

Hybristanbul

Turkey's urban development boom

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The Gezi park uprising of June 2013 emerged in protest against a planned urban development project proposed by the Turkish government as part of its wider policy of attempting to revive the country's glorious Ottoman past, despite the fact that Turkey is now a modern republic. J-F. Pérouse takes a look at the country's ambitious urban transformation.

Turkey has yet to witness a more urban uprising (urban in the sense that it was triggered and sustained first and foremost by a backlash against planned urban development) than that seen in Gezi park in June 2013. The fact that the protest emerged from within one of Istanbul's central locations is perhaps not surprising given the city's leading role in the policies of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and his Justice and Development Party (abbr. AKP in Turkish). Erdoğan, who was mayor of Istanbul between 1994 and 1998, often refers to this period as having been crucial in building his popularity. Several days before the protests began, he made the following statement during an event organised to celebrate European Union projects:

I had many dreams when I was Mayor of Istanbul, and I currently have the pleasure of seeing each of these dreams realised, one by one. One of the most important was the Marmaray project, which is now well underway, expected to be completed by 29 October (2013). This is not all, however. We are also currently building a two-lane automobile passageway to pass through the Bosphorus, on target for completion in 2015. My third wish is to see a third bridge built over the Bosphorus Strait, and with construction due to start on 29 May, I believe God will grant us this wish also¹.

Erdoğan, who has princely offices located in Dolmabahçe Palace, spends an increasing amount of time running the country from here instead of from Ankara, which was made the political capital in 1923. He seems unable to leave his former city behind, instead continuing to indulge it and seeking to retain personal control over the decisions affecting it. Istanbul stands at the very heart of his vision of national greatness; it is a city in which he feels more comfortable, a city which exudes the glory of the Ottoman past of which he considers himself guardian, heir and champion. It is as though he feels too cramped in Ankara, a city tied too closely to the Republic. By contrast, Istanbul's location and history sets it apart as destined for international greatness, nicely in keeping with Erdoğan's plans to strengthen his country's influence and standing abroad.

That such anger erupted at the end of May 2013 is not surprising if we bear in mind the huge number of urban development projects which had been announced over the course of that month, each one more extravagant than the last, and which would necessitate a re-centralisation of urban policy, a blatant contradiction of the 'politically correct' statements widely made by government officials promising the exact opposite: administrative decentralisation. After all, the nature of this business requires that one acts swiftly and bypasses local authorities. Indeed, the Mayor of Istanbul has no say whatsoever in the project bidding process, no more than the municipal assembly within the Metropolitan Municipality does, not to mention the actual citizens themselves. The primary

¹ Translated into English from the French translation taken from: *Dünya*, 15 May 2013, p. 2.

stakeholders are consulted only once the decisions are already taken, both for final confirmation and also to maintain the illusion that they were consulted as part of the process. Indeed, this was precisely why the AKP proposed a referendum on Gezi park. While the protesters' sociological make-up was complex in nature (despite the fact that the crowds were made up predominantly of an educated and internationally 'connected' urban middle class), and while it varied according to the situation on the ground, the demands put forward were very similar and widely shared throughout the group. These focused on improving urban development policy to include greater transparency, better and more diverse public participation in the decision-making process and less hurried procedures overall. In other words, what the protesters wanted above all was that their diverse demands be taken into account, and that they be kept better informed and more involved in the decisions affecting their local environment.

Promoting and marketing Istanbul to the world

The AKP has high hopes for Istanbul to showcase the impressive power and energy which Turkey is once again enjoying, the aim being to attract rich tourists and investors² and to evoke Turkey's glorious past, in particular the Ottoman period, so integral to Turkey's modern-day aspirations. This desire to transform the capital into a leading international hub for culture, finance and tourism, and to rid it of any negative association with factory production lines or anything else which might damage its image as a sophisticated, attractive, high-tech destination is clearly reflected in both official discourse and in the 2006 and 2009 master-plans developed for the city.

This is the background against which Deloitte submitted a report to the Turkish government in 2007 proposing the creation of an International Finance Centre (IFM) to be located between Dubai and Frankfurt³. Since then, the plans have been implemented almost down to the last letter. Land in Ataşehir, a new district of Anatolia, has been earmarked for the project, which is currently under construction, and ambitious real-estate development of office premises and residential properties is already planned for the surrounding area. Its completion, however, is expected to take longer than initially thought. Similarly, the planned transfer from Ankara to Istanbul of the Central Bank of the Republic of Turkey is also now uncertain, and it was eventually decided that the Istanbul Stock Exchange (initially the IMKB, which later merged on 1 January 2013 to become the Borsa İstanbul, BİST) would also remain where it was on the city's European side, instead of moving to the country's future financial centre as initially stated. Local city councillors have since learnt to focus their efforts on the more reliable expansion of luxury services, cultural industries, retail premises and harbourside development.

The AKP wants to see a 'universal' model of economic modernity develop within Turkey, epitomised by a sleek metropolis offering 'clean' services and consumer goods, whilst also simultaneously promoting an alternative model for modern life which stays true to Turkey's national values and customs. The theme of cross-cultural dialogue, with the oft-repeated image of Turkey as a country bridging two continents which the Prime Minister has used so enthusiastically over the last decade, is a crucial part of this campaign to promote Istanbul within the international market. The same message was used in a commercial in 2005 when Istanbul hosted the UEFA Champions Cup final, and features frequently in the city's local advertising. By spreading this message of cross-cultural dialogue around the world, which essentially requires that the story of

² The Turkish authorities hope that by 2016 Turkey will attract more foreign visitors than New York, Paris and Singapore. Just under 10 million tourists visited the country in 2012. See *Milliyet*, 30 May 2013, p. 13. In 2012, Turkey ranked 24th amongst countries attracting the most foreign direct investments (IDE) globally; it ranked 36th amongst investor countries; cf. *Dünya*, 27 June 2012, p. 2.

³ <http://www.tbb.org.tr/en/Content/Uplod/Dokuman/69/11122007.pdf>

Istanbul be re-written to depict different cultures living together in perfect harmony, the authorities are better able to mask the very conservative identity politics which actually exist within the country. This is the context in which Turkey seeks to develop its impressive new infrastructure, both to prove its conformity to international standards and also, through its transport infrastructure in particular, to reinforce its position as a regional and even global hub. This self-propagated discourse presents Istanbul as the future global centre, or at least as a regional centre of crucial importance, one which stretches across Anatolia as a strategic crossroads capable of uniting Europe with Asia, the Balkans with the Middle East, Russia with the Mediterranean... The possible unions are endless and are invoked both separately and simultaneously, depending on the context and the parties involved. These major new transport infrastructures, highly publicised symbols of Istanbul's destiny as a global leader, are clearly of central importance.

Major projects currently underway

Construction on the third Bosphorus bridge, which will be a combined road-rail bridge, began on 29 May 2013. The bridge is a symbol of this desire on the part of the Turkish authorities to see Istanbul established as a leading international transit hub. The suspension bridge will stretch 1,275 metres in length, will span 10 motorway lanes and 2 railway lines in width, and will have the highest pylons of any suspension bridge, standing at a height of 320 metres. It has been designed as a prestigious work of art, a symbol of strength to be broadcast to the world. Traffic flow patterns from the two existing bridges over the Bosphorus, however, show that the vast majority of the traffic is currently inter-city, with less than 10% transit traffic.

In addition to this third inter-continental bridge, two tunnels are currently being built to pass under the Bosphorus Strait. The first is the Marmaray undersea rail tunnel, of which the first phase was inaugurated during a national holiday on 29 October 2013. The second underwater tunnel will be a motorway and is expected to be ready at the end of 2015. The first is being financed and partially built by Japan, while the second is being financed and built by South Korea. According to the Prime Minister, who makes quite a habit of referencing the great capitals of the world in relation to these projects, the Marmaray will allow rail passengers to travel directly from London to Tehran or Baghdad without stopover. Construction of the high-speed rail link running along the Marmaray between Istanbul and Ankara is already underway. Once completed, no more than three hours travelling time will separate the two cities. Another landmark structure particularly dear to the AKP is the long-awaited Golden Horn Metro Bridge. Situated between the Galata and Unkapanı road bridges, it has already drawn significant criticism from critics who say the bridge will ruin the peninsula's historic silhouette.

A further example of the ambitious infrastructure being introduced to Istanbul is the third international airport being built in the north-west of the city⁴. It is expected to become one of the world's busiest airports, both in terms of passenger numbers and also due to its combined length in runways. A consortium made up of five companies was awarded the contract in May 2013. The bid, which stood at 22.15 billion euro and to which a 4 billion euro VAT equivalent will be added, was the largest in Turkish history. The airport is truly mind-boggling in size, covering an area so large it will become the first airport visible from the moon, with a maximum yearly passenger carrying capacity of 150 million⁵, covering a surface of 1.500.000 m², with 500 aircraft parking

⁴ An appeal was lodged with the Administrative Tribunal of Istanbul by the Chamber of Environmental Engineers on the grounds that the Environmental Impact Assessment (ÇED) requirements had not been met.

⁵ In 2012, Turkish airports saw a combined total of 131 million passengers pass through their doors. This gives us an idea of the increase in air traffic expected to occur, and what is at stake with this project. See *Ekovitrin*, June 2013,

spots, 260 jetways, and 160,000 permanent staff compared to the 45,000 currently employed at Atatürk-Yeşilköy airport. A further great legacy project for the government is expected to be the suspension bridge over the Gulf of İzmit, the future centrepiece of the İstanbul-İzmir highway. Construction began in 2011, with completion expected in 2015. It will significantly reduce travel time between the economic capital and the Aegean city Izmir, a major centre for business and tourism.

Kanalistanbul is the project name for a proposed 200 metre wide waterway which would bisect the Thrace peninsula at the west of Istanbul across a 45km stretch from north to south between the Black Sea and the Sea of Marmara. This is not merely about improvements to the country's transport infrastructure, but is part of a much wider economic and geopolitical strategy which would allow Turkey to bypass international treaties currently governing maritime traffic in the Bosphorus and to tax the merchant ships as they pass the checkpoint on this new route. It represents the government's attempt to manipulate both geography and history through the use of grand gestures designed to elicit global admiration. The project was agreed upon in May 2013 by the YPK, the country's Supreme Planning Board, but the final details are still under discussion and are yet to be confirmed.

In addition to these examples of major transport infrastructure, planned and organised directly from Ankara, a whole host of other projects are being decided upon at local level, including the many road tunnels which have been opened in total disregard of urban planning guidelines. With 3 million vehicles registered in Istanbul alone as of May 2013, private roads are clearly being prioritised, despite the usual discourse on the importance of promoting segregated-lane public transport and alternative greener modes of transport.

A focus on mega-events

The current unrest has been fueled further by the Turkish government's policies on hosting large-scale events in Istanbul and Ankara. There is nothing new or original in these policies, other than the sheer scale of the projects proposed, what they seek to achieve and the reasoning used to justify the major building works which they entail, often alluding to images of the greatness of the Ottoman Empire and the awakening of a new Muslim world. Having said that, the authorities seem quite happy to excel at anything, from the Turkish Olympiads and winning European Capital of Culture in 2010 to being crowned the 2012 European Capital of Sport. After hoping to be selected as the host city for the 2020 Summer Olympic Games, Istanbul eventually lost to Tokyo in the final stages of voting on 7 September 2013. Successive governments and the city's officials have dreamt of hosting the games since at least 1980, when a master-plan, completely forgotten about after the 1980 Turkish coup d'état in September that year, identified several potential Olympic sites for consideration. In 1992, the government adopted a Turkish Olympic law which identifies as its objective the hosting of the games by Istanbul and provides for the necessary structures and institutions to be put in place. The authorities initially set their sights on 2000, then 2004, 2008, and finally 2012. A hugely expensive campaign was then launched at the end of 2012 to win the support of local critics of the controversial Turkish bid. These critics included architects, engineers and urban planners, as well as the radical left opposition, all of whom opposed the bid on the grounds that such a mega-event would merely be used as a pretext to further accelerate redevelopment plans at the expense of the city's less wealthy communities. Opposition to the Olympic Games, held up

p. 103. Lower passenger numbers, not expected to exceed 90 million, have been estimated for 2017 when the airport is due to open.

by many as a symbol of how unrealistic the government's urban redevelopment projects are, grew even stronger after the events of June 2013.

As is often the case with these types of projects, magic mid and long-term completion dates are named in advance and repeated over and over in official discourse, in an attempt to inspire and to justify the expectations, chaos and hard work which the events generate. There are currently three big dates coming up on the horizon for Istanbul in 2013: the 2020 Olympics and Summer Paralympics, the hundred year anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Turkey in 2023, and the thousand year anniversary of Turkish rule in Anatolia (after the Seljuqs successfully defeated the Byzantine army !) Istanbul seems prepared at every turn to use its past to reinvent itself as a city with an exceptional future before it, a narrative which suits the current political agenda all too well.

As part of this focus on large international events, the construction of new sports stadiums has been pursued just as enthusiastically as convention centres, exhibition halls and up-market hotels. The projects proposed have increased both in number and in size since the beginning of the 21st century. Since the construction of Ataturk Olympic Stadium, left largely unused despite completion in 2001, the city's biggest football clubs have been fighting to outdo each other; Galatasaray was offered the new Türk Telekom Arena in 2011 with a capacity of 52,800, Fenerbahçe increased the size of its stadium, Beşiktaş is in the process of doing the same, and the Metropolitan municipality team, İBB Spor, is also now determined to have its own stadium⁶.

Limited and opportunistic projects

After the intense international campaign promoting Istanbul abroad, the city has become the stage for a booming real-estate business considered great value for money due to its higher prices, increasing numbers of primarily foreign investors, the growing scarcity of urban land, low labour costs and [the unrestricted sale of public land](#). Offices and commercial and residential real-estate have enjoyed accelerated growth in recent years, some through joint development projects and with many often outrageous in scale⁷.

Major real estate development

Batışehir, one of the largest real estate projects currently under development in Turkey, is located in the western suburbs of Istanbul, along the second ring road which circles the city. It will include 3,266 apartments expected to house around 15,000 residents, several office tower blocks and a hotel. It was developed through a public/private partnership between the private firm *Ege* and two semi-public companies, offshoots of the Collective/Mass Housing Administration (TOKİ), which has been a key player in Istanbul's transformation since it began 10 years ago. The partnership has purchased military land along the southern fringe of the vast Atışalanı test range, so vast it can be seen clearly on satellite imagery. On the Anatolian side, the Metropol Istanbul, a project even more ambitious in its scope and vision and the product of a similar partnership, is underway. As well as two thousand residential units, the building complex will include one of the tallest office blocks in Europe, the longest shopping centre in Turkey at 400 metres in length, and a cinema complex with 17 screens. In addition to this, the pharaonic Kanal İstanbul mentioned above will likely be connected to a couple of new cities located on both sides of the northern end and with a new business quarter by the southern tip. The increasing urban sprawl has opened up new

⁶ In 2012-2013, Istanbul had five of its teams in the first division, almost a third of the sixteen teams competing.

⁷ In 2012, Istanbul, with its 13.5 million inhabitants, accounted for nearly a quarter of the property sales declared across all of Turkey; see '2012 Report on the Turkish Construction Industry', Istanbul, YEM, 2013, p. 19 (in Turkish).

territory for the expansion of real estate, leading to a rapid change in the status of land and how it is used.

Galataport, Haydarpaşa and Haliçport are three projects which were designed to ‘reclaim’ the city’s shores. Haliçport, also known as the Golden Horn Port project, was made public at the very height of the Gezi uprising, with the deadline for bid submissions for the contract (and the public land) set for 2 July 2013. This is one of the major redevelopment projects taking place on the left bank of the Golden Horn, and reflects the ongoing acquisition of former military land by the public real estate market. The developers of Haliçport plan to redevelop two of the three shipyards located on the left bank. According to press reports from the end of June and the beginning of July, it will include two harbours, two 5-star hotels with over 400 beds each, a mosque able to accommodate 1000 worshippers, a shopping centre and a park, covering a total of 25 hectares. The project is expected to encounter fierce opposition.

The Galataport project dates further back in time and was initially privatised in 2005 before the deal was cancelled. The privatisation was then renewed in May 2013, with stricter conditions than those included 8 years previously, for a winning bid of 702 million dollars (compared to the 3.5 billion dollar bid in 2005!) The project plan is to redevelop the Karaköy customs docks into a cruise ship terminal accompanied by up-scale private properties and shopping malls. Its developers are even considering adding new embankments to the Bosphorus in order to increase the project surface area and thus profit. No thought has been given to the fact that this will permanently alter the areas’s coastal topography⁸.

The Haydarpaşa Terminal project, linked to the previously mentioned Marmaray project, has also been the subject of much controversy for at least the last ten years. On 19 June 2013, at the height of the Gezi uprising, the last commuter train departed from this historic train station located along the *Bagdadbahn* joining Istanbul with Hijaz and built by German architects at the beginning of the 20th century. This old railway is to be replaced by the Marmaray. The cargo port and the adjacent bus station are also destined to fall prey to the usual unoriginal urban redevelopment plans: a dockside marina, luxury hotel, private residence and a shopping centre, to which a ‘portable’ Olympic stadium might be added, judging by recent comments made by the minister in charge of Istanbul’s 2020 Olympic bid.

What Galataport and Haliçport show is the extent to which these projects rely directly on the sale of public land, something which is still occurring on a massive scale throughout Turkey. In order to finance and implement these mega projects, the AKP have transferred huge amounts of publicly owned land, of which there is still a significant amount remaining. The military, for example, still own more than 10% of land in the Istanbul province, which could give them significant leverage to renegotiate their position in the system of institutions, whilst also adding value to their land and generating immediate financial benefits through partnership with private companies, some of whom have only arrived on the scene within the last decade. In doing so, however, the public sector loses permanent control over what is one of the most effective ways of handling urban growth and land management.

⁸ Growing numbers of embankments were added in May 2013, including a vast building operation on the banks of the Sea of Marmara, similar in size to Yenikapı (built as a new recreational space).

This explosion in mega projects has seen urban design triumph at the expense of urban planning. The design projects are often one-off and limited in their outlook, characterised by an opportunism and the fact that they offer instant symbolic or financial rewards at the expense of a mid and long-term vision of land management which takes into account the needs and welfare of the public. With so much profit to be made, urban planning is no more than an illusion with little hope of being implemented properly; it lacks all prescriptive value and is ignored by those who seek only to dazzle with luxury and excess.

The new 'civilised' city-dweller which the AKP is dreaming of and hoping to produce and clone across its institutions and urban hot spots is above all a docile consumer furnished with an array of credit cards ready to use. He is conservative and consumes as a family, reflected in the shopping centres re-branded as 'retail and lifestyle centres' and designed to attract and cater to families. Consumer culture seems to have become an intrinsic component of both the modern urban society, for which the AKP sees itself as flag bearer, and of the new model of citizenship which the party intends to develop. This model quite openly treats the citizen as a customer, an attitude clearly reflected in the new language used by the local AKP authorities. It is therefore not surprising to see local councils base their offices within enormous newly built shopping centres, as in the new Esenyurt district, where the local council services are buried in the midst of a brand new retail centre. Neither is it surprising to see town councillors abandoning and handing over all responsibility for creating new social spaces to the developers of such retail centres (not to mention public spaces, if we were to use a (normative?) definition of public space which implies open and diverse appropriation, in which the public are truly free to choose the many ways in which they might use that space).

One of the most surprising examples of this transformation is the Mall of Istanbul (a reference to both the Mall of America and the Mall of Dubai), which will include a shopping centre, private properties and a hotel, and which is still currently under construction. Located on the western edge of the city in a district undergoing full redevelopment, the project belongs to Torunlar, one of the real estate industry's emerging big players. Its brightly lit futuristic towers have replaced what was previously a squatter settlement located close to the second ring road, and which was demolished in February 2007 as part of this policy of urban transformation.

Istanbul's new narrative is one of glitz and glamour, with the new government desperate to showcase its power in all its glittering excess. Everything is to be colossal in size and spectacular in effect. Records must be broken, with the aim always to announce the largest court in Europe, the biggest airport in Europe, the tallest bridge in the world (the third bridge over the Bosphorus), or the tallest tower in Europe (in the form of Skyland, a project developed by the Eroğlu group, located close to Galatasaray's Türk Telekom Arena). These are not only government objectives but are also widely shared by entrepreneurs with strong ties to the AKP, each one eager to out-do the others in professing their allegiance to this obsession with size and luxury, enthusiastically spreading the message across the country and throughout society. The sky's the limit. The politicians⁹ and their business partners seem fixated on churning out ever more staggering figures to the public; recent examples include the largest ever public sector contract (land transfer and electricity distribution contract) and the largest ever property transaction.

Speed is also crucial. One of the indicators of the strength and determination of those in power seems to be their ability to ensure that the time between project start and finish is kept to a minimum, even if this means organising and reorganising opening ceremonies to fit in with the

⁹ The Mayors of each of Istanbul's 39 districts also vie to outdo each other, promising their constituents nothing less than the moon and the stars. One Mayor of Altepe recently announced that his district would become the Dubai of Istanbul, while another several months later likened his district to Miami.

political calendar. What distinguishes Istanbul from other urban sprawls across Europe is precisely this speed, made possible as a result of the country's less secure employment conditions (greater risk of accidents, fewer contracts), and by the fact that measures put in place to protect sites of environmental or historical value are frequently ignored. This is precisely what happened on 29 October 2013 when the Yenikapı archaeological site was shut down so that the project inauguration deadline could be met, despite the fact that archaeologists had not yet completed what they wanted to achieve.

Rewriting history

Even being 'crazy' (*çılgın*) is part of the plan (Kanal İstanbul and the proposed artificial islands in the Sea of Marmara¹⁰ are good examples of this 'craziness'). Ever since the 2005 release of Turgut Özakman's *Those Crazy Turks*, a novel exploring the Turkish War of Independence of 1919-1922, the term 'crazy' has been used by many to stir nationalist sentiment, and it is interesting to see the AKP appropriate this rhetoric in a bid to legitimise its urban policy in the face of public criticism. Consequently, nationalism has spread across a broader spectrum of society, with Turkish flags an increasingly common sight on both sides of the fence, as was the case during the Gezi uprising. This phenomenon reflects the extent to which nationalist discourse has become trivialised; ubiquitous and unoriginal, it has lost all ability to polarize political sides and is for show only, devoid of any real meaning.

The theme of conquest, in reference to the Ottoman victory in Constantinople in May 1453, is also used as a tool to mobilise and win public support. This obsession with launching impressive new mega structures could be interpreted as an extension of the desire to revive the spirit and energy associated with the victories of Mehmed the Conqueror, an image constantly referenced in the country's political and economic discourse (with one very fashionable real estate developer even naming his luxury residential project '1453'). The country's modern aspirations of greatness are validated and sustained by the adventures of the past. Erdoğan, stalwart champion of the construction boom across Istanbul, is quite comfortable drawing parallels between himself and the Conqueror, despite the fact that he is not the same age that the Conqueror was at the height of his victory against the infidels in Constantinople. It is not really surprising to see this reference made so frequently. A giant statue built to honour the glory of Mehmed was even planned for one of the small islands in the Sea of Marmara, similar in style to New York's Statue of Liberty. This notion of the spirit of conquest is all-pervasive when justifying the city's transformation and redevelopment. It is a source of both motivation and pride for many of those working in this area. The ceremony commemorating the Turkish conquest, organised by Istanbul's Metropolitan Municipality, has become more of a spectacle with each passing year, with its fireworks and sound and laser lighting displays attracting huge crowds¹¹. The release in 2012 of the novel 'Crazy Ottoman Projects' by a conservative publishing house is further symbolic of this tendency by the Turkish authorities to use the revived glories of the past to contextualise its current policies of excess¹².

¹⁰ These artificial islands will be constructed from filled-in rock and sand, as in Dubai, and will be shaped in the form of the Turkish crescent.

¹¹ To symbolise continuity between the powers of the past and present, descendants of the Ottoman Sultans were invited by the Municipality as guests of honour to the ceremony on 29 May 2013. That same day, an influential research institute (İSAM) and a recently created university affiliated with the Turkish Religious Affairs Foundation (and named after 29 May!), organised an international symposium on 'Ottoman Istanbul'.

¹² Turan Şahin (2012), *Osmanlı'nın çılgın projeleri* (Crazy Ottoman Projects) Istanbul, Yitik Hazine Yayınları.

Aside from the mega projects, if Istanbul is to fully realise its exceptional destiny, it must be remodelled and rid of anything which might sully its image. This is precisely why the urban transformation policy introduced in 2004 was then very vigorously relaunched in 2012 with the adoption of a law which gives full powers to the Ministry of Environment and City Planning, as well as to the Council of Ministers, to intervene as they see fit (apparently a necessary precaution due to the risk of earthquakes). During a ceremony marking the resumption of the policy on urban development (which in this case involved watching the demolition of several buildings listed as fragile and dangerous), the Prime Minister himself stated that this represented, for him, a process of 'rewriting history'. Several of the city's mega projects (or perhaps all of them?) fall more or less within the scope of this revisionist agenda, which seeks quite dramatically to reorganise the world. The most impressive of these projects, aside from the giant mosque in Çamlıca, a high spot which towers over the Bosphorus on the Anatolian side, is undoubtedly the island of Yassı Ada in the Sea of Marmara. It is here that the members of the former ruling Demokrat Parti were tried in 1960-1961. The AKP suggested renaming it as the Island of Liberty, in memory of former Prime Minister Adnan Menderes and two of his ministers who were tried and executed after the military coup of 27 May 1960. Turkey's urban policies, inspired first by Mehmed the Conqueror, are now spurred on by striking association with the martyr-like Menderes.

A weary Hercules?

On 19 June 2013, the Mayor of Istanbul Kadir Topbaş, who had kept a low profile since the start of the Gezi protests, promised that the municipality would henceforth seek to consult the public before going ahead with any plans. Will local democracy improve as a result of challenges to the authorities' management of public policy? Some analysts had already suggested that a new form of (urban) politics might be on the way, the government shocked into change after severe criticism for its rescue efforts and failure to keep citizens well informed in the wake of the earthquake in August 1999.

As for the Prime Minister, he might currently be said to resemble the *Farnese Hercules*, the famous statue of a weary-looking Hercules and an object of great national pride¹³. And yet he shows no sign of giving up on his major reconstruction plans; on the contrary, as though to prove to the world that Turkish might is unshaken by what he has described as a political epiphenomenon and the result of 'marginals' out to get him, he seems determined to continue with his dizzying programme of urbanisation, as though himself deliriously caught up in the unending avalanche of new proposals.

The building boom which seems to have engulfed Istanbul is the result of various, very diverse national, international, ideological and speculative factors, and reflects both a desire for prestige and also an eagerness to show Istanbul as keeping pace with international standards. These mega structures, built using an insecure labour-force employed by a system which persistently externalises the environmental costs of its projects, are also able to mask certain problems, particularly by boosting a building sector so vital to the smooth running of the economy. They have a cohesive element, acting as important symbols for certain 'imagined communities' made up of those who identify themselves as religious, as nation members, or as representatives of

¹³ The statue of a 'weary Hercules', kept previously in Perga in Antalya, and which was stolen from the Turkish territory in 1980, is one of the most spectacular recent examples of the restitution of stolen artifacts, in this case of a statue taken illegally from Anatolia and eventually recovered by the Turkish government after a long campaign. The statue was officially returned to the Turkish authorities in 2011 by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. The Minister of Culture and Tourism recently had miniature replicas of the statue widely distributed to celebrate this national victory.

‘Turkishness’, as well as symbolically including those typically excluded from the AKPs ‘Turkish miracle’ years: those whose incomes did not increase along with national wealth, those with debts and those in precarious employment. However, these impressive plans would all be seriously jeopardized if the Turkish currency were to drop in value, as it did early in the summer of 2013, and by the growing financial difficulties facing many Turkish entrepreneurs who borrowed foreign currency in international markets.

Further reading

The Marmaray railway under the Bosphorus: <http://www.marmaray.com.tr/>

Skyland İstanbul: <http://www.skylandistanbul.com/en/>

Metropol İstanbul: <http://www.metropolistanbul.com/en-US/>

Varyap Meridian real estate project: <http://www.varyapmeridian.com/en/homepage>

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