

Spring 2015 AURA Research Project
Rise of Culture within Urban Planning

This research project aimed to examine the weight and usage of culture in urban planning and political motivations, specifically of pre-modern culture's role. This research explored:

How does pre-modern culture fit into the rising construction in Istanbul (and perhaps other developing cities) and how does the central government use culture in government-financed architectural/urban development projects?

Because Turkey is a centralized government, occurrences in Istanbul decision-making can be a reflection of the central government; the goals are similar or the same. This connection was further buttressed in an interview with the Vice Mayor of Zeytinburnu municipality within Istanbul; when asked about his views or goals for Zeytinburnu, he said he would work to achieve the goals of the mayor and Ankara central government.

This project was realized through historical readings of this Eurasian capital. Istanbul had been a cultural and political capital for sixteen centuries, one of the great empires being the Ottoman Empire immediately preceding the Turkish republic. When the Republic of Turkey was established in 1923, the government made explicit efforts to push away the Ottoman and Islamic culture and advocated westernization for modernization. The capital was moved to Ankara, and Istanbul lost the majority of its previously flourishing population. Culs-de-sac and winding roads were redone into gridiron formations. Building facades were raised higher. Here, one sees that the physical city and urban planning transformed due to changing cultural perceptions. Turkey, once again, saw major changes after the current party, the AKP, ascended to power in 2002 with President Erdogan, then the Prime Minister. Today, there is a re-embracing of the pre-modern Ottoman culture. Istanbul was named the 2010 European Culture Capital, and a mosque flaunting Ottoman architecture to rival those of the Ottoman-built Blue Mosque is to be erected on the Asian side of Istanbul (Istanbul is on the border of Europe and Asia).

Through my research, I found a connection to the Gezi Park protests that made news in 2013. The government was going to build a shopping mall on top of the Taksim Square Park, one of the few green spaces in Istanbul. Interestingly, the mall was planned to be a replica of the Ottoman Topcu military barracks that were previously demolished for this very park decades ago. This is a 180 degree change of the government agenda across decades.

The massive mosque being built on the Asian side of Istanbul, Uskudar, is called Çamlıca. Its construction is controversial, but not on a religious stance. The government and proponents state that they hope this mosque will be an Islamic symbol for all and that the area needs a mosque.¹ Opponents, however, state that the area is difficult to reach and simply a replica of the great Blue Mosque. Many question why this new mosque cannot reflect a modern Turkish culture and architecture. During a meeting with Sevgi Akarcesme, a *Today's Zaman* correspondent, and "devout Muslim" as she described herself, she openly opposed the Çamlıca mosque, claiming that the mosque was just a way for President Erdogan and the government to make money out of businesses that will sprout next to the mosque. According to several Turkish

¹ Today's Zaman newspaper.

newspapers, “additional facilities will be constructed in a total area of 57,511 square meters, including the mosque, a tourist area with cafés and restaurants, a recreation area, a children's park and facilities where courses on Ottoman calligraphy, gilding and ebru (paper marbling) will be offered.”² Upon further research on the architecture of mosques, I found that these additional facilities are part of the traditional külliye. The külliye, an area surrounding the actual mosque but within the outer walls of the mosque complex, was especially marked in Turkish-Ottoman mosque architecture. It usually included kitchens, bakeries, a religious school, and *hammam*, a bathhouse. The modern, Çamlıca version of the külliye are the restaurants, recreation area, children’s park, and Islamic art galleries- all of which can appeal to locals and tourists alike, and provide economic profit. Here, it is possible the government took a pre-modern concept and changed its purpose, similarly to the Gezi Park shopping mall. I also did a detailed study on the rejected architectural designs submitted for the Çamlıca mosque compared to the chosen, approved design, and its implications.

Within this mixed-method project, other than the qualitative data summarized above, quantitative data included analysis of construction costs from TOKI, the Turkish government-run housing organization. Through their website, I found total costs of construction and the amount allocated to restorative or historical works. Of the general restorative projects (i.e. fixing government buildings), approximately 50% of these were culturally related, which shows the rise of culture within urban planning and construction. The number of mosques also increased by 7,324, a 30 percent increase, from 2003 to 2013- correlating with the rise of the AKP party.

I initially found this study worthy to explore because I noticed a similar historical trend between Turkey and China. Both have historically great empires, rejected the pre-modern culture when the Republics were established, and have recently enjoyed a resurgence of pre-modern culture. This project showed how the Turkish government has changed during different cultural periods regarding its urban planning. By noticing the rise in construction and a trend in construction with pre-modern cultural ties where something previously recreational or allocative is morphed into a developmental service for the economy, one can say that culture is no longer a separate category from government decision-making. Perhaps further studies and more field work can explain this more clearly or help us understand why this re-embracing of pre-modern culture is occurring now. Although one cannot say that this study reflects a similar phenomenon of pre-modern culture embracing in China or possible other countries, it shows the importance of connecting disciplines, specifically seeing the cultural and anthropological implications within a seemingly disparate study, like urban politics.

² Today’s Zaman.