

**“Envisioning Public Space:  
An Investigation in Istanbul’s Urban Imaginary”**

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# **Envisioning Public Space: An Investigation in Istanbul's Urban Imaginary**

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## **Introduction**

This article focuses on the city “as a state of mind”, examining the ways in which Istanbul is perceived and performed. Thereby it compares an image created by city marketing organization and photographs taken by citizens. The first image overexposes the city's wealth, history, power and unity while fading out the difficulties of everyday life, traffic jams, the polarization of the rich and poor as well as the intolerance towards diversity. It addresses an affluent touristic clientele. The second perspective documents the lived reality of the citizens. It focuses on the pleasures and troubles of everyday life, generating an “insight” rather than satisfying a pre-existing image.

Following the assumption that the city is not merely a specific spatial form characterized by size, density and heterogeneity (Wirth 1938), but also a social entity that evokes a sense of place, the investigation of urban imaginaries becomes sociologically relevant. Robert Park conceptualized the city as a “state of mind” (Park 1925: 1), i.e. as a phenomenon larger than its infrastructure, institutions and administrative devices. Subsequently, Berking writes that the city “goes hand in hand with particular patterns of perception, emotion, action and meaning, a quite coherent worldview structure that can be described as ‘urban doxa’” (Berking 2012: 320). The term “doxa”, borrowed from the phenomenological tradition, refers to a natural attitude to the world that is based on implicitness and familiarity, providing principles of action, judgment and evaluation (ibid.). In order to grasp the meaning of the city, city marketers as well as citizens organize their impressions and treat entire cities as evocative and expressive artifacts: “It is not only the booster who claims that there is no other city like his own; the ordinary citizen may feel this too, regardless of whether he approves of his city or not” (Strauss 1961: 16). This capacity to imagine the “city as a whole” (ibid: 5) provides orientation for action and everyday practice. In other words, the city dweller needs to have a notion of what and how his or her city is, in order to know how things can be achieved within

their local setting, understanding implicitly what can be done where, how and with whom.

In order to grasp the urban doxa of Istanbul, this article examines how the “idealized city” is staged by city marketers and compares this perspective with how everyday life within the city is perceived and performed by her dwellers. The staged city can be conceptualized in an Lefebvrian sense as a “space of representations” (conceived space), the lived city as a “spatial practice” (perceived space) (Lefebvre 1991). The first part of the paper concentrates on an advertising picture created for the “European Capital of Culture” event in 2010. The analysis demonstrates that the specific picture consists of two interlacing logics, which are termed with the analytical categories “the imperialistic logic” and “the orientalist logic”. The former represents hegemony of power (religious and political) while the latter stands for a melancholic gaze at a bygone time. Hence the picture “works” both, for the international target audience – which gets proved within its “western gaze” and attracted by the possibility of experiencing the oriental exotic – and for specific groups within the city that can identify themselves by the demonstration of hegemonic power. The second part of the article will make a strong shift and focus on images generated via “participatory photo interviews” (Kolb 2008). Thereby seventeen inhabitants of various districts – differing in terms of age, sex and socio-economic background – have been asked to consider the uniqueness of their everyday lives in Istanbul. Equipped with disposable cameras, the participants explored their urban environments. In the interviews conducted after participants had completed the photographing phase each individual selected five of her/ his photographs and reflected upon them. The fieldwork took place in July and August 2010. This part of the paper is organized as a visual essay. It shows the result of an in-depth analysis of visual and verbal data employing “Grounded Theory” (Corbin/Strauss 2008). Following an inductive, step-by-step pattern of abstraction, key categories have been created which indicate a collective perceived “urban imaginary” (Lindner 2006). In comparing these two different visual narratives the analysis demonstrates that both perspectives do refer to a coherent stock of knowledge about how and what “Istanbul” is. The strategic image campaign as well as daily encounters in public space are influenced by locally shared imaginaries. Public perceptions have social consequences.

## The Staged City – Representation of Space

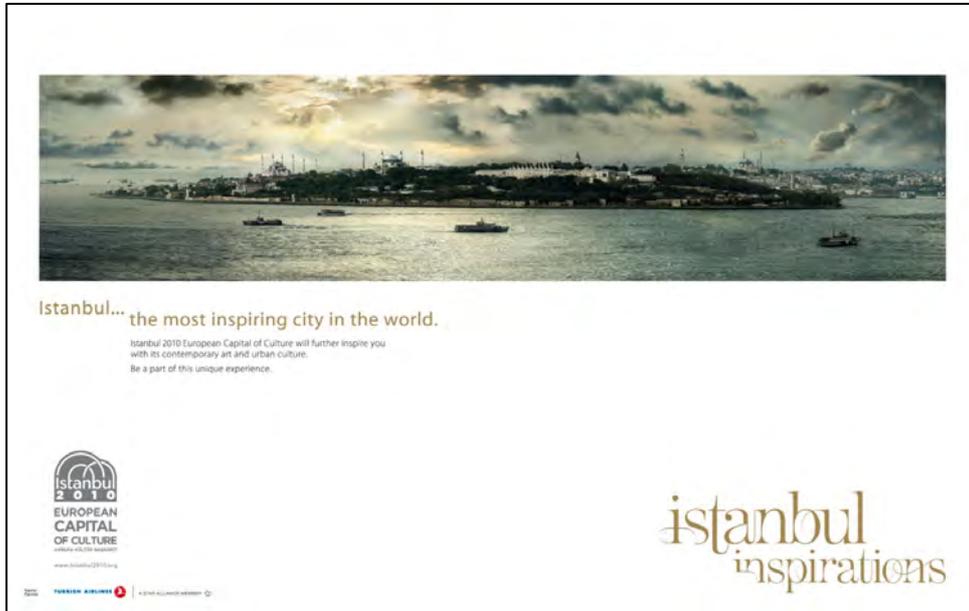


Figure. 1 International advertising campaign “Istanbul 2010”: European Capital of Culture Agency 2010 (ECoC).

The picture above (Fig. 1) shows the main motif created for the European Capital of Culture (ECoC) event to address the international target audience<sup>1</sup>. Rainer Strattman, a German landscape photographer, took the picture. Actually the campaign's motif cannot be labeled “picture”. In fact it is a collage of 30 pictures set together in a retouch process. Unpleasant elements such as building areas were replaced with trees. The commercial was shown on gateways and plazas of various international cities. It was announced in different European newspapers and international magazines and also visible on web portals such as GMX.de, TimeOut NY, Lonely Planet, etc. The campaign was translated into 14 Languages. The target audience was limited to educated people with a high-income level and frequent travelers. Its tone is supposed to be contemporary, self-confident, sophisticated and surprising.

By all means, it had to be the historical peninsula that should represent Istanbul during

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<sup>1</sup> The contextual information was obtained by two expert interviews with members of the ECoC agency in August 2010.

the ECoC event, as the CEO of the advertising agency explains: “This is what makes Istanbul incomparable. In Venice, artists choose to iconize the Grand Canal, and now it is a must-see if you go to Venice. That is a result of that iconic graph“ (Istanbul\_Magazine 2010: 54). With the historical reference to Venice it gets obvious that no modern elements are visible in the photograph (i.e. the Bosphorus bridge and the “city” itself are hidden). In that context the colors of the photographs are important as well. The photograph looks more like a painting. The CEO, who was mentioned before, comments: „If you pay close attention to the photos of Manhattan and London, they are both romantic and gloomy. Their most familiar photos are black and white, taken during the Second World War. Surely we have some by Ara Güler. We wanted the colour to chime in with the eight thousand years of history“ (ibid.). Through this statement it gets evident that the campaign far more represent the long history and especially the ottoman period and blends the younger past of Istanbul’s modernization as well as its present.

The picture was analyzed in long lasting sessions of group interpretations using the sociological segment-analysis (Breckner 2010). Noticeable are the different connotation the attendees had on the first glance. While part of the interpreters and I myself were immediately affected by the beautiful landscape, others – and especially the sociologist with Turkish background – recognized strong symbols of power and were distracted. In the end the conclusion was made, that the picture successfully intertwines two different “logics”, what guarantees that it works for an international audience as well, as it stimulates local pride and memories.

### *The Imperialistic Logic*

The depiction of the peninsula has several analogies with profile views of cities from the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century. On the highest level of the depiction are the sacred buildings followed by the palace. The fortification of the city and its ellipse form represents the city as a political and religious unity and sharply divides it from the “outside”. If the depicted city is heterogenic and divers behind the walls, than this diversity is subsumed under the hegemonic power. Looking at sky, and especially on to the white lightening above the minarets of the mosques, it can be recognised that this city is not just protect-

ed by its fortification but also by the faith of a divine power. The waterfront in the foreground brings a third dimension of power into the picture. While the peninsula demonstrates a closed unity and the sky implies a metaphysical spirit the seafront shows the connectivity to the world and stresses the city's economic importance (Fig. 2).

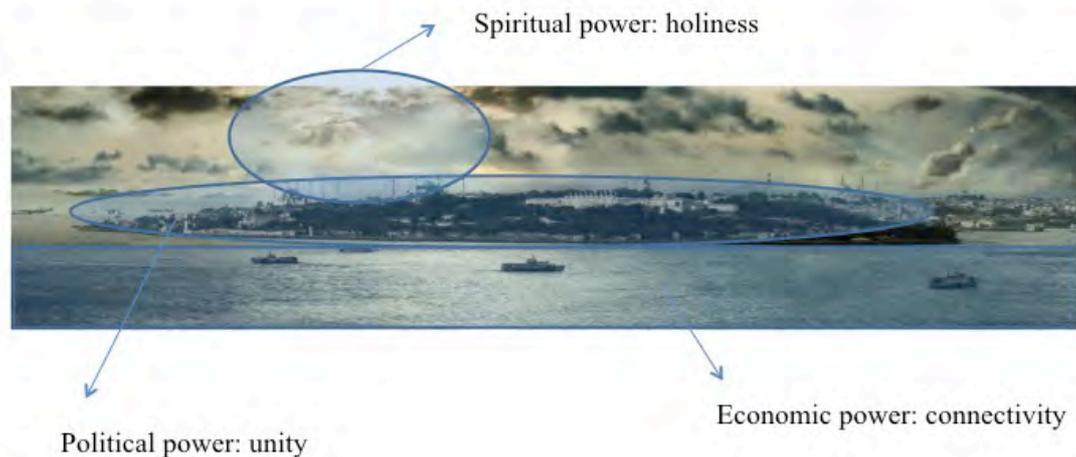


Figure 2: Dimensions of power

Beside of the visual element, the whole “image-text” (Mitchell 1984) also contains several Ottoman and Islamic symbols (Fig. 1). The calligraphic letters and the round arches in the logo of the agency have Islamic meanings. Since Turkey and Istanbul have run through several phases of modernisation one can question why this picture explicitly refers to the Ottoman period and leadership. In the context of this analysis the year 1994 is a significant turning point. In that year Erdogan got mayor of Istanbul and a “nostalgic discourse” was reactivated (vgl. Bora 1999; Keyder 1999; Stemmler 2009). With the foundation of Turkish republic in 1923 Istanbul lost political, cultural and economic importance. The new capital was Ankara. But within the nostalgic discourse the city also lost „its soul and beauty“ (Bora 1999: 48). Erdogan as mayor put a symbolic end to that. He wanted not just citizens but also tourists realize, that Istanbul is an Islamic city. To give an example: His argument for establishing a mosque and an Islamic cultural centre in a modern part of the city was the following: „This is the point of attraction of Istanbul’s tourism. The person who comes here should be able to tell that he has arrived in an Islamic city ... As we succeed in uncovering the historical and cultural texture of

our city, its Muslim character will become apparent to the visitor.“ (Erdogan 1994 quoted in Bora 1999: 49).

### *The Orientalistic Logic*

Aside from the strong symbols of power the picture also creates fabulous and atmospheric associations. It takes the observer back to a bygone time and into a different world. This perspective I call the orientalist logic of the image. Ottomans were in many cases the targets of orientalist ascriptions. Regardless if these ascriptions were positive or negative, in all cases they had to do with the construction of an absolute other. During the process of modernisation after the foundation of the Turkish Republic the Turkish elite distinguished themselves from these attributes. But slowly the oriental symbolism was reactivated. Turks started, as Eldem puts it, “a nostalgic reinterpretation of Ottoman history and began consuming the very same exoticism that they had begun selling to Western tourist” (Eldem 2010: 31). The enmeshment of ascriptions from the “west” and the self-perception of Istanbul’s citizens is also a topic in Pamuk’s work „Istanbul – Memories and the City”. Pamuk’s “Istanbul” is an intertextual construction of views from European travellers, Turkish novelists and autobiographical memories. In the chapter “Under Western Eyes” he reflects that the external perspective of European novelist strongly affected the self-perception of the citizens and that from time to time he himself sees his city with western eyes. Now then, the novelists Pamuk refers to, look at the city with a melancholic gaze. What they love about the city is the city that has remained from the processes of modernisation. Exactly that orientalist melancholy gets constructed through the strong reference to the past within the advertising picture. This creates an appeal that meets the desire of both, international tourists and many of the citizens. The picture explicitly demonstrates hegemony of power and it fades out modern aspects of Istanbul. Although it seems that this self-portrayal of the city breaks with the orientation on western standards it at the same time serves western prejudices of the “Orient”. So, in my opinion, both imperialistic and orientalist moments are inherent in that picture.

## The Lived City – Spatial Practices

### *Antagonism*



Figure 3: Antagonism (photograph by participant)

The photo above (Fig. 3) shows two shoes on a dusty road, symbolizing a sign. Their placement is suggestive of an arrowhead. The sign itself is somewhat contradictory; the left shoe on the right hand side, the right shoe on the left hand side. One could hardly walk if one were to wear the shoes in this way. They need to be switched in order to wear them and move ahead. Zeynep comments on her picture, “This photograph symbolizes the chaos of the city so well”. Another photograph (Fig. 4) shows a traffic sign that forbids right turns as well as left turns. At the same time the sign is placed in the middle of a pedestrian area, creating an obstacle for walkers. For Amila the picture demonstrates “that you have to find your own way. Nothing comes out of the options which are given to you”.



Figure 4 Antagonism  
(photograph by participant)



Figure 5 Antagonism (photograph by participant)

Deniz also uses traffic signs in a symbolic way. The perspective of her photo (Fig. 5) is carefully chosen. It is of importance that a public restriction, visualized by the traffic sign, encompasses a residential housing area. This demonstrates that there is no space to escape from societal norms. Public and private spheres are interwoven. During the interview she explains that individualistic expressions are a potential surface for verbal attacks. While interpreting her picture she claims that during the period of Ramadan (a period during which devout Muslims fast from sun-up to sun-down) she feels punishing eyes on her while drinking water. She concludes: “People are much too involved in other people’s lives. People are thinking a lot about other people, they pay too much attention. According to how they act it looks like we are all brothers and sisters”.

All three of the above-discussed photos have been interpreted in a symbolic way. Through such photos and statements, the key category “antagonism” has been constructed. It refers to the perception of coexisting and conflicting values. The interviewees feel that, no matter which rule they follow, their actions will upset another norm; putting them in an uneasy emotional state.

#### *Strategies in Dealing with the City’s Antagonism*

Following Krappmann, the demonstration of individualism requires flexible social norms that leave space for interpretation and individual configuration (Krappmann 1973: 132). Societies with flexible norms tend to reduce repression and ensure that rein-

terpretations of rules and standards are not negatively sanctioned (ibid.). This kind of tolerance seems not to be given in Istanbul. Instead of ambivalence, where multiple norms and rules are valid, the interviewees describe an antagonistic experience. Different values are rejecting each other. The antagonistic structure of everyday life in Istanbul makes it difficult for those interviewed to demonstrate their personal identity. In many other big cities the staging of individualism is highly important for distinguishing oneself from the crowd and overcoming the sense of being only one among many. In Istanbul, on the contrary, one seeks *not* to gain the other's attention. Throughout the interviews, four strategies for dealing with the city's antagonism can be identified, employed either by the interviewees themselves or observed by them as being employed by others.

### *Ambiguity Tolerance*



Figure 6 Strategy: Ambiguity Tolerance (photograph by participant)

In the photograph above (figure 6) a gift store, „Accesorize“, is situated beside a mosque. Düşün comments on his picture with the following: “For us that’s weird. In Europe it might be normal that a shopping mall is beside a church. For us this synthesis is difficult, but Istanbul has somehow managed it”. The meaningful point for Düşün is that the mosque is directly beside the gift store. He says: “A man can go out of his Friday prayer and go in to this accessory shop and buy a pair of earrings for his girlfriend”. This coexistence of differences is materialized in the built environment of the city. Düşün mentions that some people are disturbed by such elements, which they perceive

as unpleasant. But for him they all belong without doubt to the entity of the city. This lack of clarity, with its absence of clear values as well as its incoherence in the built environment, creates a fascination with the everyday life of the city for Düsün. He says: “You can see these different textures in the city. There is a huge variation. So we cannot talk about one identity. Because of this variety I cannot say “oh it should not be like this”, or I cannot say “the architecture of Istanbul is bad”. We can see all these different styles at the same time together. That is also a very attractive thing. It gives us an opportunity to rethink our own opinion about what is right and wrong”.

Throughout Düsün’s observations tolerance of ambiguity can be identified. Therefore, a kind “role distance” (Goffman 1966: 108) is required. Some interviewees maintained both traditional and modern values. In the quotation above, Düsün is neither disturbed by the incoherence of the city’s architectural forms nor by her neighboring and interwoven traditional values (i. e. Friday prayer in the mosque) and global lifestyles (Accessorize gift store). He demonstrates openness by not articulating steadfast, normative standards for how the appearance of the city should be; avoiding any definitions of either-or-behavior.

### *Dissociation*



Figure 7 Strategy: Dissociation (photography by participant)

Zeynep’s photograph (Fig. 7) documents a passage into another world. The two men refer to the “old Istanbul”. As she comments, “It’s an Istanbul I haven’t accessed and

which I don't know but which exists. And it is beautiful at least to know that it exists." She is fascinated by this old, nostalgic and narrated Istanbul, about which she has been only informed through books and stories. But, at the same time, she feels scared of it because it is a fundamentally different world from her own. She says, "This is the picture of the situation we are all scared of: the moment when we step out of our central Istanbul; we don't feel safe anymore." Here another effect of an experienced antagonism is articulated. At times it is less clear which reality is more real: The Istanbul participants experience every day or the Istanbul which is narrated through stories, movies etc. Surprisingly, Zeynep employs banal tones when describing quotidian life, reserving tones of admiration and fascination for her imagined Istanbul. Nevertheless, this unknown Istanbul creates both fascination as well as anxiety. Currently, Zeynep explains, she is searching for this "unknown" Istanbul, which she has attempted to document in her photographs.

### *Norm Demanding*



Figure 8 Strategy: Norm demanding (photography by participant)

A third subcategory that describes a strategy for handling the antagonistic experience of the city is "norm demanding". Some interviewees criticize normative behavior, while others readily subscribe to normative behaviors. Figure 8 shows a gesture of authority from a man who appears traditional (clothes, moustache) towards a young woman in a modern summer dress. This picture demonstrates a normative claim in public that is also witnessed by passers-by. Here, the woman who has taken the photograph genders nor-

mative behavior, ascribing it to men. Another woman blames the manner of people in the parks of Istanbul. She is afraid, she remarks, to go to parks because it is not foreseeable what she will encounter there. She comments on her photo (Fig. 9) with the following: “People here don’t know how to use a park, real parks belong to Europe!”



Figure 9 Strategy: Norm demanding (photograph by participant)

### *Conventionality*

The last strategic subcategory is “conventionality”. People in Istanbul who employ this strategy try not to gain any attention. They do not state their opinions nor do they express their emotions openly. They wait for things to happen rather than make things happen. Deniz describes this mentality as one of freeloaders. She took a photograph of a jogging path (Fig. 10) and describes it as follows: “After that road was built everyone started running on that road and nowhere else. That means that our people are expecting something and when you build it, they follow you, but they do not say what it is that they expect. We are no active individuals, we are passive, we do not express what we want, we just wait for something to be done by someone else”.



Figure 10 Strategy: Conventuality (photograph by participant)

These photographs and explanatory statements demonstrate a shared experience of everyday life in Istanbul and four different strategies how people deal with various situations. The plurality of values and cultures within the city does not lead to a broad tolerance but rather results in a constant tension, where no behavior is more clearly correct than any other. Nevertheless, some of the interviewees negotiate quotidian urban situations with situational flexibility and role distance (“ambiguity tolerance”), managing to integrate contradictions. On the basis of some other statements it becomes evident that the plurality of meanings shapes personal perceptions of the city. Hence, some citizens experience their everyday life as unreal and artificial (“dissociation”). This emotional state was mostly articulated in the context of the massive urban transformation that Istanbul has undergone during the last decades. Other participants observe normative behaviour or are reclaiming subjective standards themselves (“norm demanding”). Finally, some participants try not to attract too much attention upon themselves; rendering their behaviour invisible and protecting themselves from being the potential targets of a perceived infringement of standards (“conventuality”).

### *Production of Coherence*

Aside from this harsh criticism on interaction in daily life in Istanbul, the photos and statements by the interviewees also show evidence of strong emotional ties between themselves and the city. One motif occurs repeatedly: the sea. “What makes Istanbul Istanbul is the sea”, states one of the interviewees explicitly. Throughout the interviews

it became evident that the panoramic gaze from the seashore to the other side of the city is more than a tourist attraction. The pictures created by the attendees of the photo interview reveal “gazes” rather than “interactions” with the sea – people are sitting or standing along the seashore rather than sailing, swimming, or fishing (Fig. 11 and 12).



Figure 11: Production of Coherence  
(photograph by participant)



Figure 12: Production of Coherence  
(photograph by participant)

Gökcer explains the tie between the citizens of Istanbul and the sea as follows: “The Istanbulite has no relationship with the sea anymore. The sea stopped its relationship with us. We are very crowded now and the sea cannot feed us all anymore. The sea was always very important. Now it’s polluted, the fish route has changed, you cannot swim in it. Now we are just looking at it, we get melancholic and just talk about it.” Although Gökcer states that the relationship between sea and citizens has fallen apart, one can recognize in his following explanations that it is still intimate, though platonic. The gaze from the stable ground of the seashore has a psychological function: “The sea calms you down. It pushes you to think about things.” It offers a space of reflection. Another interviewee describes Istanbul as too lively and crowded. For her the sea functions similar to an emergency exit: “Whichever part of Istanbul you are passing through somehow you get the chance to reach the sea, the possibility to reach the water. And this means, that you can get rid of your pessimism. Leaving your troubles on the water and restart your life.” The sea is not considered a place of adventures and departure it is rather associated with a space of contemplation, retrospection, regeneration and desire. It has a mental and metaphysical quality for the interviewed citizens. In opposition to the “active” sea metaphors (Makropoulos 2007), the statements and pictures refer to “pas-

sive” associations that are linked to the view instead of to a physical interaction. The interviewees did not create pictures that demonstrate the ubiquitous large container or cruise ships that could take them away from Istanbul, nor did they include photos that only show nature. Therefore, the sea does not serve as an escape from the city; rather, it helps to reconcile the city with the everyday life.

## Summary

This article focused on how “Istanbul” is perceived and performed. In this way, the city was conceptualized as a specific symbolic universe that provokes action in a typical manner (Löw 2012: 303). The connotations of “Istanbul” and everyday life within the city have been presented and discussed in two very different sections: the “space of representations” (advertising image) and the “lived reality” of the city (participatory photo interviews). In the sense considered here, both dimensions refer to a *collective* perceived “urban imaginary” (Lindner 2006) that is *unique* for Istanbul. In that sense, also the advertising picture reflects more than just an artificial product that addresses an international touristic audience. The analysis showed that it is “self-portrayal” of the city. The campaign considered the symbolic dimensions of the city. Without doubt it is a reduction and an interpretation of what the city is and what it should represent. But, nevertheless, the image also refers to deeply routed narratives and expresses the city’s contemporary political and social situation. Both perspectives contain three equal dimensions: (1) the demonstration of power contains a countervailing power, (2) the self-perception is not sharply divided from the image of the others and (3) the major change and transformation the city goes through leads to persistence:

- (1) Power / Countervailing Power: The hegemonic power demonstrated in the advertising image is fragile. The picture looks like a painting. The mastery of contemporary global cities is neither visualized through the fortification of a city wall, nor through an ancient palace. Rather their imagery highlights architecture of steel and glass. Also in the everyday perspective conflicting values converge. The ambivalence that is symptomatic for various postmodern cities rather reveals as a collectively perceived antagonism in Istanbul.

- (2) Self-perception / Images of the Other: The analysis of the advertising has shown that in Istanbul western ascriptions and the self description are interwoven. Likewise the citizens utter uncertainty about what are external and own attributes. The attendees of the participatory photo interview question: “Is this my Istanbul or a narrated Istanbul”? Or: “Are these our values or western values”? It is evident that self-description depends on the images of the other. Nevertheless it got evident that the self-perception analysed through the pictures and statements above, neither draws a strong distinction, nor are western or foreign ascriptions appropriated and transformed into the self-perception.
- (3) Persistence / Change: Istanbul has undergone tremendous changes in the last decades. Interestingly the advertising campaign fades out the new face of the city and revitalizes the past. Similarly the participants of the photo interviews observed insistence on traditional values (conventionality, norm demanding, dissociation).

Finally, in both visual narratives – the advertising image and the pictures taken by the citizens – it is the sea which offers a “nomic function” (Berger/Luckmann 1991: 116). The sea, which generally has the potential for multiple connotations and meanings (Makropoulos 2007), has a particular significance in Istanbul. It aids in organizing antagonistic impressions and experiences and helps to put “everything in its right place” (Berger/Luckmann 1991: 116). Some photographs taken by the citizens capture the city and the sea from the same angle as the advertising picture (Fig. 13).



Figure 13: Production of Coherence (photograph by participant)

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