

ISLAM, MODERNITY, AND THE POLITICS OF PUBLIC REALM IN TURKEY

THE KOCATEPE COMPLEX OF ANKARA

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Based on the premise that architectural practice is not independent of politics and affected by power struggles in society, this essay tries to expose the subtle relations between “spatial representation” and “political landscape.” With this aim it focuses on a particular site, the Kocatepe Complex in Ankara, which operates as an object of political/spatial representation in contemporary Turkey.

Located at the heart of Ankara, the Kocatepe Complex is the biggest religious ensemble of the city, comprising — among other facilities — a mosque, a library, a conference hall, exhibition areas, a parking ramp, and the offices of the Theological Foundation.¹ Construction of the complex, an outcome of the liberal socio-political climate of the 1950s, was completed in the 1980s after a long and tumultuous period of construction. In the beginning, with its monumental scale and historicist symbolism the complex emerged as a controversial place, as an arena for the public display of different Islamic groups. Yet it has gradually begun to operate as a religious center for the other sections of the society as well. One of the most striking features of the Kocatepe Complex, on the other hand, is a shopping mall, one of the first and biggest in Turkey. This apparently conflicting togetherness of a religious complex, token of the struggle of the Islamic ideology to become visible, and of a shopping mall, outcome of Turkey’s newly adopted free market policies and its opening to international market, reveals a new synthesis of Islam and consumption culture in Turkey.

Both the construction process and the end product, the complex itself, exemplify the political instrumentality of architecture: the whole construction of it has been a political act, the expression of a political struggle. And today, as a “constructed” space charged with symbolism of “power” and “Islam” it continues to be a site of confrontation for competing world-views: From the very beginning, the Kocatepe Complex has been a place of representation for various political/ideological positions. In time these positions have changed and the complex has been appropriated as a cause by different social groups and as a place of departure for their political struggle. It is interesting to see the changing representational role of Kocatepe throughout the changing political climate of Turkey since the end of World War II. Beginning with the fifties the struggle has

started between the “republican project of modernity” and the newly emerging populist liberal tendency which would be much more tolerant to Islam and would come up with the idea of constructing a grand mosque in Ankara. In the 1970s the idea of a grand mosque (which was not built yet) — on the other hand, became the symbol of the strengthening power of the Islamics. Since the 1980s the conflict is between the “secularist” and the “Islamic” positions. Kocatepe now operates as the site of the normalization of the Islamic view within the capitalist order. Today, the cohabitation of the mosque and the shopping mall materializes the mutual appropriation of Islam and capitalism in the changing socio-economic reality of Turkey.

Building the Base: Ankara, the Capital of the “Turkish Enlightenment”

Since the foundation of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, Ankara which was the center of the political struggle for independence, became the mythical place of the “Turkish Enlightenment” as well as a powerful symbol in the construction of the “republican project of modernity.”³ The choice of Ankara, located at the middle of the Anatolian plateau, as the new capital of the Republic, was a political act, the outcome of the will to construct a modern state detached from the reminiscences of the Ottoman Empire. The Republic of Turkey, in contrast with the theocratic structure of the Empire, was based on a secular system in which the state was separated from the sphere of religion.⁴

Ankara would be the place for constructing the national identity, where the republican Turkish elite would nurture a culture of modernity, which would be presented as a model for the whole nation. According to this ideal Ankara began to be shaped after the plan of a German urbanist in the 1930s.⁵ With a deterministic belief that a collective consciousness for social change toward modernity can be developed through the production of modern spaces (i.e., boulevards, public parks, plazas, promenades, etc.) the new capital was constructed according to the image of “modernism.”⁶ Construction of a monumental mosque for Ankara hence was not a priority for the authorities in the early republican period.

Despite the attempts of the republican elite to dominate the Turkish cultural landscape; however

Ankara's spatial as well as political development has been shaped by a much more complicated net of interactions and conflicting interests. Following the transition to the multi-party system, and parallel to the strengthening liberal tendencies after the World War II, reactionary currents against the republican socio-cultural revolution found a political expression. Ironically enough, "economic liberalism" and "cultural conservatism" found a common ground in the political context of the post-war period in Turkey.⁷

Breaking the Base: A "Grand Mosque" for Ankara

The idea of erecting a monumental religious complex for Ankara became a significant issue in the political agenda after the World War II. Debates cultivated by the opposition parties centered around a populist discourse which emphasized the Islamic characteristics of the Turkish national identity.⁸ It was in that context that the idea to construct a new mosque in Ankara, known as "the city without minaret," began to be discussed, and presented as the wish of the citizens. Indeed, the population of Ankara had increased considerably after the World War II and had become significantly heterogeneous; it was no longer the republican elite — mainly composed of bureaucrats — that characterized the city's population. We see that the whole debate was soon followed by the foundation of a civic organization for the construction of the mosque in 1947.⁹

Following the electoral victory of the opposition party in 1950, the location of the complex was decided by the new government: the Kocatepe hill, at the very center of the new districts of Ankara, would be the appropriate site. A national architectural competition was held in 1957. The project chosen by the jury among 41 projects was a proposal by a well-known architect, Vedat Dalokay. According to the jury report, the success of this project laid in its achievement as a "modern interpretation" of religious architecture.¹⁰ There began an interesting conflict regarding the stylistic features of the project. The conflict was, in fact, the expression of a more profound political and ideological divergence between two standpoints of the modernists and the cultural "conservatives," the former associated with the earlier republican project and the latter with the strengthening Islamic groups. These groups which had a particular weight in the composition of the foundation ("Türkiye Diyanet Sitesi Yaptırma ve Yasatma Derneği") and which were backed up by the government, succeeded to stop the realization of Dalokay's project after the construction began. Instead, another architectural firm was hired; the new architect was Hüsrev Tayla, an architect-restorer. From that moment on, the Kocatepe Mosque has become both the object and the instrument of the political struggle of the Islamicists.

Re-Constructing the Past: Architectural Symbolism

Construction of the Kocatepe Complex was completed after a historicist design alluding to the classical Ottoman architecture in the mid-1980s. The reinforced concrete mosque is an adaptation of Mimar Sinan's Şehzade

and Süleymaniye Mosques which were built in the sixteenth-century in Istanbul.¹¹ The structural logic of the models, however, was completely ignored in this revivalist project. Other buildings that surround the mosque also mimic the Ottoman classical *küllüye* compositions. In the case of Kocatepe, however, each building has a different architectural language.¹²

The historical reference chosen for the "grand mosque" of Ankara is not without ideological significance: Allusion to 16th-century religious architecture reveals a longing for a remote time in which the Ottoman Empire was at the summit of its power. Through the utilization of a historical model, that belongs to a glorified era of the Ottomans, the contemporary Islamic ideology seeks historical legitimation. Moreover the use of historical forms such as domes which have strong religious significance in the collective memory of Turkish people serves to popularize the Islamic discourse.

The symbolism of power appears also in the scale of the building. Constructed in a much larger scale than it was intended in the beginning, the complex became dominant in the silhouette of Ankara. It is a huge mass dominating its immediate surrounding as well: no attention was paid to the integration of the complex to its urban context. Rather it appears a violent gesture toward the city due to its monumentality and due to the way it imposes itself on the urban fabric; it is a product of an ideology that wants to be visible.

The mosque, today, operates as one of the most significant religious centers of Ankara.¹³ It is one of the few mosques where funerals take place and a site for state funerals. The headquarters of the Directorate of Religious Affairs, a governmental organization, is located within the complex. Fairs and expositions for religious publications as well as conferences and symposiums are organized regularly, i.e., it is an active milieu for the propagation of Islamic culture. In short, the Kocatepe Mosque *de facto* becomes a powerful "locale" for continuous religious indoctrination and it attempts to construct a religious public sphere.

Confrontation or Reconciliation: Capitalism and Islam

The complex in addition to religious buildings houses the biggest shopping mall of Ankara. In the appropriation of the complex by different sections of the society this last addition to the complex is pivotal. The creation of a mall within the complex came into consideration by the time the construction of the mosque was completed. This was a time of structural transformations in Turkish economy.¹⁴ As a consequence of the transition to free-market economy and the opening of the country to international market in the 1980s, the new economic order generated a space of its own where capitalist modes of interaction are reproduced. This was part and parcel of constructing a new culture of consumption. Shopping malls as a new form of commercial space appeared at this particular moment. The Begendik Shopping Mall was one of the first examples of the type. After the construction of the mosque the mall settled within the Kocatepe complex although it was not planned in the original project.

Today the three-story shopping mall has a large parking ramp that cover the entire basement and the ground floor of the complex. It is now an integral part of the architectural ensemble. Although the mall is boycotted by a certain group of the “secularist” camp due to its association with the Islamic interests, it is still a highly visited place of consumption accepted by the majority. According to the representatives of the mall, it is visited by an average of 14,000 people in a day. On a typical day in the cafe of the mall, veiled-women and “yuppies” drink their espressos together while waitresses in miniskirts serve their clients. In sharp contrast to what the Islamicists defend in their anti-western and anti-capitalist rhetoric, the mall offers a wide range of goods imported from the West in a manner that one can find in a luxury market anywhere in the western world. In this sense, Begendik is an explicit replica of its western counterparts in its spatial organization, accessories, and space quality, and it promulgates a new shopping pattern for Turkey.¹⁵

One tends to think that the owner, the Theological Foundation, proponent of an Islamic world view, should not allow itself to be involved in such a worldly, profit oriented enterprise. What is most interesting at this point is the reconciliation of Islam with capitalism. The Islamic position uses the capitalistic mode of trading. In other words, despite their anti-western rhetoric in relation to culture, the Islamicists do not clash with the western system par excellence — capitalism. And in the process the Islamic position itself is transformed, as well, due to the sacrifices it makes — it has to show tolerance to the unveiled women, sell cosmetics, etc.

This reconciliation between Islam and capitalism takes place in the material world through everyday practice in which social as well as spatial relations are continuously reproduced. As a consequence, the Kocatepe Complex not only becomes the spatial representation of different world views of political Islam and consumption culture respectively, but also operates as a specific “locale” in which Islam and capitalism can find solid ways of expressing themselves and normalize each other through the dynamics of everyday practice. Rather than relying on direct political forces, both the Islamic ideology and capitalism in Turkish context seem to increasingly mobilize their forces for legitimation: On one side, political Islam using a pragmatist strategy within the existing system for gaining power in the direction of the “Islamic ideal;” on the other, capitalism demanding legitimate social relations of production within Muslim country. It is, indeed, a new relationship that is based on “interdependency.”

NOTES

- ¹ The “Theological Foundation” is a non-governmental organization that aims at supporting religious affairs in Turkey.
- ² Throughout this essay the term Islamic is used to denote certain political groups which share a common Islamic world view and propagate Islamic values for the regulation of the society. This is not to say that they do not have differences among themselves in terms of the interpretation of Islam.
- ³ Enlightenment in the Turkish context signifies a total project of modernity that aimed at constructing a new order based on the principles of “reason” rather than Islamic tradition. This implied

a revolution for a radical change in all domains, political, social, and cultural. For this purpose, a series of reforms were put into implementation: e.g., abolition of the monarchy, November 01 1922, declaration of the foundation of the Republic, October 29, 1923; abolition of the caliphate, March 3, 1924; abolition of religious courts, April 18, 1924; abolition of religious orders, November 1925, acceptance of the civic and penal codes, October 04, 1926; secularization of the state, April 10, 1928; acceptance of Latin alphabet, November 01, 1928. See Suna Kili, *Atatürk Devrimi, Bir Çağdaşlaşma Modeli*, Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, Ankara, 1983; Kurt Steinhaus, *Atatürk Devrimi Sosyolojisi*, çev. M. Akkas, Sander Yayınları, İstanbul, (1973).

- ⁴ Vacit Imamoglu, “A Synthesis of Muslim Faith and Secularity: The Anatolian Case,” *Arch & Comport/Arch & Behaviour*, Vol.11, no. 3-4. pp. 227-234.
- ⁵ An international competition of urbanism was held in 1927 for the construction of Ankara as the new capital. The prize-winning project which was that of Hermann Jansen, was designed for a population of 300,000 people and put into implementation in the 1930s. Although the present population of Ankara is over 3 million, Jansen’s plan still dominates the structure of the city center today. See Gönül Tankut, *Bir Baskentin İmarı Ankara (1929-1939)* (Ankara: ODTÜ Mimarlık Fakültesi Yayınları, 1990).
- ⁶ This new approach refused any influence of the Ottoman architectural past which would have alluded to the political power of the old regime. The very first buildings of the Republican period however were designed in a revivalist manner in the search for a national architecture, yet this approach was soon replaced with the “international architecture” by the end of 1920s.
- ⁷ This period was characterized by important developments that changed the main course of the political life in Turkey: the transition to the multi-party system in 1946; the election of 1950, and the victory of the Democrat Party (defending at once economic liberalism and cultural conservatism) over the Republican People Party which was in power as the only party since 1923; and Turkey’s membership to Nato.
- ⁸ The claims that the Republican People Party for 27 years of its government had restricted the religious practices of muslims became the main theme of the oppositional discourse. See Serif Mardin, “Modern Türkiye’de Din ve Siyaset”, in *Türkiye’de Din ve Siyaset*, trans. by M. Erdogan (Ystanbul, 1993), pp. 114-145.
- ⁹ It is to note that this foundation was also recognized by the government of the Republican People Party as the legitimate “association of public interest” in response to the public pressure. See Selim İltus and Nazif Topcuoglu. “Kocatepe Camii Muamması,” *Mimarlık*, no.1. (1976).
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ According to some critics the Kocatepe mosque is nothing but a kitsch. See Dogan Kuban. “Serbest Sütun: 20. Yüzyilin İkinci Yarısında 16. Yüzyil Stilinde Cami Yapmayı Düşünenlere,” *Mimarlık*, no.1. (1976).
- ¹² The conference hall reminds, for example, Seljukid tombs of the late Middle Ages in Anatolia.
- ¹³ For the first time in the history of the Republic of Turkey, a president of the Republic, Turgut Özal, attended regularly the Friday prayer in this mosque. That was an important step in the appropriation of the Kocatepe by the state elite.
- ¹⁴ By the 1980s, parallel to the economic developments on international level, new policies have been introduced: transition from protectionist policies to a free-market economy was fore-

seen. The goal was to open the national economy to the international market. Accordingly, the privatization of state properties, some changes in the monetary system and the policies encouraging international trade has been implemented. Since then an extraordinary flow of goods into the Turkish market has been observed.

15 Though provision of areas for commercial uses is a feature that can be found in some historical religious complexes (in some of those located within the commercial districts), the Kocatepe Complex with its shopping mall, introduces a new building type in Islamic architecture, an outcome of completely new tendencies, and intricate relations within today's socio-economic situation.