

Istanbul's Urban Public Space

Continuity and connections

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Open public spaces have been an important element throughout Istanbul's long history, in the numerous physical transformations of the city, but also as elements in its political and cultural history. The Nika riots of 532, in the age of Justinian, and the Gezi park protests of 2013 are just two well-known cases where central public spaces have framed decisive political events. The Hippodrome, the site of the Nika revolt, by that time already had a long history. Its original shape from the early third century AD had been extended a century later under Constantine. It has been the most continuously used urban space in Istanbul through all generations, with recently renewed paving and other amendments. Basically it still carries its original name, *At Meydanı* meaning the horse square.

Besides the Hippodrome, the major Byzantine public places were the imperial forums shaped along the main thoroughfare with its two branches leading from the eastern hub to the western land wall. The Augusteion, founded by Constantine and named after his mother, empress Augusta Helena, received its monumental shape as the Forum of Justinian in the sixth century. Today it is just an open space to the south of the Hagia Sophia. The Forum of Constantine and the Forum Tauri, that later became the forum of Theodosius, likewise have lost their distinct framing colonnades. Only the central column of Constantine maintains its role as a distinct urban vertical. Like in many cases throughout the world these public spaces were in essence manifestations of centralized power, mainly dedicated for ceremonies even if they could also frame counteractions.

The urban development during the Ottoman centuries is known for its dense urban residential and commercial fabric. This texture of mainly narrow streets and alleys was scattered with mosques and other public buildings rather than open city squares. But whereas the domed mosques with minarets, following the example of the converted Hagia Sophia, became the dominant feature of the skyline and distant views, the open spaces to which they were connected became important elements in city life.

This became obvious in the first sultanic mosque complex, that of Mehmed II, planned and built in the 1460's and known by his epithet Fatih. Besides the inner courtyard with the ablution fountain and the backyard where later the mausoleum of the sultan was placed, this arrangement is framed by a generous open space, geometrically forming a precise square. This space is framed on the northern and southern sides by the eight madrasas, or university departments, being an important part of the complex. On the other sides it was framed by a hospital, a library and by guesthouses. Mosque courtyards had always served the social function of

urban public space, besides for ablution and as extensions of the prayer hall, but the outer courtyard of the Fatih mosque had a more obvious secular public function. Formally it can be compared to contemporary Italian urban projects, thus belonging to a wider Mediterranean renaissance culture, but as a generous public space it has no real equivalent. In contemporary descriptions the space was referred to as the outer courtyard of the mosque, but also as *meydan*, a public square.¹

The outer generous courtyards remained a distinct component in most of the following sultanic mosque complexes, and we will return to the one of Mehmed's successor, Bayezid. But two major examples were built under the following generation and shaped by the architect Sinan in the mid sixteenth century. In the later one of these, the Süleymaniye mosque complex, not only did a wide courtyard frame the mosque with its inner courtyard and cemetery garden, but on south side, outside the walled space, another open space was created in front of a row of madrasas, more directly connected to the commercial areas. While the space surrounding the mosque had the features of a garden, the outer space had a more distinctly urban character. Its oblong shape, like an elongated square or a widened street, may be said to represent a synthesis of these two fundamental types of urban public space.

Thus, like in most urban cultures worldwide, religious and secular public life were intertwined, but the case of Istanbul shows more variety in their relationships, represented by the differentiated open public spaces.

One likely source of inspiration for the outer public space of the Süleymaniye could in fact be the still dominating urban feature, the Hippodrome or *At Meydanı*, with its somewhat similar relationship to the Hagia Sophia. This converted major church, being since the time of Mehmed II the grand old mosque, had a comparatively modest surrounding courtyard space, however balanced by a widely generous connecting outer space, including the former Augusteion but extending throughout the large *At Meydanı*. This monumental space also framed many public events connected to the sultans.



Fig. 1. The former Byzantine Hippodrome or At Meydanı with the Sultan Ahmed mosque in the background. Photo by the author.

¹ Kafescioğlu, Çiğdem. *Constantinopolis/Istanbul* (University Park: Penn State Press, 2009), 94.

The importance of the At Meydanı became even more emphasized when in the years around 1610 the next major mosque, that of Ahmed I, often referred to as the Blue mosque, was built next to it. The orientation of the Hippodrome happened to be precisely at a right angle to the *qibla* direction, making the close connection between the mosque and this, at the same time, independent urban space very obvious. Also the controversially numerous minarets of the mosque, the six tall verticals outnumbering all its predecessors, formed an interplay with the obelisks of the Meydan, seemingly strengthening the urban connection. While the imperial columns of the Theodosian forum and the Augusteion were replaced as urban accents by the nearby minarets framing the Bayezid mosque and the Hagia Sophia, the more modest but no less expressive verticals of the At Meydanı would form additional qualities to the Ahmed mosque.

A much more distant connection to the new position of the At Meydanı, that could hardly be overlooked, was to the Maidan-i Shah in the Iranian Safavid capital of Isfahan. This was planned and constructed in the early 1590s as a large rectangular urban space for ceremonies and public life, located between the market area, the palace quarters and the major new mosque. This recently completed urban space forming the central node of the eastern rivals of the Ottoman empire had several parallels to the new position of the Hippodrome. While its long side, facing one of the two mosques connected to the Meydan, had the palace loggia from which the shah would observe the ceremonies and public life going on beneath, this position corresponded in Istanbul to the loggia of the former vizier palace, where the sultan would take a similar position.

The early sixteenth century Ibrahim Pasha palace was the most voluminous and strategically located palace of any grand vizier and was for this reason obviously also found to be controversial in the eyes of the sultan. As a strong urban feature it is reminiscent of the kind of palace culture belonging, for example, to contemporary Italian cities, where residences of highly ranked families often dominate urban piazzas. The overtaking of Ibrahim's palace by the sultan, manifesting his relation to the public place beneath it, thus restored the relation of public space in Istanbul to the sultan and the mixed population rather than to the interjacent hierarchy of power.

In this sense the urban structure of Ottoman Istanbul seemed more closely related to eastern metropolises, like Isfahan, than to western ones, like Rome. However, not many years after the completion of the Ahmed I complex, including the At Meydanı, a similar complex took shape in Istanbul's continuous western counterpoint, in the Italian papal capital. The oblong piazza of Saint Peter, formed in the 1650s by Gianlorenzo Bernini in a transverse direction to that of the domed church, was dominated by an obelisk, that had to be moved from its nearby location and by strong efforts erected on the cross axis. Thus, the central power of the pope was manifested by a uniquely shaped urban public space with strong similarities to that of Safavid Shah, but even more so to the new complex of the Ottoman sultan.

In the eighteenth century, public urban life in Istanbul was vitalized not least by richly expressive fountains built in many strategic places. They served as centres for gatherings, outdoor meals and diverse activities. The concept of public space became extended from openings in the dense urban fabric to a wider urban landscape, making use of the rich topography of hills and waterfronts.²

² Hamadeh, Shirine, *The City's Pleasures. Istanbul in the Eighteenth Century* (Seattle & London: University of Washington Press, 2008).

Urban transformations that affected most of the European capital cities in the nineteenth century also put their marks on Istanbul. Even if large scale urbanism would be carried out much more radically in the late modern era of the mid 1900s, some important projects introduced institutional buildings on a scale that had so far only been represented by the mosques. One obvious case was the war ministry complex of the 1860s, replacing the Eski Saray, the old palace from the period of Mehmed II. The open space fronting the monumental entrance to the ministry complex had a long history, as a part of the outer courtyard of the early sixteenth century Bayezid mosque and before that being the forum of Theodosius.

The Bayezid mosque was the second sultanic complex to be built, after that of Mehmed II. The combined connections of this space with the adjacent grand bazaar, the mosque and the new ministry building opened for an elaborate design of the space as the contemporary hub of the city. The generous traffic solution was combined with green areas and a fountain to mark pedestrian approach along with vehicles.³ And the front of the ministry building itself, with an entrance like a triumphal arch with orientalist detailing, became the expressive visual focus. The French architect Auguste Bourgeois probably wanted to connect to the Roman origin of the site, where a modest triumphal arch had been included. While the reference to the triumphal arch could also have reflected the widely recognized ongoing Parisian urban transformation, the orientalist detailing of Bourgeois' wide entrance arch pointed rather to Istanbul's eastern identity.

The importance of this space as a true city centre was maintained through the next century, with a number of changes taking place. The function as a war ministry being in 1924 replaced by the university marked an important social change.

Along with the Hippodrome, the Bayezid meydanı is a remarkably surviving urban space through millennia, notable not only for Istanbul but also on the world scale. In the late modern era, with the traffic planning dominating the restructuring of Istanbul in the 1950s, and causing several sad demolitions, its key position was emphasised and also mirrored in the corresponding node in the expanding area on the northern side of the Golden Horn, the Taksim Square.

The traffic planning of the early twentieth century, promoting pedestrian space and dominated by a large oval pool with fountains, was by the mid-century turned towards prioritizing the car traffic representing the new modernity. This, however, raised resistance and a competition was held in 1959 in order to regain the pedestrian qualities. An important contribution was made by Sedat Hakki Eldem, but interesting proposals were submitted also by the Italian Luigi Piccinato, and the German Hans Högg. The most convincing project, however, was produced by Turgut Cansever, who was given the contract to develop his version. Through its basic irregularity the project saved the essential urban qualities of this space, as framed by different Ottoman structures. Cansever's solution restored a central position to the mosque complex with its outspread buildings, while its varying ground levels could both refer to the original topography and diminish the dominance of the car traffic by allowing the formation of a tunnel. As a central pedestrian space, the Bayezid square appeared generally to correspond to the informal structure of the housing blocks, rather than to the large scale introduced as a major element in traffic planning. Most remarkably, while sensitively framing the piazza in relation to the variety of surrounding elements, the basic organisation was made in the qibla direction followed by the mosque, the madrasa and the hospice with a

³ Yeşilkaya, Neşe Gürallar. "From a Courtyard to a Square: Transformation of the Beyazit Meydanı in the early Nineteenth Century Istanbul". METU JFA (2007/1), 24:1.

caravanserai. The inner courtyard of the mosque in this way was complemented along its three outer sides by the more public outer version. In this way the outer courtyard was restored in a version that seemed to reflect most closely that of the previous mosque, the one of Mehmed II. But while closely connected to the mosque, the Bayezid Square was also made outwardly open in all directions, uniting historic and recent developments of the city. Cansever's proposal was not completely implemented but has survived as the basic structure for the layout of the Bayezid Square.⁴

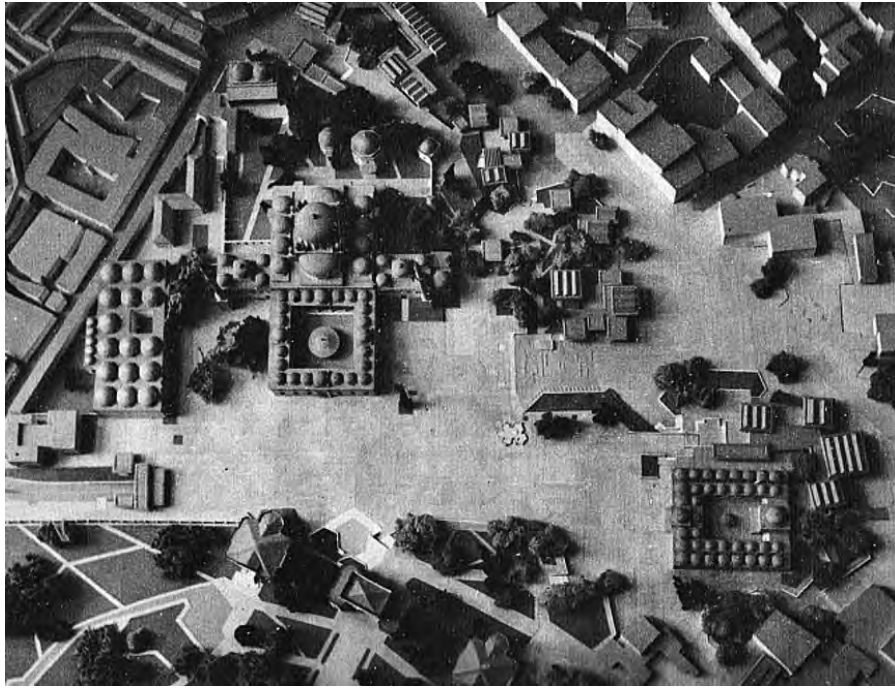


Fig. 2. Plan for the Bayezid Square by Turgut Cansever, 1959. © Emine Cansever

Even though the urban public space in late modern Istanbul may be considered as having been largely neglected in favour of rational solutions for traffic, housing and commerce, there are a number of interesting exceptions. In some cases, especially the Hippodrome and the Bayezid Square, direct connections can be made through the millennia as far back as to the early Byzantine city. The concept of permanence, established as a major quality in the developments of urban spaces and monuments by late or post-modern theoreticians, most famously by Aldo Rossi, has been considered mainly with references to Italian examples.⁵ In spite of major transformations it strongly deserves to be applied also to Istanbul.

⁴ Martinelli, Eliana. "Turgut Cansever, an Interpretation of the Turkish City". (Istanbul: Turkey Studies '16. 2016).

⁵ Rossi, Aldo, *L'architettura della Città* (Padova, 1966).

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