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Murat Gül

The Emergence of Modern Istanbul: Transformation and Modernisation of a City

London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2009. 256 pp.; 48 b/w ills. Cloth \$95.00 (9781845119355)



Çiğdem Kafescioğlu

Constantinopolis/Istanbul: Cultural Encounter, Imperial Vision, and the Construction of the Ottoman Capital

University Park: [Pennsylvania State University Press](#), 2009. 346 pp.; 8 color ills.; 154 b/w ills. Cloth \$100.00 (9780271027760)

Shirine Hamadeh

The City's Pleasures: Istanbul in the Eighteenth Century

Seattle: [University of Washington Press](#), 2007. 368 pp.; 8 color ills.; 97 b/w ills. Cloth \$60.00 (9780295986678)

[İpek Türeli](#)

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These three books on Istanbul are welcome additions to an emergent field that it might be possible to call “Istanbul Studies,” with new research centers dedicated to the study of the city, and an increasing number of doctoral students working on Istanbul in Turkey and abroad, mostly at U.S. programs. The ascension of Istanbul into the ranks of global cities must be credited for arousing general interest in the city, both popular and academic. Yet, the number of scholarly works on the architectural urban history of the city, especially in English, does not match this rising interest. Thus, together these books fill important gaps in the scholarship. In chronological order, Çiğdem Kafescioğlu discusses the first decades of the transformation of Constantinople, following its capture by the Ottoman Turks in 1453, into the seat of the Ottoman throne. Shirine Hamadeh interprets the eighteenth-century flourishing of art and architecture, following the decisive return of the royal household to Constantinople. Murat Gül’s book is a planning history from the eighteenth century until 1960, with an emphasis on the remarkable continuity in formal planning ideas. Based on doctoral dissertations submitted respectively in 1996, 1999, and 2006 at Harvard, MIT, and the University of Sydney, they all have central questions that they explore using new types of sources, and they all challenge existing scholarship on their periods. Together, they complement each other in providing in-depth perspectives on important episodes of building boom in Istanbul.

Kafescioğlu and Hamadeh make use of new or under-examined visual depictions, textual narratives, and literary sources,

identifying clearly how these materials support, enrich, or limit their arguments. Great care has been taken in the preparation of their illustrations; maps and aerial views, for instance, are marked with numbers and legends are provided. The authors situate visual representations in the context of their production and use. Kafesçioğlu analyzes European visual depictions, such as Vavassore's and Buondelmonte's views of the city, together with literary images by the Ottomans (chapter 3). She returns in the epilogue to another famous view of Istanbul, by Matrakçı Nasuh, which interestingly has multiple points of view and which merges the conventions of bird's-eye view with miniature painting (207) in order to project a unified Ottoman Islamic identity, due to its later date of 1537. The second half of Hamadeh's book examines poetry (chapter 5) and rhymed architectural chronograms (chapter 6–7) in which she identifies an Ottoman architectural discourse on novelty. Gül also introduces new kinds of textual sources, most notably tribunal records and municipality meetings that have not found their way into existing published histories. In contrast to Kafesçioğlu and Hamadeh, Gül uses visuals as merely illustrative of the plans or physical changes he is talking about. The maps and plans reproduced in his book are too small to decipher, which is a fault of the publisher that can hopefully be addressed in subsequent editions.

Kafesçioğlu explains that the 1453 capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans was a “catalyst” in the transformation of what was a *beylik*, a “tiny principality” that bordered on the remnants of Byzantine territory in Anatolia, into an empire. There, the Ottomans encountered and selectively adopted the imperial legacy of Eastern Rome. Sultan Mehmed II (r.1451–1481) pioneered the new Ottoman imperial vision, encoded imperial practice, and invented a new court ceremonial based on seclusion from his subjects. In her study, which centers around three themes—monumentalization (chapter 2), representation (chapter 3), and inhabitation (chapter 4)—Kafesçioğlu argues that the foundations of Istanbul's later development were laid out in the first decades following the conquest, but this involved a complex dynamics in which diverse cultural traditions, Ottoman and Byzantine, along with Renaissance ideas of ordering the urban environment encountered each other, i.e., it did not turn overnight into an “Islamic city” (cf., Halil İnalçık, “Istanbul: An Islamic City,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 1 (1990): 1–23), a concept residual of Orientalism in urban studies. The projects implemented in the first years after the conquest (1453–59) addressed immediate concerns (chapter 1). For example, the conversion and endowment of the Hagia Sophia is one of the most well-known examples of the selective adoption of the Byzantine legacy. The Seven Towers (Yedikule) citadel, the design of which was based on theories by Alberti and Filarete, is an important example of the Ottomans' use of Renaissance ideals of ordering the built environment (26). In 1459, Mehmed II announced his campaign to rebuild the city and enlisted the ruling elite to participate in the process (chapter 2). Kafesçioğlu's examination of changing residential patterns (chapter 4) explores the interaction between the neighborhood, as institution and as physical space, and the larger-scale urban layout envisioned by royal and elite patronage.

Soon after the fall/conquest of Constantinople, Topkapı Palace was constructed on the eastern tip of the peninsula in a commanding position vis-à-vis the surrounding land and waters, as Kafesçioğlu points out, with deliberate Byzantine, Timurid, Mamluk, and Italian visual references expressing the spheres of influence claimed by the Ottoman state (62). It served as the main residence for the Ottoman Sultans in the city as well as the administrative center of the state. When Ahmed III (r. 1703–1730) and his court returned to the city decisively in 1703 after nearly fifty years in Edirne in Thrace, he left the imperial palace of Topkapı to spend summer months in *sayfiyye* or *villegiatura* (Hamadeh, 24), a tradition previously in currency, stretching back to Byzantine times. He ordered the surveying and restoration of old imperial gardens, the addition of new structures in them, and continued by commissioning several new palaces for himself, his family, and highest ranking officials, which resulted in property confiscation targeting non-Muslims. Most importantly, and similar to the earlier process of post-1453 “architectural conquest” of the city during Mehmed II's reign, as discussed by Kafesçioğlu, it served to assert presence and display power. The most famous of the summer palaces was Sa'dabad (1721–1722), the Abode of Happiness (Hamadeh, 25), located in Kağıthane on a water channel that flowed into the Gold Horn estuary—famous, or perhaps more accurately described as infamous, because it came to represent the court's ostentation, especially in the janissary-led Patrona Halil revolt of 1730. Several years after the revolt, however, the passion for building palaces resumed. Overall, Hamadeh points out, some three hundred palaces and residences were built in the eighteenth century by the sultans, their imperial households, and high-ranking state officials (17). New suburban expansion extended beyond the ruling class to the middle class, composed of a diverse social and professional spectrum.

If Topkapı Palace featured traditional massive and blind-masonry walls organized around protected courtyards, as well as small-scale articulated openings, windows, balconies, and projections that always personified the presence of the sultan behind them, the new “suburban” waterfront imperial palaces were constructed of timber, with bold linearity, openness, and transparency. Hamadeh suggests that the transformation in the architectural idiom of the palatine tradition was informed by popular urban traditions that preceded the new waterside palaces and evolved in the absence of the court. Hence the adoption of this architectural idiom in the new palaces challenges trickle-down theories in relationship to the cultural role of

the elite (chapter 2). She observes transformations not only in façades and plan articulations of buildings but also in the commissioning and creation of new types of public spaces. Old imperial gardens were opened up for general public use, as in many instances in Europe, and acted as spaces of social change where boundaries were transgressed. Hamadeh makes a concerted effort to show the imperial family's reassertion of its presence in Constantinople through the commissioning of suburban palaces; she also argues that the open display of ceremonial and festivity was novel in the sense of its intensity, and, significantly, that it was paralleled by the increasing role of non-courtly residents as patrons of architecture such as public fountains (chapter 3). Moreover, while a new public culture was nurtured through the patronage of the ruling class, it was also kept in check through sumptuary laws; both the commissioning and control of new spaces opted "as a solution to repeated instances of public disorder" (chapter 4). This double movement is one of the most interesting arguments in Hamadeh's study in that it speaks to parallel processes in Europe.

A characteristic of Ottoman/Turkish histories of architecture, urbanism, and planning has been an inclination to interpret the built environment in terms of political programs, following nationalist historiography, at the expense of alternative views and accounts. This determinism is quite problematic because multiple actors, negotiations, and processes are at work in the shaping of the built environment, and architectural trends in the city do not necessarily follow top-level political shifts such as the change of a regime, sultan, or prime minister. (A point systematically made by Turkish architectural historian Uğur Tanyeli in relationship to the architectural history of Istanbul in his *İstanbul 1900–2000: Konut ve Modernleşmeyi Metropolden Okumak* (Istanbul 1900–2000: To Read Housing and Modernization from the Metropolis) Istanbul: Akın Nalça, 2004.)

In both Kafesçioğlu's and Hamadeh's books, the key events may be the arrival of the royal family to the city and its efforts to transform and "conquer" it via architectural interventions at the urban scale, but in both accounts royal patronage responds to and takes shape within the context of internal power dynamics, along with cultural and class encounters.

Kafesçioğlu explains that from the later fifteenth century onward Ottoman chronicles helped create the myth that Mehmed II built the city, and that especially in the late nineteenth century the Ottoman elite recast the conquest of Constantinople as the high point of the Golden Age of the Empire and referred to Mehmed II as "the Conqueror" (Fatih). The inclusion in her examination of chronicles originating from the "milieu of frontier-warriors who were increasingly marginalized by the new state" (6) with its transformation into a sedentary empire provides a critical view of the reconstruction effort. She points out that in producing a homogenous account of the post-conquest building of the city, nationalist histories have shadowed the complexities of the process and subdued alternative accounts and dissident voices. Furthermore, a linear understanding of history has meant that the post-conquest decades were seen as a mere precursor to the classical image of the city of the latter half of the sixteenth century. Alternatively, in Western scholarship, Ottomans' "use of forms associated with Byzantine architectural culture," she remarks, have "often fallen into the trap of a loaded debate of 'influences' rendering it difficult, if not impossible, to understand the products of a complex cultural environment marked with interactions, fluidity, and hybridity" (9), which her work highlights.

Hamadeh discusses the decisive turn of the royal household to Istanbul and its patronage in relationship to social transformations in the making since the late sixteenth century, and concurrent Safavid, Mughal, and European models. In her discussion of the paradigm of Western influence in relationship to the Sa'dabad Palace, she argues that there is simply not enough evidence to support the claims in European observers' accounts and some modern-day histories that it was inspired by Fontainebleau, Versailles, or Marl; however, Ottoman poets and court historians' accounts reveal analogies between Ottoman and Safavid monuments (chapter 8). The reason why some accounts were facile in interpreting the palace in terms of Western influence among the ruling elite has to do with the framing of the era that the palace came to represent. The second half of Ahmed III's reign (1718–1730) is marked as the beginning of the "Stagnation" or "Westernization" period in official historiography and referred to as the Tulip Era for its conspicuous consumption, tulips being a highly prized commodity. Thus, Hamadeh is responding to this periodization by showing that it was instead an era of opening up, in multiple senses—physical, cultural, and social. She furthermore uses poetry to suggest that the general public perception was not concerned with the sources of architectural features but in an overall sense of novelty. Hamadeh explains that in fact Ottoman-European cultural and artistic interaction was not novel to the eighteenth century but had a long history (as Kafesçioğlu's book also demonstrates), and that Ottomans borrowed forms from both the East and the West for innovation, with internal changes bearing more than external factors on the motivation for creative adaptations.

Squarely at odds with Kafesçioğlu's and Hamadeh's projects, which effectively question notions of continuity, break, and influence in favor of encounter, interaction, selective appropriation, and fluidity, Gül relegates in his first chapters, on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the agency of change to the West and subscribes to the now outdated model of Western

impact and Ottoman decline. He adopts, in his own words, “the traditional periodisation of Turkish history,” i.e., linear history, avoiding discussion of why and how it impacts his version of the city’s history. Yet, considering his overall project is to tackle architectural historiography on the mid-twentieth century city, it seems he would have benefited from a more critical lens in the first half of his book, which focuses on Ottoman Istanbul.

Gül’s main protagonist is Prime Minister Adnan Menderes, who led the ruling Democrat Party from 1950 to 1960, and was ousted by a military coup and executed following a military tribunal. It is therefore odd at first glance that the book is a survey of the planning and administrative history of the city from the eighteenth century to 1960. The first chapter covers the eighteenth century and the nineteenth up until the Crimean War (1853–56); the next chapter discusses the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, culminating in the First World War. Chapter 3 concentrates on the first decade of the Republican era (1923–33); and the fourth chapter covers those years (1933–50) when French architect Henri Prost worked as the planner of Istanbul. The last two chapters discuss the Democrat Party years under Menderes (1950–60). This focus on the Democrat Party years at the end of the book makes for an uneven organization, as if the prior history was “expectant” of, or building toward, that decade. Gül explains in the introduction that the 1950s are described by Kemalist Turkish intelligentsia “as the ‘dark age’ of modern Turkish political history” (3). He swiftly claims, but does not prove how, existing studies lack a consideration of the decade from the “perspective of underlying historical, cultural and political changes in the late-Ottoman and early Republican periods” (3), which his study seeks to rectify. Historical continuity is important, he explains, to show for instance how Menderes’s program of urban renewal emulated many of the ideas in Prost’s master plan of 1939, André Auric’s scheme of 1910, and the “development policy” of 1839. (Zeynep Çelik makes a similar comment on Prost’s plan—i.e., that it draws on previous proposals—in the concluding pages of her *Remaking Istanbul: Portrait of an Ottoman City in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986, 183). Thus, Gül provides a long history, which takes up the bulk of the book and reads at times like a social history and at other times like a political history, and which self-consciously “repeats itself” (175), but without necessarily teasing out why this “continuity” is significant, aside from redeeming Menderes.

Gül does not acknowledge cross-cultural exchange or transnational flows, which, given his emphasis on experts and expert knowledge, would have enriched his project. While he mentions, for instance, that Prost was invited to Istanbul because of his prestige deriving from his prior work in French Colonial Africa and in Paris, he does not discuss how Prost’s other plans compare to those for Istanbul, or what knowledge he may have brought with him. Gül agrees with the military tribunal that tried and found Menderes guilty, and with the handful of architectural historians and other critics who claim that Menderes turned his attention to Istanbul, in the second half of his term as prime minister, as a “public relations campaign” in the face of a suffering economy and to support his desire for Turkey to play a visible role in the politics of the Middle East region; but disagrees that he acted without any significant plan and program, thereby abusing his position of power. As Gül clearly lays out in the last chapter, “Menderes’ urban renewal was not solely a spontaneous and unprogrammed action” (167), i.e., “he knew what he was doing” (166), and was acting not on his own but with many experts, Turkish and foreign, within a local intellectual milieu that was generally celebratory of renewal by demolition. Gül bypasses discussing the international context of Menderes’s city beautification, which paralleled the “bulldozer approach” seen and criticized in many cities, especially in New York City under Robert Moses, which could have made his study of interest to a wider audience than Istanbul scholars.

Despite some of these issues, Gül’s book, not only in its focus on the Menderes era but also with its long-term perspective has much to offer to urban studies of contemporary Istanbul as the city experiences another frenzied planning phase in the service of politics. While the visions currently being implemented are quiet different than those of Menderes and his predecessors, continuities exist in terms of the nature of publicity and participation. Newspaper reports on the frequent visits of the current prime minister, a former mayor of Istanbul, and his helicopter tours to inspect development are reminiscent of Menderes’s hands-on approach in the 1950s. It seems citizens learn about decisions through newspaper accounts, mostly after the fact when contracts are assigned and deeds are done. Although NGOs, citizens’ groups, and, most effectively, professional organizations of architects and urban planners do raise their voices through the media and courts, there is a lack of transparency and of accountability to the citizens.

A tantalizing aspect of public discussions on the city today is the paucity of memory and historical awareness in relationship to past planning endeavors, as well as how certain planning ideals and ideas developed, were implemented, resisted, or contested. All three of the books under review here will help rectify this situation. Furthermore, they show that accounts exploring the relationship between politics and built environment need to take into consideration the multiplicity of actors along with dissident and subdued voices. These books also argue for the importance of visual and literary representations and commentaries, sometimes inscribed in less than anticipated locations, that participate in the production of space, a la

Henri Lefebvre, and complicate and enhance our understanding of the built environment, and society at large. All three of these books are extremely rich in terms of the wealth and diversity of sources they draw from, the questions they ask, and the suggestions and arguments they make. They will undoubtedly remain as important resources for new Istanbul studies for years to come, and offer insights to scholars working on different cities.

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