

# From borders to boundaries: Istanbul Land Walls

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## Abstract

The city is a whole with its local, cultural, social dynamics, and built environment. From economics to socio-political, and contextual relations, it contains different kinds of topological relations. In time, these relations become hybrid layers in different ways; and play a decisive role in the change and transformation of the urban context. Therefore, the 'palimpsest' is an important notion that reveals the causalities and the relations behind the transformation of an urban context; and a palimpsest urban reading helps us to recognize and understand the dynamic relations of urban transformation by making an inquiry for the physical and contextual values. Through its layers, an urban palimpsest reading makes it possible to observe these characteristic changes and actors involved in changes.

Extending from The Golden Horn to The Marmara Sea, Istanbul Land Walls can be regarded as one of the distinct examples of the urban palimpsest. Since its construction, Istanbul Land Walls have been functioned differently from time to time; and played a critical role in macro-scale and mezzo-scale changes in the urban context. Today, besides showing the patterns of previous civilizations, these buildings also show the traces of a contextual transformation, a transformation from being borders to becoming boundaries. The study discusses the land walls and their impact on the hybridization of the urban context through a historic research, current observation, and photographs in the direction of Topkapı-Yedikule Gates.

## Keywords

Borders and boundaries, Istanbul land walls, Layers, Palimpsest, Urban hybrid.



## **1. Introduction: Reading the palimpsest in the urban context**

The city is a whole with its local, cultural, social dynamics and the built environment. From economics to socio-politics, or even topographic relations, it contains different systems of different topological relations. From time to time, these relations become hybrid layers in various ways; and play a decisive role in the growth, change, and transformation of the urban context. Eventually, the urban context forms into a spatiotemporal combination of dynamic layers. As a sociologist Richard Sennett (2006) puts it into words: 'Growth' in an urban environment is a more complicated phenomenon than simple replacement of what existed before; growth requires a dialogue between past and present, it is a matter of evolution rather than erasure. Therefore, the conception of palimpsest allows us to recognize the causalities and the relations behind the spatiotemporal transformation of the hybrid layers of the urban context. Although the word palimpsest refers to 'manuscript in roll or codex form carrying a text erased, or partly erased, underneath an apparent additional text (The Britannica Encyclopedia, 2014)'; in architecture, it may refer to describe the physical, conceptual and contextual changes of a building or an environment (Thomas, 2010).

Within this regard, a palimpsest approach to reading the urban context not only reveals the physical changes in the urban pattern but also it exhibits the aspects and actors involved in the urban's contextual transformation. Consequently, the urban growth and its transformation for that matter may cause interactions among the physical and contextual values in different ways. The urban palimpsest makes it possible to recognize these characteristic interactions and the actors involved in them. In every palimpsest, when a new situation is written, the previous one is not completely erased or removed (Thomas, 2010). In this study, contextual differentiations in the urban pattern are discussed through its changing layers with a palimpsest approach; and, the notion of palimpsest is used as a metaphor to refer to the hybridization

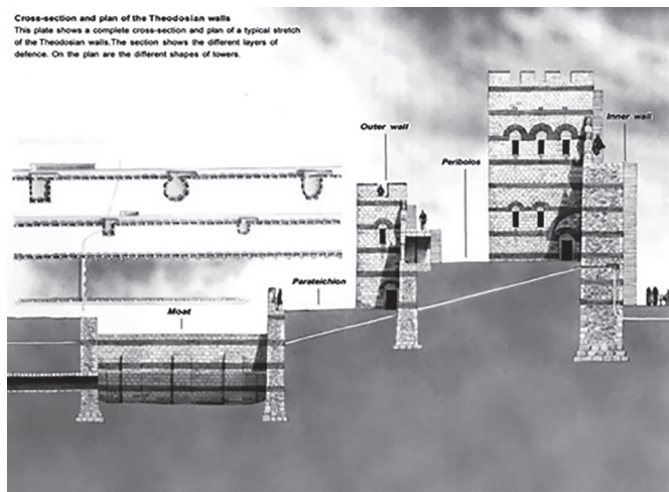
of contextual layers. For that, the article focuses on the chronological layers of Istanbul Land Walls. Extending from the Golden Horn to the Marmara Sea, the land walls play a significant role in the growth and transformation of Istanbul's urban context. Since their construction, the function of these walls has changed for different purposes and from macro-scale to mezzo-scale, they have caused drastic changes in the urban pattern.

Regarding their physical conditions and their roles in everyday life, Istanbul Land Walls may be considered one of the unique architectural examples for studying an urban palimpsest. Besides they carry the patterns of different civilizations, these architectural pieces also represent the traces of Istanbul's contextual transformation. Regarding that, our study focuses on the contextual change and transformation between Topkapı-Yedikule Gates. With a palimpsest approach, it highlights the major actors of this transformation and unveils the hybridization of its contextual layers through a historic research, site observation, using maps and photographs.

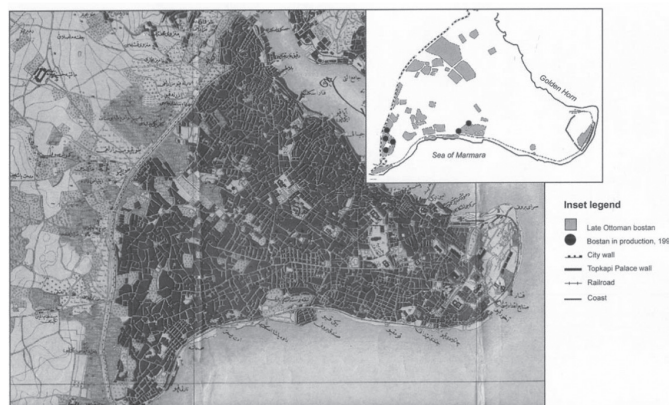
## **2. An urban palimpsest reading: Istanbul Land-Walls, their borders, and boundaries**

As architectural structures, the function of land walls is to restrict and control the city entrances, to protect civilizations for physical, political and military reasons. With their unique forms of construction, land walls are very determinant in urban growth and transformation. As opposed to that, Istanbul Land Walls also have played a significant role in the urban growth of the city and affected the practices of everyday life in several ways. Because of the natural causes and/or economic and political decisions of different civilizations, these buildings have been through numerous interventions. Yet, some of these interventions caused significant changes in terms of their contextual meaning in the urban pattern. In particular, some of them changed the contextual meaning of the walls from borders to boundaries. The transition from being traditional city to modern city affected the use of the walls in

everyday life and caused a contextual transformation for Topkapı-Yedikule area. In other words, the borders of former Istanbul have become boundaries



**Figure 1.** The typical plans and sections of the land walls, Turnbull, 2004



**Figure 2.** The significant changes of the kale-yards Kaldjian, 2004: p.289.



**Figure 3.** The settlements outside the walls Kayra, Maps of Istanbul, 1990.

for the current inhabitants. Here, the contextual description of borders and boundaries is borrowed from Richard Sennett's 'Quant: The Public Realm' (2009). In his essay, Sennett (2009) emphasizes these notions in the following words: while the borders are likely the walls which the foreign settlers use to escape from the central control; boundaries dominate the modern city.

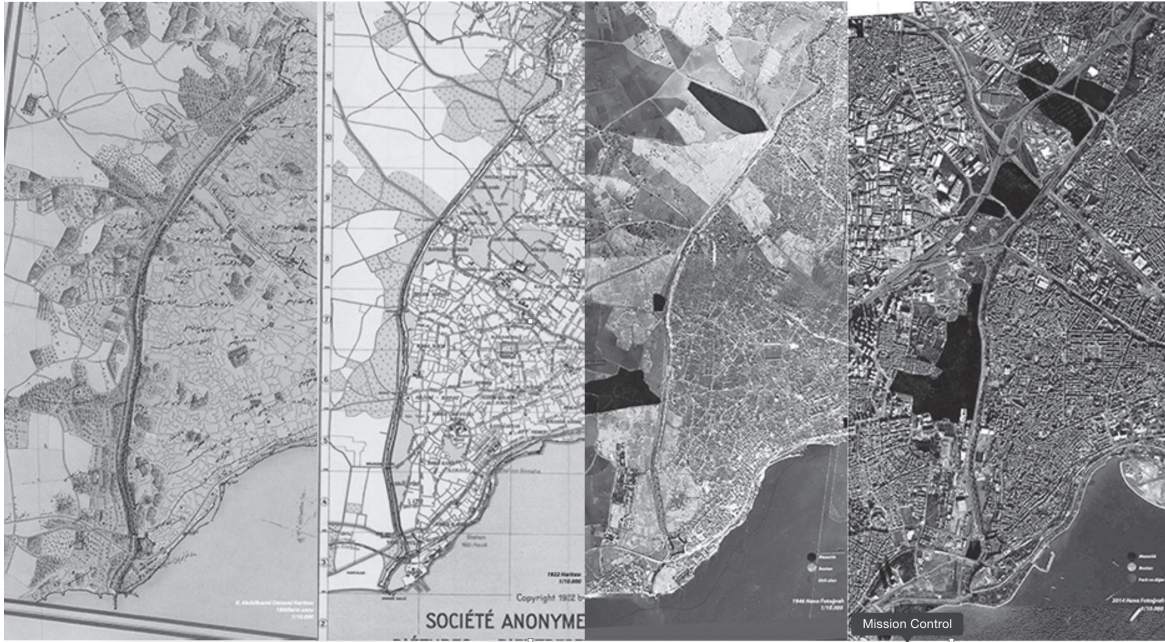
In this context, while borders refer to a physical division, boundaries refer to artificial division in the urban system. Referring to Sennett's assumption (2009), this paper examines that how Istanbul Land Walls turn into boundaries for its urban context.

As a traditional city architecture, while the walls were built to separate inside and outside life, perform as a border for its central control mechanism, ensuing interventions during the urbanization period has turned them into artificial boundaries. Within this frame, this study aims at introducing the actors and events of this contextual change of the walls with a palimpsest approach.

While first part begins with reading the historical layers of the walls within the urban texture in a chronological order, the second discusses how the hybridizations of these layers have caused the contextual transformation in the perception of borders and boundaries. It documents how these hybrid layers created the boundaries for the current everyday life, examining the land walls between Topkapı-Yedikule Gates through site observation, using maps and photographs.

### 2.1. Reading the "urban palimpsest" through historical development of land walls

As architectural structures, land walls are built with three different parts (Figure 1): the main wall on the natural topography, the front wall, and the ditch (Müller-Weiner, 2007). Extending from Golden Horn to the Marmara Sea, these structures (Figure 2) have been through four major physical interventions since their first construction. The first intervention is held in AD 196 by Septimus Severus to extend the city borders (Kuban, 1970). And the current traces of the walls belong



**Figure 4.** The changes of the land walls and their built environment Sur-Bostan- Kopru, 2014.

to the Period of Theodosius II, the time when the Byzantium gained a strategic importance as a capital of Byzantium Empire (Kuban, 1970). In that period, the walls were expanded to protect the growing population (Turnbull, 2004). During the Byzantium Period (AD 405), these walls were built to describe the inside and outside of the city and to protect the citizens inside. While the inside the walls was reserved for the settlements, the outside was reserved for agricultural production for these citizens (Kaldjian, 2004). Yet, some of these areas are still used for agricultural production as Kale-yards (Figure 3.)

From the Byzantium period (405) to the Ottoman Empire, the contextual meaning of these buildings referred to borders, because they were mostly used for the defense and protection. After the conquest of Istanbul (1453), the damaged walls have partially lost their contextual meaning as borders (Kuban, 2010). After the conquest, the expansion of the settlements behind the walls has changed the contextual role of the walls permanently. During this period, the city had spread out of the city walls, while the protection and defense lines between the two states were abolished. Within the opening of the gates thoroughly, the walls have been used neither for the protection nor for the defense. Instead, the active use of the gates as trade points, which gives a per-



**Figure 5.** People who comes to park and who lives in the park - 1, Topkapı, 2014



**Figure 6.** People who comes to park and who lives in the park - 2, Topkapı, 2014.



**Figure 7.** *The silhouette of the new settlements, behind the walls, Silivrikapi, 2014.*



**Figure 8.** *Topkapi as UNESCO's World Heritage. Istanbul Historic Peninsula Site Management Plan, 2011.*



**Figure 9.** *Stills from the kale-yards - 1, Silivrikapi, 2014.*

meable character to the structure, has created a new layer for an everyday life experience (Figure 4). Thus, the layer of Istanbul took over the layer of Con-

stantinople, neither of them attached to each other; instead, they replaced each other (Kuban, 2010).

The disappearing of the need for protection has integrated the life inside and outside the city; it increased the participation of the walls in daily life. However, as a boundary, the city walls continued to have a decisive role in the urban fabric, limiting the city's development in the West. Outside of the walls, the settlement for mainly production continued. In this process, with the growing population, an imperial decree was issued in the Ottoman period related to the use of the stones of the city walls in the construction of houses around them (Kuban, 2010). In addition, at the beginning of the 1870s, the construction of a railway has become a cause of destruction for some part of the city walls (Ahunbay & Ahunbay, 2000). Thus, with the overlap of cultural, social and structural layers belonging to two different states, hybridizations have appeared in the urban fabric. In this context, such a change in the face of the daily life conditions by the modernization and growth of the Black Walls has played a triggering role in the transformation of these structures from creating a border element into boundaries in the urban tissue.

Until the end of the 19th century, while the land walls were one of the important actors in urban growth, with the differentiation of daily life conditions in the region since the 20th century, the directing power of the city walls in urban areas has gradually decreased. In the first years of the Turkish Republic, these structures lost almost all of their border and defense functions; they were regarded as part of cultural heritage in need of protection. In this context, since 1935, many urban planners, including Proust, have provided a master plan for protection for the city walls and built environment (Arabacıoğlu & Aydemir, 2008). However, to return to Richard Sennett's debate on the border-boundary dichotomy as the starting point of the article, "...the 20th planning motion has served as the instrument for making boundaries rather than borders (Sennett, 2006)." Sennett's argument

was also notable for Istanbul's Land Walls and their close surroundings; the major actors of Istanbul's contextual change, such as industrialization, population growth and new large transportation routes, accelerated with the concept of modern city have transformed the role of the land walls in the periphery to create boundaries.

## 2.2. The hybridized layers of Istanbul Land Walls: From borders to boundaries

As an implication of the Western model of urbanization in the 1950s, some parts of the walls were demolished to build wider roads and open new arteries. While these changes stimulated the growing population to spread out of the city; the transformation of Fevzipaşa Avenue into a boulevard and the heavy use of Vatan and Millet Avenues for vehicle transportation have remarkably affected the urban pattern and damaged the walls. Relatively, the outcomes of a modern urbanization, —the characteristic changes in the economic route and the unbalanced population of inside and outside the walls— caused an emergence of different types of settlements and created new morphological layers of the urban pattern (Figure 5).

In the early 20th century, the emergence of large industrial buildings on the East Side of the walls had increased the number of new settlements; and the profile of the newcomers caused a contextual change in the urban context. Additionally, some of these industrial buildings caused a demolition of the walls (Ahunbay & Ahunbay, 2000). As a result, the aspects of all these modernization interventions have caused an emergence of new morphological layers.

As the agricultural fields outside the walls were turned into industrial zones step by step, the architectural pattern of new settlements and the profiles of their inhabitants started to change significantly. On the other hand, these significant changes dominated the role of the walls in the experience of everyday life. Today, these architectures have become actively involved in everyday life for different purposes. However, it is important to mention that, with



Figure 10. Stills from the kale-yards - 2, Silivrikapı, 2014.



Figure 11. Stills from the kale-yards - 3, Silivrikapı, 2014.



Figure 12. A still from the parking lot inside the walls, Silivrikapı, 2014.

the urban transformation intentions in the following years, these industrial layers would soon turn out to be large/neglected gaps in the urban texture



**Figure 13.** A still from the children's area outside the walls, Silivrikapı, 2014.



**Figure 14.** A still from the pedestrian road inside the wall, Silivrikapı, 2014.

(Figure 6). Therefore, in 1980, right after UNESCO's declaration of Land Walls between Topkapı and Yedikule Gates as a World Heritage, several urban interventions, and transformations were brought to the scene. (Istanbul Historic Peninsula Site Management Plan, 2011). As a part of an urban transformation, some of these large buildings were moved to different locations around the city; and the gaps they created in the urban texture

were re-functioned for different purposes (Istanbul Historic Peninsula Site Management Plan, 2011). Later, the walls and their near surroundings were defined as 'Buffer Zones' in the current development plan of the Municipality (Istanbul Historic Peninsula Site Management Plan, 2011). Although the walls and their nearby areas were designated as recreational areas for the inhabitants, some of their parts are used as shelters by homeless people (Figure 7). Consequently, the hybrid structure of these conflicting layers constituted new boundaries for human-environment relationships. Currently, these hybrid fields are creating a great divergence between people who visit the park and people who live in the park (Figure 8). By the 21st Century, the walls, which played an active role in the urban growth for a long time, gradually had lost their contextual meaning as borders.

Another critical intervention that caused a change in contextual meaning for this region involves the transformation of the kale-yards. Since the Byzantine Period (405), kale-yards had been the inseparable characteristic features of the walls (Kaldjian, 2004; Shopov & Han, 2013). During the Byzantine Period, the walls provided nearly half of the goods for the citizens (Shopov & Han, 2013). However, because of their loss impact in the trade market, the demand for kale-yards has decreased considerably over time. Until today, only the small traces of these kale-yards near the roads have survived from the urbanization; and they have been preserved as symbolic parts of this cultural heritage (Figure 9-11).

One of the protagonists of the public spaces is to play an active role in everyday life to encourage the inhabitants to socialize. However, the idea of transforming the walls' area into parks and recreation areas for a public space does not seem to work efficiently because of the hybrid layers of borders and boundaries. As seen in the following figures, the current condition of the land walls and their environment as a public space does not seem as effective as it is expected to be in the everyday life. (Figure 12-13). In order to encourage the use of this area as a public space,

most of the urban renovation and restoration projects have focused on the outside of the walls while neglected the inside of them. For that reason, as neglected spaces, the built environment inside the walls —unplanned and abandoned parking lots, storage areas, and heavy vehicle traffic— prevents the park outside from reaching out its potential users (Figure 14-16). Regarding the lack of porosity of the walls in this sense, and their obstruction the access between two sides the current condition of these architectures stands as the new boundaries of the urban context.

### 3. Conclusion: The hybrid layers of Istanbul Land Walls

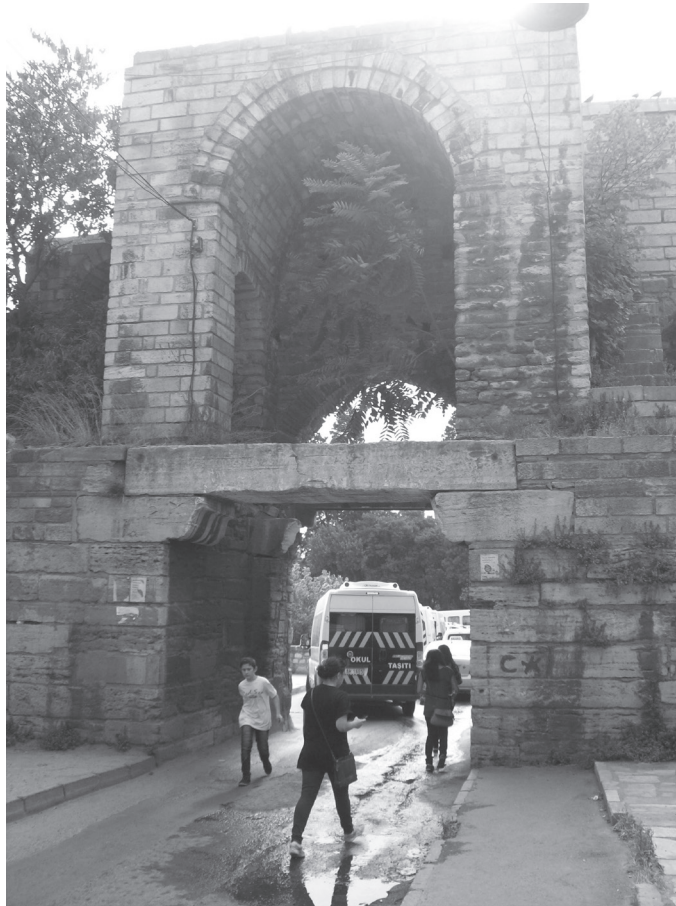
An urban palimpsest reading, the transformation of physical layers is not independent of the conceptual and contextual layers of spatiotemporal relations; and Istanbul Land Walls are the unique architectural examples for that matter.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the progress of transforming from a traditional city to a modern city has affected the role of the land walls in everyday life and caused a significant contextual transformation; a transformation that changed the role of the land walls in its urban context. Yet, this conflicting relationship of borders and boundaries created a variety of spatial hybridizations for the land walls and its built environment.

Once the walls lost their contextual meaning as borders, they have gained the new contextual meaning as boundaries; and that emerged the initial reflections of the hybrid layers. As a result, these hybrid layers have caused a damage in the inhabitants' everyday life-built environment interaction at certain points. Lack of permeability depending on different lifestyles and functions seen on both sides of the land walls, vehicle-based development around the land walls disordered the pedestrian traffic, and the superficial and inefficient structural improvements made in this direction, have triggered the perception of walls as boundaries and the transformation into abandoned areas in the urban pattern. In conclusion, the planning of an



*Figure 15. A still from the pedestrian road and the gate, outside the wall, Silivrikapı, 2014.*



*Figure 16. A still from the gate, outside the wall, Silivrikapı, 2014.*

urban transformation should be considered not only the physical aspects of the built environment but also it should focus on the everyday life of the inhabitants. In this framework, once the land walls become integrated into everyday life, they will be seen no longer as boundaries in the urban context.



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