterogeneity and being unpossessed outlined as the main characteristics of Istanbul. Through such an approach a new architecture, which can relate to its location and is unique, can be likely.

Bibliography

- Agrest, D. I. (1991). **Architecture from Without: Theoretical Framings for a Critical Practice**, MIT Press, Cambridge
- Connah, R. (2000). **How Architecture Got its Hump**, MIT Press, Cambridge
- Çelik, Z. (1993). **The Remaking of Istanbul; Portrait of an Ottoman City in the Nineteenth Century**, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- Downey, G. (1960, 1991). **Constantinople in the Age of Justinian**, Dorset Press, New York
- Eco, U. (1999). 'Tek ve Ruhani Üçlü Olarak İstanbul (Istanbul as the Single and Spiritual Trinity)', **Atlas**, January 1999, pp.14-26
- Eldem, E. (1996). 'Ottoman Period İstanbul', **Istanbul - World City**, History Foundation Publications, İstanbul
- Hughes, J. Sadler, S. (2000). **Non-Plan: Essays on Freedom Participation and Change in Modern Architecture and Urbanism**, Eds. Hughes, J., Sadler, S. Architectural Press, Oxford
- Karatani, K. (1995). **Architecture as Metaphor: Language, Number, Money**, MIT Press, Cambridge
- Kuban, D. (1996). **Istanbul an Urban History; Byzantium, Constantinopolis, İstanbul**, The Economic And Social History Foundation Of Turkey, İstanbul
- Kuper, S. (2003). **Futbol Asla Sadece Futbol Değildir (Football against the Enemy)**, İthaki Yayınları, İstanbul
- Pamuk, O. (2003). **İstanbul; Hatıralar ve Şehir (Istanbul; Memories and the City)**, YKY, İstanbul
- Ribbeck, E. (1993). 'The Peripheries as Laboratory', **Daidalos**, 50, 1993, pp.96-105
- Said, E. W. (1979). **Orientalism**, Vintage Books, New York
- De Sola-Morales, (1997). **Differences**, MIT Press, Cambridge

- Tanju, B. (2003). 'Charles-Edouard Jeanneret'nin Doğu'ya Yolculuğu' (Charles-Edouard Jeanneret's Journey to the East), *Sanat Dünyamız*, 87, 2003, pp.123-133
- Tschumi, B. (1994). *Architecture and Disjunction*, MIT Press, Cambridge
- Virilio, P. (2000). *A Landscape of Events*, MIT Press, Cambridge
- Wigley, M. (1998). *Constant's New Babylon; The Hyper-Architecture of Desire*, 010 Publishers, Rotterdam

İstanbul'un kentsel karakteri: Problem veya potansiyel?

Türkiye'de kentsel çevrenin değerlendirilmesi üzerinde oldukça geniş bir uzlaşma söz konusudur. Genel kamuoyu olduğu kadar akademik çevreler de kentsel çevrenin bozulmasının durdurulması için yapılması gerekenler olduğunda hemfikirdir. Diğer yandan ise, İstanbul'un kent yaşamı giderek çeşitlenmekte ve zenginleşmekte; bu açıdan rahatlıkla dünya metropollerini ile rekabet edebilmektedir. Bir anlamda, 'kentsel kültür' ile kentin kullanıcıları arasında ciddi gerilimler mevcuttur.

Bu yazı İstanbul'un kentsel karakterinin analizi üzerine odaklanmakta ve yeni bir değerlendirme perspektifi sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bu perspektif kentsel karakteristiklerin planlama ve tasarım çabalarında birer potansiyel olarak görülmelerini önermektedir. İstanbul üzerine yeni bakış açılarının olduğu kadar bunlardan yola çıkan tasarım yaklaşımlarının da oluşturulması acilen gerekmektedir. Bu gereksinim kenti anlamak ve tasarlamakta kullanılan yöntemlerin klişeleşmişliklerinden kaynaklanmaktadır. Bir kent hakkındaki klişeler kentliler için, bağlamından koparılan biçimsellikler olarak çok rahatsız edici olabilirler. Bu yazı İstanbul kentinin karakteristiklerini mevcut klişelerin ötesinde tanımlamayı amaçlamaktadır. İstanbul'un belirgin karakteristikleri 'sürekli değişim; çelişkiler; bitmemişlik; belirsizlik; heterojenlik ve sahipsizlik' olarak tanımlanmıştır. 'Statik, tutarlı, kapalı, belirli, homojen ve sahipli' şehirlerde uygulanabilen planlama ve tasarım yaklaşımları İstanbul için uygun değildir. Böylesi bir kentte çalışan bir tasarımcı, kentin karakteristiklerinden haberdar olmalı, çoğul esnek ve açık uçlu süreçlere ve hatta tesadüfiliğe hazır olmalıdır. Yeri ile ilişki kurabilen yeni ve özgün bir mimarlık bu şekilde mümkün olabilir. Kentsel kamusal alanlardaki kullanımların yoğunluğu ve esnekliği enerjik ve insanca bir mimarlık için potansiyeller sunmaktadır. Burada tartışılan tasarım örneği bahsedilen karakteristikleri temel almaktadır. Bu tasarım 'planlama' ile 'spontanelik' ilişkisinin kurulabileceği yeni bir yaklaşımı ortaya koymaktadır.