

ISTANBUL at the crossroads

Under the aegis of the fifth edition of the International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam, the 5th IABR: *Making City*, a Turkish – Dutch – Belgian team drew up a plan with and for the municipality of Arnavutköy in Istanbul for a sustainable and sophisticated combination of urbanization, agriculture and drinking water management around the Sazlidere Basin, complete with elaborations for pilot schemes for an ecological corridor in Bolluça and an experiment in water recycling around Hadimköy.

Mayor Ahmed Aboutaleb of Rotterdam presented this plan to his counterpart Kadir Topbas of Istanbul in December 2011. It was one of the highlights of the 5th IABR and has been on display at the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art (Istanbul Modern) since 12 October, as part of the first Istanbul Design Biennial's *Musibet* exhibition.

Around the time when this plan for a new urbanization strategy was presented at Istanbul Modern, the cabinet decision to take a part of the territory of Arnavutköy under the control of the Ministry of Environment and Urbanization was issued. Looking at the area that is being taken under central authority control, it is reasonable to assume that this is part and parcel of a series of large-scale infrastructure projects that has been announced as part of the election campaign of the governing party, AKP. It seems to be a preliminary step toward the excavation of a canal intended to serve as a second Bosphorus for shipping between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean Sea, toward the creation of a new city on the Black Sea in the northwest of the metropolis with, further to the west, the rolling out of a third international airport, and toward the threading of these infrastructure developments together by means of a (international) motorway that will cross the Bosphorus across a third bridge.

We note that crucial assets of and around Istanbul are going to be put under considerable pressure by these planned interventions. The existing Istanbul Master Plan is predicated on a lateral expansion of the metropolis along the Sea of Marmara. This zoning is prompted by the consideration that both urban and ecological assets for the metropolitan configuration of rapidly expanding Istanbul should be preserved and developed. With these new planned interventions, however, the urbanization storm is headed north. Natural assets that are concentrated in the Northern part of Istanbul – so crucial for the overall health and sustainability of the city - will be endangered. The course of the canal will seek the lowest-lying areas and will therefore flow straight across the Sazlidere drinking water basin, as well as grazing Lake Terkos. As a result, at least 10 per cent of Istanbul's supply of fresh water that will be lost and will, therefore, have to be obtained some other way – the water will have to come from further and further away. Agriculture will face further marginalization, meaning agricultural areas will become targets for real estate development, and that Istanbul will lose its unique chance to procure its food from much shorter distance. At least as significant is the danger that with a

focus on these new planned expansions; the rest of the urban landscape of the metropolis will be left to fend for itself.

From various reports, we gather that the new city will be attributed many environmental and quality-of-life benefits that are lacking in existing Istanbul. Will this, however, make this new city an isolated satellite encircled by protected areas? Or will it prove to be a cuckoo's egg that inevitably grows back toward the south and in the process devours water, woodlands and agricultural areas? And in any case, making the new city 'green' will not compensate for the devastating effects of these urban infrastructure projects for the entire city of Istanbul.

It seems that Istanbul is facing a decisive moment in its long history as a major city. The choice facing the city is a basic one: development toward a metropolis like so many others around the world, or development toward an attractive metropolis that, unlike the Mumbais, Jakartas and Nairobis of this world, stays *ahead* of the problems and turns Istanbul into a unique twenty-first-century metropolis that succeeds in finding a proper balance between continuing urbanization, rising living standards for all and a healthy environment.

Will Istanbul become the next metropolitan nightmare, or will it become an inspiring example? That is the question. In this light, the next several years will be decisive for the prosperity and the welfare of future generations of Istanbulites. If these new, ambitious infrastructure plans are simply parachuted onto its geography, the first scenario will unfold. If the gargantuan investments are seized as an opportunity to use them, in part, to promote the advancement of the qualities of the metropolis as a whole, this can safeguard its environment, its quality of life and its appeal to domestic and foreign investors for years to come.

We also note that Istanbul is in an enviable position, for it *can* opt for the second path. The knowledge, the resources and the landscape conditions are in place. The political vision, in fact, is also there: one of the five main headings of the election program of the AKP government in the 2011 elections is 'creation of livable cities'. We therefore propose that the line initiated by our plan for Arnavutköy, in which ostensibly irreconcilable conflicts between urbanization and preservation of the water basins are harmonized in a productive and ultimately beneficial way, be taken seriously as a model of what is concretely feasible in Istanbul. Given the enormous interest in the future of Istanbul at the moment, we consider it imperative that a number of the major issues facing the metropolis be addressed systematically and in a relational manner. Starting with the question of what is at stake right now; we must attempt to provide a global picture of the effects of the planned interventions in order to take these into account in the plans. Exactly which assets in the sphere of biodiversity, forestry, agriculture, water supply, delivery of raw materials and leisure activity are likely to be come under pressure? How can this be mitigated? To what extent can the existing urban infrastructure still be optimized – especially in the context of urban regeneration of risk prone areas - in order to provide realistic dimensions for

the proposed program and not incur unnecessary expenditures and damage? What are the possibilities for facilitating further sustainable growth in the existing urban area? And, how can the city's need for new infrastructure be provided for in novel ways that contribute to rather than damage Istanbul's sustainability?

The question can also be formulated like this: what added value will Istanbul derive if its entire area development is indeed handled integrally? Our hypothesis is that a different, more sustainable and more attractive spatial configuration can be forged for Istanbul by also looking at the future of the supply of drinking water, the ecology, the reduced fragmentation of the woodlands, the prospect of a future for agriculture, in short at all the other elements that, besides good urbanization and good architecture, make the city of the future attractive. By working in an integrated way with or in the slipstream of the infrastructure, a wide-ranging and sustainable area development can be implemented.

We therefore advocate the forming of a new coalition in Istanbul. A coalition of institutions, individuals and businesses willing to look at the concerted human, economic and ecological interests in working toward the quality of life in the future. This coalition will not only have to operate from a position of comment, will not only have to manifest itself politically and intellectually, it will also have to take charge of planning itself where necessary: it will have to actively participate in *making city*, starting with the development of a dynamic action plan for the metropolis that presents an alternative to the existing plans. We opt for the second path, towards a livable Istanbul, and we are very much willing to continue our active participation in *Making Istanbul*.

The curators of

the 5th International Architecture Biennial Rotterdam: *Making City*:

Asu Aksoy (Istanbul), George Brugmans (Amsterdam), Joachim Declerck (Brussels), Kristian Koreman and Elma van Boxel (Rotterdam), Fernando de Mello Franco, Marta Moreira, Milton Braga (São Paulo), Henk Ovink (The Hague)

the 6th International Architecture Biennial Rotterdam: *URBANbyNATURE*:

Dirk Sijmons (Amsterdam)

the 1st Istanbul Design Biennial: *Musibet*:

Emre Arolat (Istanbul)