

Reimagining the City: Istanbul towards Globalization and Commodification

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Abstract: The research aims to facilitate a discourse on urban and cultural identity of the cities versus invented and projected images created for marketing them. While the city itself becomes a commodity to be consumed, cultural activities turn into means of promoting and selling it. Integrating conservation and valorization of cultural heritage in the domain of community development, education and tourism, as well as encouraging its accessibility and knowledge, can be helpful in raising awareness among communities on the importance of cultural heritage in its identity. Reimagining the city brings about reconstructing and rethinking it as a transforming and mutating place by all social, cultural and historical means.

Keywords: Urban representations; Urban transformation; Identity; Mega-events; Heritage; Tourism.

Resumen: La investigación pretende facilitar el discurso relativo a la identidad urbana y cultural de las ciudades, frente a las imágenes inventadas y proyectadas para su promoción. Mientras la ciudad se convierte en un artículo de consumo, las actividades culturales se tornan en un medio de promoción y venta. Integrando la conservación y la valorización del patrimonio cultural de la comunidad, la educación y el turismo, así como alentando su acceso y conocimiento, se puede lograr la concienciación sobre la importancia del patrimonio cultural para la identidad de la comunidad. El cambio de imagen de la ciudad trae consigo la reconstrucción y reflexión sobre sí misma como sitio de transformación y mutación gracias a sus medios sociales, culturales e históricos.

Palabras clave: Representaciones urbanas; Transformación urbana; Identidad; Mega-eventos; Patrimonio; Turismo.

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Visualizing the City of Signs

Cities are complex systems of representations in which space and time are understood and experienced in the form of a portrayal. The systems of representations are composed of signs: written words, painting, photographic images, maps and signals, filmic narratives, choreographic movements, installations and events, buildings and places (Borden et al., 2001). These selective representations (re)shape the metaphors and narratives which are widely used to describe the experience of urban living. In this sense, the city is recognized as an interface between individual experience and cultural representations (Milestone, 2008: 1165). Cities play a major role in the construction and experience of the cultures of everyday life and, within their spaces, collective and individual meanings are made and unmade and identities are formed (Stevenson, 2003).

Similarly places to visit are chosen through representations that are sustained through a variety of non-tourist practices, such as films, newspapers, TV, magazines, records, and videos which create the 'tourist gaze'. Moreover the gaze is constructed through signs, and tourism involves the collection of those signs (Urry, 1995). What is consumed in tourism are visual signs and sometimes a simulacrum in which tourists are the semioticians (Urry, 1990). The significance of visual consumption can be seen in the pervasive tendency to produce 'themed' environments. The top-down policies for urban regeneration are mostly aimed at brushing up the facades of the old buildings and creating pastiched surfaces leading to what MacCannell (1973: 595) calls 'staged authenticity'. What is sought for in a holiday is a set of photographic images which have been already seen in glossy brochures or other media.

Vedutismo - the influential Italian art of imaging the city - evolved from a veritable pandemic of urban imaging and a hunger - a taste - for viewing sites. As an art of viewing in the Italian 'vedute', the portrait of the city was staged. Masters of this type of representation include Canaletto and Panini (18th century). As they merged the codes of urban topography and landscape

painting city views, they also incorporated the cartographic drive, creating imaginative representational maps. Imaging a city in fact involves a cluster of multiple diverse maps that are inhabited and physically carried around by city dwellers. More than a factual accuracy, it was rather an exhibited interest in rendering a mental 'image of the city' and it proposed not a single 'cognitive mapping' but diverse observational routes. The art of viewing followed the older touristic drive to embrace a terrain that led to climbing of church towers, mountains and buildings to take in the panorama (Bruno, 2007).

Baudelaire developed a derived meaning of the French term 'flâneur' — that of "a person who walks the city in order to experience it". His description of *flâneur* has a key role in understanding, participating in and portraying the city. Simmel and Benjamin adopted the concept as a product of modernity. The modern city was transforming humans, giving them a new relationship to time and space. According to Simmel, the deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces, of historical heritage, of external culture, and of the technique of life (Weinstein, 1950). Benjamin, on the other hand, became his own prime example of *flâneur*, making social and aesthetic observations during long walks through Paris. His description of *flâneur* is an uninvolved character but highly perceptive toward an aesthetically attuned observation, which brought the term into the literature of photography. Sontag (1977: 55) claims that hand-held camera has become the tool of the *flâneur*:

"The photographer is an armed version of the solitary walker reconnoitering, stalking, cruising the urban inferno, the voyeuristic stroller who discovers the city as a landscape of voluptuous extremes. Adept of the joys of watching, connoisseur of empathy, the flâneur finds the world 'picturesque'."

Benjamin, in his writings on social and urban life in 19th century Paris, has shown that representation entered fully into the commodity relation by its production of an

economy of display in which the spaces of visual display and mass consumption are included. The visual, informational and the exotic were commodified through the new and global imagery: the national exhibition (Crystal Palace), the panorama, the plate-glass window and the shopping arcade in which the world of people, places and goods were gathered for display and consumption (Pickles, 2003). Not merely commodities are being displayed in world exhibitions, but also their metropolitan sites are being represented too. In other words, visitors to these exhibitions participated in the consumption of symbols of the city itself. The city is not merely epitomized through the display of all the important styles of the present cultural world but also, through its own production, a city can represent itself as a copy and sample of the manufacturing forces of the world culture' (Frisby, 2001). Recent accounts of urban political change have been typified by the speculative deployment of resources to attract investment. Within such processes, the construction of spectacular urban landscapes has become a requisite strategy for making the city attractive as a site for investment, yet, with a few notable exceptions, the meanings projected by these landscapes have been given little attention (Hubbard, 1996: 1441).

Marketing the City: Creative Cities and Mega-Events

City-marketing and place-branding strategies today often stress ideas and stereotypes of culture and creativity to promote attractive urban images (Vanolo, 2008: 370). Cities compete with each other in (re)producing and promoting their urban heritage and symbolic assets for tourism (Urry, 1990). The medium of competition has become the activities on the city. The attractiveness of these activities brings an increase in the number of tourists and this growth contributes remarkably to the economy of the state (Beyazit & Tosun, 2006). In light of the convergence of the inner circle of cultural tourism (heritage and arts tourism) and the outer circle (lifestyle and the creative industries), product development will become increasingly important for cities who want to offer a differential advantage and thereby stay ahead of the

competition. Urban cultural tourism related product development can range from the potential offered by cultural diversity and ethnicity, culinary culture, fashion and design to signature architecture for cultural institutions, cultural festivals and events (World Tourism Organisation and European Travel Commission, 2005).

The development of urban cultural festivals and their support of political authority and local economy dates back to the Roman Empire. From the mid-19th century onwards, however, the fashion for new large-scale, prolonged and spectacular city-based festivals gathered pace (Gold & Gold, 2005). The staging of the 1851 Great Exhibition in London's Hyde Park, which is also known as the Crystal Palace Exhibition, as a temporary structure made of iron and glass designed by Joseph Paxton, had become an emblem of the 'commodity fetishism' – the term used by Marx to describe the phenomenon of consumption. In this sense, the Crystal Palace was the precursor of the modern department store or shopping mall: unlimited objects of desire in one public space (Thackeray & Findling, 2002). Mitchell's argument is that starting from the exhibitions of modern capitalism such as the Crystal Palace – the world is represented by the exhibition itself; simply a further series of representations of a reality that we cannot know except in the forms of symbols that are culturally determined (Mazlish, 1994: 55). As we refer back to Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, we can think of the Crystal Palace as a shopping arcade creating a new and global imagery for consumption (Pickles, 2003), which would be joined by an ever-growing list of events that included sports meetings, garden festivals, song competitions, international arts festivals, major trade fairs, awards ceremonies, scientific congresses and mega-events. One good example for mega-events is the European Capital of Culture (ECOC) programme in which the city is given a chance to showcase its cultural life and heritage for a period of one year (Gold & Gold, 2005).

According to the definition of cultural heritage by UNESCO (2008), the term encompasses several main categories such as movable-immovable or tangible-intangible. The term 'cultural heritage' includes build-

ings, monuments, landscapes, urban areas, countryside, buried remains and objects that are classic and contemporary, and it contributes to the identity and branding of territory, so relevant in an age of globalization (Pugliese & Da Sacco, 2007). Heritage is part of a common past; it is a source of the community identity as it offers us various perspectives to ponder over our histories, identities and our current standing. The preservation of heritage allows us to construct our collective memories and establishes our cultural identities, as it includes the common patrimony of historical evidences (identity and memory) of a specific territory that needs to be safeguarded in a combined process of protection, management and usage. However this does not and should not necessarily mean making up historical sites into museums. Between the possibilities of making the territorial definition of cultural district reachable and preserving cultural heritage, there is a combination of interests aimed at visualizing possible strategic development actions.

For Lefebvre 'space is produced and reproduced, and thus represents the site and the outcome of social, political and economic struggle'. Heritage is a key element in those processes of the production and reproduction of power relationships (Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge, 2000). Recognizing local/global relationships and conflicts is essential to address cultural continuity in recognizing the intangible cultural practices and heritage resources of the historically built environment. History, traditions, local lifestyle, art and culture are intangible elements of the cultural heritage that shape the built environment, vernacular architecture and cultural landscape. Here the crucial point is forming a collective cultural memory for communities and to communicate these intangible categories to the future generations. Another question which should be asked is the level of consciousness as well as the level of interaction. Various interest groups affect the level of public consciousness: Governmental and non-governmental organizations, international non-profit organizations, etc. This is done through legislations and protection of listed buildings, the organization of fairs and festivals, visual media such as documentaries and films and all other re-

lated media, public campaigns and mega events such as the ECOC Program. The result is not only raising the consciousness level of the local community, but also attracting visitors to the site, as cultural heritage can be lost due to lack of awareness and interest. On the other hand, intense promotional campaigns to attract a high number of visitors may result in exceeding carrying capacity of the historical site and damaging the cultural heritage.

Cities that have been awarded as Cultural Capitals of Europe and that are promoted to the public with their outstanding cultural properties constitute a good basis to determine issues related to urban heritage, urban transformation, culture politics and continuity in terms of socio-cultural and socio-economic aspects. The transformation does not only happen on the urban level but also occurs on the national and transnational level. The designation of Istanbul as one of three very different capitals of culture for 2010 reflects the changing nature of the European Union's space and identity and the evolving capital of culture program (Hein, 2008).

Cities can intensify, exploit and even reinvent their image and identity through the ECOC process. It is a fact that ECOC presents a valuable opportunity to market cities. In this sense, 1990 has been a turning point in the history of cultural capitals of Europe with the designation of Glasgow, a non-capital city. It has changed the scale of the event and showed that the programme could evolve into something that played a strong promotional and regenerative role. Staging of major cultural events is often seen as more flexible and distinctive carriers of the symbolic capital of a place than hard infrastructure-based projects. Thus, the example of Glasgow stands for 'new style' urban cultural policies as well as cultural production and consumption. It allowed the municipal authorities to undertake a rebranding exercise to confront the city's established image as a dour manufacturing city, build venues that would enrich local cultural life when the festival was over, and use culture as an engine to promote urban regeneration (Gold & Gold, 2005). The social and cultural transformation gained a different and multidimensional structure by bringing a new model to

promote the city through art and culture events. Artists, designers, architects, intellectuals are attracted to the city as a part of urban development policies; art and culture zones are created. In this way, a new image is created for Glasgow: “creative city”.

Like in many sectors and projects, creativity is very important in the ECOC project. So as the time is limited, the projects that will represent the city should be creative, expressive and impressive (Beyazıt & Tosun, 2006). With mass media and mass tourism as their most powerful tools, intercultural communication is largely based on image transfer. Nonetheless, without a carefully structured approach, these opportunities may be overlooked and indeed wasted, with a huge expense incurred on the part of the city with little or no long term benefits for its residents (Besson & Sutherland, 2007). The question is whether the projects within the frame of ECOC are the outcomes of a strategic planning process which lead to sustainability or if they are short-term projects to create an alluring theatrical stage for the sake of marketing.

Reimagining the City: Case of Istanbul

Istanbul has been a gateway between Asia and Europe or in general terms East and West through the ages. The popular ‘bridge’ metaphor also represents a connection between the past and the present. The city that has been the capital of three empires (Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman) in the past is now getting prepared for 2010.

Similar to many “global cities” Istanbul is exposed to economic, social and political changes along with the bombardment of globalization, which has brought rapid and chaotic urbanization. There is still something mystical in Istanbul, mostly because of the Orientalist representations of the city. Although the city silhouette with minarets is still in place, it is now coupled with the image of a metropolis in pace with global standards: a booming culture industry, lively entertainment and night life, five star hotels, business districts and shopping malls. The change of the city image from an oriental portrait to a multicultural European city vibrating with arts and culture started synchronously with negotiations on

Turkey’s European Union membership and the designation for the ECOC (Ozkan, 2008). Improving the capital’s image was the concluding order of the business. The models most admired were the European capitals. The deterioration of Istanbul so troubled the rulers that many attempts were undertaken to bring the old city up to modern standards (Celik, 1993).

Tourism has become a tool to demonstrate to the European Union the economic, technological and physical, as well as the conservative/Islamic power change in the social context of Istanbul; in other words, the making of a stage for the ‘dialogue of civilizations’ between the West and the Islamic countries, as well as a stage for the Cultural Capital of Europe in 2010 has been introduced through the ‘tourist gaze’. In the period of the ‘tourist gaze’, Istanbul has witnessed the physicalization of multinational investments through an upscale architectural vocabulary including multi-use complexes of residential towers, offices and shopping malls located in globalized cores of ‘social distinction’ (Akpınar, 2008). Within the emergence of the new global politics and economics, the municipal program of Istanbul may be seen as a ‘marketing strategy’ for attracting foreign investment and tourists. The government clearly declared that “marketing Istanbul” is their priority in the highly competitive international tourism sector and supported the idea of the museumized Historic Peninsula (Kayaalp, 2008). In 2005, the law (no. 5366) on the ‘Preservation by Renovation and Utilization by Revitalizing of Deteriorated Immovable Historical and Cultural Properties’ was approved by the Council of Ministers. The law aims “reconstruction and restoration of the zones which are registered and declared as SIT (Conservation) areas by boards of conservation of cultural and natural assets which have been worn down and are losing their characteristics” (Act No: 5366, 2005). To give an example, the districts of Fener, Balat, Süleymaniye, Tarlabası and Sulukule, which are the places where diverse ethnic groups (Jews, Armenians, Greeks) used to live, now have changed into poor urban areas where cultural properties are not taken care of.

The government plans to clean up these areas by moving out the current population

for “gentrification” purposes and by renewing the historical buildings. The renovation and redevelopment of the area, like many similar plans, seems to be a part of the “identity construction” project of the ruling party through a top-down implementation. The “revitalization” of two of these targeted areas, Sulukule and Tarlabası, will involve the mass displacement of local populations. Socially, these two areas of Istanbul embody precisely what makes the city so emblematic of European culture in the 21st century: migration. In the last fifty years, as the city’s population has increased ten fold because of migration from Turkey’s East,

the neighborhood has become a squatter’s zone, home to Kurdish and Arabic speakers whose culture is synonymous with many aspects of contemporary Istanbul life. What both neighborhoods have in common is the fact that, in spite of the contributions of their communities to the city’s vibrancy, their inhabitants are overwhelmingly poor. They also comprise populations whose existence is a threat to myths of nation-state identity (Pine, 2008). On the other hand, without local people, the heritage loses the meaning and the renewal projects only touch the facades of the buildings, creating a theatrical stage of the history.



Figure 1. Conservation Areas: Fener, Balat, Süleymaniye, Tarlabası, and Sulukule

The social and cultural transformation gained a different and multidimensional structure by bringing a new model to pro-

vide the city through art and culture events. Artists, designers, architects, intellectuals are attracted to the city as a part of

urban development policies; art and culture zones are created. In this way, a new image is created: “creative city”. Major cultural events staged are often seen as more flexible and as distinctive carriers of the symbolic capital of a place than hard infrastructure-based projects. Istanbul seems to emerge as a ‘creative city’. Thus, contemporary art events, biennials and festivals have become a vital economic development strategy in cityscapes that are increasingly characterized by social segmentation and gentrification, and thus may actually feed into exclusionary practices in the urban realm. However what makes the difference is the ‘urban experience’. Jacobs says that:

“The streets are the vital organs of the creative city. After all, people meet in the streets and it is here that human contact, unexpected encounters and business life take place. This street ballet contributes to creativity and economic dynamics.” (Hospers & van Dalm, 2005: 10)

The melting-pot metaphor and chaotic structure with crowds of people from different nationalities, ethnicities and speaking different languages are signifiers of the heterogeneity of Istanbul’s urban culture and rich cultural life not in buildings, cinema and theater halls but on the streets of the city. As Florida argues, creative cities are able to combine the T’s of Tolerance, Talent and Technology. Jacobs brings about urban environment and the need for urban diversity: diversity of buildings, people and their economic activities as a helping hand to Florida’s creative triad (Hospers & van Dalm, 2005: 11). As well as its melting-pot structure, the diversity in Istanbul is formed through “union of the opposites”. As Istanbul is a city between ‘Orient and Occident’, the conflicting sides are not perceived as somewhat negative but on the contrary they are appraised as qualities enriching the city and its identity. Different ethnic groups living in the same neighborhood, churches, synagogues and mosques in vicinity to each other, booming population with continuous migration despite the carrying capacity of the land, skyscrapers rising shoulder by shoulder with “gecekondus” - they all seem like the signs of a problematic and chaotic city. The sphere of circulation – of commodities,

money and individuals – provides the basis for an image of the city as a highly complex web of interactions verging on the chaotic (Frisby, 2001). As Foucault (1970) notes, discourses constitute not only representations that lie at a surface covering “reality;” they form concepts, political positioning, and most substantially, “the order of things”. Decq claims that for most of the people, there is not much to discover in the planned, orderly cities of Europe, and on the contrary, there is always a lot to discover in a chaotic city like Istanbul (Atmaca, 2005). As such, the Dutch ‘starchitect’ Rem Koolhaas expresses his excitement about the “chaotic” and “self-generating” quality of Istanbul (Ozkan, 2008 qtd. in Arkitera Online 17.04.2005). Conception of Istanbul as a “nicely chaotic and thereby exciting” city is also what makes the difference. The distinctiveness of the places provides attachment to particular neighborhoods or cities, given that people perceive places through their own identity and characteristics. These characteristics can be anonymity, uncertainty and unpredictability of events in complex and urban environments, the senses of possibility and danger induced by cities. Conover (2004) goes beyond the chaos and claims that ‘delirium’ rules Istanbul:

“Istanbul wrote delirious into the script of the urban imaginary. “What protects us against delirium or hallucinations are not our critical powers but the structure of our space,” Merleau-Ponty wrote. In the case of Istanbul, there is no protection. Delirium is order”.

In such representations, it is suggested that chaos or delirium would be the quintessential representations of Istanbul’s urban order, thus giving its uniqueness.

In July, 2005 Istanbul hosted the 22nd World Architecture Congress, organized by the International Union of Architects (UIA). Şefik Onat, the Head of the UIA 2005 Organization Committee, highlighted Istanbul as being “the most problematic city of the world”, in contrast to Florence as “the world’s center of art and culture” and Nagoya as “the most perfect city of the world”, which were the other two candidates for the same year. Interpreting Istanbul’s problematic urbanization as a potential point of attraction for architects,

Onat was already giving clues of the upcoming celebrations of Istanbul as a chaotic city (Ozkan, 2008).

The congress was a great opportunity for Istanbul in terms of contributing to the city's tourism sector because it would include a lot of publicity and thus promote the city's image on the world stage. The billboards featured photographs of mosques by the 16th century Ottoman master architect Sinan, while banners stretched on pedestrian overpasses displayed a monochrome sketch of the Maiden's Tower, one of the iconographic symbols commonly used in publicity campaigns about Istanbul. That is, the iconography of the city's welcome call to architects was not much different from the touristic and commercial imagery used to make Istanbul look appealing to its touristically motivated visitors (Ozkan, 2008).

Conclusion

It is expected that the ECOC will foster the improvement of tourism in the city and Istanbul will attract more tourists with its new image. However, when the project is approached from the tourism side, being the European Capital of Culture will be no different than hosting the Olympic Games or Formula 1. What is different about the ECOC from the other events is the understanding of the concept of "culture". The crucial point is to place culture as a driving force in city development, not to consume it to become more competitive. Here, the integration of the projects with the social and physical structure of Istanbul becomes very important, as they are thought as a part of cultural policy (Beyazıt & Tosun, 2006). Combining the physical city and the services/events creates the city's image. This image can be of beauty, excitement, charm, or artistic value. The image can also arise from the lifestyles and values of the local residents, such as an ethnic culture, the friendly attitude of the residents, etc. This combination of physical product, services and events provided, and the image of the city is part of the experience of visiting the place. It is actually this entire experience that must be promoted when marketing a city (Kolb, 2006).

Tourism is one of the main mechanisms

to reformulate Istanbul through its characteristics. In Robins' words "the particularity and identity of cities is about product differentiation; their cultures and traditions are now sustained through the discourses of marketing and advertising" (Dogan, 2005: 20 qtd. in Robins, 1993: 306). Keyder (2000) states that, Istanbul has to take part in the global mobility in accordance with the concept of "global city". Therefore, globalization brings about reimagining Istanbul as a world capital and marketing it in the global market. However, together with the globalization and its effects, it is also crucial to think of the reflections on the society. An urban space is not solely an image to be sold through the media, but rather it is something to be experienced physically through high level of interaction with its inhabitants, history, culture and heritage. Today culture industries, governments and private sectors separate the culture from its urban context and create new values through the process so called 'urban renewal'. There is a gap between local needs and the cultural policies due to the absence of local community's representation. The Municipality is so occupied with "marketing Istanbul" that it seems to miss one point of the creative triad: Tolerance! Although the marketing strategies emphasize ethnic diversity to celebrate Istanbul as a world city, the reality is different. The minority groups and Romani populations are subjected to social stigmatization and exclusion. Nonetheless, the creative city cannot be constructed on glamorous projects of 'Starchitects' or world-famous artists simply, but can only be achieved by encouraging its citizens to take an active role and to participate. The creative city needs creative citizens.

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Sometido a evaluación por pares anónimos