

## THINKING "OTHERWISE"<sup>1</sup>

Fulya Erdemci, Independent Curator and Critic  
March 2005

Along with the process of globalization, the authority of nation-states has been declining and leading to the emergence of cities as centers of the new world order and their rising autonomy. "Global Cities" like New York, Tokyo, Sao Paulo, Caracas and London have surpassed the borders of their geographies and nation-states and have become the heart of a new commercial and financial geography enabled by the digitalization of knowledge and the informatic revolution. These cities became centers of arts and culture as well<sup>2</sup>.

All over the world, there have been exhibitions concentrated on urbanism and cities, articulating the transformations that those cities have undergone. Recently, we have witnessed an accelerating interest in Istanbul, which was fostered by the negotiations over the Turkey's integration into the EU. Now, Europe wants to know more than what was available through the mediocre touristic perspectives towards Istanbul. It is not an oriental dream any more; it is getting real with its over-size scale and over-population whose majority is under the level of literacy; with its 'incidental' architecture and urban development; and finally, with its unstable economic state which is magically surviving. Controversially, it also appears as a possibility for a future habitat considering its multicultural configuration and alternative way of existence.

The historical and contemporary literature on Istanbul constitutes a vast corpus and seems inexhaustible, to which, I also contributed with couple of texts, mostly written for exhibition catalogues in the last four years. Therefore, this time, I decided to write on Istanbul through the artistic production focusing on the city, especially, on the urban setting and public space. The main

---

<sup>1</sup> This text was written for the "Focus Istanbul" exhibition catalogue, but as a reaction to the totalizing 'orientalist' approach of the exhibition, it was withdrawn and has never been published neither in the "Focus Istanbul" catalogue nor anywhere else. It was written originally in English.

<sup>2</sup> For more details: Saskia Sassen, "The Global City: Strategic Site/New Frontier", Democracy, Citizenship and the Global City, Ed. by Engin F. Isin, Routledge, London & New York, 2000

axis will be established on the cultural and architectural 'diseases', 'accidents' and 'wonders' of Istanbul.

### **Two Façades of Globalization: Satellite Cities and Shanty Towns**

1980's marks the date of the oppressive coup d'état and the adaptation of a liberal economic model, which was the first step towards integration into the economic globalization. With the process of globalization, Istanbul has been going through a series of drastic cultural, social, economic and urban transformations. 1980's witnessed radical urban renewal projects such as the construction of the second bridge over the Bosphorus, new high ways and boulevards, an underground metro, a second international airport as well as new docks and ports on the Asian coast. Shifting, relocating and restructuring the already existing business, finance, media centers and urban spaces related to transportation has changed the existing balances and given way to the emergence of new locations for concentration of diverse purposes. In addition to all these structural renewals, the best locations of the city were reserved for the five-star hotel chains in the expectation of accommodating "world elites" and the entrepreneurs of global capital. Gigantic shopping malls, fashion designer boutiques, clubs for the world music, specialty restaurants, etc, followed to fulfill the emerging demands created by the new lifestyles of the citizens of the desired "global city"<sup>3</sup>.

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 immigration 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 Istanbul suburbs, lower income classes migrating from rural Turkey have been creating new shantytowns as alternative habitats to accommodate their particular life styles. Signifying clean, upgraded, European-style secure housing for the new generation middle class families, the satellite cities have actually proven to be far from realizing what they are promising. Instead,

---

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

they became the zones of social, cultural and economic isolation.

The "Picnic City" (2001)<sup>4</sup> by **Eric Gröngrich** is a visual research on these newly emerging settlements. The work consists of a small size flipbook, slide show and large-scale drawings. The booklet presents a visual and written account of the urban and socio-economic development of Istanbul in the last twenty years. In the booklet, he gave statistical and informal information he acquired through the conversations he made with Istanbulers and through diverse printed materials. "...Everything seems to be coming together without any idea of an urban, historical or socio-political order. Somehow, there is a living with and making use of public space that can turn even a highway junction into a picnic site. Such examples indicate the presence of a different type of order."<sup>5</sup> Though the artist points out the existence of a different type of order, his photographs and drawings claim an understanding of disorder. His photograph, showing the view of a satellite city on the banks of the highway openly demonstrates how these isolated, cold, lifeless apartment buildings fail to accommodate the basics of any social housing project, while his other photograph capturing a concrete squatter house and his drawing depicting the Gültepe-Levent region where two opposing forces, the shanty town and the high-rise office towers coexist, call for a new term such as 'incidental' architecture and urbanism.

Mostly illegal, the 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 Bosphorus. Referring to the practicality and speed of their construction, the shantytowns in Turkish called Gecekondu (founded-by-night or landed-by-night). In addition to what the name implies, with the diversity and variety of materials and methods with which these Gecekondu were built, and with the resulting unrecognizable architectural notes of which they consist, they recall spaceships that have landed at night.

### **Limits: Tension Between Public and Private Spaces**

---

<sup>4</sup> Becoming A Place, Proje4L-Istanbul Museum of Contemporary Art, Istanbul, 2001

<sup>5</sup> "Picnic City" booklet

How do we read the urban space? The answer might vary according to where we look from and which direction we are heading at. The tension between the public and private spaces and the city's social (and even class-based) and spatial fragmentation as its consequence constitutes one of the major problematic related to urban space in Istanbul. Fragmentation begins from Istanbul's different neighborhoods housing differing social strata and includes the privatization of the coastline and even the fragmentation of the public spaces among themselves due to construction and usurpation. Squatter houses on the skirts of the Bosphorus, the villas we could call "thought gettos", or the controversial "Gök-Kafes" (Sky-Cage)<sup>6</sup> building rising in a space without pedestrian access cut by traffic could all be viewed as examples of the illegal construction in green areas and the usurpation of public spaces.

**Canan Tolon's** unrealized site-specific installation "Lots for Sale" (2002)<sup>7</sup> satirizes the usurpation of green areas and the private exploitation; how sometimes property rights and limits go beyond rational thought and take an "absurd" dimension. It relates the city's "invisible, disregarded spatial pockets and left-over voids... filled with junk and dirt, and jammed with wires, pipes and building materials" that are passed by unnoticed. She selected a 'blind spot' in between two apartment buildings, which was born out of a conflict on property rights between two neighbors, to construct a fake "green patch, a fragment of a field which would seem to spread as far as the eye can see". With this project, the artist aims at reversing the usual situation where city constantly invades the nature, and proposes an extraordinary situation where "nature acts as an intrusion upon the city's concrete mass, as if to take it back, to claim and occupy it."<sup>8</sup> Tolon's project hit such a sensitive point regarding the ambiguous and dark borders of ownership that the residents of the apartment building protested the project and refused to let it happen. This, in turn, ironically accentuates the validity of the project's objective.

---

<sup>6</sup> The Gecekondus are not the only "illegal" structures built in Istanbul. "Gökkafes" (Skycage), one of the "prestige" buildings in the very center of the city and 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.

<sup>7</sup> Istanbul Pedestrian Exhibitions I: Nişantaşı, Personal Geographies, Global Maps, Istanbul, 2002

<sup>8</sup> Istanbul Pedestrian Exhibitions I: Nişantaşı, Personal Geographies, Global Maps, Istanbul, 2002, exhibition catalogue, pg: 228

For Istanbulers the borders constituted by walls, grids and various types of separations are a significant part of the visual pollution; we are surrounded by borders along the shore, on the roads, around greens and abandoned spaces, even in the backyards of our apartment buildings. We have come to regard them almost as a part of nature and that we have been inured to them to the degree that we can no longer notice them. The grid/walls that partition the space and interrupt its unity and continuity also determine our spatial perception.

The "Quay" (2001)<sup>9</sup>, which was a collaborative project, realized by **Ahmet Soysal** (philosopher), **Fuat Sahinler** (architect) and **Murat Sahinler** (artist with urban interior design background), relates directly to the usurpation of public space by governmental and private interventions. While the project analyzes the intersection where the Sea meets the Land, it also notifies us that the key geographical, cultural and economic characteristic of Istanbul resides in its being a Seaport city and that it is our legal right to enjoy it. Since the late Ottoman period, the coastline of Istanbul belongs to the public sphere legally, therefore, the buildings located at the coastline should be arranged architecturally in such way that they should allow a passageway for the public to enter and enjoy the coastline. However, though it is a law, the situation in Istanbul presents quite the contrary of this fact. The artists selected Dolmabahçe Palace and its precinct as it exemplifies the situation severely in different levels. The Palace was enclosed by a second wall-grids with a "prize winning" project which is encircling the Clock Tower, once belonged to the public square on the coastline and where was a favorite meeting point down the Taksim/Gümüşsuyu district. The enclosure, not only "steals" the tower from the public, but simultaneously, obstructs "the access to the quay which is not its (Palace's) property and where people used to stroll freely in old times."<sup>10</sup>

The project consists of four billboards, a panel board in the exhibition venue, a film and an unrealized amphitheatre project for the boathouse in Dolmabahçe area. On the billboards, there were images and texts telling the story of the Dolmabahçe case and articulating the terms "Quay",

---

<sup>9</sup> Ego Fugal, the 7<sup>th</sup> International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, 2001

<sup>10</sup> Ego Fugal, the 7<sup>th</sup> International Istanbul Biennial, Istanbul, 2001, Exhibition catalogue, pg: 156

"public space" and "law". The captions in the billboards read "Public needs space. Istanbul is the city of quays. See the quay" or "See the quays which belong to the public and yet are enclosed. See the enclosed, spoiled, plundered quays". In their documentary film, the already existing life going on in the coastline along the Bosphorus was captured in a simple and unpretentious manner while their unrealized amphitheatre project unfolds another crippled relationship: between the land, the sea and the coastline.

In the lack of the Utopian height and midst of nothingness, the artists propose us to look at the "otherwise" of the way we think and live and to experience the city as it calls for.