

Rethinking the Palimpsest City: The Case of Topkapı Kaleiçi Square - From Competition Vision to Implementation



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ABSTRACT

Historically, Topkapı represented the final expansion of the walled city towards the west. The transition from the Roman forum hierarchy along the Mese Way to the organic Ottoman neighborhood fabric created a rich urban morphology. However, post-WWII planning interventions, influenced by the Prost Plan and subsequent motor-centric infrastructures, caused a traumatic dissolution of this fabric. The removal of historical bus terminals left the area as an inarticulate, high-scale void, isolating the "Sur Kapısı" (City Gate) from its role as an urban focal point.

The concept of the city as a "palimpsest" an urban surface where new layers are written over partially erased traces of the past, serves as the foundational theoretical framework for the urban design of Topkapı Kaleiçi Square. İstanbul, with its complex spatial composition spanning Antiquity, Rome, Byzantium, the Ottoman Empire, and the Republican era, epitomizes this de-facto parchment city. This paper evaluates the "Topkapı Kaleiçi Square Urban Design Project," the first-prize winner of a national competition, by tracing its trajectory from a conceptual competition entry to its realized implementation, highlighting the continuity of its core strategies and the adaptations necessitated by the urban context.

The methodology of the project relies on cartographic superposition, utilizing the 1875 Ekrem Ayverdi map to reveal the erased traces of the historical street fabric. The design proposes that the "new" square should emerge directly from these kazınmış (scraped) historical footprints. While the competition phase emphasized the restoration of historical street traces and the re-centering of the gate as a primary constitutive element, the implementation phase strategically integrated these with the "Kara Surları Millet Bahçesi" project, ensuring a holistic green-infrastructure connection.

Four core strategies define the intervention: Permeability, Continuity, Multi-functionality, and Identity.

- **Permeability is achieved by re-opening historical portals like the Romanus Gate and prioritizing pedestrian-micro-mobility networks over vehicular traffic.**
- **Continuity focuses on the blue-green system, integrating the historic Lykos (Bayrampaşa) Stream traces with urban parks and "Hafıza Rotaları" (Memory Routes), such as the Mimar Sinan Route.**
- **Identity is revitalized through the adaptive reuse of historic structures (e.g., transforming the Surp Nigoğayos Armenian Church into a Culture House) and the insertion of a lightweight steel "Observation Tower" on the traces of a lost bastion to offer new perspectives on the city's skyline.**

Furthermore, the project addresses urban crises through socio-ecological resilience. The preservation and expansion of "Historic Bostans" (urban gardens) and the implementation of sustainable rainwater management systems (bio-filtration terraces) demonstrate how historical urban practices can solve contemporary ecological challenges. In conclusion, the Topkapı Kaleiçi project serves as a model for how competition visions can be translated into practice by maintaining a balance between historical memory and functional urban resilience.

KEY WORDS:

Palimpsest City, Urban Memory, Topkapı Kaleiçi, Cartographic Superposition, Istanbul Land Walls