

Commodification of Urban Space and the Image of ‘New’ Istanbul: Decoding the prevailing discourse

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the urban transformation strategy implemented in Istanbul for the last 15 years as a tool to promote the ‘new’ city discourse. This marketing strategy leads to a thoroughly manipulated or re-written urban texture, constructed through concepts of identity, context and historicism. By decoding its actors, their roles, and branding images of five selected urban projects which relied on a top-down approach, the research exposes the implicit and explicit targets behind the political discourse of ‘new’ Istanbul. Through a qualitative content analysis of branding images and promotional media, the research focuses on the unseen agenda of the governing authority concerning the urban image and the state economy, which, on the contrary, undermines legitimate laws covering disaster mitigation. The conceptual framework of the study draws on Tafuri’s (1969) seminal article "Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology" to deepen our examination of the leading forces of urban ideology that are reshaping the city. The article aims to spark a debate over the ‘new’ Istanbul discourse and its planning practices through its re-reading of urban projects, the field of architecture and planning, development strategies, and their relevant actors.

Introduction

A perusal of the legislation related to Istanbul's built environment following the 1999 Marmara earthquake, and especially over the last fifteen years, seems to suggest that disaster mitigation is at the heart of the ongoing urban renewal process. Major urban policies announced during this period are: Law No. 5366, ‘Preservation by Renovation and Utilization by Revitalization of Deteriorated Immovable Historical and Cultural Properties’ (2005), Law No.5393 delegating the authority of designating urban transformation areas to local municipalities (2005), and Law No.6306 titled ‘Law on the Transformation of Disaster-Risk Areas’ (2012), enabling the central government to declare almost any building as ‘at risk’ (Çavusoglu and Strutz, 2014, pp. 146-47). An additional policy move was made through the enactment of Law No. 6292 (2011), focusing on the green (formerly forested) areas of the city, opening these up to urbanization and the real estate market (Çavusoglu and Strutz, 2014, pp. 141). Yet taking the intentions set forth in the legislation

marketed through a complex discourse, and disaster mitigation is not always at its center.

The country’s ‘Agenda 2023’ prescribes a construction and economy-oriented socio-spatial re-structuring process for the main cities. The governing authority's desire to create a ‘New Istanbul’ is befitting of this process as it enables the realization of new urban policies, and a focus on marketing strategy. The city of ‘new’ Istanbul described in the political discourse, frames a globally-orientated representation with the connotation of creating a ‘new Turkey’. This connotation, defining an about-turn vis-à-vis the Republic’s founding principles, has led to a thoroughly manipulated or re-written urban texture, constructed through concepts of identity, context and historicism. Phrases promoting the country and branding the city of Istanbul as its leading economic actor (through mega projects with references to Anatolian Seljuks and Ottoman periods) exposes a marketing strategy designed to attract direct foreign investment (DFI). Hence, the production of architecture and urban planning represents a

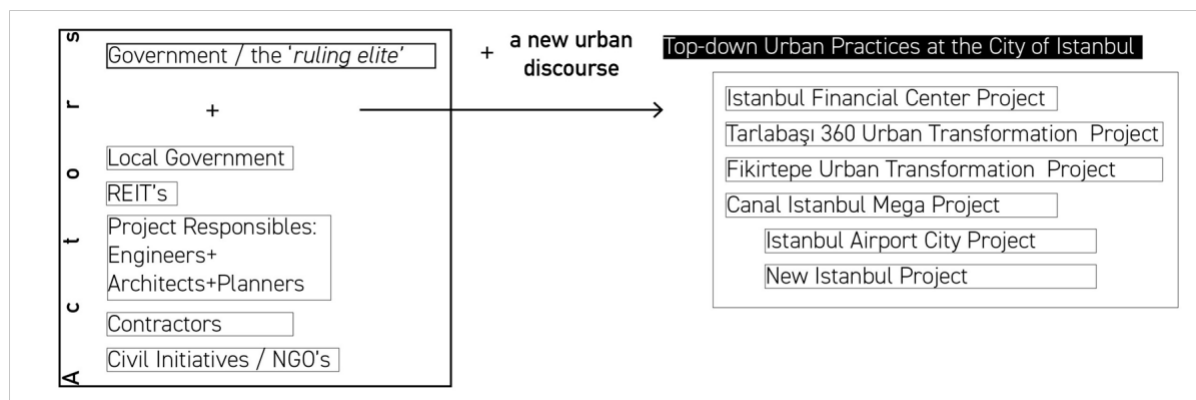


Figure 1: General framework of the study.

at face value would be misleading. Istanbul's frenzied urban renewal process is legitimized, promoted, and

stage of political discourse for the governing authority. The actors within this process, and acting in such an environment, are led through the government's political

missions and play a supporting role in a game composed of contractors, architects, civil initiatives, real estate trust funds (REITs), local governmental bodies and the media.

This study aims to identify the features of the urban transformation strategy implemented in Istanbul for the last 15 years to demonstrate how it is used as a tool to promote the ‘new’ Istanbul political discourse. To do so, we identify its actors, decode their roles, and analyse branding images used through selected top-down urban implementations and/or projects (Figure 1). By examining the leading forces of urban ideology that reshape the city, the conceptual framework of the study draws on Tafuri’s (1969) article "Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology" to criticize the tools used to legitimize the positions of the actors and their actions in establishing the ‘new’ Istanbul discourse.

The first part of the research clarifies the current conditions under which a city becomes a commodity that is sold, diversified, varied, grown and transformed. It proposes that, informed by top-down urban policies, the new modes of architecture and planning practices are changing, and the urban transformation projects are becoming the

representations of new urban policies that focus on the commodification of the city’s tangible and intangible heritage(s). The article then examines the emergence of the “new” İstanbul discourse since 2005 and underlines the specific role played by large-scale and capital-oriented urbanization practices in the transformation of the city’s current state.

By selecting five top-down urban implementations from the last 15 years, we expose the positions and roles of the actors within the overall urban agenda of the city of Istanbul. The selection of case studies is based on several criteria. Firstly, each of these project implementations were supported directly by the government through the designation of the project area by a governmental body such as the Ministry of Environment and Urbanism or the Presidential office or by the announcement of an urban law which evolved through a nationwide discussion on a specific neighborhood or area located in the city. Additionally, all of the selected projects are located at the growth axis of the urban land towards east-west and north-south directions, with the potential to create a newly-built and fragmented city within Istanbul. In this manner (1) Tarlabaşı 360 Urban Transformation Project, (2) Fikirtepe



Figure 2: Urban development process of the city until 2020.

Urban Transformation Project, (3) Istanbul Financial Center project, and finally two components of the Canal Istanbul mega project: the (4) New Istanbul settlement and (5) the New Istanbul Airport city were selected as case studies to deconstruct and analyze their focuses, implementation methodologies and their actors.

As a next step, the commodification of urban fabric among project representations and branding statements were collected from the media through a snowball sampling method, and presented within categories through a qualitative sampling analysis. In this manner, we implement a critical decoding strategy that aims to highlight the implicit and explicit targets behind the new İstanbul discourse. Finally, the research concludes with a critical deconstruction of the urban implementations for İstanbul led by the government using a top-down approach. The discussion on the new city discourse focuses on the concept of 'plan' as defined by Tafuri's statement (1969, 1998, p:15) and reveals the prevailing hidden agendas in addition to their legitimizing statements which have been developed over the last 15 years and through major urbanization practices. In closing, we reconsider the 'new' İstanbul discourse; exposing it as supportive the governing authority's mindset or 'power image', which promotes the commodification of the city for the urban economy.

Commodification of Urban Space and the 'New' İstanbul Discourse

Harvey (1990) describes how the definition of the term "urban" is related to the capitalist mode of production and the framework of capitalism, evoking the themes of accumulation and class struggle. From this perspective, the built environment clearly becomes a profitable commodity for investors. Characterized by prioritizing business interests over the urban landscape, re-development projects started to develop throughout the formerly dilapidated or underused regions of cities. In this way, cities became the driving forces of the urban economy. Koolhaas (1995, p. 28) describes this situation as the "triumph" of urbanization over urbanism; that is, the transformative effect of urban design practices on the urbanization process was diminished, and other actors began to dominate urban transformation processes. On a larger scale, urban policies on which the practices of these actors were based began to serve this process as well, prompting Koolhaas (1995, p. 28) to ask: "How to explain the paradox that urbanism, as a profession, has disappeared at the moment when urbanization everywhere-after decades of constant acceleration- is on its way to establishing a definitive, global "triumph" of the urban condition?"

This question maintains its validity in relation to today's urban context. Politicians, architects, planners, representatives of media, civil initiatives, and REITs ultimately involve urbanites, and produce a common, acknowledged language for urban practices. Through this language the city is readily understood as a commodity and can thus be diversified, grown and transformed through market-oriented strategies. Moreover, the urban fabric is presented as an investment. As discussed by Mutman (2009, p. 29), through the promotional images of the 'new', cities start to gain meanings. Mutman (2009, p. 29) defines such a transformation process as a 'strategic urban

move' representing the overall mission of the ruling classes' policies.

The city of İstanbul has experienced such urban transformation and expansion, primarily in the last 15 years (Figure 2). In fact, the majority of these large-scale urban implementations were presented as the new symbols of the city. On the other hand, İstanbul has also represented the neo-liberal face of the Turkish Republic since the mid-1980s, concomitantly hosting critical implementations of non-participatory planning approaches. For a more vibrant life, the city's dilapidated urban areas have been being redesigned under an economically driven mandate and new visages / façades are popping up as new old-town centers, renovated urban cores and traditional textures (Mutman & Turgut, 2018).

The reality of a "new" İstanbul (Candan & Kolluoğlu, 2008) has been the "region-city" reconstructed through an ideological, physical, social, and cultural restructuring process. The current political discourses entail a restructuring of the city with a 'global-city' approach. This understanding indicates a political perception of major cities as the "growing engine of Turkey's economy" (Candan & Kolluoğlu, 2008), using urban practices to base their structures on Agenda 2023 targets.

The 1990s constitute an important turning point for the 'new' İstanbul discourse. According to Keyder and Öncü (1994), İstanbul played a critical role regarding the rising "participation" within the "trans-regional network" and mechanisms of "control", in accordance with the preferences of state policies which obtain the dominance of capital through the principle of transformation. This role is structured through the privilege of cities that is based on the economic rationale of the capitalist market. As Keyder and Öncü note (1994, p.386), İstanbul joined the 'capitalist ocean', which led to the legitimization of its urban practices. Such implementations, mega project proposals, large scale urban investments gained even more momentum with the 2000s.

Two major laws, legislated in 2006, accelerated the rapid transformation of many historic neighborhoods in a variety of cities, including the Historic Peninsula of İstanbul. These laws were Law No. 5393, which delegated the authority of designating urban transformation areas to local municipalities, and Law No. 5366 titled "The Law on Renovating, Conserving and Actively Using Dilapidated Historical and Cultural Immovable Assets". The proclamations of these laws supported the rent-oriented urbanization practice of the city in line with the capitalist expectations and needs of the central authority. What is more, the promulgation of these laws reveals a top-down urbanization approach in which socio-cultural, historical, physical and ecological contexts were ignored (Mutman & Turgut, 2018). This new trend resulted in gentrification, especially within the historic neighborhoods of the city (Mutman & Turgut, 2018), or through new satellite cities/settlements on the outskirts of the city that created new and smaller-scaled centers, decentralizing parts of the city core to peripheral neighborhoods. The situation was cleverly described by Uluengin (2008, p.18) (with reference to the famous architectural motto) that 'form follows funding'. In the 2000s, the city of İstanbul promoted the historical center for tourism, extended the limits of the city with mixed-use structures, and allowed

new business developments to spread along with residential areas.

Re-Reading the Cases: Strategies, Actors and Their Promoted Missions

Along with the ‘new’ city discourse, the focus of this research is on government-supported projects, showcasing a top-down planning approach featuring architectural and planning components over the last 15 years of urban policies (Figure 3). In addition to these approaches, the importance of all these selected projects is highlighted by their proximity to the growth axis of the city. For these reasons, Tarlabası 360 Urban Transformation Project, Istanbul Financial Center Project, Fikirtepe Urban Transformation Project and the final two components of the Canal Istanbul mega project: the New Istanbul settlement and the New Istanbul Airport city projects were selected as case studies. Through a critical reading of the goals, implementation methods, actors and branding media related to these cases, we concentrate on the prevailing discourse around these implementations, touting them as growth boosting injections for the city of Istanbul.

strategy being top-down in approach, the project was highly criticized due to its faded position in participatory planning as well as its cosmetic “façadist” approach to design.

In 2008, the government announced the Istanbul Financial Center Project, whereby the head office of the Central Bank of Turkey was moved from Ankara to Istanbul. The move in this context not only exposes another large-scale urban implementation, but reveals a major repositioning of the country’s economic centre of power. Through this move, the government explicitly acknowledged and fortified Istanbul’s position as the centre of capital, enhancing the city’s financial capacity.

In 2010, the Fikirtepe Urban Transformation Project was announced with the aim of upgrading living standards by constructing an entirely ‘new’ and ‘earthquake resistant’ city. With a budget of 18 billion USD (IBB, n.d.), the project was one of the largest transformations instigated directly by the government. Covering 1,310,000 sq. metres of urban land in the heart of the city, including housing units and commercial buildings, the project was promoted

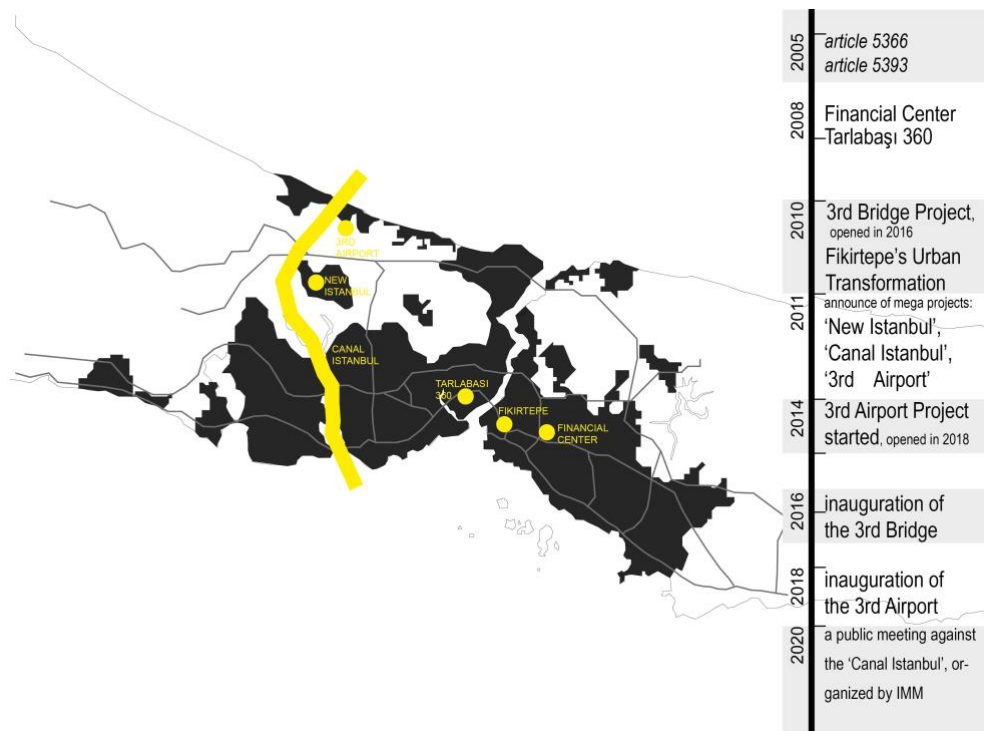


Figure 3. Geographical distribution of the case studies through a timeline

Although proposed after the announcement of the two laws numbered 5366 and 5393, Tarlabası 360 Urban Transformation Project preceded the city’s new strategy in dealing with the dilapidated urban context. Covering 20,000 sq. metres of the city’s historic Beyoğlu neighborhood, the project’s approximate investment cost was announced by the local municipality’s mayor as being 500 million USD. The neighborhood was promoted as being transformed into a renewed, secure and ‘profitable’ environment, located at the heart of the city’s historic central zone. According to the mayor of Beyoğlu at a speech in 2010, it was to become the “Champs-Élysées of Istanbul” (NTV, n.d.). Besides its urban transformation

as an investment for new businesses and as a city within the city. Even though the project was branded as ‘iconic’ by the former mayor of Istanbul it was also claimed that it would fulfill the need for housing in the city. However, the actual marketing strategy conflicted with this main message by presenting the area as an attractive spot for direct foreign investment.

The announcement of the Law no. 6292 in 2011, accelerated the urbanization towards former green areas of the city. In the same year, the ruling party announced the Canal Istanbul project, a 45 km long channel to be built as an alternative passage from the Marmara to the Black Sea.

The project, described as a "mega project" by the government, would be designed and constructed, taking into consideration the apparent earthquake risk. Environs of the canal would host residential units, housing and business blocks, hotels, fair and expo centres, as well as a new airport with capacity for 60 million passengers (Milliyet, n.d.). The Canal Istanbul mega project is comprised of Istanbul Airport, opened in 2018, and the New Istanbul Project area which is expected to serve as a satellite city within its environs. It includes a third bridge over the Bosphorus which was inaugurated in 2016.

Despite all opposition towards the implementation of the canal project due to its environmental effects and risks concerning natural disasters, the mega project is being promoted directly by the government. The project is presented as a means to preserve the historic quality of the Bosphorus by minimizing the risk posed by maritime traffic (Kanalistanbul, n.d.). A sub-project of the Canal Istanbul was announced as 'New' Istanbul, a new city project for roughly 500,000 people, featuring a design language focused on 'Anatolian Seljuk patterns'. The master plan for Istanbul Airport and its environs was drafted by Perkins and Will as a major mixed-use urban development in 2015. The airport, as well as the surrounding settlement, was subsequently promoted as the largest infrastructure in the history of the republic, and envisioned as a 'unique center of economic, cultural and social life' (Archdaily, n.d.). With its first phase completed in 2018, the airport is operational, but it is expected to reach full capacity by 2025. Covering 76,500 million sq. metres in area, the airport project caused widespread public outcry due to the clearing of large swathes of forested areas; especially since the impact on forested areas was approximately five-fold when compared to the initial environmental impact assessment report (Kuzeyormanlari, n.d.).

In the following part of this article, the case studies representing the implementation of top-down urban policies serving the new city discourse will be analyzed in detail. The analyses will address the multifaceted aspect of the process, including the guiding laws and policies, the actors, and their methodological approaches.

In the Historic Peninsula and in Beyoğlu, based on the Law No. 5366, urban renewal areas have been announced and approved by the local government and the projects have been prepared for the region by nine candidate design offices. In Tarlabası, the first evacuation started in 2010, right after the transformation project announcement for the Fener, Balat and Ayvansaray. The urban regeneration initiatives covering an area of 279,346 sq. metres focused on the functions of housing, commerce and developing a social centre. Such top-down project methodologies resulted in a *tabula rasa* approach to the physical and socio-cultural structure of the cityscape for both Tarlabası and Fener-Balat Ayvansaray neighborhoods, in the Historic peninsula (Figure 4). The historic center of Istanbul reflected an oppressive planning attitude to cleanse and reorganize the region. In both regions mentioned above, a diverse and evolving communal structure, as well as more recent in- and out-migration have created dispersed societal groups living in sub-standard spatial environments, which often result in inhabitants being defined 'other'. Accordingly, the low income and disadvantaged groups of the city are displaced

through such top-down planning proposals and implementations, giving way to a polished new cityscape. This all-encompassing planning approach that enacts a form of societal discrimination, clearly showcases attempts to align the projection of an urban image with the reality of a new city of Istanbul, defined as 'high class' and reserved for certain social groups (Figure 5). The initiatives to relocate its local citizens and to re-shape the urban context for serving the mid-high and high-class residential, business, and tourism needs, not only caused an urban and social shift in the local pattern, but also paved the way for imbalanced socio-economic structures through daily versus seasonal practices. These types of imbalanced methodologies are referred to by Koolhaas (1995, p.28) as "pervasive urbanization" which modifies beyond recognition the urban condition itself; a process where the city is lost and its concept is distorted and stretched beyond recognition. This, in its "primordial condition -in terms of images, rules, fabrication-irrevocably leads via nostalgia to irrelevance." This condition, as Koolhaas notes, "may have been the point of no return, [the] fatal moment of disconnection, disqualification".



Figure 4: Location of the Tarlabası 360 project.



Figure 5: Tarlabası 360 Project on site.

With the zoning plan prepared and approved by IMM in 2008, the establishment of a new international financial center of 1,700,000 sq. metres in Ataşehir-Ümraniye was started on the Anatolian side. Announced as one of the visionary / mega projects for İstanbul, an international financial hub is expected to serve as an alternative collective center of money flow for the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Central Asia at Ataşehir-Ümraniye (Figure 6). The project was promoted with the slogan: 'one of the steps that will be taken to make Istanbul a regional and ultimately a global financial center, with the goal of placing Istanbul among the 10 most important financial centers in the world by 2023' (General Directorate of Spatial Planning [MPGM], 2019). The involvement of the Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey in the project

definitely constitutes a strategic move to attract other financial actors into the game. In this manner, one could say that the project aims to create a platform of ‘power’ led by the government, whilst presenting the project as well as the city itself as commodified objects.



Figure 6: Location of the International Financial Center project.

transformation project was also incorporated into the development plan for the 1/1000 scaled Kadıköy district. As underlined by Keleş (2004), “the demolition of existing buildings and change of land use in there” is one of the dimensions of urban development processes, and Fikirtepe is a striking example of such a strategy. Located on the Asian side of the city, Fikirtepe is logistically situated at a profitable location with its accessibility potential to the main connection thoroughfares of the city (Figure 8). Even though such an opportunistic attitude allowed the project to gain traction early on, this quickly turned to protests – beginning with house-tenants and lower-income inhabitants – protesting for several reasons: The untrustworthy construction firms, unfinished master planning processes, and open-ended and unreliable construction contracts between the house owners and the construction companies were the driving forces of the protests.

Today, the neighborhood is filled with half-completed residential blocks; physical manifestations of the collaboration between local architectural offices and construction firms with international connections, which



Figure 7: The New International Financial Center project’ implementation process in Ataşehir.

In the new international financial center at Ataşehir-Ümraniye, the overall design attitude includes an amalgamation of ‘Anatolian Seljuk and Ottoman Architecture’ striving to present a synthesis of the past and the future while referencing the folk Turkish ‘*semâi*’ (whirling dervish) culture through the physical structures like turning torsos featured by the high rise buildings (Vakıfbank Gyo, n.d.). Such formal cross-referencing of design attitudes showcases a strong cultural referencing to a confused/mixed local background, while the ‘international’ project proposal at a larger scale exposes the city as a meta structure, signifying a demand to partake in the global arena (Yeni Şafak, n.d.). The claim is to become an important regional financial center in the following 10 years, and one of the five leading international financial centers in the world, along with London, New York, Shanghai and Tokyo, in the following 30 years (Figure 7).

Following its initial announcement in 2010, an area of 1,310,000 sq. metres in and around Fikirtepe was allocated in 2013 as a transformation project area. The



Figure 8: Location of the Fikirtepe project in Istanbul

are being promoted heavily to new dwellers, many of whom are wealthy Middle-Eastern individuals. Such a flow of urbanization compelled the local inhabitants to

move into neighboring districts where they feel more secure and connected to daily life practices, the physical texture and even to the socio-cultural pattern. In this ‘New’ Fikirtepe which was created independently of and gentrified from the city, urban transformation processes developed through public and private partnership, with the capital-oriented targets affecting in the long term not only tenants but also property owners. Large-scale displacements in the region increase the speed of fragmented urban development. Furthermore, this causes important infrastructure problems that develop unevenly, and which prevent the city from coping with the growth. Thus, Istanbul, a metropolitan city open to the world market, supports the formation of diverging regions and urban dwellers in Fikirtepe by rapidly increasing new housing and building production forms in an effort to incorporate them into the global arena (Figure 9). Foreign investments, especially projects with partners from Arabic countries, reveal that the new Istanbul urbanization has re-created the city through the actors who are supported by the system (Artuç, 2016).



Figure 9: Fikirtepe Project site, exposed on the movie ‘Saf’ (2018), directed by A. Vatansver.

In 2011, two ‘new city’ projects in Istanbul were announced; one on the European and the other on the Anatolian side as per the Kartal-Pendik Masterplan designed by Z. Hadid. In 2014, the master plan of the new city project covering 8 districts was completed. On the European side, the first step has been taken for the districts of Arnavutköy, Avcılar, Bağcılar, Bakırköy, Başakşehir, Esenler, Eyüp, Küçükçekmece covering 244,750,000 sq. metres in total. In addition, the ‘New Istanbul’ settlement, given the name in accordance with the current political discourse, and a new administrative center and residential area focused on trade, residence, culture, recreation, and education have been initiated (Figure 10). The project was hailed as the new attraction hub of the city by many local

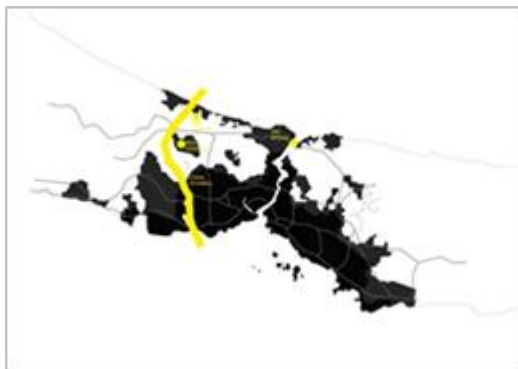


Figure 10: Locations of the mega projects, 3rd Airport, 3rd Bridge, Canal Istanbul and its environs as called ‘New Istanbul’ project.

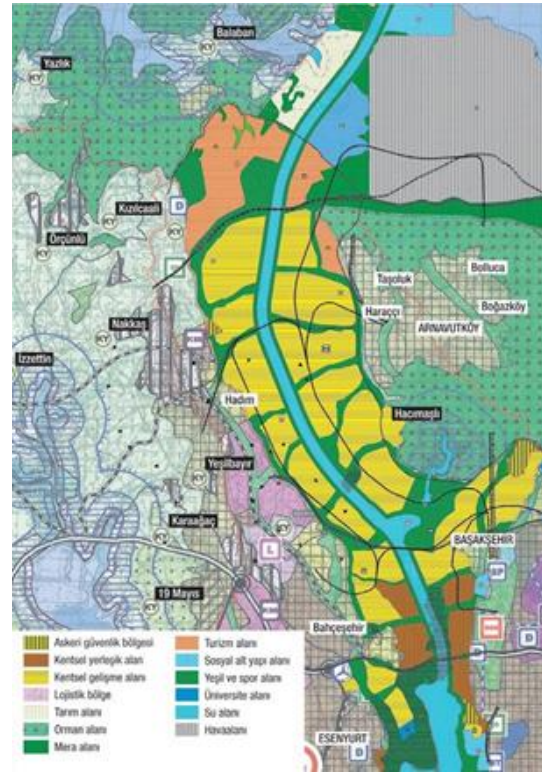


Figure 11: Canal Istanbul’s masterplan implemented by the Ministry of Environment and Urban Planning.

politicians and the government. It was considered as a proposal to succeed the ‘mega projects’ cluster-project-package, which had been announced by the Ministry of Environment and Urban Planning, and which comprised of the Canal Istanbul, the 3rd Airport and 3rd Bridge over the Bosphorus.

The Canal Istanbul project was part of the same election propaganda as the mega project in 2011. It stretches over 42 km and constitutes an axis passing through Küçükçekmece, Avcılar, Arnavutköy and Başakşehir (Figure 11). It was reported by the TEMA Foundation as one of the three projects (along with 3rd Airport and 3rd Bridge) that will negatively affect the future of Istanbul. The technical reports prepared by academics and NGOs highlight that the project cluster will result in destructive influence over the environmental texture of Istanbul, causing major loss of natural green and water resources, and will affect the agricultural production and wider ecosystem (Diken, n.d.). The project however has become the center of attention for local and foreign investors,



Figure 12: Canal Istanbul and its projected environs.

promoting various housing construction projects that are expected to host approximately 2.4 million people in 800,000 housing units (Emlak Kulisi, n.d.) at a central location in Istanbul (Figure 12).

The construction projects located in the region concurrent with the 'cultural and aesthetic values' of the Turkish Culture (Yeni Akit, n.d.) are to highlight the promoted 'new' Istanbul urban city image, ideology and culture. The project, with its estimated 60 billion Turkish Lira investment, is also likely to result in three additional infill islands located near the shores of the Marmara Sea. It will also destroy Küçükçekmece Lake by merging it with the sea, and the Sazlıdere water dam through which the canal itself will flow. The canal is expected to have a life span of 100 years and will relieve the Bosphorus of sea traffic (Diken, n.d.). Through this discourse, the projects are expected to attract greater interest and gain higher profits in return (Figure 13). Supported by the two other cluster mega proposals of the city's new face to the global world, these mega structures and resultant transformations of the cityscape were based on the government's discourse describing them as the largest project ever in history of the Turkish Republic.



Figure 13: An advertisement for a mixed-use project at New Istanbul site promoting the project as an investment.

The 3rd Airport project was announced in 2013. Despite technical and EIA reports underlining the expected damage to natural habitats, and important watersheds until the completion of the project, it was started in April 2019 (Figure 14). The 3rd Bridge project, which covered 76,500 sq. metres in area and has a total length of 2,164 m, was designed with the Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) model in Garipçe-Poyrazköy. It cost 4.5 billion TL together with the Northern Marmara Motorway. The project was announced to the public in 2010 by the government and the IMM and the bridge was inaugurated in 2016. Kolluoğlu (2008;



Figure 14: An online article on the Istanbul airport's opening illustrating the international recognition of the project.

quoted from Ekinci & Görgülü, 2015, p. 73) argues that the "mega-projects" are distinguished products of urban transformation processes that derive from "a series of legal changes packaged with neoliberal language" resulting from the fundamental changes in real estate investments, and the new visibility and dominance of the finance and service sectors in the urban economy and urban space. Through these new construction and rebuilding implementations, the ruling party of Turkey for most of the last two decades, has set an agenda to support the country's economy by building upon growth and the re-production of space as underlined by Cavusoğlu and Struzt (2014, p. 141). The case of Istanbul, as a governmentally supported, transforming city represents a direct link between the overall mission of the governing authority, economy and power through an urban Plan as indicated by Tafuri's theorisations.

Decoding the Prevailing Discourse

The Plan, as noted in the context of Tafuri (1969, 1998, p:15), represents a top-down approach starting from global capital, moving to real estate investment trusts, policy makers, contractors and finally reaching various local administrative bodies. This imposed Plan is from then on distributed towards organizational production by merging the fields of knowledge, design and business through the tools of media, professional practice and education. The production of the built environment, as discussed by Boyer (1990), becomes an instrument of capitalist development (quoted from Mutlu, 2009, p. 18).

In this manner, decoding the top-down practices through to their prevailing discourses is necessary to not only understand the implementation methodology but also the position of its actors. Therefore, through descriptive research, the roles and positions of the actors of urban practices were decoded as seen in the following figure (Figure 15). Exposing the relation between the decision makers of a project, and the network of institutions responsible for its planning and execution highlights a disrupted urban hierarchy in the process of decision making, mostly in the form of 'by force' projects of a given political strategy.

This research dwells on the analysis of the discourse set by the policies announced since the beginning of the 2000s that was driven by planning the city with a top-down approach. It was a matter of determining how the policy led the planning approach, how the roles of the actors used a common political language, as well as how the language of the constructed environment advocated and "articulated" the construction of a 'new' city. Relations between power, image and the construction of the city were being legitimized through the announcements of urban policies, considering mainly the earthquake as a risk. Insufficient housing, natural disasters, secure and qualified urban living phrases were being used as the underlying reasons in a common discourse to legitimize urban development. These common expressions were shared with the public through the use of media as a transmitting tool, and they were adopted by society, often unknowingly. Through this research, such phrases, mottos, branding images and promotional media that were used by the leading project actors of the governing authority, were collected either from the project websites and/or from inauguration speeches or interviews, until saturation by

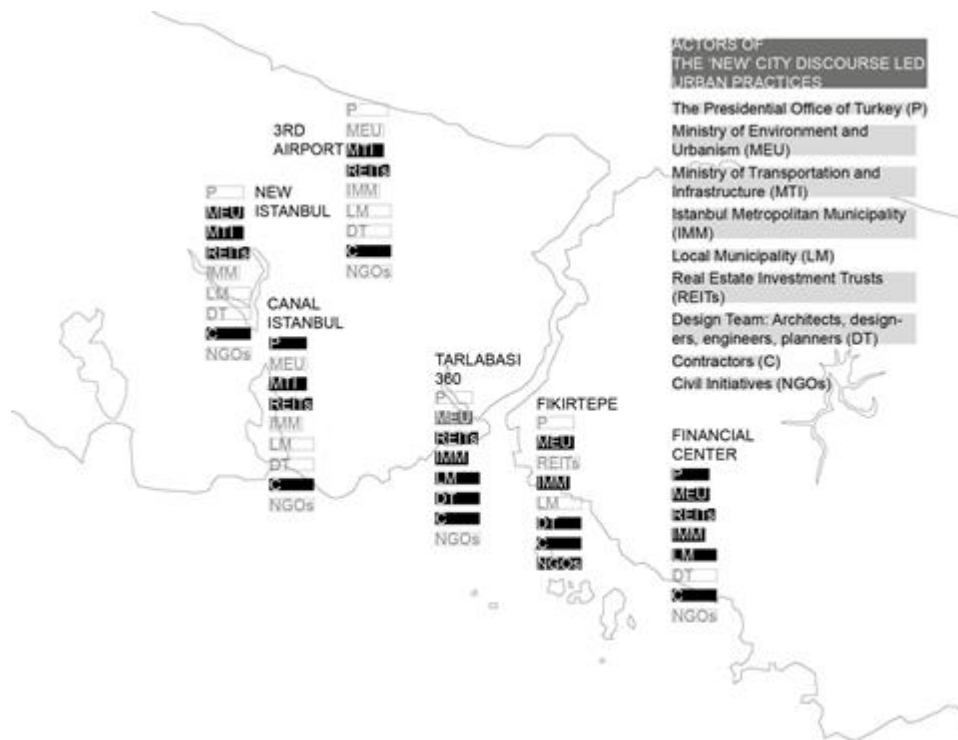


Figure 15: Actors of the new city discourse led urban practices.

	Q	P	D	N	E	\$	U	A	H	I	
Istanbul Financial Center Project	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	2	4	3	H historicism I iconic E environmental concern
Tarlabası 360 Urban Transformation Project	3	2	2	2	0	2	6	1	7	2	\$ economy U urban image A architectural style
Fikirtepe Urban Transformation Project	3	0	3	3	0	1	3	0	0	2	Q quality of life P proximity D natural disaster
Canal Istanbul Project	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	1	N a 'new' structure
New Istanbul Project	0	0	0	1	0	2	1	4	1	0	
Istanbul Airport Project	1	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	8	

Figure 16: Decoding the new city discourse through the top-down urban practices.

snowball sampling methodology. Thus, the qualitative research helped to expose the implicit and explicit expectations of the top-down planning approach, the political mission behind the settling of the new İstanbul discourse, and its urbanization process (Figure 16).

Out of the collected project promotional media, 76 key words and phrases were categorized within 10 clusters according to their relations. By developing these clusters, the goal of the research was to develop an alternative decoding system to expose the 'new' İstanbul discourse. Through such deconstruction, visible and invisible characters of all the analysed project implementations began to arise as major terminologies used repetitively. According to the research data, the top-down planning approach exposes a new city discourse that deploys an iconic and historicist urban image to attract - mostly foreign - investment to support the state economy. Such decoding of the discourse also highlights a major question of how the urban transformation and development strategy has set all its rules regarding disaster mitigation and the environment as an act. However, this agenda takes a back

seat in comparison to the city's branding agenda used by the governing authority.

This position of the discourse comes to light especially within the first half of the research's defined timespan. With the analysis of Tarlabası 360 and Fikirtepe Urban Transformation projects, the data shows that the major legitimization phrases for these projects had been necessary to reach safer living environments. The term safety in this manner not only referred to the earthquake risks, but also to a renewal strategy for crime prevention. A gain from both sides would envision increased urban quality within an earthquake resistant, new city at the hearts of both the European and the Asian sides of the city. Logistically very advantageous locations of the city exposed a completely new, context free project interventions, neglecting, however, the socio-cultural and historic patterns of the neighborhoods. In the end, both developments demonstrated either a cosmetic façadist urban image for the Tarlabası or a completely implanted, new context for Fikirtepe neighborhoods, both representing highly profitable investment plots in the city.

In the second half of the research's timespan, the implementations reflect direct governmental impacts, specifically from the presidential level. It reveals that mega project announcements, as well as the transfer of the republic's central bank from the capital to the city of Istanbul, refers to a major focus on the economy from a top level. It is also very critical to underline that all the debates and reviews for and against the project implementations or top-down interventions had been continuously neglected or the questions raised remained unresolved.

The main focus in this framework, evidently represented itself as branding the city for the global arena (Figure 17). Phrases popped up one after the other as 'the largest', 'the biggest', 'the most powerful', showcasing a promotional attempt to prepare the city as a stage. In other words, in order to attract more investment, the governing authority needed no criticism, debates or opposition, but rather, the tools and agents to design, construct and legitimize the act. Finally, this form of act, revealed a prevailing discourse of

projects which relied on a top-down approach, are decoded and analysed. The research exposed the implicit and explicit targets behind the 'new' Istanbul's political discourse. It is revealed that the prevailing approach in 'new' urbanization, serves the business-oriented urban economy. As Sklair highlights (2010, 2012) top-down approach urbanization, fuels the discourse of international economic competition through mega projects. As the centrepiece of the commodification process, the mega-project becomes "a product and a media representing a city" Ponzini states (Ponzini, 2014, p.11). Additionally, the form of representation, he adds, "interprets the spectacularization of [...] architecture and of the urban environment on global scale" (Ponzini, 2014, p. 11). Based on the qualitative analysis, the research exposed the roles of each responsible actor within the process. It is important to acknowledge the role of the media as an actor in the process legitimizing the discourse mostly led by the governing authority. The architect or the design team,

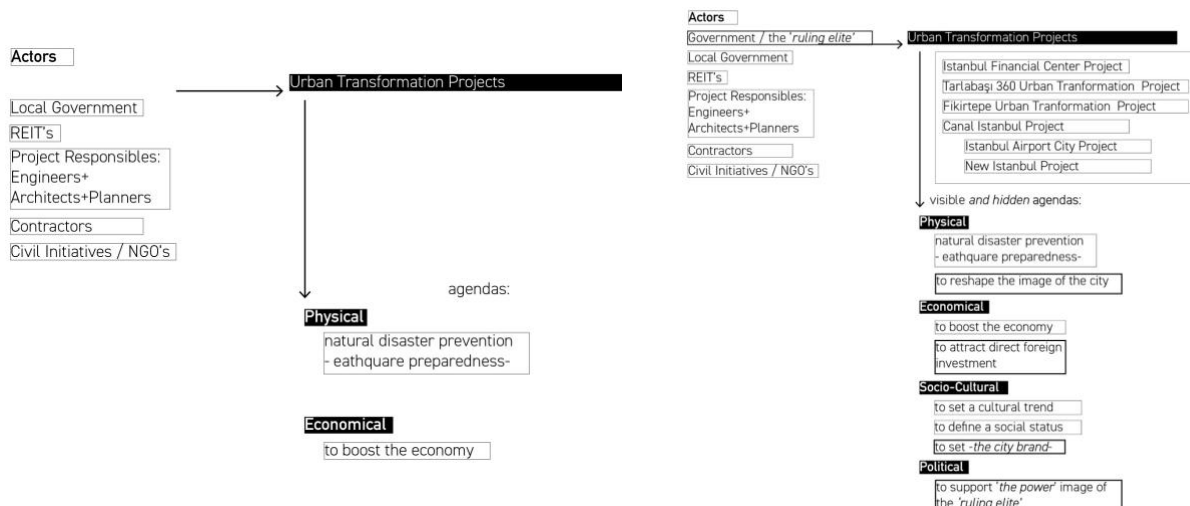


Figure 17: Visible and invisible agendas of the 'new' Istanbul's prevailing discourse.

the 'new' city. The new city would be branded and presented through its urban capacities, which were polished and redesigned, and even at some levels featured entirely refurbished spatial environments. A securer city in terms of natural disasters and criminality ratios would promote Istanbul as a safe spot for investment.

At this point considering Tafuri as a direct link between the practice and the reality of production becomes necessary. Although his reference to the act of production was highly associated with 'Modernism', one can easily link the formation of the city of Istanbul in this particular research, as the perfect environment for "an ideological climate". The city, according to his perspective, represents a place for the comprehensive 'production of...an ideological situation" (Tafuri, 1976, p.48).

Conclusion

This study identified the urban transformation strategy implemented in Istanbul for the last 15 years as a tool to promote the 'new' urban discourse and the cityscape. The actors, roles, and branding images of five selected urban

however, also plays an instrumental role through the production of a built environment fuelled by capitalist development strategies.

Due to the accepted task for the agents of politics of "politicizing", Tafuri states that the architect becomes the producer of "objects"; an incongruous figure with the sole task of organizing the cycle of production (Tafuri, 1969, 1998, p. 22). The position of the fields of design, architecture and planning, as well as the role of the designer, planner and architect clearly demarcate the boundaries of the field, setting the rules of the game, and defining the roles of the players. In this context, initiatives following the common path of configuring the city related to a top-down planning strategy reminds one of Tafuri's argument regarding the practices in the city of Istanbul, describing it as "devoid of social and individual utopia" due to the dominance of capitalist, development-led practices which embody "the drama of architecture" (Tafuri, 1998, p. 3-4).

In order to understand how design and architecture are deployed as tools for establishing an eligible environment for commodification, ideologies of power and the

promoted ideology in particular must be exposed. Accordingly, this article has attempted to highlight the features of the existing ‘new’ urban practices, lifestyles and spatial expectations. Current urban debates and trends developed from the top down, while local and global policies are presented through new imagery of urban representations. Not only is the strategy of re-writing the urban image revealed as a key subject worthy of discussion, but the position of the fields of architecture and planning as legitimizing tools of the system have been exposed. In this manner, the present article has attempted to spark a debate. Moreover, our analysis of representations of the “new” city in its promoted materials have highlighted the lack of a holistic approach to planning, while exposing the commodification of the city’s urban, cultural and historical contexts. Indeed, it has been shown that, through the practice of urbanism, a form of new urban identity is gradually being implemented.

Analysing the new urban discourse has also revealed the governing authority’s major concerns: that is, its attempts to create an iconic and historicist urban image. Connected strictly to its pre-republic history, the political discourse establishes mainly a conservative and profit-centered identity. The results from the study suggest that through the re-reading of the city and its “new” Istanbul image, one can easily capture a construction practice through the simulations of historical images and the manipulation through spaces for ‘the new’, ‘the iconic’, ‘the gigantic’ which are representations of political power. Therefore, this study offers a framework for further research on the socio-spatial impacts of the mega projects discussed, with regards to the challenges and daily life practices among displaced groups and newcomers to the city. We recommend, in closing, a comparative study that would highlight the differences between the promoted/idealized vision of the city and the experienced/realized ‘new’ İstanbul.

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Keywords

'New' City Discourse, Actors, Commodification, Representation, Image.