

TRANSFORMATION OF PUBLIC SQUARES OF ISTANBUL BETWEEN 1938-1949

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the radical transformation of Istanbul under the Prost plan between years 1939-1948, during the mayoralty of Lütfi Kırdar, focusing on the formation of three main public squares of the city through demolitions; questioning urban development at the expense of urban memory.

The mayoralty period of Kırdar was one of the most important periods transforming the urban fabric of Istanbul. Following the proclamation of Ankara as the capital city of the new republic, Istanbul was left outside the mainstream Turkish politics, resulting in the shift of all state funding to the building-up of the new capital. To become the symbol of the modern Turkish nation state, the new capital was developed through Jansen plan in 1928 while Istanbul, symbolizing the Ottoman period as being the capital of the late Empire, was left unattended until 1930s. Together with the liberal economic change, the obscure, quiet period of Istanbul came to an end. In 1936 the French urban designer Prost was invited by Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic, to prepare a master plan and a development report for Istanbul. The implementation of Prost plan started immediately after Lütfi Kırdar was elected as the mayor of Istanbul in 1939. The collaboration of Prost, a professional from the modern west, and Kırdar, a politician with ambitions for a modern city and power to do so, had was key in transforming Istanbul to match the western influenced modernization ideals of the new secular republic.

Transportation problems, hygiene and aesthetics were three key issues Prost put in the forefront of his plan, proposing a radical change in the daily life of the society. Decreasing continuously after the First World War, the population of the city, once again, started to increase in parallel to the urban planning activities. "The beautification" of Istanbul, as Kırdar described it; "a city of public squares" as Prost put it, the transformation saw the construction of Haussmanian boulevards, connecting the "espaces libres" - open spaces, created at the expense of demolition of many historical buildings. Some others - fortunately considered important enough - were saved and included in the master plan; these buildings were believed to give a "decorative nature" to the open spaces created or they were thought to strengthen the perspective effect of the new boulevards. In the urban transformation of Istanbul, the development of urban space came with the loss of urban memory permanently. This paper will explore the transformation of Istanbul between years 1938-1949, focusing on the formation of three main public squares of Istanbul; Eminönü, Taksim and Fatih Squares, questioning demolitions within the old cityscape through planning decisions and decision making processes, as a part of the western influenced modernity project of the new Turkish Republic.

INTRODUCTION

The modernization of Istanbul by transforming the organic urban fabric based on Western models had started at the reign of Sultan Selim III (1789-1808) and continued by gaining momentum during Tanzimat period. The westernization attempts continued during the mayoralty period of Topuzlu at the beginning of the last century (Yıldırım, 2009). Although many of Topuzlu's projects couldn't be implemented, the formation of a culture "to transform Istanbul into a civilized, beautiful city" was passed to the future generations.

At the beginning of 20th century, the imperial capital was damaged from wars, invasions, migrations and instant fires (Çelik, 1993). With the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, the proclamation of Ankara as the new capital deprived Istanbul of this important status. Istanbul, losing its privilege, was left unattended and neglected while the funds of republic were canalized to the new capital which was under construction in accordance with Jansen plan (Akpınar, 2003).

However, by the year 1933, an invited competition was organized, not only to shape a civilized urban environment and to generate a modern visage of the city, but also symbolically to transform the radical Muslim Ottoman realm into a secular national one (Bozdoğan, 1994).

For the competition, three French and one German urban specialist were invited to discuss the plans for the future the city. Alfred Agache, Henri Prost and Herman Elgözt were invited first. Prost declined the invitation at first and Henry Lambert was called upon (Özler, 2007). By the end of 1933 Elgözt, Agache and Lambert submitted their proposals to the Municipality, presenting alternatives on the locations of the Istanbul port, industrial zones, the trade centre, the housing zones, green areas and settlements (Bilsel, 2007 and Özler, 2007). The reports also included connections between settlements giving solutions for traffic problems and proposals for public spaces along the connections. Although never implemented, at the end of the competition Elgözt plan and report was selected as it offered a rational proposal without changing but expanding the main historic city (Bilsel, 2010c and Özler, 2007).

Following the unimplemented plan of Elgözt the municipality consulted another German planner Martin Wagner, who was the director of the city planning unit at Berlin Municipality. Wagner's report¹, completed in 1936, concerned the urbanization of the city from the economic dimension. However in his report, he projected a very low population growth for the future of Istanbul which later misguided the urban plan of the city (Özler, 2007).

For the second time in the mayoralty period of Muhittin Üstündağ, Prost was offered to work on the urban plan of Istanbul and finally on June 1936, Prost was commissioned with a contract as the planner of Istanbul. After Lütfi Kırdar was elected mayor in 1938, the 2 year contract of Prost was renewed. The collaboration of the French planner with Kırdar was very harmonious: Prost's contract was extended for another 15 years and the scope of work expanded. During his stay in Istanbul, many projects in different scales, were implemented - made possible by changing the urban law. In this period Kırdar, who was both the governor and the mayor, had a great authority in the planning of the city. Many of the Prost's projects were implemented despite the economic difficulties during World War II. The ones that were left out were later implemented during the next decade (Bilsel, 2010c).

¹ The report of Wagner was published in *Arkitekt* as a series in issues 8, 9, 10, 11, 12.

Kirdar and Prost's mark on urban planning and Istanbul's transformation during 1940s was such that it influenced future developments for a long time.

THE PROST PLAN FOR THE OLD CAPITAL

In his plan of Istanbul, Prost displayed almost a destructive attitude towards the old city fabric, and gave priority to transform the historic city in to a modern one. The reason for his approach was, firstly the damage left from the aforementioned fires which destroyed large parts of the city in the past years (Bilsel, 2010c). The conflagration areas remained as ruins due to economic recessions during wars. Another reason was the role the women played in the new public life as part of the reforms of Atatürk. The new city should offer better living conditions for women, so that, as Bilsel states, living in the new settlement areas was regarded as a matter of prestige. Also the vernacular timber houses were a symbol of ottoman culture, and regarded as unimportant buildings due to hygienic, aesthetic reasons (Bilsel, 2010c). As a result Prost chose to modernize the historic settlements which were demolished.



Figure 1- *The Prost Plan 1941*, (Özler, 2007:106)

The final and maybe the most effective reason of the destructive approach of Prost as he mentioned in his speech² was the transformation of Istanbul in to a secular,

² Prost., H., " Introduction" Les Transformations d'Istanbul,(vol. I_VI)

(The speech he delivered in académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris) translated to turkish as istanbul'un tebeddülü.

Urbanisme les transformations d'Istanbul, 3 : plans directeurs

Cities, nations and regions in planning history

modern, civilized, European city. Prost gave importance to the ideals of the republican rulers, which was changing the face of Istanbul in a way that would honour the young republic (Kirdar, 1945).

Prost's awareness of the revolution of the country is obvious from his letter to Hautecoeur, where he mentioned the important effects of the reforms and how they reflected on the urbanization of Istanbul³ (Akpınar, 2003). He stated that the first action of the free regime was the wish to modernize Istanbul. Prost became an actor as an urban planner of the new social political revolution of Istanbul.

The Turkish Revolution's precedent was the French Revolution. From this point of view, the choosing of Prost, as a French urban planner, coming from the French planning tradition/convention, to transform the city, is more understandable. Although the similarity to create a plan for a secular society is obvious, an Islamic society needed specific measures to be transformed, which were not only political, legal, educational reforms but also spatial since in Ottoman culture the use of public space was completely oriented to the Islamic habits that were mostly abandoned by the new republic. Despite Prost's awareness and sensitiveness to Ottoman culture, he implemented the manifesto of the new political power; his plans bore very similar principals to the Haussmann's planning practice in Paris. He prepared a network of boulevards connecting public spaces in the middle of historical urban pattern, announcing to the society the new modern life style.

PUBLIC SQUARES : THE SYMBOL OF THE NEW REPUBLIC

The new public spaces had a political significance in making the national history of the new republic. For creating the new secular spatial arrangement of the city the Islamic oriented Ottoman past was rejected. Prost had chosen to emphasize the Greco-Roman and Byzantine past of the city. As he states in his letter to Hautecoeur,

"I force myself to preserve the most characteristic of the Roman and Byzantine civilizations"(Prost, 1943).

As a result of this decision and the conservation perception of the period at early 20th century, Prost preserved just the monumental structures from the past, opening and widening their surroundings in a manner that would provide a perspective with the new avenues and squares. Opening monumental squares, surrounding the historic monuments by eliminating the historic urban fabric, resulted in these monuments coming apart from their original historical connections. Bilsel states that Prost diffused motorways as a network in the city regarding automobile as a prerequisite for the individual freedom (Bilsel, 2010c). Huge avenues connecting public squares were thought to be a solution for the condensed Ottoman fabric. However, the avenues mainly served transportation, inviting the use of the automobile and interrupted the pedestrian circulation. Without a doubt, Prost aimed to design Istanbul as a city of public squares, along with modern public buildings, giving perspective to monuments. In his report he mentions public buildings and squares as a part of a decorative nature (Prost, 1948). Within the context of this article the main public squares of the early republic will be examined.

³ Prost, H. Letter to Hautecoeur, İstanbul, 1943

Taksim Square

In the period when Lütfü Kırdar was the mayor, the most significant transformation planned by Henri Prost, for Taksim Square, was the demolition of Taksim Artillery Barracks to build the İnönü Esplanade. The esplanade was defined as Boulogne Woods of İstanbul. Now called Gezi Park, İnönü Esplanade was designed as a starting spot of the second park, which was thought to be the lungs⁴ of the planned residential area. In this respect the demolition of the barracks was one of the essential decisions for the master plan of İstanbul.



Figure 2- (left) the orientalist facade of Taksim Artillery Barracks facing the square (Gülersoy, 1986), (right) from air a view of Taksim Artillery Barracks before the demolition (Özler, 2007:106)

The first location proposed for the idea of creating a city square for the Republic Day Celebrations was not Taksim but Sultanahmet. Prost planned to transform the hippodrome at Sultanahmet into a republican square similar to Moscow's Red Square.⁵ Although this idea was included in the master plan of İstanbul, there were two high-school buildings in the area that cannot be removed in the short run - a problem that stopped the project going ahead in this location (Bilsel, 2010a).

Prost's designs for the new republican square in Taksim included a spectators' terrace to accommodate large crowds. He did not propose any changes to the Independence Monument and the circular city square around the monument. Prost showed sensitive and preservative attitude to Monument of independence, however he disregarded the historic Taksim Artillery Barracks. In his words he described the area as follows;

"The area included the old remains of an old cemetery, several jerry-built garage buildings, a barracks in ruins, and a number of shops and cafes around the square where the monument was located." (Bilsel, 2010a).

Prost completed his plan for Taksim Square in 1939. In his drawings, for the space that emerged after Taksim Barracks were demolished, he proposed a terrace opening up to Taksim Square and an esplanade in its continuation. At the north end of the esplanade a "Grand Theater was situated, designed by the French architect Aguste Perret. The location for the proposed theatre was occupied by the official residence of the governor of the electricity distribution Inc. (Çelikgülersoy, 1986). Also in the plan there are two rows of buildings along north-south direction. The symmetrical buildings designed for the axial geometrical plan of the İnönü Esplanade were, on the north wing, the Party Head Quarters and on the south wing

4 Prost., H., "Les Transformations d'Istanbul,(vol.VIII) ,Pera-Galata, 3.

5 Prost., H., "Les Transformations d'Istanbul,(vol.VIII) ,Pera-Galata, 1.

Cities, nations and regions in planning history

for Kızılay (the Red Crescent), including a concert and conference hall (Prost,1997b). With its design, the drawings of Prost for Inonu Esplanade, reminds Palais Royal complex in Paris (Bilsel, 2010a). In Cumhuriyet newspaper, on 14th of January 1940, it was written that Prost divided the land in 4 parcels where large scaled, private and public buildings were going to be built.

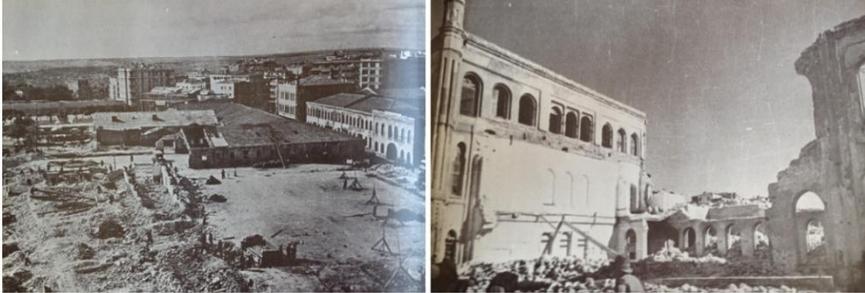


Figure 3- *The Taksim Artillery Barracks that are being demolished according to the Project of Prost , (Gülersoy, 1986:83,97)*

By the end of the year 1940, it was reported in newspapers that for the demolition of Taksim Barracks, which had been used as Taksim Stadium from 1921, an inspection plan was going on and the demolition was planned to be done at four divided sectors of the barracks. Barracks was to be demolished in 4 stages both to provide time for dwellers and also for the football games. The demolition was planned to be started at the northern wing facing Taksim Garden, followed by the eastern wing facing Mete Street and western flank facing Cumhuriyet Street, lastly operation was planned to end with the demolition of the southern flank looking at the Taksim Square (Üzümkesici, 2011). With the termination of the football matches at Taksim Stadium on 25th of March 1940 the demolitions started. However the demolition of the barracks in course of II World War was criticized, since the building would have been used for refugees (Üzümkesici, 2011). Disregarding the criticisms, Lütfi Kırdar had started the demolitions at the rear facade of the building. When the proposal was submitted the National Assembly in order to stop the demolition, three wings of the historic Taksim Artillery Barrack had already been demolished in accordance with Kırdar's orders (Üzümkesici, 2011). The barrack, was built in 1806 as a part of Ottoman military reforms under the reign of Selim III (Atabeyoğlu, 1995). Serving as a military practicing ground, the building was standing on the vast open area of Talimhane Ground. With the expansion of the city, Beyoğlu Disitric become an attraction point for the city and inside and around the barracks, Taksim Square hosted diverse social activities. By the beginning of 19th century with its new function as a football stadium, the Taksim Barracks became the major field where league matches were played (Atabeyoğlu, 1995). During the stadium years, other sports, such as athletics, boxing and wrestling were also performed and the building prepared the ground for the flux of crowds (Atabeyoğlu, 1995).

After the demolison of Taksim Artillery Barracks, Prost plan was not implemented entirely. Buildings on both sides were removed to obtain a large park area and promenade terraces. The North of the esplanade ended with Taksim Garden and it was connected to Park No.2 with a pedestrian bridge. Also a Municipal Pub

15th INTERNATIONAL PLANNING HISTORY SOCIETY CONFERENCE

designed by Rüknettin Günay, was built on the north eastern corner of Taksim Garden (İstanbul Municipality, 1957)

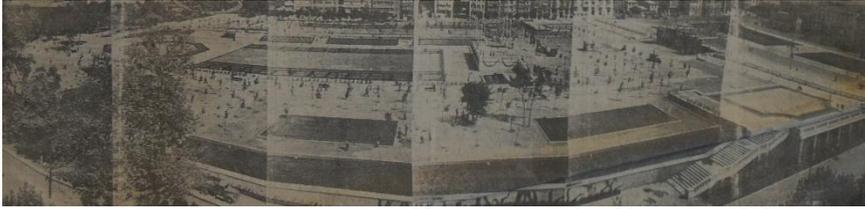


Figure 4- *The Inonu Esplanade prepared for 30 August Victory Day, 30 August, 1942, Son Posta Newspaper*

After the demolition of the barracks and the construction of Prost plan for Taksim Square, the new square received positive reviews however the project also provoked negative reactions from several newspapers about its location which is in the heart of the new quarters rather than in Old Istanbul. His project was also criticized because it coincided with the II World War. On 5 March 1940, Cumhuriyet Newspaper published an article titled "The matter: What we need is a zoning plan or a defence plan?" Looking back to that time from today, it is also very interesting that there were no reactions for the demolition of Taksim Artillery Barracks regarding it is historic monumental structure. As it is today, in 1940s, critical discussions for the planning of Istanbul was disregarded and many historic monuments carrying the public memory have been demolished and critical approaches have remained in the background.

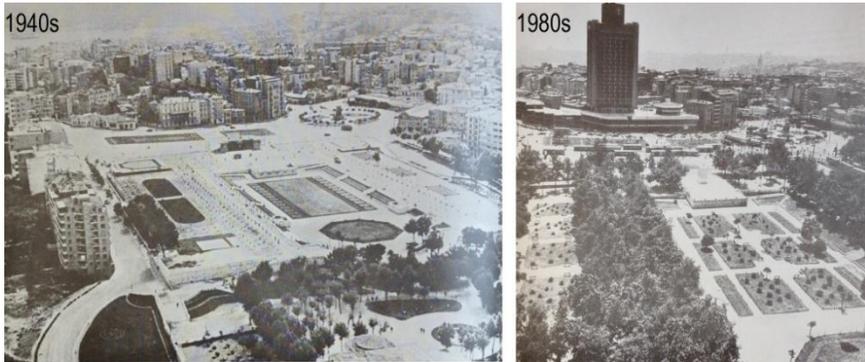


Figure 5- *The Inonu Esplanade in 1940s and 1980s (Gülersoy, 1986:54,55)*

Nowadays new projects for the reconstruction of the old Taksim Artillery Barracks are being discussed. Intellectuals are discussing the project proposing underground highways to Taksim Square creating a huge inhumane square. The project also includes the reconstruction of Taksim Artillery Barracks by demolishing Inonu Esplanade, now called Gezi Park. The attempt to demolish Gezi Park is a repetition of the past. Just in one century the public memory of the land will be lost again. It is hoped that the discussions and demonstrations by opposers will not remain in the background and will lead to questioning before implementing grand projects and demolitions.

Cities, nations and regions in planning history

Eminönü Square

The opening of Eminönü Square with the Galata Bridge was a major discussion of late 19th and early 20th century. The first large scale proposal for Eminönü as a European square was designed by Antoine Bouvard. Bouvard designed a square opening it in front of Yeni Cami. His project never executed. Çelik states that, since Bouvard did not see the area, he didn't design the project according to the topography of the land, moreover he didn't take the urban fabric into consideration (Çelik, 1993:92).

Another attempt was at the second mayoralty period of Cemil Topuzlu although his ideas never had been executed, he published his ideas in his book called *Yarınki İstanbul* where he mentioned the plan and design of the square. He states that the square should be opened by creating a wide avenue ending with a roundabout on the axis of Galata Bridge and the square should be planned giving perspective Eminönü Mosque (Topuzlu, 1937). Therefore, he proposed to demolish the buildings around the mosque. After the publication of this book, Prost planned Eminönü Square as Topuzlu dreamed. He opened the northern side of Yeni Cami creating vistas and perspectives by demolishing the buildings around it - the buildings he called parasites (Bilsel, 2010b).

As Prost states in his report the first principle was the demolition of the 'parasite' buildings for bringing out the mosque in the open. The second aim of the plan was catching the Süleymaniye view towards the university and Beyazıt along the road. (Road number 4). Moreover he proposed opening new roads towards Grand Bazaar, Fish Market and Sultanahmet.



Figure 6- *The expropriation areas according to the Prost's Plan* (İstanbul Municipality, 1943)



Figure 7- *The expropriation areas according to the Prost's Plan (İstanbul Municipality, 1943)*

Prost's grand intention was to rearrange the Eminönü Square - in his words - as the gate *parexcellence* to the historical city of Istanbul.

The so called parasites - the buildings which were demolished were defining the southern boundaries of the Square in that period. The triangular arched vault of the Sultan's kiosk gave access to the automobile traffic (Çin, 2006).

From the square in front of the Mosque, the panoramas, perspectives and axis are captured towards Süleymaniye Mosque, The Grand Bazaar, Sirkeci Train Station, Rüstem Pasha Mosque and the Bosphorus (Çin, 2006).

A. Gabriel mentioned Prosts plan for Eminönü;

"...the structure (Yeni Cami) was surrounded on all sides by heterogeneous modern structures the demolition of these buildings on the east allowed for the reorganization of a vast space that was quite useful for relieving the traffic congestion in this area. On the west a public garden was to be built in the area where a group of ill-assorted shops was located. The neighboring bazaar, known as the Egyptian Bazaar, would be exposed in all its picturesque appeal and the silhouette of the mosque would appear in its entire splendor."⁶ (Bilsel, 2010b)

⁶ Bilsel cited from Gabriel A "Henri Prost et le plan-directeur de Stamboul" Fonds A. Gabriel, Bar-sur-Aube., 10."

Cities, nations and regions in planning history

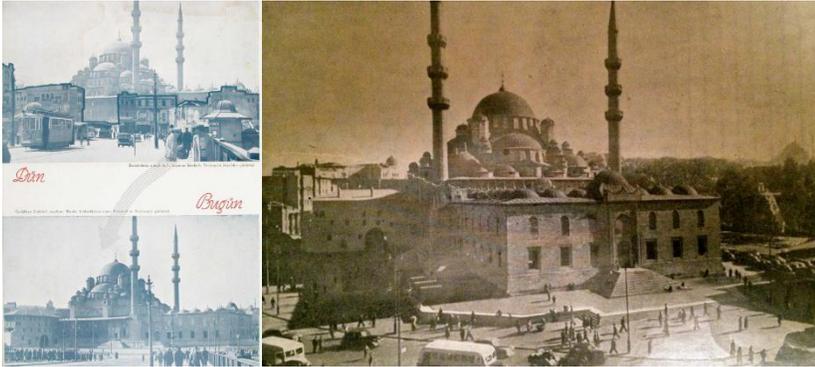


Figure 8- (right) Eminönü Square after and before the implementation of Prost plan, (left) The stairs and the terrace in front of Yeni Cami (İstanbul Municipality, 1944)

Although Prost was proud of the plan he made for Eminönü Square, where he proposed in his words a public garden, creating a decor by beautiful trees, replacing the unappealing, revolving junkyard of shapeless shacks of clothing vendors and other similar shanties, the Minister of Public Works rejected his plan both because he was demolishing *hans* and other historical buildings, and also since the laws do not permit such a spread-out area. Prost stated that, the municipality does not have the financial capacity to appropriate such vast quarters. As a result the plan of Prost was half implemented with the demolition of the buildings in front of Yeni Cami. Luckily not all historic buildings were demolished under Prost's plan which rejected the old city fabric. The Eminönü project of Prost represents the ideology of modernization of the Republic in a westernized concept. The Harim of the mosque is opened thoroughly to the public since the courtyard of the mosque was not opening to the square. The western plan didn't match but did resemble plazas in European cities.

After the operation of Prost the expropriated area defining the southern edges of the Square had changed the foreground of the Square. A new terrace and staircases were added to monumentalize Yeni Cami (Çin, 2006:87). The demolition of the Harim of the mosque and the shops in front of the Egyptian Bazaar also meant the loss of the complex relationship between religious and the commercial activities of the old Ottoman tradition. the project of Prost consisting of the modern Square, the new park in the place of the old Harim of the Mosque and new roads completely changed the urban fabric of Eminönü.

Fatih Square and Atatürk Boulevard

The opening of Fatih Square was very much related to the opening of Atatürk Boulevard since Prost proposed the square as a part of the boulevard. Prost envisioned to open a scenic route between Şehzade and Fatih Mosques in his master plan by revealing Valens Aqueduct, rising in the middle of a large, flat terrain.



Figure 9- *The construction of Atatürk Boulevard, the demolitions and the expropriated parcels* (Pinon, 2010:307-310)

Accordingly, Atatürk Boulevard was situated between the hills of Zeyrek and Vefa. It was opened on a small valley following the line of the existing Unkapanı Avenue connecting with Atatürk Bridge. In the drawings of Prost, it is seen that the boulevard is based on the portion between Valens Aqueduct and the new bridge (Pinon, 2010). His project also includes the expropriated areas and the elevations of the buildings while conserving Pantokrator Cistern and Şebsefa Hatun Mosque. Along the boulevard two rows of trees on the northern section of Aqueduct and on the southern section a row of trees were designed on either side of the middle forestation. For the southern section Prost proposed a series of blocks facing the boulevard. The expropriation of the quarters was achieved only for the southern side of the aqueduct. As a result in his plan Prost proposed a large park and a square to this area leading from Şehzade to Fatih Mosque, comprised of planted land and the New City Hall which was designed to satisfy all the needs of the future Municipality. In front of the City Hall he designed a square with an obelisk in the middle. His project for the City Hall has never been implemented, however, the boulevard and the green area with the square became a remarkable component of the city.

The demolition and leveling works for Atatürk Boulevard and the surrounding landscape were started at 1941 and completed at 1945. The speech of Kırdar, at the opening of Atatürk Boulevard, expresses the symbolic meaning of the new public spaces where he mentions the avenue as a result of beautification and reconstruction of Istanbul and the most beautiful example of the shift in creating a civilized Turkish land (Kırdar, 1945).

After the implementation, Prost stated that, the boulevard revealed the unknown aspects of the ancient Valens Aqueduct, traversing with its roadways and sidewalks the arches of one of the oldest structures of Istanbul without touching a single one of its stones. Implemented part of the project should have been discussed regarding the boulevard passing through the arches of Valens Aqueduct. With his interpretation, Prost left the aqueduct as an arch of triumph giving a remarkable perspective to the boulevard.

While transforming the city into a live land for automobiles, he used monumental historic structures as remarkable perspectives for guiding but he disregarded the pedestrians. The construction of the Atatürk Boulevard was an important implementation, as one of the main transportation axis of Istanbul. However, the construction of the boulevard and the park meant that the ancient quarter reflecting the old fabric has been demolished. By the demolition of these quarters, the historic monuments, such as Fatih Mosque, Molla Zeyrek Mosque, were also "cleaned from (so called by Prost) *parasites*", so that they could contribute to the perspective that the scenic route the boulevard creates.

Cities, nations and regions in planning history

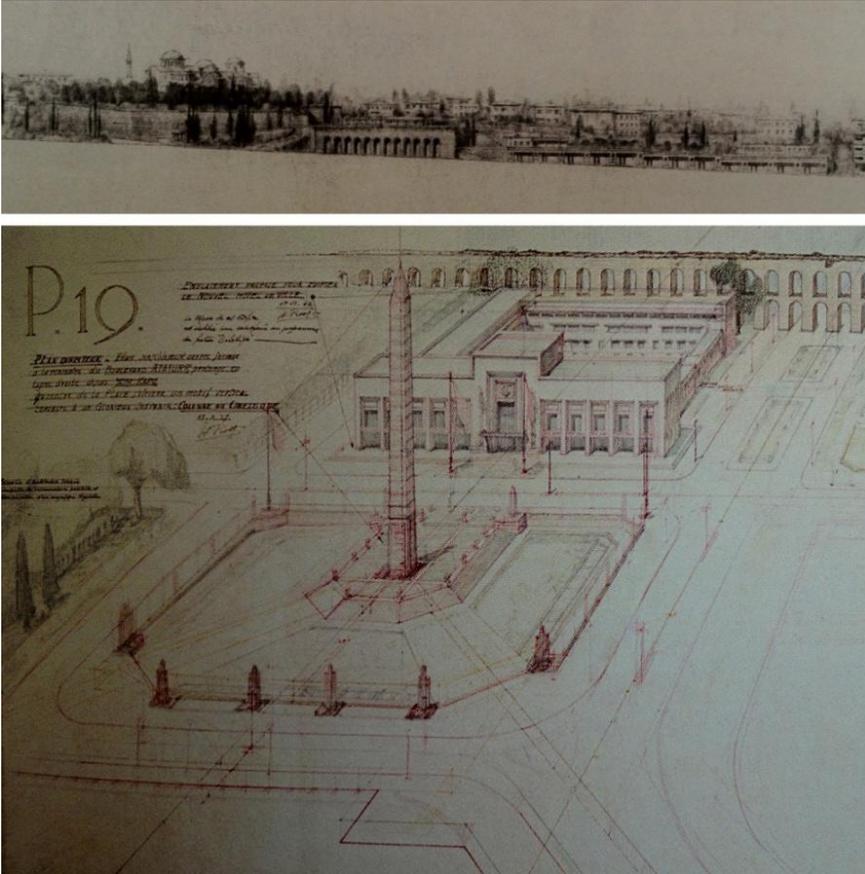


Figure 10- (top)The section of the project of the Atatürk Boulevard,(bottom) Axonometric drawing of Prost for Fatih Square (Pinon, 2010:317)

CONCLUSION

For the transformation of Istanbul into a secular, modern, civilized, European city Prost had three key issues; transportation problems, hygiene and aesthetics. In this context, between years 1939-1948, approximately 90 km highways were opened for transportation and connected with 18 public squares which were widened or opened for the aesthetic reasons. These squares were decorated with the historical monuments creating perspective to the squares. Moreover, parks, public buildings were constructed.

In this article the transformation of three main public squares were analyzed. In Taksim Square, the Artillery Barracks were demolished to construct a hygienic green belt to the city and the topography has rearranged to create a terrace facing the square. In Eminönü, for opening the square, the urban fabric has changed with the demolition of shops, as well as the tomb and harim of Yeni Cami. A new terrace

15th INTERNATIONAL PLANNING HISTORY SOCIETY CONFERENCE

and staircases are added to decorate the square in front of Yeni Cami. In Fatih, a huge boulevard was opened by expropriating the old neighborhood and this time Vales Aqueduct decorated both the boulevard, the square and the park. The main problem of these planning activities were the conception of creating a beautiful western city, while ignoring the traditional urban fabric.

The implementations and projects done at the period of mayor Lütfi Kırdar in the light of Prost plan constitutes one of the most remarkable periods of Turkish planning history. However, starting from Topuzlu's mayoralty period the implementations of Prost was just a part of the rapid transformation period in 20th century. Today, Istanbul is transforming with mega projects one of which involves the new Taksim Square with the proposed reconstruction of Taksim Artillery Barracks. As a repetition of the past, these interventions are not the solutions for gaining back the public memory. Without a doubt, the transformation of cities cannot be and shouldn't be frustrated but the political decisions shaping this transformation should be questioned.

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