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Maurice Cerasi, Emiliano Bugatti, and d'Agostiono Sabrina

The Istanbul Divanyolu: A Case Study in Ottoman Urbanity and Architecture

Würzburg: [Ergon Verlag](#), 2003. 154 pp.; 8 color ill.; 89 b/w ill. Paper \$62.50 (3899133706)



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The “Divanyolu” in Maurice Cerasi’s title refers to the main thoroughfare of Ottoman Istanbul. Cerasi uses the Divanyolu to provide a novel lens on the city. According to the author, the Divanyolu escaped the attention it deserves in existing literature because it was not perfectly axial or unitary as a throughway. It was not built for the display of monumentality or as a hub of commerce. Yet, it was central to urban culture because of its spatial character. Hence, the Divanyolu helps reimagine urban morphology in a city that has changed dramatically.

In the Ottoman period, the “Divan” denoted the imperial chancery held in the Topkapı Palace. The thoroughfare was named after the Divan because of the regular appearances of the dignitaries on their way to it. The meaning of the term extended over time to refer to a council chamber, and presently to a day bed. Nevertheless, the Divanyolu remains as the official name of the avenue between Sultanahmet Square and Çemberlitaş in contemporary Istanbul

Cerasi uses “Divanyolu” to indicate the avenue; in turn, “Divan axis” refers to its extension to the Gate of Edirne (Edirnekapı) on the city’s land walls (21, 27). The axis stretched out of Istanbul to the city of Edirne and to Europe where the Ottoman Empire had territories and into which it had further ambitions to expand. According to the author, the axis was a system of uni-directional streets defined by the congregation of monumental buildings and the staging of official processions.

There are significant differences in urban morphology between the Byzantine and Ottoman periods. The Byzantine walled city (330–1453) on the historic peninsula featured a triangular layout defined by forums connected by porticoed avenues (*mese*). Under Ottoman rule (1453–1923), the city walls lost their importance for security purposes; the city expanded beyond the walls, attaining an outward-looking character. The triangular system of the *mese* and the forums were not revived. Key public buildings were built on prominent hilltop locations near the northern *mese* that was subsequently called the Divanyolu. As a result of this construction activity along the Divanyolu, Istanbul acquired its unique skyline dotted with minarets.

The Istanbul Divanyolu seeks to answer the following questions: “Given the importance of this axis in the symbols and ceremonials of Ottoman society and in the daily life and culture of Istanbul, how and in which parts and aspects was it [the Divanyolu] associated to the values and functions of that culture? . . . What was its relationship to the daily life and activities of the city?” (21) The book first defines and describes the Divanyolu, and then traces its transformation from the Byzantine period to the mid-twentieth century. The book is organized in ten chapters written by Cerasi. Three of them (chapters 2, 8, and 10) have appendixes written jointly by his assistants Bugatti and d’Agostiono. At the end, a “catalogue of monuments” lists public buildings “within a 600-meter-wide urban strip along the Divan axis” (135–144). This is followed by a selected bibliography of four pages; finally, chronological maps and graphic reconstructions of the axis are presented in eight folded plates.

The authors draw from a wide array of sources in Italian, French, German, English, and Turkish. Surprising in terms of the historical scope of the book is that they do not read Ottoman Turkish. Cerasi briefly explains that the “written historical sources didn’t have much to say” on the Divanyolu, and that the book’s argument is “the overall picture” (10). However, the book ends up heavily relying on secondary sources. It resurrects some of its sources’ outdated arguments. Furthermore, it adheres to a methodology that cannot satisfactorily address the relationship between urban space and urban culture.

The authors’ primary sources are visual, including maps, illustrations, and surviving buildings. They compare a variety of maps, as well as check them against surviving monuments. They explain that they use secondary sources mainly for fact checking. It is exciting to see, for instance, the procession route described by Surname-i Vehbi (an account of the 1720 royal circumcision festival) marked on a schematic map (fig. 3) of the historic peninsula. This and similar exercises in mapping, however, fall short of further illuminating the experience of particular events, but rather serve to support the assumption of the Divanyolu’s significance in Istanbul’s culture.

The authors are committed to what Cerasi elsewhere called the “typology-morphology school of thought” (Maurice Cerasi, “Type, Urban Context, and Language in Conflict: Some Methodological Implications,” *Typological Process and Design Theory*, Attilio Petruccioli, ed., Cambridge, MA: Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, 1998, 179–88), which examined the interaction between urban morphology and building typology. Typological and morphological research proved immensely popular throughout Europe during the 1960s and 1970s as a resistance to what was seen as homogenizing tendencies in modernism. It emphasized continuity in urban forms through time, and the role of architecture in shaping collective memory. Studying typologies and recovering them could restore an authentic public realm. Later, this approach lost its critical edge as it was subsumed in the UK and US. Cerasi seeks to go beyond its descriptive or operative uses by interpreting the aesthetics of urban spatial form in relationship to the culture of the people who occupied the spaces.

Cerasi states the Divanyolu “mirrors Ottoman culture” (10). Understanding the aesthetics of Istanbul’s urban space, hence, can open a window onto Ottoman society. It must be pointed out that this is a passive understanding of space in which built form is treated as the reflection of a homogeneous culture. Also, because of its method, the book does not touch on economy or social groups. It is not clear how the Ottomans, be it sultans, dignitaries, or ordinary residents, experienced and conceptualized the Divanyolu.

Cerasi traces the first usage of Divanyolu for the ceremonial route to eighteenth-century written materials (14). Since both Cerasi and other sources make it clear that street naming was of “scarce relevance in Ottoman towns” (21), and, moreover, that it was through the neighborhood with the mosque as its focus that Ottoman urbanism attained its character, what would be the use of assessing Ottoman urbanism and spatial aesthetics through spatial concepts such as the axis? Cerasi draws on numerous sources to argue convincingly that this was indeed the heart of the city.

Cerasi endeavors to show that the Divanyolu was a distinctly Ottoman spatial construct rather than merely a carry-over of the Byzantine *mese* as various histories and maps of Istanbul suggest. For instance, in nineteenth-century maps of Istanbul produced by Westerners, Roman-Byzantine names are superimposed on the concurrent fabric. Most histories of Istanbul today also state that the Divanyolu corresponds to the Byzantine *mese*. Such inscriptions of the Byzantine *mese* onto the Divanyolu serve to undermine the contributions of Ottomans to Istanbul’s urban form.

In chapter 3, entitled “Byzantine Mese and Ottoman Divanyolu,” Cerasi interestingly explains that the Divanyolu is ten meters north of the early Mese Ragia, and is on an average 2.35 meters higher following eleven centuries of infill. The spatial characteristics of the Byzantine *mese* and the Ottoman Divanyolu were very different. Whereas the *mese* was a porticoed street that connected forums, Cerasi explains, “the Ottoman system [was] a non-artery rambling through the city in a continuum of short linkages between juxtaposed elements . . . [with] strong linguistic implications” (42). The Ottomans did not revive the arcaded street tradition that had fallen into despair by the time they took over the city—not because they could not, Cerasi asserts, but because their processions, “interesting and picturesque in themselves, did not seem to require a magnificent background” (45).

The Divanyolu was inscribed in collective memory through processions and daily activities that took place on it. Following a loose chronological order, Cerasi describes various occasions in which the dynasty and dignitaries exhibited themselves to the public along it. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, these included processions to the Sultanic mosque complexes for Friday prayers and funerals; to the Old Palace for wedding, birth, and circumcision celebrations; and to Eyüp for the ceremony of the girdling of sword. In addition, the military paraded along the Divanyolu days on end before going off to expeditions abroad. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, pashas’ endowments in the form of mausoleums, medreses, and libraries helped define its architectural coherence.

The question regarding the experience of the Divanyolu on a daily basis is dealt with in chapters 6 to 9. Grand masonry palaces of the classical period were gradually replaced by wooden *konaks* with smaller footprints, and increased density in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries changed the sense of urban space (chapter 6). While the Divanyolu was not the commercial center of the city, it featured a diverse array of programs that enabled the interaction of ordinary residents. Cerasi provides a review of programmatic types such as public buildings including *mescits*, mosques, *tekkes*, *medreses*, libraries, and fountains (chapter 7). In the latter part of the nineteenth century, buildings for leisure—for example coffeehouses and theatres—also found their way into the axis.

In chapter 8, entitled “Architectural Characteristics,” Cerasi discusses the aesthetics of urban space in Ottoman Istanbul, in his words, “Wrongly classified as informal, picturesque, and hence, lacking architectural control” but “deeply rooted in Ottoman environmental consciousness and form psychology” (90). The latter concepts such as “form psychology” are used without explanation, assuming familiarity with the terminology. Yet, the concept is clear enough, whatever its sources. Cerasi seeks to show that Ottoman urban space was a conscious design rather than an accidental product, and that it had its own distinctive instruments of composition such as fragmentation, diversity, differentiation, “short-linkages,” and cross-referencing. The resultant Ottoman town had an open character and a formal grammar of collage. As such, the Ottomans’ street system was not comparable to that exhibited in French avenues. Nevertheless, Cerasi curiously continues to compare Ottoman urbanism with mainly Western urbanism. In chapter 9, he reasserts that Ottoman Istanbul lacks formal urban monumentality because the city as stage was less important than the processions themselves.

The concluding chapter, “Reforms and the Conflict in Urban Conception,” along with the appendix by Bugatti and d’Agostiono, outline the effects of Westernization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Cerasi argues that Western concepts of town planning proved incompatible with Ottoman space, and that the elites who promoted urban reforms according to Western standards harbingered the loss of Ottoman Istanbul’s distinctive aesthetic spatial features. It is particularly in such statements that Cerasi resurrects arguments about the negative impact of Westernization on a previously harmonious non-Western society.

Ottoman architectural history seems to have moved from a macro view toward micro-history, from the model of Western impact to a model of cultural exchange and translation. For this reason, this book may not meet the expectations of specialists on Ottoman urban history who are already familiar with Cerasi’s sources as well as his previous publications. But for those interested in architectural urban history, in the method of morphological analysis, or more specifically in the architectural urban history of Istanbul, *The Istanbul Divanyolu* will be a valuable source, especially for teaching purposes, because of its overview of available secondary sources and its comparative study of visual sources.

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