

ISTANBUL, NOVEMBER 2009

ISTANBUL'S CHOICE: OPENNESS

Asu Aksoy, visiting fellow at Goldsmiths College, London, and in charge of Santral Istanbul at Istanbul Bilgi University.

In the context of Turkey's accelerating membership negotiations with the European Union, and the popularity of the neo-liberal outlook within the Islamic AKP (Justice and Development) government, a more confidently outward-oriented, globalising and liberal-minded Istanbul has been emerging over the last decade. This changing mood and orientation in Istanbul is a positive sign for the rest of Turkey, as Istanbul has not only effectively become the country's leading city, but also a microcosm of Anatolia. Istanbul's predominantly migrant population comes from all over Anatolia, and they maintain their links and networks with the rest of the country. Thus, if this megalopolis of around 15 million can hold on to its perspective of what might be termed 'worldliness' – a combination of openness, liberalism, pragmatism, democratic culture, and global embeddedness – then this momentum would help Turkey become more centrally and deeply engaged with, and implicated in, world affairs. Turkey would finally leave behind the remnants of the inward-looking modality that has hitherto marginalised the country and condemned its people to provincialism and isolation.

Hrant Dink's murder in early 2007 put the tentative and fragile nature of this new cultural orientation into perspective. The murder of Dink – an Istanbul-based journalist, writer and civil rights activist of Armenian origin – by a youth with ultra-nationalist connections in front of the office of the newspaper he edited, demonstrated that if there has been a certain opening up, diversification and reinterpretation of the mental maps of Turkey over the last two decades or so, this has been accompanied by a simultaneous convergence of reactionary positions whose common denominator seems to be precisely the fear of openness. What has surfaced is the precariousness of the culture of openness, now increasingly challenged by the very tensions

it has given rise to. Hence, how the public culture of Istanbul develops is central to the position that Turkey will adopt in the global world order. Istanbul's insistence on the virtues of openness, over and against regressive and nationalistic calls for defensive closure, will make all the difference.

Istanbul's pull into the force field of globalisation is affecting deeply-rooted ways of thinking and acting. With its new spaces and cultures of consumerism, its expanding and deepening financial flows in the real estate and service industries, and its new mechanisms for the global integration of local cultures through commodification, globalisation is making irreversible entries into the daily life of the city, forcing change in urban spaces and on public culture. But it is far from clear how this process of globalisation might translate into an orientation towards worldliness in the city's public cultural life. As the city opens itself up to the contemporary global order, the issue confronting Istanbul is not the choice between openness and closure, but a choice about the kinds of openness it will admit. Crucial to this debate is the city's potential to articulate a counterweight to fundamentalist neo-liberalism by enhancing a democratic modality of worldliness. In the face of the uncompromising forces of urban globalisation now assaulting Istanbul, openness could be diminished to the status of a market-driven and market-shaped culture of self-interest. In this context, Istanbul's choice should be for a kind of openness that deepens democratisation through empowerment of the excluded and the disadvantaged. What is not known is whether the elements for this culture of worldliness to be elaborated are present or emerging, or do not yet exist, in globalising Istanbul.

Istanbul, in fact, has thrown itself open to a new round of urban globalisation. When the Directorate of Privatisation

Administration sold 100,000 square metres of National Highways Authority land in Zincirlikuyu to a Turkish business group for US\$ 800 million in 2007, the price of land in this central business area increased substantially. Shortly thereafter, the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality finalised the bidding process for a 46,000 square metre warehouse space belonging to the Istanbul Transport Authority, situated immediately adjacent to the Highway Authority's land. It was sold to a Dubai-based real estate company for US\$ 705 million, with future plans to build the Istanbul 'Dubai Towers', Istanbul's tallest building, at an estimated cost of US\$ 5 billion now on hold. With this municipal sale, the value of property in the area rose to US\$ 15,000 per square metre – surpassing average values in the central business districts of London and Tokyo. What was shocking was the speed with which the price of land almost doubled between these two sales, indicating the appetite of global real estate investors for sites in Istanbul.

And there is plenty of land. The transfer of land to global commercial interests is no longer limited to one particular area of the city, as was the case in the mid-1980s. Public spaces located around the city are coming up, one by one, for large-scale privatisation and development initiatives. Public authorities and municipalities are not wasting any time to facilitate the sale of public land. Massive stretches of land around both the Galataport and Haydarpaşa zones, situated at the two key entrance ports from the Anatolian and European sides of the Bosphorus, are now being considered for redevelopment. Considering that there is also the political will to support privatisation – Prime Minister Erdoğan recently declared that his duty is to market his country – Istanbul is going to witness more and more global capital pouring into its beleaguered urban space.

Thus the new round of globalisation in Istanbul is primarily real estate driven. As Çağlar Keyder has remarked, 'land has finally become a commodity'. It is within this context that the recent political initiative to push through large-scale urban regeneration programmes targeting neighbourhoods with low-quality housing or derelict but historically valuable properties should be evaluated. Policymakers at both the local and central levels are now frantically drawing up metropolitan-scale visions and plans

to put in place the infrastructure required for the next round of investments. Cash-strapped municipal authorities are finding solutions through large-scale projects undertaken by powerful investment and construction companies.

The head of TOKİ, the Prime Ministry's Housing Development Administration, declared that half of Istanbul's housing stock (approximately 3 million buildings) would have to be replaced over the next 20 years; work would begin in 20 slum-housing areas. Istanbul's residents – whether in Sulukule or in Süleymaniye within the historic centre's city walls, in Tarlabaşı in the Pera district or Zeytinburnu to the West of the city – are now subject to municipal programmes involving the expropriation of private properties in return for cash compensation or relocation to new developments in the far periphery. Thus, the historic Tarlabaşı district in Beyoğlu, with its abandoned Greek Orthodox churches and its streets of dilapidated nineteenth-century houses – now occupied by Kurdish populations from the South-East of Turkey living side by side with local gypsy populations and illegal African immigrants – is targeted for clean up. This will entail turning the houses into 'attractive' residences with parking spaces and shopping areas; façades being one of the few remnants to be retained of the area's unique character. Across the city, construction companies are soon set to start pulling down entire neighbourhoods. This work is carried out in abeyance of an explicit regeneration and redevelopment agenda to turn city spaces into money-making assets: sites to accommodate the demands of the city's newly expanding wealth or for tourism, for heritage, shopping, entertainment and large-scale events.

In this new round of globalisation, global investments invade the most profitable areas, ones that are no longer associated with the industrial profile of the city. Investors are attracted to the skyrocketing consumer demand for high-quality housing, recreational and retail facilities, and not surprisingly, for cultural tourism. One by one, industrialised areas are being transformed; as stated by metropolitan mayor, Kadir Topbaş, 'Istanbul should shed its industrial profile... Istanbul should, from now on, become a financial centre, a cultural centre, and a congress tourism centre.' Results of this shift can already be seen in a 550 hectares (5.5 km²) large redevelopment project, master planned by

Zaha Hadid, and designated for an industrial area in the Kartal district along the Marmara shore on the Anatolian side, that hosts more than 100 factories. As part of the project, the former Mayor of Kartal had announced plans to attract US\$ 5 billion from foreign investors to develop a yacht marina accommodating 1,000 boats, plus hotels, residences and plazas. In response, some 26 industrial landowners with factories in Kartal have started to move their production base, getting ready to turn their much sought-after land into shopping and recreational centres.

The project of globalising Istanbul initiated in the mid-1980s is now being fully realised. But this is a new round of urban globalisation. In the 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the global vision achieved partial and piecemeal results. This earlier phase was distinguished by real estate developments (shopping centres, residential complexes and commercial headquarters), which did not touch most of the city, nor did they have a large impact on the daily lives of its citizens. Instead, they remained sequestered projects of the city's globalising elite, driven mainly by the Turkish-origin conglomerate capital. Istanbul thus entered the new millennium as a dual city. Now every part of the city is exposed to radical change as more and more land is pulled into the market sphere, catapulting the whole of Istanbul into an irreversible process of large-scale urban development. It is an overwhelming and all-encompassing transformation owing to the alliance of national and local political will as well as economic interests, but it is also happening because of the scale and scope with which global capital has entered the city.

This new round of urban globalisation is not driven by real estate alone. It is also a cultural project. As public spaces fall one by one within the ambit of design and management projects (invariably extensions of global property development companies), the city's public space has become a business proposition conceptualised in terms of consumption and recreation.

The Kanyon shopping centre, recently opened in Istanbul's central business district of Maslak, illustrates how public space has been incorporated into the culture of hyper-consumption. In as much as it covers a nearly 38,000 square metres plot of land,

the centre literally transforms a huge public space into an affluent middle-class consumption arena; and it is not just a mere shopping experience. Four floors wrap around a canyon-like open-air environment to evoke the sense of being in a street lined with upmarket retail outlets, well-groomed street vendors selling traditional food from designer carts, and arty street-lighting and furniture. The publicity material boasts, however, that most walking areas are covered and climate controlled with natural light and open air allowing visitors to enjoy every season without suffering its excesses. What Kanyon offers, then, is a new interpretation and a new culture of the experience of the city and its variety of streets.

In similar fashion, local authorities are initiating large-scale programmes using culture as a vehicle to regenerate city quarters. The Beyoğlu Municipality was the first to allow private developers to turn an entire street in a run-down part of the old Pera district into a themed street, based on the French lifestyle. Changing the name of the street from Algeria Street to French Street, everything, from street furniture, sculptures and wall paintings to the design of the restaurant interiors, was styled to evoke a certain image of Montmartre. The street, once a public space, is now a commercial area managed by a business association dictating the outdoor music, the architectural features, and advertising. At one point, there was even an attempt to install security guards at the entrance to the street in order to monitor the flow of 'customers'.

New urban regeneration projects and residential developments all come with a cultural approach to urban living. Culture is used to promote lifestyle. According to the marketing concept for one massive residential development project on the Anatolian side of Istanbul, My World Ataşehir, the new urban culture is informed by a dream of a world perfectly and completely thought through: here 'you will find the life you are looking for'. Residents live happily within their own self-contained environments, with their own kind of people, without having to rub shoulders with others (even the next-door neighbours); they need only to leave their enclaves for work, and on weekends to travel downtown for a bit of heritage or arts.

In Istanbul, culture and its various signifiers are shifting: in its anthropological sense as a way of life, in

its economic sense as a business opportunity, and in its symbolic sense as a seat of power and status. Investing in art and culture has become the fashion of the day, and major business conglomerates and their foundations are competing with one another for suitable spaces to build arts and cultural centres. After the opening of Istanbul Modern, founded by the Eczacıbaşı family, one of the city's prominent business families, came the recent announcement from the Suna and İnan Kıraç Foundation to turn the centrally located TÜYAP area – owned by the metropolitan municipality – into an international centre for culture and arts with a US\$ 160 million cultural complex designed by Frank Gehry funded by the Kıraç Foundation's US\$ 500 million for arts and culture. For the first time, foreign involvement in the traditionally closed off arts and culture sector is occurring through joint venture agreements and collaborations; a five-year agreement for artistic and scientific cooperation between the Sabancı Museum and the Louvre will bring cultural capital in the form of exhibitions, know-how and networking to Istanbul.

Culture is implicated in everything now. Companies use culture to enhance their image as sponsor, but investment in arts and culture also brings with it a higher profile and stature – elements which in turn help to boost a city's overall appearance to investors, visitors and residents alike. The central government as well as the local municipalities are now undertaking huge cultural infrastructure projects. In the centre of the city, the Atatürk Cultural Centre (AKM) in Taksim and the Muhsin Ertuğrul Theatre Hall in Harbiye both illustrate the trend of targeting existing cultural facilities for demolition in order to build super-modern, prestigious and multi-functional cultural spaces. In the case of AKM, however, redevelopment will take place instead of demolition, owing to the public outcry about the building's secular and republican symbolism.

Central and local authorities of the AKP have instigated a number of key initiatives – for example, the Istanbul 2010 European Cultural Capital project – explicitly aimed at using Istanbul's cultural assets and resources to improve the global image of the city (and thereby the country). The Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality's recently completed masterplan makes a great deal of its competitiveness by investing in

culture to project a contemporary image of the city. Concepts about 'city branding' and 'image marketing' have thus entered into the city's political vocabulary. Neo-liberal strategists use culture as a tool for revenue generation as well as tourism – approximately 30 million visitors to Istanbul are anticipated in 2010. Although initiated by the private sector, this cultural renaissance maintains the support from the government in the form of legal and regulatory changes, including a controversial new law for the 'renewal' of historic areas (Law 5366), in addition to well-financed programmes for the development and promotion of the city's cultural and tourism infrastructure. Central government has committed an investment equivalent to the Ministry of Culture and Tourism's annual budget towards the restoration and regeneration of the city's rich cultural heritage as part of the Istanbul 2010 programme. Istanbul's bid to become a global 'open city' involves transforming its image, creating what Mayor Kadir Topbaş refers to as 'a city with a different attitude towards the world.'

As featured in *The New York Times*, Istanbul is enjoying a renaissance. Regarded as one of the most dynamic cities in the world, Istanbul is open to change, and, indeed, is changing fast. And not only that. In 2005 *Newsweek* magazine featured 'Cool Istanbul: Europe's Hippest City'. The picture on the front cover displayed a scene of a scantily dressed young man and woman dancing to dimmed red lights in a nightclub – a westernised lifestyle, not like the old and what may be regarded orientalist depictions of Istanbul with whirling dervishes or squatter areas. So what has changed in Istanbul? The answer lies in the shift away from an inward-looking stance that has taken place: globalisation is forcing open the city's urban spaces and cultural practices, bringing with it a parallel process of cultural change.

The city is finally relinquishing the feeling of isolation and provincialism that characterised Istanbul's public culture up to the late 1980s, and even into the 1990s. As business conglomerates compete with one another about larger investments in museums, art collections, galleries and exhibitions, the old model of centrally controlled cultural provision is becoming obsolete. State-run cultural organisations, such as the State Painting and Sculpture Museum or the Atatürk Cultural Centre in Istanbul, are now having difficulties

maintaining their place within the new cultural scene – difficulties attracting both audiences and sponsors, and management and financial difficulties as a consequence of being state-controlled. Sponsorship for commercially funded events such as the Istanbul Biennale now commands a company's status and image, hence Istanbul's Biennale is flourishing and has now become one of the key artistic events in Europe. The private sector's reliance on transnational connections with international art institutions helps make the old, closed and inward-looking modality in cultural provision a thing of the past.

This turn towards greater openness and interconnectedness, however, is ultimately an outcome of the city's gentrification. The 'projected city' is a collection of gentrified spaces, and the cultural imaginary is increasingly being shaped by this project of gentrification. What is significant is the relentless ascendancy of this imaginary. Behind it we find a previously unanticipated coalition of urban elites. This coalition involves what Orhan Esen calls the 'North-Istanbul elites' (the post-1980s generation of secular, middle-class and professional workers) and the rising commercial elites of the Islamic-oriented traditional circles, politically represented by the 'innovative group' in the ruling AKP. Until now, these two elite groups had remained polarised. They now share a common aspiration and a vision of Istanbul as a globalised and gentrified city with orderly and clean public spaces and residential quarters, and an attractive public image with world-class services and goods. Cultural liberation thus responds to expectations of higher living standards.

What I have described so far is the global opening up of Istanbul according to an unfolding and relentless neo-liberal dynamic. In so far as the ruling AKP government have helped open up Istanbul to market-driven global forces, the city's transformation has been a state-led project. This restructuring of the city suits the aspirations of its globalising elites and an expanding base of property owners. Considering that 58 per cent of the households (out of around 2.5 million from the 2000 census) live in their own property, a considerable proportion of the urban population is directly implicated in the changing economy of the city. What is more, according to the Istanbul Governor's office

quite a significant proportion of this property-owning category consists of those living in recently legalised squatter settlements, or *gecekondu*. In other words, as the squatters of yesterday turn into property owners of today – however unplanned and rundown their properties might be – the scale of market activity is extended.

This process brings together very different constituencies with diverse lifestyles, values, beliefs and practices. It represents a coalition of self-interests involving Islamic communities, secular elites, large capital, small and conservative business interests, and so-called bourgeois bohemians. All these different groups can, in different ways and combinations, join forces – awkwardly, and ironically – in their jostle to benefit from Istanbul's transformation. It is this broad social, cultural and class basis of globalising Istanbul that balances the calls for closure. Nevertheless, this programme of openness hangs in delicate balance in Istanbul, as discourse feeding on nationalism and anti-European sentiments increasingly finds a receptive audience. One reason behind this is the exclusionary mechanisms that globalisation has set in motion. In Sulukule, for instance, one of the oldest Roma neighbourhoods, almost all of the 620 households have been evicted from their properties, with all the tenants relocating to far-flung destinations, despite the fact that they have been residents in this area for generations. This has been because of a municipality-led renewal project, proposing to turn the neighbourhood into an upmarket housing area. The same fate awaits the local Roma population and the recent Kurdish immigrants from the South-East of Turkey in the Tarlabaşı district. These residents are very poor, but more significantly, without title to their land they are unable to take part in Istanbul's increasingly market-oriented housing economy. It seems that those lacking title will be quietly relegated to the status of the invisible, no longer heard in the public sphere, except when they become junkies, dealers, or criminalised youth.

Insufficient welfare state structures alongside the collapse of informal and identity-based incorporation mechanisms in the city have created exclusionary dynamics that operate on a much larger scale than ever before. With high levels of unemployment, an unqualified labour force and the continuing influx of

immigrants from the rural areas of Turkey, as well as from neighbouring countries and Africa, social exclusion finds fertile ground in Istanbul. The scale of the social problem becomes clear when considering that Istanbul's official population increased from around 10 million in 2000 to over 12 million in 2007. Almost all of this growth can be attributed to new migration. Even so, Istanbul lacks a social vision to engage the mounting exclusionary dynamics of market-based relations. Unchecked, they may eventually find expression in social fracturing, division and conflict. In a context where the division between the excluded and the included is sharpening dramatically, and where the familiar mechanisms of incorporation are increasingly being weakened, religious and ethnically-informed identity positions can become ready ciphers for frustration and anger. This new round of urban globalisation is characterised, moreover, by the sheer scale and power of global capitalist dynamics to undermine small-scale and individual efforts of urban constituencies hoping to determine the basic conditions of their everyday lives.

Before this neo-liberal programme turns into a grim scenario where powerlessness feeds a backlash of political conservatism and authoritarianism, there is clearly a need for a new politics of openness – a new perspective based on the notion that 'a different global model is possible'. Above all, this is a project requiring a prolonged process of negotiation, with an explicit agenda about the kind of globalisation and openness that might enlarge public spaces of interaction, engagement, and mutual responsibility – against the grain of the fragmentation and commercialisation of city spaces, which only serve to underscore growing social inequality and exclusion. Is this all just a dream? Will Istanbul come to terms with the choices it faces? In a context where the commissioning of internationally renowned architects for public projects faces mounting anger, with protestors posing the issue as a confrontation between local (read Turkish) versus the international (read outsider), the vulnerability of the neo-liberal project of openness becomes clear. The 'old order' may be dismantling on the ground, where traditional and non-formal structures are no longer able to act as incorporating mechanisms, but it is clearly not being written off entirely. Defensive and fearful responses to urban globalisation slip easily and

seamlessly into an exclusionary language and rejection of difference and diversity. Ultimately this may fuel nationalistic fanaticism. The challenge is to deepen and secure the continuation of public experiences of worldliness – to not lose sight of the real choice that Istanbul needs to make. We have to hope that Istanbul's worldliness can help maintain a democratic basis of social solidarity where the city is imagined once again as a public space for all.

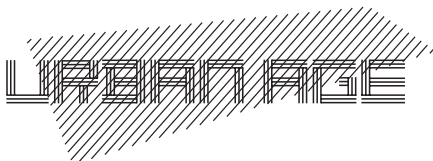
Contact:

Cities Programme
London School of Economics
Houghton Street
London WC2A 2AE

+44 (0)20 7955 7706
urban.age@lse.ac.uk
www.urban-age.net

Alfred Herrhausen Society
Deutsche Bank
Unter den Linden 13/15
10117 Berlin
Germany

T +49 (0)30 3407 4201
ute.weiland@db.com
www.alfred-herrhausen-gesellschaft.de



a worldwide investigation into the future of cities
organised by the Cities Programme
the London School of Economics and
Political Science and the Alfred Herrhausen Society,
the International Forum of Deutsche Bank

