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**Putting Istanbul on the Map of Art World:
Analysing Istanbul 2010 Cultural Capital of
Europe**

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**Putting Istanbul on the Map of Art World:
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Abstract

This paper will present the Istanbul Biennial and Istanbul 2010: Cultural Capital of Europe events as o The Istanbul 2010: Cultural Capital of Europe project was realized as a result of the long-lasting efforts of a volunteer-private committee to introduce cultural heritage as well as the modern face of the city. The reason behind this project is that the city of Istanbul aspires to be categorized in the group of Europe's global cities such as Berlin, London, Paris and hoped this title would have an impact on the city's international image, particularly on tourism. This strategy, it was planned, would attract first-class wealthy tourists to the city. Within this framework, outcomes of the Turkish state's changing vision for cultural policy. The following question will be asked: which apparatus was used to promote the cultural image of the city in visual arts? In fact, Istanbul 2010: Cultural Capital of Europe primarily was concerned with the use of culture for urban marketing and tourist promotion. Its program contained panel discussions, conferences, workshops organized with the aim of discovering the beauty of the city, and developing cultural tourism. Establishing new museums or renovating museums in this context should be seen as attempts to develop the infrastructure of cultural heritage and museums rather than radical changes in attitudes vis-a-vis art and culture.

Introduction

Nowadays, by defining cultural identity between international politics and national image, the position of Istanbul came to demonstrate the boundaries between the global and the local cultures. Considering the new meanings and the images of the city, in this paper, it will be discussed how the city's culture has been integrated into the global art system. During the last two decades, Istanbul has become more visible as a postmodern image of Turkey. Due to its geographical position, Istanbul, once the capital of the Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman Empires undoubtedly has been one of the most iconic cities. For this reason, it usually is identified as a battleground between East and West and between Islam and secularism. This complex structure of the city leads to the creation of clichés in the art and culture events that will be questioned in this study. Transcending developmentalist perspective and highlighting cultural creativity, Istanbul 2010: European Capital of Culture will be investigated as a re-presentation of visual art as multicultural perspective. This project is a phenomenon of the global culture industry, nourishing the new imperialistic instincts of Europe.

The European Capital of Culture project, which is based on the idea of selection of Capital City from the countries that are members of European Union each year, was first implemented in 1985 with the selection of Athens.¹ In 1983, the Greek Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri, and her French counterpart, Jack Lang, declared that culture was not given the same attention as politics and economics, and a project for promoting European Cultures within the member states should be pursued. The main aims of the program were highlighting the richness and diversity of European cultures, celebrating the cultural ties that linked Europeans together, promoting mutual understanding, and fostering European citizenship. In addition, the organization provided regenerating cities, and raising their international profile, giving new vitality to their cultural life.

Until 2010, more than 40 cities had been designated as European Capitals of Culture. During the German Presidency of 1999, the European City of Culture program was renamed the “European Capital of Culture”. During the first two decades, cities were chosen primarily based on the criteria of cultural history, scheduled events and the ability to provide infrastructural and financial support. According to the European Commission, the European Capital of Culture is a golden opportunity to show off Europe’s cultural richness and diversity, and all the ties that link Europeans together. The event is so attractive that Europe’s cities vie with each other fiercely for the honour of bearing the title.² In response to the difficulty of generating a European identity and overcoming national interests, the EU developed various programs including the European Capital of Culture event.

The Project of Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture

In 1999, the ECOC Project was enlarged to include non-member countries. A group of civil society volunteers in Turkey arranged a meeting on 7 July 2000 in order to establish an “Enterprise Group” that would take the required steps for Istanbul to become candidate for European Capital of Culture. The collaboration of thirteen non-governmental organizations under the name of The Initiative Group to working for Istanbul’s candidacy, made possible. With the participation of academics, new NGOs, members of the city’s cultural and artistic communities and the support of the state institution, Istanbul was designated as one of the European Capital of Culture for 2010 along with Pecs (Hungary) and Essen (Germany). These three Capitals of Culture selected for 2010 presented new aspects of urbanity and metropolitan form and its citizenries and identities.

Urban sociologist Carola Hein argues that “Istanbul’s selection as a European Capital of Culture is an example of how EU policies attempt to overcome nationalist sentiments by supporting cities, which are traditionally cosmopolitan and thus able to transcend national identity. Istanbul does not just belong to Turkey; it belongs to Europe and the world.”³ Hein regarded the selection of Istanbul as the Cultural Capital of Europe in terms of the EU’s decentralization strategy to market the city. In this sense, the EU uses cities and European-branded spectacles and festivals to

¹ *Avrupa Kültür Başkentleri Hakkında*. Accessed February 15, 2010.

<http://www.en.istanbul2010.org/AVRUPAKULTURBASKENTI/avrupakulturbaskentleri/index.htm>

² *Avrupa Kültür Başkentleri Hakkında*. Accessed February 15, 2010.

<http://www.en.istanbul2010.org/AVRUPAKULTURBASKENTI/avrupakulturbaskentleri/index.htm>

³ Carola Hein, “The European Capital Programme and Istanbul 2010,” in *Orienteering Istanbul: Cultural Capital of Europe?* edited by Deniz Göktürk, Levent Sosyal, and İpek Türeli (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp.253-266.

promote “Europeanness,” the cities use the events as a means to urban transformation. As following statement of ECOC shows that

Cities wishing to become European Capital of Culture must prepare a cultural programme that meets rather specific criteria: it must reflect the European character of the event and involve the participation of the people who live there. The European flavor can be seen in the themes chosen and the artists and cultural organizers from different countries cooperating to put on the event. The programme must also have a lasting and sustainable impact on the city’s long-term cultural, economic and social development.⁴

This perspective illuminates the motto of EU “United in Diversity”, while it provides important opportunities for rethinking a reorganizer of the European space and its networks and for integrating a diverse group of cities and regions from the center and the periphery. Since 2000, there have been multiple simultaneous European Capital of Culture, highlighting the diversity of European cities in terms of space, size, and urban form.⁵ Andreas Huyssen argues that through European cities of culture and other initiatives, the EU seeks to create new urban ‘imaginaries’ and European rather than ‘national’, ways of citizens to perceive the cities in which they live and work.⁶ Through arts and culture, European Cities of Culture highlighted the imagined European culture and European citizens.

Decentralization and weak governance is one of the most important problems of the EcoC program. While the EU selects the ECoC events, it provides only partial funding, leaving the actual planning and of the organization of the year’s events to the respective cities. In this regard, Istanbul’s ECoC programme included European-themed activities, symposia and workshops, new art, historical renovation, urban development projects and competition. At the beginning, the main goals of the event were written in the application document for Istanbul 2010 they were overcome the challenges of the city and solve the local governmental problems. The Istanbul 2010 program mainly focused on “facilitating harmony between urban renewal and the transformation of daily,” ensuring the independence of the cultural capital and facilitating the interaction of the every class within the city.⁷ Developed projects provided access to art and culture to people and areas which usually lacked such opportunities.

The project was called “Istanbul: City of Four Elements.” The content of the project was described as follows:

Throughout history, then, Istanbul has been home to countless societies and cultures. Yet this “beautiful harmony,” which is embedded in the city’s foundations and entwined in the branches of its family tree, is not just a pleasant memento from a bygone era. Istanbul retains still its rich cosmopolitan character, sometimes concealing and sometimes revealing the evidence of its unrivalled physical and cultural legacy. The city is a living example of the much

⁴ *European Capital Culture Programs*. Accessed December 15, 2010. http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-programmes-and-actions/doc413_en.htm.

⁵ Hein, “The European Capital Programme and Istanbul 2010”, p.258.

⁶ Andreas Huyssen (ed). *Other Cities, Other Worlds: Urban Imaginaries in a Globalizing World* (Durham, NC:Duke University Press, 2008)

⁷ *Forging the Future*. Accessed January 17, 2010.

<http://www.en.istanbul2010.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ist2010-images/gp540583.pdf>.

sought-after meeting of civilizations-something so desperately missing in the modern world that the search for it seems almost utopian. For more than two thousand years, as if inspired by Aristotle's theory of the four elements, the city has captivated humankind's attention.⁸

The Istanbul 2010 ECOC Agency was founded for the purpose of planning and managing the activities for preparing Istanbul as the European Capital of Culture by 2010 and for coordinating the joint efforts of public bodies and institutions in order to realize its goal. The Agency operates in three strategic areas: culture and arts, urban applications and protection of cultural heritage, tourism and publicity. In these three categories, there were ten aims targeted by the executive committee of Istanbul 2010. These were demonstrating Istanbul as the symbol of the country, discovering the beauty of the city, developing cultural tourism, creating jobs for a large number of people, engaging people in various artistic discipline establishing new museums, renovating historical buildings, sharing knowledge and experience with European countries, and making process in the promotion and branding of Istanbul. Visual arts, music and opera, film and documentary and animation, literature, theatre & performing arts, urban culture, education, cultural heritage and museums, urban projects, tourism and promotion, maritime and sports, international relations, fund raising projects, projects acquiring logo support were the departments under the Istanbul Capital of Culture Project.

Discussing Turkish Cultural Policy in the Light of Istanbul 2010

The Istanbul 2010 ECoC Agency was assigned the task of carrying out 'a comprehensive urban development project through arts and culture, and reveal the wealth as an inspirational source for the whole world. The Agency evolved into a fully-fledged organization, with various departments responsible for managed projects mentioned above. As Cengiz Aktar, one of the advisors to Istanbul 2010, wrote that, "one of the most valuable benefits of the ECoC project' would be 'transforming the classical local government into good governance."⁹

However, due to legal arrangements, the Agency was connected directly to the Office of the Prime Minister and depended on a strictly bureaucratic and hierarchical structure. This weakened the role and the influence of civil initiative. The advisors, consultants, and directors were turned into state bureaucrats and the Agency was turned into a government bureau. For this reason, the former director of Istanbul 2010 ECoc Agency, Nuri Çolakoğlu and the executive committee members, Gürhan Ertürk, İskender Pala, and Metin Sözen, resigned from their positions in the Agency. Their positions were filled by state bureaucrats and Istanbul Municipality governance members Şekib Avdagiç, Cumhuriyet Güven Taşbaşı, and Muammer Erol.

Urban sociologist Asu Aksoy stated her expectations on the Istanbul 2010 event as below:

(In Turkey)...although they are chosen democratically, municipalities and local governmental bodies do not have organizing and facilitating roles in the cultural sector, and they do not create platforms for institutions and cultural actors to interact with each other. Rather, they

⁸ *Avrupa Kültür Başkentleri Hakkında*. Accessed February 15, 2010.<http://www.istanbul2010.org>

⁹ Cengiz Aktar, "Istanbul, the European Cultural Capital," *Turkish Daily News*, April 14, 2006.

choose to act as monolithic parties with a singular cultural vision and play central decision-making roles...Istanbul 2010 can help to solve this structural problem and create new practices for negotiation between different actors, by creating discussion platforms where citizens seek common languages to speak.¹⁰

Instead of working with civic activists and private and cultural sectors actors, the Agency was constituted of bureaucrats and local administrators who viewed the Istanbul 2010 project as a state-centered cultural project. Furthermore, the Istanbul 2010 initial programme was not creative or innovative; it was a bureaucratic tool to promote Istanbul to the world and achieving short-term goals in culture. The 2010 programme book, presented in 2009 on the web site and a published book, demonstrates the shifts in focus. Şekip Avdagiç, Chairman of the Executive Board of the Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture Agency, states that the agency selected the motto “Istanbul: The most inspiring city of the world” and characterized “Istanbul, Europe’s Natural Culture Capital” as one of the cities, which most influenced European culture and civilization.¹¹ This statement illuminates attempts to overcome the lost status of the City and recover its powerful position among the world cities. As can be seen in the 2010 program catalog, the renovation projects were the Kariye Museum, Hagia Sophia Museum, restoration work undertaken at Topkapı Place, and Süleymaniye Mosque.

In the closing ceremony of the Istanbul 2010, the Turkish State Minister and Chief European Union Negotiator, Egemen Bağış, said that “Istanbul will be one of the cultural capitals of the world with its assets, historical heritage and spirituality, which inspired our civilization based on tolerance and affection. It is unfair to define Istanbul as only the cultural capital of 2010. “This is not just a city. It is the identity of Turkey and a unique source of inspiration for peace, brotherhood, tranquility and tolerance.”¹² In the final form, the European Cultural Capital Program comprised 549 projects, selected from a pool of more than 2.500 applications. The total budget of the projects approached 300 million Turkish liras, of which about 60 per cent were spent on urban transformation projects. It is not my intention here to describe the content and scope of these projects. Only projects developed by visual art departments are analyzed in order to widen to the perspective of the study.

The main target of the projects was to contribute to the international dignity of Istanbul and Turkey and to provide an opportunity for interaction among European cultures in the EU integration process. Şekib Avdagiç, the Chairman of the Executive Board of Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Cultural Agency, stated that “the event that world-wide acknowledged prominent contemporary artists in order to make production. This project is also important with regard to its fulfillment of principles which the Istanbul 2010 ECoC Agency maintained for supporting creative people, renewing their infrastructure for art and culture production and enhancing the international networks of contemporary art.”¹³

¹⁰ Oğuz Öner, “Istanbul 2010: European Capital of Culture: Towards a Participatory Culture?” in *Oriental Istanbul: Cultural Capital of Europe?* edited by Deniz Göktürk, Levent Sosyal, and İpek Türeli (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), pp.267-278.

¹¹ Ayşe Orhun Gültekin, *Istanbul 2010* (Istanbul: Istanbul 2010 European Capital of Culture, 2009), p.5.

¹² “Istanbul 2010 Capital of Culture Prepares to Sign Off”, *Turkish Daily News*, December 20, 2010, p.15.

¹³ *Avrupa Kültür Başkentleri Hakkında*. Accessed February 15, 2010. http://www.en.istanbul2010.org/HABER/GP_786292.

Starting from 2008, the visual department was under the directorate of Beral Madra, who determined the needs and activities in contemporary art. There were two basics that come to the fore in this respect: supporting young creative individuals and professional artists, and promoting large masses of people to embrace contemporary art. Projects were undertaken in five main frameworks: Kadırğa Art Center, Sanat Limanı, Lives & Works in Istanbul, Portable Art Project supported by VAD.

The Municipality of Fatih allocated a duplex center in the square of Kadırğa for the Istanbul 2010 Art Production Center as the main center of the projects. The center included a library, archive, technical room, exhibition halls, performance hall for 600 people, music and a conference hall. The predicted outputs of the projects advanced and supported by the Visual Arts Directorate by the end of the 2010 were an international art collection dedicated to Istanbul, an Art Production Center Model which had international visibility and democratic synergy to connect art project in Europe, interacting and connecting different art styles. Madra writes that “Art in Nişantaşı is definitely different than the art in Eyüp. The main theme in Istanbul 2010 should be to bring these two extremes into a platform of settlement and to find a common denominator for them.”¹⁴ For this reason, the visual culture activities took places in the different venues of the city.

In addition to Kadırğa Art Center, the second project realized by Istanbul 2010 ECOC was called Sanat Limanı, a new venue for exhibitions at Warehouse #5 in Tophane in attempt to fulfill the alternative location requirements of exhibitions to be realized in İstanbul. The place is designated as an art center model which has a permanent location in the public domain. Two stairs of 3,600 m² were renewed with technical and aesthetical aspects at Warehouse 5 in Tophane to comply with contemporary exhibition standards. In 2010, Sanat Limanı hosted the following exhibitions: “European Eyes on Japan/Japan Today Vol.12, Photography, Video, Poetry Exhibitions,” “Architectural Counterpoints in Greece: From the nineteenth Century Tradition to twentieth first Century Mutations,” “A Space between Contemporary Art from North and South Cyprus: The Little Black,” and “Contemporary Arts: Mutual Trusts”.

Another project was realized under the direction of the visual arts department “Lives and Work in Istanbul,” carried out since 2008, hosted artists from EU countries who had accomplished great projects in visual arts and contributed to universal arts. These artists were provided with opportunities for living, working and producing in Istanbul; and they were allowed to conduct workshops, thoughtout meetings and production together with creative individuals, academicians and local artists of the young generation. Within the scope of the project, Istanbul hosted prominent names of contemporary art, such as Remo Salvadori (Italy), Danae Stratou (Greece), Victor Burgin (United Kingdom), Peter Kogler (Austria) and Sophie Calle (France). The main aim of the project was to turn Istanbul into an international modern art connection. Another feature of this project was that six produced art works along with the production of 48 artists who joined the workshops within this project constituted the first public contemporary art collection in Turkey. The mentioned above-in six artists exhibited their works in other museums, art centers and galleries contributed to the promotion of global art environment of Turkey.

¹⁴ Beral Madra, *Home Affairs: On Contemporary Art and Culture in Turkey* (İstanbul: BM-Suma Contemporary Art Center, 2009), p.69.

One of the most successful projects of the visual arts department, called the Portable Art (October 2008-December 2010) project, aimed to ensure the distribution of contemporary art productions and events to remote districts of Istanbul, which were normally only presented to limited audiences in galleries and art centers concentrated in five neighborhoods. Portable exhibitions, curated by established and up-and coming curators were realized in the art and cultural centers used daily by common people. The project also aimed to enable independent curators, exhibition organizers, and artist's initiatives to exhibit their works in multi-disciplinary exhibitions, adopting an interactive, pluralistic approach open to participation and dialogue with different audiences. From October 2008, seven exhibition project and three performances displayed the productions of 155 artists and curator, reaching more than 350,000 people in Umraniye, Kartal, Tuzla, Küçükçekmece, Zeytinburnu. The projects were Portable Borders, Amber Seçkisi, Very Good, Now You Are Here! Contemporary Art for Children, Temporary Inconvenience, Amber '08:, Memorycity. The projects were supported by VAD-nonprofit art organization in Europe: Anatolian Enlightenment of the Art, Istanbul Otherwise, Flash Rue, The Saturday Events, Such is Youth, Traditional Turkish Book Arts, The Photography Parade, Cihangir Mitte, Istanbul in Children's Eyes, Art and Desire Seminars, Istanbul Time Travel Experiment, 1st International Artists Initiatives Istanbul Meeting, 1st Art Design Knowledge Symposium, The Cuma Ertesi (Saturday) Events, Contemporary Art Memory, Metrobüs to Üküdar: Connecting Perspectives in Contemporary Art, Visibility, Atlas Pasajı 3rd Floor Exhibitions: Possibilities, Intuitions, Fantasies on Istanbul, Breaking the Stereotype, Artists Meeting, The Table Project, and Divercity: Learning From Istanbul.¹⁵

In most of the European capitals of culture, the state and local municipalities worked together on projects, working groups, and the selection of the categories under the title of the European capital. In Turkey, the organization committee and its director were changed two times because of differences in political opinions. Due to the lack of public and were intellectual support, the Istanbul Cultural Capital of Europe project stayed limited in scale and in terms of public attention. Mahir Namur, the director of European Cultural Association, emphasized the dynamics of being a cultural capital as follows: "2010 is not a target, but it is a tool for the emerging of new possibilities in art and culture. The event is a public event; this project should be integrated into Turkish society. It can be as a tool to develop a strong network at all levels of Turkish society."¹⁶ Similar to Mahir Namur, Beral Madra, the director of the Istanbul 2010 Visual Arts Department, states the importance of developing independent organizations in the cultural sector.

Being a capital of culture is not an ordinary event for Istanbul. It is an attempt for the structural change, waiting at the doorsteps. It is the urgent need for globally recording Turkey's potential of critical thinking, visual/audial production and aesthetic creativity. It is to take effective part in the ideological, aesthetic and thinking production-areas of resistance and inspiration for the global culture industry. It is

¹⁵ Handan Durgut (ed.), *365 Gün, 549 Proje* (Istanbul: Istanbul 2010 Avrupa Kültür Başkenti Ajansı, 2010), p.30.

¹⁶ Mahir Namur, "Geçmiş Avrupa Kültür Başkentleri Deneyimleri,"in *Geçmişten Geleceğe Avrupa Kültür Başkentleri*, ed. Mahir Namur (Istanbul: MSGSU Publishing, 2007), p.57.

to enter the brisk culture/art market, enabling the introduction of the outcome of these productions to the outer world.¹⁷

Unfortunately, the organization of the European Capital of Culture was far away from making a strong connection between artists and the public to integrate art and culture in Turkish society as well as in Europe. At the state level, this event was seen only as an economic and political opportunity in regard to the integration of the EU. Istanbul 2010 was attractive for the opportunities opened up in terms of marketing the city's image as a modern, charismatic and cosmopolitan place. Hence the opportunity was being turned into a branding exercise to attract tourists and global capital investments into cultural industries. Museologist Neslihan Albayrak states that "carrying out numerous exhibitions and concerts doesn't necessarily mean that the year has been successful. The point is how these programs were chosen and they were shared with the people of the city. Unfortunately, those aspects have been quite weak."¹⁸

A committee of state officers, academics and representatives of non-governmental associations had been working on the idea of bringing the Capital of Culture to Istanbul for 10 years. However, instead of following the advisory committee's directives the agency decided to focus on mainly projects that involved protecting cultural heritage and the restoration of historical places. According to Korhan Gümüş, a member of the agency's executive board, "the restoration projects were preferred because the state's understanding of culture is rebuilding its pasts. There are also technical issues. The bureaucracy is used to handling the restoration process instead of developing new and creative projects. But they are so closed off to creativity while completing these projects; they treat them like engineering jobs."¹⁹ However, restoration need to be done carefully and this takes a long time, so these projects could not be finished in a year.

As a result of the Istanbul 2010, there were lessons learned and mistakes made. Civil and private cultural agencies could not participate in this process because of the state- dominated system. Due to the lack of an autonomous, decentralized organizational structure in Istanbul as well as in Turkey, Istanbul 2010 was not able to realize a model which was more influential or structured. Inspirational visual art projects lost its high potential to be effective in the global art scene.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, it is observed in the late 1980s that the Turkish state increasingly relied on public relations strategies in public relation activities. International exhibitions played a leading role in promoting tourism and advertising Turkish culture in the global scene. The modern face of Turkey had to be re-fashioned in international politics to eliminate negative stereotypes. In heritage exhibitions and Turkish Festivals, an emphasis on the ancient national heritage and asserting the glorious Islamic/Ottoman past continued to build on stereotypes and the symbolic construction of sense of Turkishness served self-orientalization in many ways.

¹⁷ Beral Madra, *Home Affairs: On Contemporary Art and Culture in Turkey* (Istanbul: BM-Suma Contemporary Art Center, 2009), p.54.

¹⁸ "Istanbul Cedes 2010 Culture Capital Title As Post-Mortem Begins," *Turkish Daily News*, 31 December 2010.

¹⁹ *Puts A Quick Make up on Istanbul*. Accessed May 25, 2010.
<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=2010-puts-a-quick-make-up-on-istanbul-2010-12-30>

However, this stereotypical mode of representation was no longer the dominant trend in Turkish cultural policy. The global political atmosphere caused changes in the direction of the exhibition strategies which gradually began to display the diverse cultural characteristics, regional plurality, and ethnic diversity in Turkish society in the past decade. During the last two decades, the state and private sectors in Turkey have acted as the two main actors in the rising sponsorship in the field of art and culture. Organizing festivals, promoting Turkish culture abroad and refining the cultural taste of the public have been the major developments taking place in to Turkish cultural scene in the early 2000s. With the increase in the number of cultural centers and foundations in Europe, Turkish artists have had the chance to act independently in international art pushing the boundaries of European and Middle Eastern art networks beyond past limits.

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