

Northern Istanbul Urban Infrastructure Projects: A Critical Account on the Environmental, Spatial, Social and Economical Impacts

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Abstract : As an urban settlement dating as early as 8000 years and the capital for Byzantine and Ottoman empires; İstanbul has been a significant global city throughout history. The most drastic changes in the macro form of Istanbul have taken place in the last seven decades; starting from 1950's with rapid industrialization and population growth; picking up after the 1980's with the efforts of integration to the global capitalist system; reaching to a climax in the 2000's with the adaptation of a neoliberal urban regime. Today, the rate of urbanization together with land speculation and real estate investment has been growing enormously. Every inch of urban land is conceptualized as a commodity to be capitalized. This neoliberal mindset has many controversial implementations, from the privatization of public land to the urban transformation of historic neighbourhoods and consumption of natural resources. The planning decisions concerning the city have been mainly top down initiations; conceptualising historical, cultural and natural heritage as commodities to be capitalised and consumed in favour of creating rent value. One of the most crucial implementations of this neoliberal urban regime is the project of establishing a 'new city' around northern Istanbul; together with a number of large-scale infrastructural projects such as the Third Bosphorus Bridge; a new highway system, a Third Airport Project and a secondary Bosphorus project called the 'Canal Istanbul'. Urbanizing northern Istanbul is highly controversial as this area consists of major natural resources of the city; being the northern forests, water supplies and wildlife; which are bound to be destroyed to a great extent following the implementations. The construction of the third bridge and the third airport has begun in 2013, despite environmental objections and protests. Over five hundred thousand trees are planned to be cut for solely the construction of the bridge and the Northern Marmara Motorway. Yet the real damage will be the urbanization of the forest area; irreversibly corrupting the natural resources and attracting millions of additional population towards Istanbul. Furthermore, these projects lack an integrated planning scope as the plans prepared for Istanbul are constantly subjected to alterations forced by the central government. Urban interventions mentioned above are executed despite the rulings of Istanbul Environmental plan, due to top down planning decisions. Instead of an integrated action plan that prepares for the future of the city, Istanbul is governed by partial plans and projects that are issued by a profit based agenda; supported by legal alterations and laws issued by the central government. This paper aims to discuss the ongoing implementations with regards to northern Istanbul; claiming that they are not merely infrastructural interventions but parts of a greater neoliberal urbanization strategy. In the course of the study, firstly a brief account on the northern forests of Istanbul will be presented. Then, the projects will be discussed in detail, addressing how the current planning schemes deal with the natural heritage of the city. Lastly, concluding remarks on how the implementations could affect the future of Istanbul will be presented.

Keywords : Istanbul, urban design, urban planning, natural resources

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