

Shaping a Modern City out of an Ancient Capital: Henri Prost's plan for the historical peninsula of Istanbul

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Henri Prost was one of the leading figures of the first generation of French urbanists who contributed to the creation of the new discipline and its institutionalization. He is particularly known with the planning works that he undertook in the early 20th century. Prost's career of urbanist began with his winning entry for Anvers (Antwerp); then he participated in the elaboration of the first extension plan of Paris together with Eugène Hénard (Cohen, 1996). In 1913, he was invited by Marechal Lyautey, the military governor of the French Protectorate, to found the *Service des Plans* (planning office) in Morocco, where he realized a comprehensive planning work for several cities, such as Fez, Marrakesh, Meknes, Rabat and Casablanca. The latter was particularly renowned as a success of 20th-century urbanism at that time (Toucheff, 1994; Cohen and Eleb, 1998). Prost's planning of the Moroccan towns is characterized by his protectionist attitude *vis-à-vis* the old *casbahs* in contrast to the modern European neighborhoods that he planned. This planning approach, associated with French colonialism, has recently been the object of post-colonial criticism, for being a policy of isolating the indigenous population from the European newcomers (Wright, 1991).

In his return to France, Prost worked on the regional planning of Côte Varoise in 1923-1924, in which he paid particular attention to the preservation of the "picturesque" values of the landscape (Cohen, 1996). Finally, starting from 1932, he directed the regional planning studies of the metropolitan area of Paris, the *Plan d'Aménagement de la Région Parisienne* will be approved in 1939 (Gaudin, 1991, p. 169).

Henri Prost was contacted by the Turkish government first in 1924 for the reconstruction of Izmir, destroyed by the fire in 1922 (Bilsel, 1996). Although he delegated this task to his colleague René Danger, he worked actively as consultant in the preparation of a comprehensive plan for the city of Izmir. In 1932, Prost was invited to the planning competition for the city of Istanbul. French urbanists Agache and Lambert and the German planner Elgötz participate in the competition with their entries. Elgötz's proposal was selected at the end, as it was found more realistic by the jury (Tekeli, 1992). However, this plan would not be implemented, and Henri Prost was invited in 1936, this time directly to conduct the planning of the city. From 1936 to 1951, he worked on the urbanization of Istanbul at the head of the Planning Office of the City. Fifteen years of planning activity of Prost in Istanbul covers a wide range of studies, including the Master Plan for the European side of the city (1937), Master Plan of the Asian side (1939), the planning of the two coasts of the Bosphorus (1936-1948) and numerous detailed urban projects for plazas, squares, construction of new avenues, parks and promenades.

Among all these works, this presentation will focus on Prost's planning proposals for the historical peninsula of Istanbul, particularly on his Master Plan of the European Side, which dates from 1937.

A student of *Prix de Rome* in Istanbul

Henri Prost's acquaintance with the city of Istanbul dates, in fact, back to 1904, the year when he first came to the capital of the Ottoman Empire, as a young architect of *Prix de Rome*, to study the archeological remains of the Ancient Constantinopolis. He stayed in Istanbul in 1904-1905 and 1906-1907 (l'Académie d'Architecture, 1960) and returned to Paris with magnificent drawings of Hagia Sophia and restitutions of the Imperial Palace of Constantine.

When he comes back to Istanbul three decades later, this time as the chief planner of the city, his earlier studies on the city's archaeology would be influential on his planning proposal for the restructuring of the old city. The memory of the Ancient East Roman capital buried under the contemporary city would constitute the reference for Prost in shaping the modern Istanbul of the young Turkish Republic.

The archaeological studies of the first generation of architect-urbanists, graduated from the *École des Beaux-Arts*, and particularly their interest in “urban archaeology” is well known. Tony Garnier, Léon Jausseley, Ernest Hébrard and Henri Prost were at the Villa Medici at the same time, and each studied an ancient city within the framework of the *Prix de Rome* program. Their fervent debates on the cities and their development at the Villa Medici paved the way to their formation as urbanist. (Wright and Rabinow, 1992) Archaeological discoveries of planned settlements of Antiquity were influential in the emergence of urbanism as a discipline of town building. The architectural historian Bruno Fortier (1994, pp. 49-72) goes even further by arguing that the discovery of planned ancient cities was a source of inspiration for modern urbanism; as these came to prove that cities can be totally planned and created from the scratch.

The particular interest of the *Beaux-Arts* School in the Ancient Roman vestiges influenced also the aesthetical understanding of *Beaux-Arts* urbanism, as in grand circulation axes and triumphal arches that crown the crossing of these. Léon Jausseley's visionary project on a "Capital City for a Democratic Republic" is worth mentioning in this context, as it conflates classical urban aesthetics with the ideal of a democratic republic.

In Istanbul, Henri Prost found the opportunity to plan the future of a city that stands on the vestiges of the ancient capital of the East Roman Empire. How he combined this opportunity with the objective of the modernization of the old Ottoman capital and how the Republican authorities in Turkey responded to that will be discussed later in this paper.

The socio-political context in Turkey and Istanbul in the 1930s

In the mid 1930s, when Prost was given the commission of planning Istanbul, the political context in Turkey had radically changed. Istanbul, which had been the capital of the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires, for more than a thousand years since Constantine, was deprived of its title. The Ottoman Empire had definitively ceased to exist with the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923. The founders of the Republic, who were determined to break with the Ottoman past, had decided to transfer the political capital to Ankara, where the National Assembly was gathered and the War of Independence was directed from. This revolutionary political decision had mainly three reasons: Ankara symbolized national unity, while Istanbul was closely associated

with its imperial past; Ankara, which is located almost at the geometric center of the national territories, had a more strategic location for the modernization of the country, whereas Istanbul, which was the most westernized city, had not been very influential in the modernization of the rest of the country; and finally, the young Republic was determined to break away from western colonialist networks which were settled in Istanbul. (I. Tekeli, 1998, pp. 4-11)

The relocation of the political capital to Ankara had immediate impacts on Istanbul. The population of the city decreased considerably - from around one-million inhabitants before WWI to 700.000 inhabitants in 1927 (Toprak, 1994, p. 110). The limited funds of the Republic were canalized to the construction of the new capital city, and the old capital was neglected at least in the early years of the Republic. The long period of wars, which had started with the Balkan Wars, followed by the First World War and the occupation of the city by the Allied Forces, had destructive effects on Istanbul, economically, socially and physically. Fires, which had always been frequent in Istanbul, devastated numerous neighborhoods that remained as hollow grounds within the historic city.

Yet, at the same time, the early years of the Republic were characterized by an atmosphere of enthusiasm and an overall mobilization for modernization, animated by the comprehensive reform program of the Republic. However, this movement had destructive effects on the historical city of Istanbul. Secularism was one of the keystones of the Republican modernization movement, that envisaged not only the secularization of the state affairs, but of the whole societal sphere. Along with the secularization of the national education, the religious schools (*medreses*), centers of religious orders (*tekkes* and *zaviyes*) were closed down by law in 1925, and the properties of religious foundations (the *vakif -wakfs*) were taken under state control. The edifices belonging to these establishments, numerous in the historical city of Istanbul, were deserted and in time fell into decay.

People's aspiration for modern life styles resulted in a progressive desertion of the historical peninsula. Although individual building activities were observed in the old neighborhoods of the city, higher income groups were leaving the historical peninsula for the newly developing settlement areas on the north of the European side, or on the Asian coast of Marmara, as Henri Prost would state in his reports. This process gained momentum in parallel with the development of means of public transportation (tramway and maritime transportation). In the speech he made at the *Institut de France* in 1947, Prost (1947, pp. 15-16) relates this continuing mobility from the old city towards new settlement areas with the people's adoption of modern life-styles and the emancipation of women in particular. The emigration of higher income groups resulted in the continuous extension of the city towards its peripheries, in spite of the fact that the city's population was still decreasing in the 1930s.

While the urban area was being extended, the central business districts continued to develop within the historical peninsula as well as Galata -the old European quarter on the north of Golden Horn; the Grand Bazaar and its environs still served as the commercial center *par excellence* for the entire city. (H. Prost, 1947, pp. 16-17). This resulted in an increase of everyday mobility, causing considerable problems in urban transportations.

Briefly, when Prost came to the head of the planning office, Istanbul was a city with a recessing economy and population; but paradoxically, it was geographically extending, which, in turn, caused difficulties in the urban circulation system. The historical city of

Istanbul confined within the Byzantine walls had been largely devastated by fires and partly abandoned by its inhabitants. The majority of the Ottoman public buildings - religious centers and school buildings, public baths and fountains e.g.- were falling into ruin.

Planning Istanbul: Setting the infrastructure for a modern city

Within the revolutionary socio-political context of the 1930s in Turkey, the principal objective of planning the cities in general and in Istanbul in particular, was "modernization". This was what the local authority expected to achieve by elaborating and implementing a comprehensive plan. Urbanism was perceived by the Republican authorities as an effective instrument to reorganize cities in accordance with "scientific" criteria, to build the infrastructure that would sustain the economic development, and finally to provide the equipment that a modern society required. What was meant by the modernization of the cities was also the arrangement of settlement areas conducive to modern life-styles and hygiene, and the creation of open public spaces that would contribute to the flourishing of a civic public realm. (1) Henri Prost defined also the principal goal of the planning of Istanbul as the "modernization" of the city. According to him, this was inevitable for a city in the process of a "complete social change". (H. Prost, 1947, p. 18)

Prost completed his Master Plan (*plan directeur*) for the European side of Istanbul in 1937. The master plan consisted mainly of a transportation plan, supported by detailed urban design proposals for strategic nodes of the plan.

In his preliminary reports, Prost developed alternatives for both railway and motorway connections between Europe and Asia across the Bosphorus. (Prost, 1936-1938) However, he did not include these in the master plan. He proposed, instead, to reinforce the maritime transportation between the two sides. He introduced a new port between Yedikule and Bakirköy on the European coast of the Marmara Sea in relation with the industrial zone that he proposed to organize on the west of the city. The international train station, situated at Yenikapi on the Marmara coast of the historic city, constituted one of the central nodes of the road network that he proposed. A port for ferryboats for the crossing of trains over the Bosphorus between Yenikapi and Haydarpasa station on the Asian coast was situated in direct relation with the central station. (Prost, 1937)

The urban circulation network that Prost studied in detail was organized around a spine that crossed the city from north to south connecting the newly developing settlement areas on the north, to the old city. (Prost, 1937 and 1947) This road, which started at Taksim Square –the Square of the Republic- on the north, went through the old quarters on the west of Pera, crossed the Golden Horn by Atatürk Bridge and continued directly following the valley between the two of the seven hills of the historic peninsula. It passed through the Byzantine aqueduct of Valence and crossed the old city from north to south to end up at the proposed central station at Yenikapi. It divided the historic city into two zones, the central business district, commercial activity centers -the Grand Bazaar and the proposed site of the newly founded University of Istanbul on the east, and the settlement areas on the west. (Prost, 1947, pp. 21-25) A second connection, in the north-south direction, started again from Taksim Square, crossed Pera and Galata through tunnels and viaducts to reach Karaköy before passing the Golden Horn by Galata Bridge. (Prost, 1937, pp. 12-13, and 1947, p. 21) On the historic peninsula, it continued through the central business district of Eminönü to reach Beyazıt Square where the University of Istanbul was to be located.

Besides these two north-south arteries that would connect the northern districts to the central activity areas located in the old city, Prost proposed a new circulation network to be created within the historic city. Making partly use of the existing street network, the new circulation system necessitated the opening of several new avenues and streets within the historic urban fabric. These are listed as "operations to be realized in priority" in the program of Prost's master plan (H. Prost, 1937, pp. 19-23).

The planning of the historic city: modernization and conservation

In his conference at the *Institut de France* in 1947, Henri Prost clarifies his approach to the planning of Istanbul particularly *vis-à-vis* the planning of the historic city:

"The modernization of Istanbul can be compared to a chirurgical operation of the most delicate nature. It is not about creating a New City on a virgin land, but directing an Ancient Capital, in the process of complete social change, towards a Future, through which the mechanism and probably the redistribution of wealth will transform the conditions of existence.

This City lives with an incredible activity. To realize the main axes of circulation without harming the commercial and industrial development, without stopping the construction of new settlements is an imperious economic and social necessity; however to conserve and PROTECT the INCOMPARABLE LANDSCAPE, dominated by glorious EDIFICES, is another necessity as imperious as the former". (2) (Prost, 1947, p. 18)

As he expressed in these words, the protection of both the "incomparable" landscape and the townscape of Istanbul was of primary importance for Prost, as important as the modernization and economic development of the city. However, he adopted a highly interventionist attitude towards the historic urban fabric. The reorganization of the road network that he proposed for the historic peninsula reminds, in fact, Haussman's operations in 19th-century Paris. The grand avenues that crossed the historic city and multiple secondary roads transformed the introvert neighborhoods of the old Ottoman city into an open structure.

One can argue, however, as fires had already destroyed large areas in the city, such operations were inevitable. In addition, the regularization of the neighborhoods destroyed by fire had become a tradition in Istanbul since mid 19th century, that is the beginning of the Ottoman reform movement. (Yerasimos, 1993) Yet, the operations foreseen by Prost were not limited to the areas destroyed by fire, but brought forth an overall reorganization of the whole city. Prost's plan was realizing, in a way, an age-old project of modernization in Istanbul (Celik, 1993, Yerasimos, 1992) that had already been put into implementation through piecemeal operations in the late Ottoman period. However, his observations on the societal change in 1930s Istanbul, and particularly the determination of the Republican authorities who undertook a comprehensive socio-cultural revolution must have been influential in Prost's interventionist planning approach. This hypothesis is also supported by the words of Le Corbusier in a 1948 interview:

"One of the biggest mistakes I made in my life was the letter I wrote to Atatürk. If I had not written this letter, I would have been working on the plan of Istanbul in place of my rival Prost. In this letter I advised the greatest reformer of a nation to conserve the city

of Istanbul with its centuries old dust. I realized the error I had committed afterwords". (Le Corbusier quoted by S. Demiren, 1948, p. 231) (3)

When compared to the protectionist attitude that Prost had adopted *vis-à-vis* the Moroccan historical towns, his interventionist approach in the historical city of Istanbul raises questions about his position as an urbanist and his relation with the socio-political context within which he works. In the scope of this paper, I would content by stating that the socio-political circumstances in the 1930s Turkey differed from those of Morocco under the French protectorate. I would argue that the French colonial government policy to keep the traditional structure of the indigenous society as it was, coincided with the urbanist's sensibility about the conservation of the urban fabric of historical towns. On the other hand, the revolutionary political context, but also the dynamics of social change in 1930s-Turkey, forced the urbanist to intervene radically on the urban historical fabric of Istanbul.

Conservation of the townscape and the monuments

While adopting an interventionist attitude towards the urban fabric, Prost paid particular attention to the historical monuments of Istanbul. He listed numerous monuments that date from both Byzantine and Ottoman periods, and gave particular effort for their conservation. He collaborated with the Turkish Association of the Friends of Istanbul (4) as well as French, German and American institutes of archaeology. His call to the *Institut de France* for financial support for the conservation of archaeological vestiges of the city is worth mentioning in this context. (H. Prost, 1947, pp. 27-30)

He put much emphasis on preserving a great number of Ottoman structures, which were out of use by giving them new functions. He integrated these to pedestrian promenades, as "picturesque" monuments to be contemplated together with the monumental trees that complete the composition. (Prost, 1947, pp. 16-17) In Prost's plan of 1937, significant monuments of the city, such as the grand mosques, constituted landmarks, on which perspective axes opened in conformity with the *Beaux-Arts* tradition. Urban aesthetics was pivotal for Prost's planning, which reflects both a picturesque and classical understanding of urban design. While completely remodeling its urban fabric, Prost conceived the historical peninsula as a "glorious landscape" ("*l'incomparable paysage dominé par des edifices glorieux*") to be preserved in its totality. It was the total effect of the townscape that was important for Prost. The historical silhouette of the peninsula will effectively be preserved by the building regulations and particularly height restrictions that were imposed by the urbanist.

Prost had certainly a significant contribution to the development of conservation policies in Turkey. The detailed plans that he elaborated for the funerary quarter of Eyüp on the Golden Horn as well as the settlements and groves of Bosphorus prove his sensitivity about the historical monuments and the preservation of the landscape as a whole.

“Urban archaeology” as a system of reference in Prost's plan

Prost's interest in the Roman-Byzantine history of the city is obvious in his plan proposal and his reports. He attributed particular importance to archaeology as a means of revealing the memory of the past ages of the city. He combined the “urban archaeology”, which is a modern idea, with the modernization of urban spaces.

Prost's particular interest in the Byzantine vestiges of the city can be traced back to the studies he realized in Istanbul, thirty years ago, as a young architect of *Prix de Rome*. In his master plan of 1937, he proposed to create a park of archaeology on the eastern tip of the historic peninsula, a project that he pursued until he left in 1951. The Park of Archaeology extends from the Sultan Ahmet Mosque (the Blue Mosque) on the south, to Hagia Sophia on the north and the Byzantine maritime fortifications on the east by covering a large area. It includes the Acropolis of the Ancient Byzantium, the Hippodrome and the Imperial Palace of Constantine and his successors. This park, where archaeological excavations were to be held, would be an open-air museum open to public. (Prost, 1937, p. 4 and 1947, pp. 28-29) The area, which was divided into private properties, was covered by constructions that had to be expropriated for demolition, which was bringing an enormous burden to the city's administration.

Prost (1947, p. 29) reports that his proposal for the Archaeological Parc was approved by Atatürk, who had ordered the transformation of Hagia Sophia into a museum. That decision about the edifice, which had been the Grand Mosque of Istanbul since the city had been conquered by Mehmet II in 1453, was certainly a symbolic act. This could be interpreted as an expression of the determination of the Republic to break away from the Ottoman past and its symbols. Atatürk declared that this edifice did not belong to a religion or another, but to the entire humanity, as Prost stresses in his speech at the *Institut de France*. (Prost, 1947, p. 29). By the same token, the idea was that the history of Istanbul belonged to the whole humanity, rather than to a nation or another. We also know that archaeological excavations were started in several places in Anatolia in the early years of the Republic. The Temple of Augustus in Ankara was cleared of the constructions that surround it and restored with the initiative of Atatürk in the 1930's, on the occasion of the celebrations of the 2000th anniversary of Augustus (S. Güven, 2001). By supporting archaeological studies, the aim was to link the Republic of Turkey to the universal history of humanity. Hence, Prost's proposal for creating an archaeological park at the historical center of Istanbul was well received by the Republican authorities and by Atatürk in particular.

In Prost's plan, The Park of Archaeology was not, however, the only reference to the Byzantine history of the city. In his master plan of 1937, he proposed to rearrange the square in front of the Sultan Ahmet Mosque, which had been the hippodrome of the Byzantine Constantinopolis, into a plaza crowned with a grandiose monument dedicated to the Republic. Hence, three eras of Istanbul -the Byzantine, Ottoman and Republican periods- could be symbolized at one place (Prost, 1937, p. 5). He proposed to remove the buildings, which are located on the southern edge of the hippodrome (dating from the late Ottoman period) in order to open the perspective from the plaza onto the Marmara Sea, and to make this grandiose monument, located on top of the colossal retaining walls of the Byzantine hippodrome, visible far from the sea.

Prost's proposal for Beyazit Square was also founded on the same idea of simultaneous presence of the three epochs of the city (Prost, 1937, p. 5). This square where the Beyazit Mosque -erected in the late 15th century- stands, and the gate of the proposed University (the former Old Palace and later the Ministry of War) opens to, is located next to the Ancient Forum Tauri of the Byzantine city. Prost suggested enlarging the Beyazit Square in the direction of the ancient forum, and to reconstruct the triumphal arch that used to stand there, and certainly the remains of which could be found, if excavations were made. Prost's proposals for the two main squares of the city, the description of which we found in his report of the master plan, were not implemented. It

is interesting to note that the urbanist did not insist on these later, for some reason that we do not know.

In Prost's plan, the main arteries that cross the historical city from east to west follow the hypothetical trajectory of the Byzantine axes. These radiated and branched off from the *Mese* -the first principal axis of the ancient city- towards the gates on the terrestrial walls on the west, following the crests of the seven hills of the city. In the 1950s, during the construction of these avenues, the Roman porticoes along these axes came to light.

It is also important to note that one of the consistent efforts of Prost in Istanbul was the preservation of the Byzantine fortifications that surround the historical city. Besides labeling them as monuments, he defined, in his plan, a zone of *non-aedificanti* covering an area of 500 m. outside and 50 m. inside the terrestrial walls, in order to conserve the walls in their integrity, and also to emphasize their monumental total effect.

We can argue that in his plan for Istanbul Prost reshaped the historic city. With the new arteries he proposed to open through the urban fabric, he clearly referred to the remote history of Constantinopolis. He aimed at revealing the memory of the ancient city buried under the Ottoman Istanbul, while modernizing the urban infrastructure. He put emphasis on the preservation of the monuments of the city from both the Byzantine and Ottoman periods. Hence, he attempted at reconstructing the collective memory of the city through the co-existence of these monuments in the cityscape. However, while he paid particular attention to the individual monuments and historical structures, he opted for a highly interventionist attitude towards the Ottoman urban fabric in the name of "modernization."

The master plan of Henri Prost for the old city of Istanbul, aimed at creating a modern city out of a historic capital. Interestingly enough, the hypothetical restitutions of the ancient city constituted the reference lines in envisaging a modern infrastructure and an urban setting for the future city.

Notes

- (1) This point is particularly developed by Ipek Akpınar (2003) in her article, where she studies Prost's notion of "*espace libre*" in relation with the secularization of the social realm as conceived by the Republican reformists in 1930s in Turkey.
- (2) Author's translation from French.
- (3) Author's translation from Turkish.
- (4) This association, which was founded by Ottoman intellectuals in 1911, was active until 1940s.

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