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The Reign of ‘Madness’ in Istanbul: Economies of Scale of Urban Transformation

Yaşar Adnan Adanali

**Introduction: Istanbul Becoming Global**

Istanbul is transforming. The city is turning global, becoming one of the nodal hubs that knit the global economy together. According to the MasterCard’s Global Destination Cities Index, in which the 20 most visited cities in the world are listed, Istanbul is ranked as the fastest growing destination, positioned number 5 after London, Paris, Bangkok and Singapore. International Congress and Convention Association ranks Istanbul 9th in terms of international meetings organised by international organisations, signifying its political influence. For the second consecutive year, ULI and PwC ranked Istanbul 1st for both real estate investment and development in Europe. GaWC’s list of the Alpha World Cities (Fig. 1), which are characterized as “very important world cities that link major economic regions and states into the world economy”, comprised 47 cities and Istanbul is ranked 35th.

If put together, these striking figures indicate that Istanbul is rapidly becoming a global attraction point, not only for people but also for capital. Istanbul is already a city of billionaires. It is now number five on the list of world cities with the highest number of dollar billionaires. Today, Istanbul is home to 30 such residents with a total combined wealth of $ 48.7 billion.

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4 <http://www.forbes.com/pictures/ef45edihhs/5-istanbul/#gallerycontent>

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**Figure 1:** GaWC’s list of the Alpha World Cities (2011). Source: <http://www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/rb/rb394.html>
Figure 2: Tarlabası Urban Transformation Project envisions to replace the current “marginalised” communities with the “new” Istanbulites. Photo by the author.

Turkey is ranked last among 31 OECD countries in terms of social justice, according to the Justice Index prepared by the Bertelsmann Stiftung. Hence, there is a connection to this growing number of wealthy inhabitants and the polarising urbanisation policies. Moreover, on the list of Turkey’s 100 richest persons, it is not industrialists who constitute the majority anymore, but those in the real estate and construction businesses. Almost one third of the richest Turkish persons are directly profiting from the business of global “city-making”.

The ‘global city’ project is made possible via the reproduction of the city in the framework of processes of capitalist accumulation and mechanisms of neoliberal production and consumption. This project consists of spatial, economic and social processes as well as those that are by content and application political. In the following, the way in which ‘the urban’ is transforming Istanbul within the processes of globalisation and its impact beyond the ‘city of billionaires’ will be discussed - by first focusing briefly on the overall strategies at work; secondly, unpacking the discourse of transformation by focusing on the mega-projects; and thirdly, zooming in Taksim Project, an emblematic intervention at the city’s most visible public space.

Making the Global City: Urban Strategies

Global(urban)isation
Although Istanbul’s current rapid transformation has been presented as a ‘non-Western’ miracle of development in the face of the destructive effects of economic crises, it is actually possible to think of this transformation as a ‘skilful’ application of well-known global(urban)isation strategies by an alliance formed between the state, the investors and local governments: (a) The segmentation of the city into detached islands through the construction of profit-making fragments of the global urbanisation catalogue, such as shopping malls, gated communities, mass housing settlements (TOKI: Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry Housing Development Administration of Turkey), residences, plazas, airports, techno parks, golf courts, cruise harbours; (b) rendering lower and middle classes ‘powerless’ in the face of this transformation by means of forced evictions and legal pressure in order to secure the land necessary for the construction of these urban fragments; such that social and class-based segregation is conducted alongside spatial segregation; (c) the production of urban corridors and transportation infrastructures that will facilitate the flow of capital, goods and humans between these fragments of the urban catalogue. Consequently, while prioritising the city of fluxes composed of corridors to the city of integrated urban spaces, Istanbul’s global(urban)isation project constructs the spaces of wealthy on the spaces of poor and the marginalised.

Lower class neighbourhoods inhabited by the city’s poorest, which at the same time carry the highest potential in terms of the rising value of urban land, are refashioned by local municipality and private investors partnerships and allotted to new Istanbulites with highest cultural and economic capital – such as local and foreign executives working in sectors that are in great demand in the post-industrialist era like finance, design and informatics, as well as professionals of the institutionalised field of arts and culture (Fig. 2).

Branding Istanbul
The global(urban)isation project is not a one-way process of globalisation of the world’s cities but a dynamic and dialectical transformation through which the meaning of the ‘global’ has also been redefined. This transformation, on the one hand, is rapidly changing the appearance of the cities, and their sub- and super-structures as briefly described above. On the other hand, economy and politics, broadly speaking, have been redefined and ‘urbanised’. Cities are not just passive receivers of those fluxes but are coming into the picture as active participants of the globalisation via implemented urban policies. The competition among cities as ‘market actors’ for attracting global fluxes (of capital, people, investment, and political leverage) reveals itself in the city branding discourse. The emphasis of inter-city global competition on “becoming a city brand” is an attempt to institutionalise cities within the global capitalism by discovering their potentiality or by creating/assigning new ‘assets’ with strategic planning.

To start with, Istanbul has all the essentials necessary for this project to be marketed and institutionalised: being centrally located (between Europe and Asia); having a young and educated population and surplus labour with high human capital that is required for the services sector; having a unique position in Turkey with an uneven geographical development; resting on a multi-layered history ready to be capitalised by the global tourism industry;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>GDP</th>
<th>Construction</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>6,2</td>
<td>13,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
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<td>7,8</td>
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<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>9,4</td>
<td>14,1</td>
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<td>8,4</td>
<td>9,3</td>
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<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>6,9</td>
<td>18,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>4,7</td>
<td>5,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>2,0</td>
<td>-8,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>-4,8</td>
<td>-16,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>9,2</td>
<td>18,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>8,5</td>
<td>11,2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Rate of Growth of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Construction Sector in Turkey. Source: State Statistical Institution
and with its Ottoman heritage, providing an anti-thesis to Ankara, the ‘Kemalist’ capital of the ‘old’ secularist regime, for reshuffling the (national and regional) hegemonic power.

Building on this basis, local and central authorities are performing entrepreneurial governance and hence working hard to make Istanbul a rising and marked up ‘value’ with branding projects such as European Culture of Capital 2010 (cool Istanbul), European Culture of Sport 2012 (dynamic Istanbul), candidacy for 2020 Olympics and European Championship for Football (the global Istanbul), etc. As described by the city’s strategic plan, the ambitious aim is “a centre for art & culture, tourism, finance, trade and sport”. Articulating on being ranked as the fifth most visited city in the World, the 2020 Olympics bid leader Hasan Arat states that “our economic growth is enabling Istanbul to build towards a spectacular 2020 Games. Our ranking… displays that Istanbul is a city that people from all over the world want to experience”.

Politicised Istanbul
We have been observing the consolidation of (re-positioning) Istanbul at the central stage of national politics for the last few years, precisely throughout the last national elections in 2011. The Prime Minister Erdogan had preferred to label his ‘visionary’ urban interventions for Istanbul as ‘mad projects’ during his election campaign. Here, madness was synonymous with mega and grandeur. Those mega-projects, varying from constructing an artificial channel paralleling the Bosphorus to building two satellite cities out of scratch, had become the most visible and debatable subjects of the election, dominating all the others, such as democratisation process, right of the Kurdish citizens, making the new constitution. As the political process turned more urbanised, ‘mad projects’ got normalised. With the changing discourse, we are not talking about urban policies and politics per se anymore, but instead about how the broader political framework is becoming urbanised. Given the turnout of the elections, it seems that many voters buy into the “branding cities with mad projects” message. Hence, it is possible to consider the global(urban)isation project of Istanbul as the totality of those operational strategies supported from above (the government, and international capital) and from below (local government and investors).

Political Economy of Construction
Indeed, ‘rediscovery of the urban’ and the political economy of city branding via mega-projects are strongly related to the extraction and absorption of surplus value, as discussed at length by David Harvey (2012) with references from Haussmann’s Paris to Robert Moses and suburbanisation of America. Harvey explains the intrinsic relationship between the crisis of capitalism and urban interventions at grandeur scale “to resolve the capital surplus absorption problem”. Following his vein of thought, Istanbul’s recent building boom has been very much related to the attempts of the long governing AKP which came into power following one of the worst financial crisis in the country, to overcome economic crisis via initiation of an ambitious urbanisation process. If mega-projects are one aspect of this process, facilitation of (national and supranational) capital for having access to urban land for real-estate investments is another. As seen in Table 1, Turkey’s ‘economic miracle’ has heavily...
Mega-urban projects (a.k.a. ‘mad’ projects) require a special attention within the context of Istanbul’s urban transformation process. They signify those urban infrastructure and/or development projects with certain characteristics as summed up by Frick: mega-urban projects are colossal in size and scope; captivating because of their size, engineering achievements or aesthetic design; costly – and often under-costed; controversial, complex and have control issues. With reference to the mega-urban transportation projects, Sturup states that their advocates go straight to the question “can we do this thing?” and the question of “should we do it?” is subsumed by the fact that we can. Considering the colossal impact of those projects on the environment, society and economy, such reasoning poses great challenges.

Flyvbjerg, Bruzelius, and Rothengatter argue that “cost overruns are endemic and are largely the product of deliberate misinformation provided to government by project proponents.” Flyvbjerg provides a ‘Machiavelian’ formula for this cost overrun:

\[
\text{Under-Estimated Costs + Over-Estimated Revenue + Under-Estimated Environmental Impacts + Over-Valued Economic Development Effects} = \text{Project Approval}
\]

In the case of Istanbul the official labelling of mega-projects as ‘madness’ adds extra layers to this formula, one being the ‘branding’ and the other ‘politicising’ the city, as briefly described above. The shopping list of ‘projects with scale’ is lengthening to such an extent that the city is now called ‘a mega-construction site’: opening up a canal (similar to Suez or Panama) in the European side of Istanbul between the Black Sea and Marmara, 45 to 50 km long, 140 m wide and 25 m deep, which would provide to the ships and tankers passing the Bosphorus an alternative route; filling the seashore with extensive visibility that it is not surprising where people from very different backgrounds co-exist and pass-by in a somewhat surprising harmony not only among thousands of pedestrians but also with slow-paced flowing car traffic. There are seven roads coming together at the square, including the city’s most lively pedestrian main street, Istiklal, with over 2 million passers-by a day. This is such a central urban space with extensive visibility that it is not surprising to see the appetite of the city’s and the capital’s officials to intervene, re-design and put their sign on the space.

The Taksim Project

Indisputably, one of the most important public spaces in Turkey is the Taksim Square. In the minds and hearts of Istanbulites and anyone who visits the city, Taksim will remain as a dazzling, cosmopolitan urban centre where people from very different backgrounds co-exist and pass-by in a somewhat surprising harmony not only among thousands of pedestrians but also with slow-paced flowing car traffic. There are seven roads coming together at the square, including the city’s most lively pedestrian main street, Istiklal, with over 2 million passers-by a day. This is such a central urban space with extensive visibility that it is not surprising to see the appetite of the city’s and the capital’s officials to intervene, re-design and put their sign on the space.

Figure 6: Taksim Barracks (1900). Photographer: Sebah-Jaillier, German Archeological Institute

Figure 7: Prime Minister Erdoğan presents Taksim as one of his ‘mad projects’. Source: <http://taksikal.com.tr>
Taksim Square, being as much as a vibrant urban centre, has always been a political space in the contemporary history of the Turkish Republic, a space where the May Days were celebrated (Fig. 4), various protests took place, access to social movements were denied by the authorities many times for many years; but over and over again, Taksim has been reclaimed by the social and political movements. It can indeed be considered as the Tahrir Square of Istanbul.

In the making of the global city, the urban transformations of Istanbul are visible more than ever. Taksim Square is at the centre of this rapid change and now targeted by the government as a space of intervention for another ‘mad’ project. ‘Urban madness’ has become a norm and ethos of transformation for some time now. Among others, Taksim Project was introduced and propagated during the election by the Prime Minister. Recently, as the urban plans were approved, and some details were revealed, we have had a better idea about the scale of this project.

According to these plans (Fig. 5), the car traffic will be transferred to underground by the construction of a complicated motorway and viaducts’ system connecting those seven streets; the diving and escaping tunnels will be built with service roads replacing the pedestrian streets; and an old army barracks demolished 70 years ago (Fig. 6) will be ‘reconstructed’ on the only remaining green park in this part of the city, probably to function as a lucrative shopping mall, one of the symbolic consumption spaces in the rapidly globalising city. With such project, according to the Taksim Platform, a civic initiative composed of various urban social movements, the accommodating symbiosis of the square will be radically damaged; a parallel automobile universe will be constructed underground; the tunnels will drastically limit the pedestrian access to the square and de-humanise the space; and the shopping mall will replace a very valuable green oasis and commercialize this ‘political’ space, probably with an out-fashionable architectural intervention.

The initiation of the project was as striking as the project itself. One of the events of ‘Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture’ was the ‘Ghost Buildings’ project by the Istanbul-based architects PATTU, which was aiming to “open a discussion about the destructions and reconstructions in the city through 12 selected buildings”. Following a provocative question – ‘what would have happened if these destruction never took place?’ – the project provided different urban scenarios about long-gone buildings, to be shared through in-situ installations and an exhibition, however, without the intention to actually re-build them. The idea of ‘re-thinking those demolished buildings’ was partly related to the contemporary demolitions, due to the urban transformation projects, in Istanbul’s inner city and informal ‘gecekondu’ neighbourhoods where mainly the urban poor live. Hence, one of the 12 buildings of the project was Taksim Artillery Barracks, which was built in 1806 at Taksim Square, was used as a stadium for a few decades, and then transformed into a public park in 1942 following its demolition. Figure 7 shows the Prime Minister Erdogan presenting his Taksim Project in 2011, with an image of an old barric and a football field in the middle. Indeed this image was taken from PATTU’s Taksim Project, nonetheless, it was used for Erdogan’s presentation without their knowledge.

PATTU developed 5 scenarios for this space, under the titles of ‘leisure city’, ‘provisional city’, ‘open city’, ‘improvisational city’, and ‘city of collective memories’. The concept of the last one, depicted by Figure 7, was described as following:

“Taksim Barracks housed many sports events during the Ottoman era as well as the early years of the Turkish Republic. The football games that started during the occupation years in Talimhane area between the occupation forces and Turkish teams were later transferred to the courtyard of the Taksim Barracks. The matches of teams like Galatasaray, Besiktas and Fenerbahçe with English and French teams, as well as the first national games of the young Republic were played here. The barracks not only housed football games, but also boxing matches, horse races, car and motorcycle races. If the barracks was not destroyed could it preserve its modest atmosphere? Would people still play street football on its field covered with weeds, while you find yourself 70 years in the past when you enter its courtyard surrounded by old walls?”

Surprised by the utilisation of their drawings at the highest level, the curator of ‘Ghost Buildings’, Cem Kozar stated that “our project was one that was against the reconstruction of such buildings. Our thoughts in the beginning were those demolitions shall remain as unpleasant memories. Because when you aim to reconstruct such buildings they cannot go beyond a theatre décor. We were teasing ourselves by saying: what if they decide to realize them?” Not surprisingly, despite the efforts of the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality to commission an architect, none of the renowned offices in Turkey had volunteered to be associated with such a reconstruction project.

Conclusion: The State of Emergency of Planning

Taksim Project and the other ‘mad’ ones raise important questions with regards to the limits to urban democracy. Neither civil society nor Istanbulites were part of the decision-making process. The central authority was above the local level. The decisions were made behind closed doors, hidden from the public until the final shows where the Prime Minister himself presented the concepts. The projects were not part of the urban development plans. Those in power preferred to go straight to the question “can we do this thing?” instead of posing the question of “should we do it?” They were presented as quick-fixers to many challenging inter-related urban problems, however, vigorously endorsed as catalysts for economic development, heavily depended upon the construction sector. One can hardly miss the ‘modernist’ vision behind them, aiming to impress one’s seal to the city; in the tradition of Haussmann or Robert Moses. Whilst doing so, these projects pave the way into a ‘state of emergency’ regime of planning, and repositioned the planning above the politics. In line with the technocratic, managerial governance prioritised by the neoliberal system, urban transformation projects become means to delink democracy and urban spatial reproduction.

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