

Chapter 9: Ritual and Power in Daily Urban Life

The Divan axis was a narrative not only of architectural and typological variations. For the townspeople it was also a journey through mythical and symbolical facts, familiar and yet forcefully pregnant: they might stop for a short prayer by the tombs, remember processions terrifying or joyful, admire the domes of the powerful, enjoy the sebils and fountains and evoke their real or imaginary donators. The vision of cemeteries architecturally enhanced and yet within the same scale and frame of everyday life, was obsessive: both an et in Arcadia ego reminder and proud invocation of communal roots in that soil.

Though the Divan axis was rich in ideological and ritual meanings for Ottoman society, they were not expressed by its general form, or at least, not in the way in which the myths and rituals of foundation of many other societies had determined homogeneous forms and plans.

Rykwert lucidly explores the ideas and dreams, and the beliefs hidden in the forms and functions of historical cities through their basic geometrical layouts, the recurrent symbolism of centre—fringe—gate, and insists on universal mental forms.¹⁷⁵ Such an interpretation would apply fairly well to each outstanding Ottoman monumental ensemble, but hardly to the Ottoman town parts. Not directly and not without much mediation.

As in many other Islamic towns, Ottoman Istanbul can be seen as a sum of heterogeneous foundations: *mahalle*, *tekke*, *külliye* etc. In the century of Fatih and Beyazit this was literally true: the foremost pashas had actually founded the *mahalle* and religious complexes that had ottomanised the city. Later the foundation concept was often enacted as re-foundation through restoration, and, sometimes, through mere renaming. The myth and ideology of foundation was all-pervading in the subtle rhetoric of donator epigraphy, but it rarely

¹⁷⁵ Joseph Rykwert, *The Idea of a Town*, Princeton: 1976. I am using the Italian translation: *L'idea di città: Antropologia della forma urbana nel mondo antico*, Torino 1981.

lead to geometrical forms in over-all urban parts.¹⁷⁶ In its hero-foundation-tomb accession¹⁷⁷, the psychological impact of the foundation concept on the aesthetics of urban space is magnificently exposed in the peculiar image of cemeteries (*hazire*) and in the characteristic dialogue of transparent precinct walls and monuments.¹⁷⁸ Piety certainly played a dominant role in the interiorization by the town's population of the sight of centrally placed *hazire* and of the practice of saying a short prayer for the dead whose tombs were visible from the street. The collective presence of the dead, or better, the sum of many individual sepulchres in the Ottoman scene has perhaps more impact than that of monuments to

¹⁷⁶ The patron, pasha or man of religion, often appears, or wishes to appear, as the founder of a *maballe* or an ensemble, even if he has only restored it.

¹⁷⁷ Rykwert *Idea of a Town*, 19-20.

¹⁷⁸ After 1860-70 inhumation was always in peripheral cemeteries (Eyüp and Üsküdar being the main areas). The tendency had been at work also in earlier decades. Only important personalities could be buried in central areas. The reuse of tombs in central *hazire* was current practice for the privileged. Of course, the symbolical and formal role of transparent precinct walls has also to be re-examined in view of tombstone positioning. The impressive turnover of tombstones suggests that such positions were coveted for their prestige, as much as, and perhaps more than pious reasons (the donator's wish to attract prayers after his death). Nicolas Vatin ("Sur le rôle de la Stèle Funéraire et l'Aménagement des Cimetières Musulmans à Istanbul" in *Mélanges Prof. R. Mantran*, Zaghuan: Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Ottomans, Morisques, de Documentation et Information 1988) reports that in Eyüp some tombs might have two epitaphs, one on the effective burial place and, another one, on a tombstone placed near the *hazire* opening to the street. No evidence was found in that sense on the Divanyolu. Hans-Peter Laqueur, *Osmanische Friedhöfe und Grabsteine in Istanbul*, Tübingen, 1993, does not mention double-positioning of epitaphs. For cemeterial practice and norms, see: Nicolas Vatin, Stéphane Yerasimos, "L'implantation des cimetières ottomans intra muros à Istanbul" in *Cimetières et traditions funéraires*, II 37-56.

single individual heroes.¹⁷⁹ Rykwert's statement (*à propos* heroic foundations) that only a hero can found a city, and that an existing tomb can instil great attraction on the assembly of a new community, fits perfectly the Ottoman case if we are not thinking of the act of foundation as an overall creation of a new city.¹⁸⁰ The city, then, as we see it in the Divan axis, is the summation of eponymous foundations and of burial places. The form of the city is the sum of the single forms of these units, which sometimes possess recognizable form and boundaries, but always widely recognized meaning. It is not an autonomous form.

The elaborate protocol of the Pashas, their large retinues, the complicated ceremonial of mutual greetings, and the *alkış* of their own followers (see Chapters 2, 4 and 5), were not meant only to impress their peers, but were also an exhibition of power aimed at the town, calling up its humours and complicities. But Ottoman power found its own significant representation in signals which were fragmented and certainly not embedded in an overall town imagery. Indeed, those signals could be single monuments and buildings. More often, they were not directly architectural. They could be assumed through a technique of appropriation of natural landscape (siting), through the presence of costumes, of symbolic tools such as *tuğra*, symbolising military command, *nabil* symbolising abundance and generosity. A procession's symbolic significance could derive from its having incorporated these last elements, or because it touched certain places in town, rather than because it was enacted against a hieratic background of architectural scenery. After all, that of formal urban monumentality and its elements (triumphal arches, majestic colonnades, heroic perspectives) as symbol of—and commentary on—power, is a concept limited to specific epochs such as that of the post-republican Roman world, of the Mannerist and Baroque Western cities, and of few other periods, but not of Ottoman mentality. In the Surname-i Vehbi (see Chapter 2), the procession itself is perceived as being monumental, not its theatre.

¹⁷⁹ Even today the observer is impressed that visitors to Eyüp on Islamic festivities pray not only at Eyyub-i Ensari's tomb (he is the archetypical hero-founder for the city however apocryphal his sepulchre) but at all important tombs of pashas early or recent!

¹⁸⁰ Rykwert *Idea of a Town*, 19-20.

This is one of the keys for understanding the Ottoman use and perception of urban space.¹⁸¹

The over-all architecture of urban space was not decanted, as in the Renaissance Via Papale of Rome, into a harmonious scene, an abstraction of (and from) the chaotic and rich magma of urban facts, a concretion of architectural harmony previously perceivable only as a potentiality.¹⁸² This transition from immanent architectural form, and symbolical allegiance-adversity of people and town to power and court, into a codified and formally perceivable décor, was enacted only in some parts of the Divanyolu, and only in certain periods. Istanbul missed a development similar to that of Rome, both because of the nature of Ottoman urban aesthetics, and of the sultans' changing attitudes to the town and their changing preferences for various sites. Doubtless, the almost two-century-long occupation of the axis by the prominent pashas would have played against any imperial design. The struggle between Western and Ottoman visions of town design, so manifest during the last century of Ottoman rule, further aggravated the lack of magnificence in the overall architectural decorum.

Western observers shocked by the contrast of the daily disorder of the Istanbul streets with the magnificence of its processions and monuments, were extrapolating a rule from two historical periods—

¹⁸¹ Events and their architectural theatre acquired connotations similar to that of the European West only very late, certainly not before the last four decades of the 19th century, and only for some parts of the Divan axis and even there, with differences of nuance or even discrepancies due to the typological character of the existing buildings. Adequacy to the principles of parade-promenade-perspective and symmetry-seriality-façade continuum, much more decisive for Western-oriented symbolic and aesthetic modernization, than specific stylistic character which European Eclecticism could always absorb within its grammar, penetrated the eastern terminal (practically the Hippodrome), very timidly and with unresolved conflicts, in the Ayasofya-Çemberlitaş tract.

¹⁸² See Chapter 4. In Rome "*what had been received as a ritual form of political dialogue by the 15th century papacy was restructured in the 16th as unmitigated triumph*", because in that century, the Via Papale had been transformed into an architecturally monumental sequence expressive of the Pope's power (Ingersoll *The Ritual use*, 177-79).

late Antiquity, and Western Renaissance and Baroque—of their own background: the sublimation of urban chaos through urban architectural decorum. Not a universal truth. Their perception of Ottoman culture, which like the majority of urban cultures had not partaken of that climax, was consequently conditioned.

(MC)