



The “Capital of Culture” and its Coastal Regeneration Projects

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Sea has an important role in the formation of the identity of Istanbul since it is located at two sides of a flooded valley called the Bosphorus, which connects the Black and the Marmara Seas. The identity of Istanbul is closely tied to the numerous vistas from the sea, since it is mostly represented through its silhouettes from the sea. It was the capital of the Roman Empire signified by its column monuments bearing the statues of the emperors. It was the capital of Islam signified by the domes and minarets of its mosques, and it was the capital of finance at the end of the 20th century as signified by its high rise office buildings.

The severing of the ties of Istanbul with its sea-oriented identity started after 1950's as a result of its unforeseen and therefore unplanned growth. The population of the city, which was 1 million in the 1950's, increased to 12.5 million according to the latest census in 2007. Perhaps the biggest mistake in response to this increase is the policies of the subsequent governments that supported transportation via motorways. Because of its motorways and the growth they encouraged, Istanbul which has been a sea-oriented city became a land-oriented city identified by its traffic.

The coasts of Istanbul are being re-evaluated for the last ten years within the context of an ambitious campaign of urban regeneration initiated mainly by the Istanbul Metropolitan Municipality under the control of central government. Main motivation behind the prestige projects that have been prepared at various locations at the coasts is to regenerate the coasts so as to provide economic gain. Yet, some other concerns such as integration of the waterfront with the inland, retrieval of the ecological values of the sea, re-establishment of historical and mnemonic heritage and introduction of new social functions to the coastal areas are also at work in some of the more recent projects.

Beginning with the Haliç Cultural Valley project, the urban regeneration projects along the waterfronts of Istanbul started to include cultural and educational facilities in their programs. These facilities aim to attract populations to the sea-side trying to revive the relationship of the city with the sea. Museums, aquariums, cultural centers and archaeological parks proposed in these projects, are alternatives to the major mode of socializing in Turkish cities in shopping centers, which are generally located inland and tied to the major motorways. This paper will re-evaluate the coastal regeneration projects in Istanbul as the new activity centers of the city in relation to the sea. It will propose that 2010's “Capital of Culture” is perhaps defining itself in relation to the sea through these projects.

KEY WORDS: Istanbul, waterfront regeneration, capital of culture.