

Istanbul: The Improvisational City*

İstanbul is improvising once again for its future. The hasty preparations for the local elections coupled with the overdose of excitement about the integration of Turkey into the European Community has resulted in a kind of social and political hysteria. Not surprisingly, İstanbul has once again appropriated a post-modern mode as opposed to adopting a modernist stance in response to these conditions.

Mapping:

The story of Turkey's integration into the global economy started with a military coup d'état in the early 80's. With the process of globalization, İstanbul has been undergoing a series of drastic cultural, social, economic and urban transformations. Following the oppressive coup d'état, a liberal economic model was adopted. As an integral part of this process, there began a campaign for establishing the necessary infrastructure to meet the basic conditions of economic globalization as well as to develop large-scale urban projects. The relocations within the present urban structure, together with the replacement and development of entirely new areas (designed especially to meet the new functions emerging in the finance, service and consulting sectors) shifted balances significantly. This in turn led to the restructuring of business, financial and transportation centers. So for example the financial district was relocated from Karaköy to the Zincirlikuyu-Maslak axis, while the media district moved from Cağaloğlu to Güneşli-İkitelli. Radical, large scale urban projects such as the planning and building of the second bridge on the Bosphorus, the new highways and avenues, the planning of the subway system to connect the new functions of the rapidly growing city, and the opening of new ports and the second international airport on the Asian side, can all be viewed as preliminary actions on the part of the state and municipalities in the 80s and 90s to link İstanbul to the global world. In addition to all these structural renewals, the best locations of the city were designated for the five star multinational hotel chains (like the Ritz-Carlton, Kempinsky, etc) in the expectation of accommodating "global elites" and entrepreneurs of the global capital.

Parallel to these changes, other infrastructural improvements were also being made. The educational system was revamped in order to better equip the workforce to serve İstanbul's new identity, and many new private universities and institutions were added to the city's repertoire. Accompanying these structural innovations, many new commercial and cultural spaces were established: gourmet delis, fancy street cafes, specialized restaurants, designer stores, clubs playing world music, gigantic shopping malls, movie theaters, art galleries and institutions (Proje4L-İstanbul Museum of Contemporary Art, Platform, Garanti Contemporary Art Center, etc.). Rounding out the picture, several festivals (İstanbul Culture and Arts Foundation festivals, film festivals, Yapı Kredi and Akbank events etc.) and international art exhibitions (International İstanbul Biennials) came onto the scene--all an extension of the life styles of the "global elites".

Over the past 20 years, the widening gap between the social strata due to the changes in the socio-economic structure and the phenomenon of globalization led to the formation of different living

spaces within the city. While the urban middle and upper classes built satellite cities in the newly developing İstanbul suburbs, lower income classes migrating from rural Turkey have been creating new shantytowns as alternative habitats to accommodate their particular life styles. Mostly illegal, these shantytowns have been extending their territorial sprawl beyond the industrial zones into the heart of the most elite districts, as well as at the back of highways, in the midst of skyscrapers, and on the hills overlooking the Bosphorous. The shantytowns are called “Gecekondu” in Turkish. This name literally means “night-landed or constructed-by-night,” referring both to the practicality and quickness of the construction as well as to the appearance of the structures. The diversity and variety of materials and methods used to build the Gecekondus results in unrecognizable architectural forms recalling spaceships or unidentified objects which have landed on the earth by night.

The Gecekondus are not the only “illegal” structures built in İstanbul. One of the “prestige” buildings in the very center of the city, “Gökkafes” (Skycage), which hosts such top multinational companies as the Ritz-Carlton Hotel, is actually an illegal construction built outside of normative regulations due to corruption and Mafia relationships. Another prestige building in the city, the Feshane, which was renovated by Gai Aulenti for the very first contemporary art museum in İstanbul in 1992 (the inauguration exhibition was the 3rd İstanbul Biennial, directed by Vasıf Kortun) has also a curious and whimsical story. Because of a conflict between the İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts (the organizing body of the İstanbul Biennials and the initiator of the museum project) and the radical Islamist municipality of the time (Tayyip Erdoğan was the mayor of the city), the museum project was first postponed and then cancelled. Now, despite its architectural properties, which are suitable for exhibition purposes, it is used for the traditional Ramadan (religious feast for Muslims) night entertainment, which is very similar to vaudevilles. Such hybrid combinations and juxtapositions are typical of İstanbul at many levels, and define the curious, often contradictory sites and modes of expression in almost every field, from economic to political, from religious to legal, from architectural to urbanistic, from musical to theatrical.

Emerging Locations for the Concentration of Art:

Although all these transformations, activities and preparations did not lead to the transformation of İstanbul into a ‘global city’, they did initiate a new context for art. The İstanbul Biennial was born in 1987 as one of the most crucial byproducts of the desire to transform İstanbul into a “global city”.

In a city where there were no contemporary art museums and only a limited number of international shows, where the majority of the traditional art institutions like the academies and universities resisted change and fell behind the contemporary world, and where a very limited number of galleries promoted contemporary art, the İstanbul Biennials (presently directed by Emre Baykal) had to function in multiple ways to compensate for this lack. In this sense, the İstanbul Biennials have had an enormous impact on the formation of the new artistic context in İstanbul by creating a laboratory for the ever-emerging tendencies in the contemporary art--a multi-lingual platform for a critical dialogue between artists from all over the world and the İstanbul art milieu, and a global network for artists, curators, critics and art

professionals. As a result, the İstanbul art world has undergone a series of transformations, adapting itself to the emerging art context.

Shifting, relocating and restructuring the already existing business and finance centers and urban spaces has changed the existing balances and given way to the emergence of new locations for the presentation of art. The Beyoğlu/Pera and Maslak districts can now be counted among the newer districts where visual culture is concentrated, while older art centers like Nisantasi (where most of the commercial galleries were located) and Ortaköy and Kuzguncuk (where artist groups and colonies resided) have also undergone a series of transformations, adapting themselves to the new art context.

Nişantaşı is one of the very few districts of İstanbul which has managed to preserve its historical face and structure. This district represents the ‘appealing’ side of globalization, with its designer boutiques, beauty parlors, fancy cafes, restaurants and clubs, advertisement and public relations agencies, alternative sports and yoga facilities, art galleries and buildings housing the city’s global elite. And yet at the same time, with the ghetto neighborhood which is called “Teneke” (tin, referring to the tin roofs) at its outskirts, it also exemplifies the other, disregarded face of globalization. The Maçka Art Gallery and the Gallery Nev are the two major historic galleries in Nisantasi, which promote contemporary art, exemplifying the transition process. While the Maçka Art Gallery has transformed itself into the new type of art institutions in between a traditional commercial gallery and a non-profit art center, Gallery Nev has remained its commercial status. The newcomer in this area is the Galerist, which has managed to create a market, though small, for contemporary art, encouraging the younger generation of business entrepreneurs to become collectors.

Beyoğlu/Pera district was the first multi-national, multi-cultural and multi-lingual “Europeanised” center for entertainment and finance in the capital city of the Ottoman Empire. It was also the site of its foreign embassies, in the 19th and early 20th century. After the 1960s, Pera lost its previous glamour, even becoming the hub of an underground world – a place for nightlife and illegal transactions –before it began its comeback in the late 1970s and the early 80s. A new boulevard behind Beyoğlu, caused a serious public debate when it was constructed because it violated the historical and cultural heritage of the Levantines, at the same time making it possible to close Beyoğlu to traffic. With the restoration of the historical tramway, Beyoğlu was put totally in service of the pedestrians. During the 1990s, this district once again became a lively center, not only for entertainment and shopping but also for cultural interactions. New second-hand / antique bookshops, street cafes, bars, underground clubs, cinemas , and public and private art and cultural institutions have helped give new life to Beyoğlu. Among these are the İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, the Platform, Garanti Contemporary Art Center, the Chamber of Architects, the Amnesty International, İstanbul Bilgi University Cinema-theque, and foreign cultural institute, almost all of which contain extensive libraries and gallery spaces. In the vital mix of Beyoğlu, commercial galleries and bank galleries exist in close proximity to non-profit cultural centers and multi-functional spaces.

The Counter Artworks, which is located at the historical Elhamra Passage building, is one example of a gallery and a center which functions as a commercial gallery and a non-profit center but lives on private sponsorship. Gallery Apel, on the other hand, is a strictly commercial operation that contributes to the dynamics of the new formation of Beyoglu by attracting art buyers and collectors to this area. Among the new non-profit galleries, Borusan Art Gallery, Kasa Gallery (it was established and run by the Sabancı University) and the Gallery of İstanbul Bilgi University stand out among the prominent ones. The Platform, Garanti Contemporary Art Center (initiated and directed by Vasif Kortun) is non-profit center that has had an unprecedented impact on the creation of a contemporary art milieu in İstanbul that is connected to the international art circles beyond it. With its consistent exhibition, conference and exchange program, its extensive archive of artists' portfolios, its library of periodicals and catalogues, and its open atmosphere for discussion, it has become a place of gathering and networking not only for young artists and students but also for international curators and critics.

Because of the relatively cheap real estate rates, young artists mostly moved to the Tunnel area. While some of them have opened their studios for other artists to exhibit, others converted non-art spaces like shops into exhibition spaces. "Vitrin" initiated by Selda Asal, "Oda/Room" by Güneş Savaş, Özge Açıkkol and Seçil Yersel and "Dükkan/Shop" by Selim Bırsel are among the examples of artist-run-spaces in the Tunnel area. Similarly, *Art-ist* magazine has been published for five years under the initiative of one of İstanbul's internationally renowned artists, Halil Altındere. While creating opportunities for many young artists to appear, these new spaces and platforms also provide young curators and critics like Ali Akay, Ahu Antmen, Levent Çalikoğlu and Başak Şenova with a vivid, rich, multi-layered artistic scene to work in.

At the North of the city, on the **Levent-Maslak** axis, a new finance and banking center has been developed to carry the load of newly emerging functions and services. This area is referred to as the "Manhattan" of İstanbul, referring to the tall office towers of the major multinational companies and stock exchange located there. The underground metro which was just completed in the year 2000 connects these two locations; Taksim – Beyoglu to Levent – Maslak, and has even further accelerated the development of this new formation in Maslak. The artistic community was first drawn to Maslak because of the low real estate rates in this area. The artist settlements in the Maslak Atatürk Auto Industry Complex owed its existence to this fact as well as to the existence of large sturdy studio spaces originally designed for auto repair purposes. Here studios of photographers, sculptors, and painters co-exist with the commercial studios for film production, graphic design, animation etc.

Certain office towers on the Levent – Maslak axis (such as İş Bank and Sabancı towers) incorporated cultural and artistic activities into their profile in order to signal contemporaneity to their global partners. However, the most crucial investments in art in this area are the İstanbul Culture and Congress Center initiated by the İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts and the Proje4L-İstanbul Museum of Contemporary Art initiated by Vasif Kortun and founded by the collector couple, Sevda and Can Elgiz in Levent-Göltepe. The İstanbul Culture and Congress Centre is the most ambitious project in the city, a

world-class space on a par with its counterparts in other cities. Unfortunately, however, because of a conflict between the Foundation and the Minister of Culture, the gigantic construction site was shut down in 2000 and is still waiting for its completion. Proje4L, which is the largest contemporary art venue in İstanbul, occupies a specific position in relation to the city of İstanbul and the collision of its diverse social strata. In the front, it faces the newly emerged finance and business center on Büyükdere street, while at the back, it faces the Gültepe district, whose identity is largely determined by the phenomena of immigration in the last 20 years. Located in an office tower, Proje4L aims to provide a bridge between these two socio-economically distinct entities.

Epilogue:

At this pivotal point in time, what can be said about a city like İstanbul, which feeds on motion and speed, and which is constantly transforming itself like some giant mechanism in a work of science-fiction? Considering the contemporary art milieu in İstanbul, whose parameters are yet to be determined and which are still in a state of transition, how can we evaluate the new and traditional locations for art, the recently emerging art institutions (non-profit and profit), and the complex relations between them? How can we reflect on the future developments when the present ones are still in a state of flux? Despite the brief history of contemporary art in İstanbul, the solid achievements of local artists and institutions like the İstanbul Biennial point in promising directions. For future interventions and planning, much is expected of the correlations and collaborations between the new generation art institutions (academies, centers and museums), most of which were created by non-governmental organizations and private enterprise. The next, crucial steps will be determined by these initiatives and interactions as well as by the new official policies of the local municipalities and the state, which are all under renovation with the expectation of Turkey's integration into the EU.

(*) "İstanbul: The Improvisational City" was one of the early working titles of the exhibition that became "Call Me İstanbul". I decided to adopt this as my title since the word 'improvisation' captures the essence of the nature of the changes in İstanbul which my essay is about.

(**) For a detailed account on the sociology, economy and history of globalization in Turkey, specifically in İstanbul, see "İstanbul Between the Global and the Local", edited by Çağlar Keyder (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., USA, 1999).