

URBAN SPACES IN AND AROUND ISTANBUL

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To start with a few facts and figures, with 15 million the population of Istanbul and its emerging city region is one of the largest in South-East Europe. Geographically situated on two narrow peninsulas separated by the Bosphorus, the northern shores of either landmass are covered by ecologically sensitive forests, water catchments and reservoirs vital to the future of the city. Because of these physical barriers, a major part of the population lives in a linear band approximately 100 kilometres long and 20 kilometres wide. Hence Istanbul has a population comparable to that of the Netherlands concentrated in less than 10 per cent of its surface area. The greater metropolitan region of Istanbul accounts for slightly more than 20 per cent of the national population, while the city generates 40 per cent of value added and approximately 50 per cent of the tax revenues of the entire country. Thus, the most significant part of Turkey's economic activity, the manufacturing of goods and services, as well as its social life and artistic creation, all take place in this tiny north-western corner of the country.

It would be difficult to convince a contemporary visitor impressed by the size, density, dynamism, and congestion of the cityscape that only six decades ago, Istanbul was a forgotten and stagnant port city with less than one million residents cut off from world trade. The recent history of the city, however, sheds light on the dark side of Istanbul's obscure and intractable socio-spatial formation. As is the case in many peripheral countries, the end of World War II constituted a major turning point in the social history of Turkey and Istanbul. In spite of notable efforts to industrialise, Turkey's economy was basically agricultural. Urban residents accounted for less than 20 per cent of the population, and the bulk of its imports were financed by exports of semi-processed agricultural products along with a handful of raw materials and minerals.

In the 1960s a new regime of accumulation forbade investments in non-productive sectors such as housing and urban utilities, and instead gave incentives for domestic production. The underlying belief was that Turkey would solve its urbanisation problem and develop only if it industrialised. As expected, stopping all investments in urban infrastructure and metropolitan transport had important repercussions on the urban fabric of Istanbul. In addition, increasing land prices and unaffordable rents made housing of the emerging middle classes a major issue. Likewise the new regime was silent about – even blind to – how new residents should be housed. Unable to find formal solutions, these two groups of residents created ad-hoc solutions that now constitute the distinctive features of the urban fabric in and around Istanbul.

For the new middle classes, the approach consisted of transforming former detached single-family dwellings into apartment blocks. Landowners were not paid in advance but were instead compensated per apartment unit, depending on the level of the land and the rent. This significantly lowered the initial capital required for development and resulted in the ubiquitous four- to five-storey walk-ups constructed in the early 1960s and 1970s. These developments were carried out by small-scale entrepreneurs targeting middle- and higher-income groups in highly sought-after and comparatively well-served parts of the city.

Newcomers, on the other hand, built *gecekondu* (literally 'built overnight') on irregularly subdivided 'private' property. Informal housing in Istanbul took place on small parcels of land, irrespective of topography, in back-to-back building blocks on narrow streets according to the orthogonal street grid. The provisions and quality of services improved over time in the *gecekondu*. Water, for example, was initially a major issue. Supplied through public fountains or municipal tanks, water supply developed into a cottage

industry that provided jobs for the unemployed. Sewage issues were solved through septic tanks or local streams. With its unplanned high density, the urban infrastructure in the *gecekondu* was certainly significantly low. Water supply was intermittent and the quality generally failed to meet the minimum requirements set by the World Health Organization. Power cuts were also frequent. The chronic lack of investment by service providers forced residents to devise their own solutions by adding water tanks and pumps.

To enhance its control over urban space, the new regime introduced unprecedented reform devised to regulate former squatter housing. This form of building amnesty occurred following the 1984 municipal elections and regularised all irregular constructions and add-ons, regardless of their size and building conditions. It provided security of tenure for a period of transition and a formal land title that had an immediate and significant impact on urban processes and land tenure systems.

Endowed with new discretionary and planning powers, as well as significantly higher revenues, the newly established Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality was capable of massive investment in urban infrastructure, metropolitan utilities and mass transit systems. With telecommunications being privatised, it was possible to have a phone connection within a week, whereas as recently as the 1970s it would have taken years. The new liberal regime reduced customs barriers and introduced preferential credit schemes for house buyers and passed new laws encouraging capital-intensive mass production in the housing sector. Due to the availability of long-term credit, large-scale investments in urban infrastructure enabled developers – the new actors in the city’s housing sector – to construct housing complexes at metropolitan fringes. The days of the petty producers were over.

In this new economic climate and era of new municipal governance, the city decentralised at an unprecedented speed. Decentralisation of the population went hand in hand with that of jobs, services, and shopping facilities. The inauguration of the second bridge over the Bosphorus facilitated the northward decentralisation of the central business district. Systematic disinvestments and privatisation of state enterprises led to significant losses in the manufacturing sector and factories on the

Golden Horn shores. Along the Bosphorus these spaces were transformed to create new uses and jobs in the cultural industries. And as is the case in most global cities, the rise of the service economy created a minority of well-paid executives in finance and services.

Although Istanbul still has a substantive stock of squatter houses, shared taxis and street vendors, it is no longer a city of squatters. It has been replaced by a new global city for which we urgently need a metaphor. The map below charts the contiguous growth processes that were instrumental in its formation. Thus the socio-spatial structures of former decades can be used as matrices or incubators for an emerging global city. As the Istanbul metropolitan region that is emerging around the new Marmaray mass transit system is constructed, we do not yet know how the city’s growth will evolve. But we do know that we have a vast urban age to discuss and reflect on its differences.

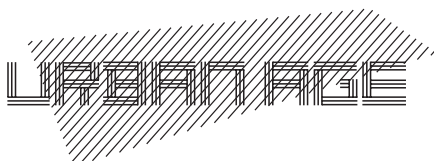
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