



“Les Transformations d’Istanbul” / Transformation of Istanbul by Henri Prost

Cana BİLSEL, Associate Professor
Middle East Technical University, Turkey
bilsel@metu.edu.tr

Henri Prost, who was one of the founders of town planning in France at the beginning of the 20th century, was invited, in 1936, by the Turkish government to prepare the master plan of Istanbul. He conducted the planning of the historic capital and the most populous city of Turkey from 1936 to 1951. Belonging to the first generation of urbanists, Prost has been renowned particularly with his conservative attitude toward the cultural/architectural heritage and the assets of the natural landscape. However, he adopted a highly interventionist planning approach in Istanbul.

“Les Transformations d’Istanbul” is the title of Prost’s speech on the principal lines of his planning in the Institut de France in September 1947. This title, which he also gave to the compilation of his planning notes, revealed indeed the principal goal of his planning. The aimed transformation consisted in the restructuring of the city as a whole mainly by establishing a new transportation infrastructure (a system of motorways with viaducts and tunnels cutting through the city), by opening new development areas, and also by intervening on the fabric of the existing settlement areas. Changing the building and population density of the old districts was one of the motives of this intervention. Prost pointed out the necessity to decrease the density in the Galata and Beyoğlu districts for the sake of “hygiene,” while he argued, on the contrary, that a “concentration plan” was needed for the intra-muros city. Therefore, the plans that he prepared for the historic peninsula were directed to increase the building density besides rationalizing the street network. Nevertheless, although he interfered radically with the historic fabric of the city, Prost also cared especially for the “total effect” of Istanbul’s townscape. Along with the emphasis that he put on the “picturesque qualities” of the city and its surroundings, his planning decisions were influential in the conservation of the historic city’s silhouette as well as the landscape of the Bosphorus.

Prost’s plans, which were partly implemented during and after his stay in Istanbul, had long lasting effects on the city’s transformation, although his planning practice was severely criticized by Turkish architects and planners in 1950s and 60s for not respecting the qualities of the historic city, among other arguments. This paper will enquire into what Henri Prost meant by “transformation,” as well as the reasons of his interventionist attitude in the context of Istanbul and explore the planning tools and modalities of transformation (such as “extension”, “concentration”, “rationalization” of the street network) that he suggested for restructuring the city and changing its fabric.

KEY WORDS: Urban transformation, tools and modalities, restructuring, extension, concentration, rationalization, historical fabric.