Chapter 12

The Role of the Imperial Palaces in the Urbanization Process of Istanbul, 1856–1909

Daphna Sharef-Davidovich

Introduction

On November 3, 1839, the Ottoman sultan Abdülmecid (r. 1839–1861) issued the “Gülhane Hat-i Şerif” (The Noble Edict of the Rose Chamber), which launched the Tanẓīmāt period of reform and reorganization of his empire. The edict was one link in a chain of measures enacted by various Ottoman sultans since the eighteenth century that were designed to adjust Western models to fit the Empire’s institutions, and to bring “the benefits of a good administration to the provinces of the Ottoman Empire through new institutions.” Above all, this edict and others like it helped to determine a new set of civic, criminal and commercial laws based mainly on French models. Soon after the application of the first Tanẓīmāt laws, Abdülmecid chose to utilize art and architecture as a means of visual expression for his new regime. He sponsored the construction of various public and private buildings in Istanbul, including military barracks, banks, hospitals, mosques and palaces, all of which were designed to display the adjustment of Western models to fit the Ottoman capital’s new institutions. In so doing, the sultan had hoped to re-create his capital and turn it into a fashionable and progressive city.

This article shows how the construction of imperial palaces during the second half of the nineteenth century was a part of the Ottoman sultan’s plan for the expansion, renovation and renewal of Istanbul. The palatial architecture itself, contemporary Ottoman documents housed at the Prime Minister’s Archives in Istanbul, and both Western travelogues as well as Ottoman diaries serve as the primary sources of information for this research. These sources shed light on various historical reasons that might have motivated the construction of the imperial palaces and provide information about their functions within the urban landscape. As most of the nineteenth century

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2 B. Lewis, The Emergence of Modern Turkey (London, 1968), 76.
Ottoman imperial palaces in Istanbul still exist today, they, along with the relevant primary sources, are able to convey a broadly reliable picture of their contemporary urban and historical roles.

Imperial Palaces and Urbanization during the Eighteenth Century

The urban, historical and social roles imperial palaces played in Istanbul during the eighteenth century form the subject of Shirine Hamadeh’s book. Hamadeh demonstrated that the eighteenth century imperial palaces changed Istanbul’s architecture and urban fabric, and thus became involved in the representation and construction of a changing social order. Indeed, most such palaces established and constructed along the shores of the Bosporus during the nineteenth-century were built to replace ones built during the eighteenth century. However, it was only during the second half of the nineteenth century that the official residence of the Ottoman sultan moved from Topkapı to Dolmabahçe, subsequently causing the city center to shift from its traditional location in the old city to Beşiktaş. Moreover, the new neighborhoods that evolved around the new palaces began to take root only toward the end of the nineteenth century. It is, therefore, possible to assume that the eighteenth-century imperial palaces paved the way for the neighborhoods that would be built more than a century later. This article demonstrates that the nineteenth-century imperial palaces had a more profound impact on the urban fabric of modern Istanbul.

Istanbul in the Nineteenth Century

During the four decades following the proclamation of the “Gülhane Hat-i Şerif,” the population of Istanbul more than doubled—the city and its suburbs were home to about 391,000 inhabitants in 1844, and over 851,000 in 1886.

4 S. Hamadeh, The City’s Pleasures: Istanbul in the Eighteenth Century (Seattle, 2007). Hamadeh’s book is, to my knowledge, the only one source to touch upon on a subject similar to that of the present paper. There are other researches on the nineteenth-century imperial palaces in Istanbul, but these are either architectural surveys—e.g., D. Kuban, Osmanlı Mimarisi (Istanbul, 2007)—or studies of individual palaces, e.g., Ç. Gülersoy, Dolmabahçe Palace and its Environs (Istanbul, 1990); idem, The Çerâğan Palaces (Istanbul, 1992).

5 Hamadeh, The City, 17.