

## Limits of re-writing and legibility of transformations in Istanbul's Historic Peninsula: An interpretation inspired from the Wabi-Sabi philosophy

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### **Abstract:**

The Japanese philosophy Wabi regards beauty as the results of imperfections and changes of daily life, and Sabi teaching supports this attitude by advocating the idea that life experiences and accumulation of years are important factors increasing beauty. From the viewpoint of Wabi-Sabi, urban transformation is an inevitable and imperfect activity that, nevertheless, always progresses to beauty. In this article, the Wabi-Sabi philosophy will be related to the event's theme "imperfection" and life experiences to analyze Istanbul as "the palimpsest city". The discussion will be carried out step by step from the first urban settlement at the Historic Peninsula and the following transformations in the light of Wabi-Sabi philosophy, by tracing the continuities and changes at the civic heart of the city.

The geographical location of Istanbul has always provided a productive living environment that was preferred by communities due to its vital superiorities. As a result, the town has always remained as a populated, though changing and transforming area throughout the history. When the traces of these transformations are analyzed, the Megaran colonies of Byzantion and Chalcedon, which introduced an urban way of living into the region, appear as urban textures consisting of temples and sacred areas as outcomes of the commercial ports and Pagan traditions. As a result of the passing years, the increasing beauty of these sacred areas, whose locations were determined according to the topographical characteristics, resulted in their being handled as references for the later transformations of the town. For example, the juxtaposition of the sacred area Athena Ekbassia and the contemporary Topkapı Palace at the same location highlight the palimpsest aspect of Istanbul. Similarly, the co-existence of the Pagan traditions with Christian buildings shows the associated relationship of two different urban languages in the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. This situation is an indicator to the deletion of "the palimpsest town" Byzantium and writing of Constantinople gradually by inevitable transformations in the town texture.

Likewise, the public and ceremonial centers of the first settlement show parallelism with contemporary Istanbul with regards to the positioning of today's buildings in the town. The direction of this continual deletion and re-writings of the town has progressed from the highest point of the Acropolis towards the east from the Antiquity onwards, and all civilizations have created their own centers by protecting or transforming the pre-existing spaces of urban experience. The Sultanahmet Square over the Hippodrome appears as the beauty of earlier experiences in uppermost writing of today.

From the viewpoint of “imperfections”, as a result of the increase in population, the city walls of Byzantium were extended, creating space in the middle of the town. This area was transformed into the Augusteion Square, which became the construction site of the Hagia Sophia, later. With the reign of the Ottoman Empire, this monumental building, whose importance increased with life experiences and passing years, became an “imperfect” building that continually necessitated intervention to the degree of giving up the religious functions, and the building became a museum for today.

When the continual transformations of Istanbul are evaluated with the Wabi-Sabi understanding, while the speed of re-writings of Istanbul increase with the socio-cultural, political and technological dynamics; the opportunity of erasing, changing or transforming diminishes synchronously with every intervention. This is reminiscent that after erasing a paper repeatedly, soon after, it becomes unreadable and non-erasable.

The essence of this article is the increasing beauty of the Historic Peninsula by virtue of life experiences and passing years, despite all the “imperfections” that affect the course of daily life, as reveals in the light of Wabi-Sabi philosophy.

**Keywords:** *Life experience, Wabi-Sabi philosophy, history of town, palimpsest town, Historic Peninsula*

The Japanese philosophy Wabi advocates an escape from the mundane materiality of the world and seeks beauty as a result of the imperfections, deformations and changes of daily life. The relevant Sabi teaching adds life experience and passing years to the appreciation of the everyday life imperfections as the real beauty. When taken together, Wabi philosophy and Sabi teaching advocate the idea that real beauty is implicit in the inner potentials of beings and these hidden qualities come to light as the imperfect effects of passing years and experiences. Generally, these effects and traces of the past do not follow a linear direction and, instead, interact continuously with earlier events and circumstances. While interpreting and evaluating current circumstances, a synchronous reading of such overlapping constitute a palimpsest effect, in the two senses identified by the British archaeologist Geoff Bailey’s article “Time Perspectives, Palimpsest and the Archaeology of Time” (2007).

Bailey points to the danger in a permanent deletion of the past, and also to the opportunity to find traces of all time periods with their own characteristics overlapped on the latter due to the palimpsest effect (Bailey, 2007). The indefinite boundary between these overlapped “writing” is formed by living memories and valuable things as a result of the passing years and usage. With each new writing, reading of the former becomes more difficult, forcing the readers to reproduce their own conclusions according to their past experiences and individual perspective. This interpretative aspect of the palimpsest relates to the Wabi and Sabi rejection of any universal criteria of beauty by advocating the individual viewpoint as constituting value judgments. The results of passing years can be seen physically by everyone, for example, on the pots used for the Japanese tea ceremony. But those very traces of deformation are taken only by the real participants of the ceremony to represent the expression of the inner life of the host, and the cleaning of the pots is equated with the respect given to the guest.

Such an appreciation of deformation may be found also in architectural literature, and not only in such seminal works of Ruskin or Piranesi. In her recent article “Mimarlık Nesnesi ve Başka Nesnelere”, Nur Altınyıldız Artun follows Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye after its construction in 1931, when the building was not used actively by the Savoye family and disuse resulted in severe aging and deformations on the building. This visible transformation has been appreciated by architect Peter Blake from a surrealistic framework because of the idea that the cracks and ruined walls reflect the real life experience and material world’s inevitable effects (Altınyıldız Artun, 2012). Swiss architect Bernard Tschumi has also observed the co-existence of death and life on the deteriorated building and advocated the idea that Villa Savoye meets its own real beauty as a result of deformations and visible effects of passing years (Altınyıldız Artun, 2012). Both interpretations parallel the Wabi concept of beauty as a result of imperfections, deformations, and changes of daily life, which is only possible following the Sabi teaching of appreciating life experiences and passing years. Art and architecture historian Nikolaus Pevsner, on the other hand, has criticized such an appreciation of deformation of the building as he advocates that everything must be new, clean and perfect to be beautiful (Altınyıldız Artun, 2012).

Indeed, the question remains as to whether there does exist a limit of imperfections, deformations, and changes of daily life that could be introduced in time into the built environment in such a way as to allow for the appreciation of its beauty. In other words, going back to the palimpsest analogy is there a limit to re-writing a building or a city through transformations after which it becomes impossible even for the best-equipped reader to interpret what is left of the overlapped layers of writing to appreciate their beauty? This article will attempt to answer this question on the basis of data from the Historic Peninsula of Istanbul from the Neolithic period onwards, tracing the passage of time from existing physical imperfections and deformations to highlight their potential to be appreciated as the real beauty of the city in its past as well as present daily life from a multiplicity of perspectives in the light of Wabi-Sabi philosophy.

### **Chronological transformations of the Historic Peninsula under the light of palimpsest effect**

As one of the most important cities of the world, Istanbul has always hosted different civilizations and cultures throughout its history. Each civilization settled its own regime and re-formed the city according to their daily life necessities. These necessities were determined by several variables such as political, ceremonial or military needs and each intervention changed the texture of the city. While former writings of Istanbul are erased step by step and new writings appear continuously, each new writing has carried traces of the former within its own renewal, resulting in a palimpsestic texture which is the source of the city’s real beauty from the viewpoint of Wabi-Sabi philosophy.

A chronological analysis of the structural traces in the Historic Peninsula would reveal contemporary Istanbul’s origins in the Neolithic ages. Due to its advantageous geographical location between the Mediterranean, Black Sea and Anatolia, with hills advantageous for defending the settlement, the site of contemporary Istanbul was settled continuously from the early history onwards. As a result of its location at the junction of two important routes, i.e. the land route between Europe and Asia and the channel between the Black

Sea and the Mediterranean, Istanbul has always been an important commercial port (Müller-Wiener, 2003).

According to the study of Istanbul University Faculty of Literature, the first urban settlement on the Historic Peninsula was a Greek colony established in 7<sup>th</sup> century BC. by settlers from Megara with the name of Byzantion. As a result of the striking location, settlers had to protect the settlement from the attacks of enemies and so, the settlement was surrounded with city walls (Müller-Wiener, 2007). As shown in a map by Müller-Wiener, the first city walls were constructed at the boundaries of the current Topkapı Palace, and the construction of the walls continued until the reign of Roman Emperor Septimus Severus (196-211) (Çakmak and Freely, 2005). As a result of living by the sea, important buildings and public spaces of the town were located near the coastal stretch and, in the lack of archaeological evident; the historically documented ports of Neorion and Portus Prosforion are accepted as the first ports of the city and located on the north part of today's Sarayburnu (Müller- Wiener, 2003).

Up to the Roman conquest in 196 AD, Byzantion was enhanced as a Greek city and this enlargement took place near the highest area of the town, the Acropolis, where we now find the main buildings of Topkapı Palace. Several temples such as those dedicated to Hera, Pluto, Zeus Ourios and sacred areas of Apollon and Athena Ekbasia among others were built mostly on and around this hill.

In fact, the location of the temples and sacred areas would seem to overlap with the legendary "Seven Hills of Istanbul". For example, the hill now under Topkapı Palace was designated as the Acropolis of Byzantion and, in addition to a Temple of Apollo; a stadium was constructed over the northern slopes of this hill as an important public building of the city. With reference to the study of Istanbul University Faculty of Literature, Athena Ekbasia sacred area and Artemis, Aphrodite and Poseidon temples are other buildings that point to the religious importance of the area. The religious importance of this hill was maintained for centuries, through continual transformations that correspond to layers of writing in the palimpsest model. After the Ottoman conquest, this area retained its importance with the construction of the Topkapı Palace and became the administrative center of Konstantiniyye.

In the same way, on another hill of the city, where the Greek Hera and Pluto temples were located, Rhea and Tykhe temples were built during the Roman control, and later, the Church of the Holy Apostles with the Mausoleum of Constantine the Great (306-337) was built. Construction activities on this hill continued with the Fatih Complex after the Ottoman conquest of the city and the area retained its importance with this new function. In terms of the palimpsest analogy, both hills exemplify a process of erasure and re-writing at the end of which physical traces of the earlier writing is hidden as a potential meaning implicit in the continual importance of the hills in interaction with following events such as conquests.

As an example, in 196, Byzantion was sieged and conquered by the Roman army with the orders of the Emperor Septimus Severus and the name of the city was changed from Byzantion to Byzantium. The city was burned in the same year. During the re-foundation of the city, the old walls were preserved and strengthened with several reconstructions (Çakmak and Freely, 2005). While Septimus Severus was expanding the city from north ports to the west

and south side of the settlement, the Severan Portico was constructed as the main route of the town and developed as the Mese during the reign of Constantine the Great (Çakmak and Freely, 2005). As to partial erasure and re-writing, integrating latter with former, a colonnaded square called Tetrastoon was built on the south side of the Acropolis. This colonnaded area would play a determining role on the construction of the Zeuksippos Baths during the reign of the Roman Emperor Septimus Severus. Also, the Strategion was built on the west side of the Acropolis and served as another important square for Byzantium under Roman rule. Later an amphitheatre was built on the east side of the Acropolis during the extension of the city (Müller-Wiener, 2007). While taking Acropolis as reference, all these monumental constructions actually appear as imperfect additions to the concentric structure of the Greek Acropolis, in response to necessities of daily life under the Roman Empire.

In other words, when the existing texture of the city became imperfect, a new writing was introduced to respond to the new necessities of Roman daily life, nevertheless, a certain part of the former writing such as the city walls were preserved because of defensive concerns, which continue to constitute an important need for daily life.

Perhaps more importantly than all for the Severan re-structuring of the city, a hippodrome was built as the most important public area and an inseparable part of the ceremonial life of the city (Kuban, 2004). In the beginning, the hippodrome was used as a stage for wild animal shows and, so, the enclosed area was built as a ditch (Kabacalı, 2003). During the reign of Constantine the Great, the social life changed according to new life of Constantinople and the hippodrome became incapable for competitions which would be main public activities of the city. As a result of the imperfection, the Septimus Severus's hippodrome was transformed into a functional area with its new walls and elevated circle enclosure where the competitions were occurred (Kabacalı, 2003). The Augusteion Square was built as the main public meeting space on the north side of the hippodrome and in this way, Septimus Severus invented a new architectural and urban language for the ceremonial life of the city that was now re-located from the Acropolis hill south to this area which would retain its legibility throughout the history by transforming into the Sultanahmet Square in Konstantiniyye and Istanbul. Also, the construction of the Zeuksippos Bath on the site of the Herakles and Zeus Hippios Temples, near the Augusteion Square, was begun on the orders of Septimus Severus (Müller-Wiener, 2007). In addition to the hippodrome, these buildings and public spaces constituted the uppermost layer of the urban (con)text of that period. However, in the presence of the later urban texture, it is nearly impossible to complete the huge gaps between these monumental traces in the central area of the city and others such as the Severan aqueduct to get a complete picture of Byzantium under the pagan Roman rule. Therefore, although traces of the Severan re-writing are occasionally legible as at the Sultanahmet Square, the later transformations have largely exceeded the limits of re-writing to produce a palimpsest effect.

These large-scale transformations started in 324, when Byzantium became the capital of the Orthodox Eastern Roman Empire with the orders of the emperor Constantine and the name of the re-structured town was changed to Constantinopolis. Septimus Severus's Byzantium was taken as the main core for this new town by Constantine and many buildings such as the

hippodrome and baths were preserved while expanding the city (Kuban, 2004). In other words, while constructing the new monuments, sculptures and dwellings to show the new imperial power of Constantine to the whole world, the old writing of Byzantium was read carefully and maintained clearly legible in the new configuration of the city center. However, the city of Constantine was considerably bigger than Byzantium, with walls extending from the present-day Atatürk Bridge over Haliç to the Marmara Sea to respond to the new necessities of the city (Çakmak and Freely, 2005). Also, as a result of an increase in population, the existing Neorion and Portus Prosforion ports on the north side of the city were now incapable; so new ports were built on the south part of the city to respond to the commercial and military needs of the new imperial capital (Müller-Wiener, 2003). These changed the overall macro form of the city, erasing the earlier traces, and restructuring the central relations between the most important public areas that were, nevertheless, built on and enhanced the pre-existing traces. As an example, the Forum of Constantine was constructed at the end of the Severan Portico as a continual writing of old Byzantium with the orders of Constantine the Great. The Mese route was developed from this Severan Portico as the main transportation axis of Constantinople (Kuban, 2004) and retained its legibility in later urban (con)text as the most important commercial route of the city throughout centuries.

Another continuity may be found in the site selection for Constantine's Great Palace on the south side of the city center for the administration of Constantinople and the Empire, for which the Severan hippodrome served as a reference (Kuban, 2004). In this way, Constantine the Great created a symbolic and administrative core for the city at the site where the hippodrome and the Augusteion Square were earlier located by Severus. In other words, with the construction of the Great Palace and the nearby palaces for the ruling class, the south part of the city which served as a public area from the reign of the emperor Septimus Severus onwards, was transformed into an administrative center. In terms of palimpsest, the old writing of Byzantium was preserved and transformed into another function to meet the new necessities of the imperial capital Constantinople. The Hagia Eirene was added in the 4<sup>th</sup> century to north of the Great Palace and served as the most important religious building of the city until the construction of the Hagia Sophia (Müller-Wiener, 2007). Built with the orders of Constantine the Great but opened in 360 by his son Constantinus II, the first Hagia Sophia called Megale Eklessia was built at the new center of the city which was surrounded with the hippodrome, the Augusteion Square and the Great Palace, and had a Roman basilical plan with timber roof (Türkoğlu, 2002).

In this way, a religious component speaking a new architectural language was introduced into an otherwise secular public space, changing its meaning into one proper for the capital city of an Orthodox Empire. This important (con)textual transformation was completed with the construction of the Hagia Sophia in 360 and after that the two churches were administrated together (Müller-Wiener, 2007).

To spread Christianity in Constantinople martirions in commemoration of people who died for the sake of religion to affect more people were built with the orders of Constantine (Kuban, 2004). In contrast to the old Pagan traditions, these new Christian buildings were accessible to the public and served as social places for people in addition to their religious function. In this way, with the conversion of Constantine, his empire and, its capital city

to Christianity, the understanding of worship changed and was integrated better with daily life. As the most important change in the uppermost writing of this religious transformation was the accessibility to the worship buildings for public during the Roman domination. Because, before the construction of the Hagia Sophia, paganism and its worship buildings were dominantly used by previous writing's "readers" but this reading remained passive as a result of the prohibition to entrance to the temples and the lack of life experiences. At this point, the Hagia Sophia appears as an active building which can be used by its "readers". This transformation resulted in a new religious (con)text which became an inseparable part of daily life in Constantinople, while the legibility of the old (con)text was retained with the continual use of old pagan temples up to the edict of Theodosius the Great (346-395) delivered in 380 which banned pagan worship, making the Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire. Theodosius later prohibited the residence of temples in Constantinople, and confiscated their places of worship in 392 and 394. Therefore, the edict of 380 may be considered to start another re-structuring in the city that is comparable to that of Constantine the Great. The re-writing of the city of Theodosius the Great was not limited to its religious aspect. The city walls were also re-constructed and strengthened to mark the imperial power of the city. In other words, religious building transformation and the importance given to the extension of the city walls were two important components (Kuban, 2004) that can be read clearly on the upper layer of the Christian Constantinople. The great expansion of the city and increased population that resulted in the re-writing of the city can be followed from the construction activities of new ports on the south side of the city such as Lusianus port (361-363), re-called as Port of Sophia after the fire in 561 and the port of Theodosius (Müller-Wiener, 2003). As a result of the increased population and incapable ports and walls, these new additions to the pre-existing urban texture were responding to the daily life and commercial needs under the new regime.

Enhancement of the Constantinople was continued during the 4<sup>th</sup> century and the security necessity came up again as the important consideration of the town. The former walls became imperfect and were expanded through the west side of the city (Kuban, 2004). Constructions of new residential and religious areas was continued to show the imperial power to the whole world but in 404, when the Patriarch of Constantinople Ioannes Chrysostomos was sent to exile as a result of his conflict with Empress Eudoksia, the people protested against the Empress and burned the Megale Eklessia. After that fire, the building was reconstructed with some innovations and opened for public in 415 with the orders of Emperor Theodosios II.

This new building was burned again as a result of the Nika Riot in 532. At that time, the Hippodrome was the most important public site in the city where all social and political meetings occurred. There was a big conflict between two of the four competing groups and the Second Hagia Sophia was burned during this conflict. The reconstruction of this most important part of the city had to wait for Justinian the Great (527-565) who also re-built the Hagia Eirene, Great Palace and Forum of Constantine (Müller-Wiener, 2007). The neighborhood of the Hagia Sophia thus retained its importance keeping up with the pre-existing urban (con)text that was kept legible with minor functional additions. The most important ceremonies were still performed in the neighborhood of Hagia Sophia and this building served as an endpoint for walks of the ruling class which began from the Great Palace. The Hippodrome was still the most important building in the neighborhood of

the Hagia Sophia, because it served as the main assembly area for the public and all celebrations, parades, competitions and important events such as coronation, of the town still took place in the Hippodrome. Additionally, the Great Palace served as a court where important trials were made and the public baths of Zeuksippos near the palace were the other important components of this neighborhood (Kuban, 2004). In this way, the city of Constantine the Great started to serve as the capital city of the Christian state established by Theodosius the Great, after the construction of its symbolically most important building by Justinian the Great, which changed the meaning of the otherwise preserved urban (con)text of the earlier epochs at the center of the city without interfering with their legibility.

After the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, the name of the city was changed to Konstantiniyye and the Hagia Sophia, as its symbolically most important building, was transformed into an Imperial Mosque in 1453. So, in terms of the palimpsest analogy, the keywords in the earlier writing were kept but, nevertheless, the transformation from cathedral to mosque resulted in several changes in both building and urban scale. The old Christian furnishing was removed and a mihrab was inserted inside the building, fitting the directionality of Mecca. Most importantly, new minarets were constructed for this Imperial Mosque and this resulted in a significant alteration in the urban silhouette. In this way, the change in the building scale transformed the urban silhouette and Konstantiniyye gained a new appearance with the construction of other very important religious buildings such as Topkapı Palace (1460), Süleymaniye Mosque (1558), and the Blue Mosque (1616) in the vicinity of the Hagia Sophia, as a form of re-writing the past to transform the central administrative functions with symbolic power in a different architectural language.

### **Transformations of the Historic Peninsula from the viewpoint of Wabi-Sabi philosophy**

In this chronological reading of the Historic Peninsula of Istanbul, basically, two types of transformations may be observed. The first group consists of erasure and re-writing in building scale and the second of a gradual shift in the ceremonial and administrative core of the city, keeping part of older writings while totally erasing others. This process maybe understood within the framework of the Wabi-Sabi philosophy, as analogous with the cracks in tea pots and their beauty as derived from passing years and life experiences through continuous use of certain parts of the city such as the first and second hills presently with the Topkapı and Fatih Complexes, the Septimus Severus Portico or the Hippodrome and the Augusteion Square.

To start with the first hill that was the Acropolis of the Megaran colony of Byzantion, while the area retained its importance throughout history, each new civilization attached to it a different meaning thanks to which the overall texture of city was opened to an endless variety of readings through the integration of former writings expressing older viewpoints within the new. A common characteristic of these different writings is that, from the early ages of the first settlement of Istanbul, this highest area was loaded with religious significance. The religious importance of this hill has been expressed continually in different architectural languages and vocabulary and, in this way, the first writing of the town was re-written by different civilizations from different viewpoints and necessities according to changing circumstances, however, without changing the essential meaning. In the Byzantine period,

the Hagia Eirene and Hagia Sophia were constructed in the neighborhood of this hill as the most important religious buildings of the city. The Hagia Sophia is still considered the religious centre of the Greek Orthodox community. After the Ottoman conquest, this area retained its importance with the construction of the Topkapı Palace and became the administrative center of Konstantiniyye, where after the victory of Yavuz Sultan Selim (1512-1520) the religious leader of the Sunni Muslim world, started to live. In other words, the area, where the architectural and urban traces of previous civilizations were preserved and transformed with different interventions, validates a common beauty criterion for completely different civilizations and periods including our own.

The source of this common sense of beauty may perhaps be related to the topographical characteristics of the area. For the defensive and military considerations of the first Greek settlement, the hill provided a secure location for the placement of the most important buildings such as temples and sacred areas. Under the Roman rule, the beauty of the hill in responding to the daily necessities of security was appreciated, and the re-writing responding to the other necessities for the Christian daily life highlighted not only the peak point of the hill, but also its neighborhood. For the increasing population and changing religious view, the temples of the Acropolis became imperfect and the town expanded from north to south of today's Historic Peninsula. On the other hand, the diminished importance and erased beauty of the highest part of the town was rediscovered when it attained a new character with the construction of the Topkapı Palace after the Ottoman conquest of the city. Previous writings on the area re-appeared while transforming into the new administrative core of the city and re-gained their beauty as a result of the ruler class's re-writing of the area as their residence. Criteria for selecting this area for the palatial function should have been associated with the previous importance since the period of Greek colonization, due to sheltering efficiency and defensive advantages, which became a daily necessity again after the end of Pax Romana. These necessities resulted in the re-creation of beauty under the Ottoman rule when the area was re-built in a different architectural language.

Similarly, another hill of the town can be analyzed from the viewpoint of religious meaning. From the early ages of the city, this area where we now find the Fatih Complex was another important religious core. In addition to the pagan Greek Athena Ekbassia sacred area, the Hera and Pluto Temples were constructed on this hill during the Byzantion period, constituting writing synchronic but far from the city center located at the contemporary Sarayburnu. The re-writing of the area continued with the constructions of Rhea and Tykhe Temples under the Roman rule and the importance of the hill increased significantly with the construction of the Church of Holy Apostles under the reign of Constantine the Great after the re-foundation of the city as Constantinople. In other words, the changing understanding and daily conditions resulted in the imperfection of existing buildings and so, constructions of different religious buildings were continued with reference to traces of previous writing of the city. Adopting a model long employed in the city of Rome, the emperor constructed his mausoleum near this church which, thus, became the religious focus of the city. While the religious core of the city was located at today's Historic Peninsula, the construction of these new buildings away from the existing core may appear as constituting a discrepancy. However, these may actually be seen as responses to the daily life necessities of the increasing population after the expansion of the

city, for whom the extant residential areas near the Acropolis and its south part became inadequate and imperfect. Therefore, to respond to the necessities of the new inhabitants of Christian Constantinople, the ruler class created a new charms in an unsettled area by constructing the Church of Holy Apostles where now stands the Fatih Complex.

When we evaluate the transformations on these two hills under the light of palimpsest understanding, each new construction may be seen to refer to the previous configuration of the area. While new writings are constituted, former existences are not erased; in contrast, they are preserved with respect to the beauty criteria based on life experiences and living memories of past cultures. In this respect, preservation of such traces creates a historical storage with reference to Bailey's definition of the palimpsest effect and constitutes a parallelism with the Wabi-Sabi understanding of beauty based on the importance of passing years and continual use.

Similarly, important routes of the city can be analyzed as another area of re-writing which can be read synchronously with those on the sacred hills. The Portico of Septimus Severus can be given as the most striking example for this palimpsest effect. Under the pagan and Christian Roman rule, the Portico retained its importance as the forerunner of the Mese Route which gained importance with the construction of the Forum of Constantine at its starting point. The continual usage and beauty of this may be related to its importance for the daily life in the city. Stoas with commercial function and public spaces were located along this route and, so, the Portico and the Mese gained beauty as a result of the daily use made of them by the people of the city. Continual usage of the route for commerce and as a permanent working area of the town resulted in an appreciation of its beauty, thanks to which it gained the right to be preserved by different cultures.

The transformation along the Mese is also linked with the above mentioned second group of re-writings which includes the displacement in the ceremonial and administrative centers of the city. In the Greek Byzantion, as a result of living by the sea, important buildings and public spaces of the town were located near the coastal stretch, and the Acropolis became the most important symbolic area due to its closeness to the sea and visibility as the highest point of the city. The sacred area of Athena Ekbasia and the temples of Apollon, Artemis and Aphrodite were located on the Acropolis, as the most important religious areas of the city. Also, near this hill, a stadium and a square called Strategion were built as important public spaces of the city. In other words, as a result of being a port city, the north side of the Acropolis was used as the religious and public core of Byzantion until the Roman domination. In this way, the first writing based on religious and public importance was re-written near the highest area of the city but along with the Roman domination, the existing configuration of the city became imperfect for a commercial hub now annexed to a maritime empire and, so, the urban extension of the town was not continued to the north side. Instead, the settlement was developed towards the west and south parts of contemporary Sarayburnu, and the reconstruction of the hippodrome, Zeuksippos Bath and Augustaion Square accelerated the speed of new writing that created a new type of core that was characterized by an imperial ceremonial rather than religious function. As a result of these new buildings, Byzantium's new ceremonial and meeting areas were re-written on the south part of the city and the Acropolis became imperfect and the importance of the area diminished. The neighborhood of the hippodrome became the new center of

the town and retained its beauty until today. After the conversion of Constantine into Christianity, the first Christian building of the city, the Hagia Eirene, was built in this area and, in this way, the religious core of the town moved from the Greek Acropolis to the southern slopes of the hill. While the town expanded towards the interior parts of the Historic Peninsula under the Roman domination and the effect of Christianity, the architectural and urban script on the highest point of the town were erased as a result of its imperfection to respond daily life necessities, the importance of the Acropolis diminished. The new writing became more legible with the construction of the Hagia Sophia and the religious beauty of the town shifted from the hilltop to the neighborhood of this monument that was speaking a language of interior space for the Christian community.

After becoming the capital of the Orthodox Eastern Roman Empire, the city became incapable and imperfect again for this new identity. To respond to the increasing needs of the population, the city walls were enhanced and two new ports were constructed. The old (con)text of the Severan city planning was used as a guide for the Christian Constantinople. So, the city continued to develop from the Severan Byzantium and his reference points could be read despite the new writings of Constantine the Great. The south part of the town remained as the administrative core of the city and the construction of the Great Palace increased the importance and the beauty of the area. With the construction of the Megale Ekklesia, namely the first Hagia Sophia, the previous center of Christianity became imperfect and the religious center of Constantinople moved from Hagia Eirene to this basilica. In this way, entertainment, administrative and religious center of city overlapped in the neighborhood of the Great Palace. Also, the construction of the Forum of Constantine created a new meeting area for Constantinople, in addition to the hippodrome. This new center of the city continued to preserve its importance during the Ottoman period as the Sultanahmet Square overlaps this previous writing of the city. The administrative meetings and ceremonial walks started from this square and, in this way, the area was re-written again with respect to new Ottoman understanding and changing imperial circumstances.

### **Conclusion**

The Ottoman period and its relationship with its past and today is not analyzed in this article because of the limited area, but an integrated viewpoint of Wabi-Sabi and palimpsest analogy used in this article will be helpful to re-read different (con)texts of the city from the Ottoman conquest. These observations up to Ottoman period attest that building transformations and shift in the city center are results of the imperfection of the existing circumstances and each new construction activity according to new necessities developed the configuration of the city and resulted in an endless re-writings of the town.

To interpret the re-writings of the Historic Peninsula, two groups of transformation can be seen as a result of the necessities of daily life and beauty concerns of the epoch. The first group contains the re-writing of accessible components which have continually been important parts of the daily life with active use such as squares, public buildings and routes of the city. This group has been accepted "beautiful" from the viewpoint of Wabi-Sabi, as result of being inseparable and active parts of the city life. In this respect, this group corresponds to the charm of the Japanese tea ceremony

which constitutes an important ritual of the daily life of the Japan. The second group consists of inaccessible components which have been used for worship or by upper class of the city such as churches and palaces. This group can be related to the “beauty of the inaccessibility and necessity” and involves the configuration of two main components of the city from Greek colony to the present day: religion and administration. Both groups validate a common beauty criterion from the viewpoint of Wabi-Sabi philosophy. While the first transforms itself in the daily life culture of the city without changing its function and legibility by tracing the previous writing, the second transforms itself into a different language which changed according to the necessities of each epoch.

For example, the transformations of the Acropolis into Topkapı Palace, while the previous writing of the same area describes a religious function, the latter transformation and new writing transforms it into an administrative core and constitutes a different (con)text with a different language to retain its importance and beauty for the ruler class rather than the people of the city. Similarly, the accessibility concern and its effects on the texture can be seen in the evaluated placements of the ruler class residences in the city. According to the security need of the first settlers of the town, the most important buildings such as the temple and the palace were built at the highest point of the city and surrounded with walls. But passing years and increasing life experiences of people changed the epoch’s understanding and these buildings were constructed at the very heart of the city. As a result, the symbolic meaning and the beauty of the temple were replaced by the palace in the new writing of the (con)text because the previous remained incapable and became imperfect to respond daily life necessities.

To view the Wabi-Sabi philosophy in the Historic Peninsula, it is clear that the beauty criterion has a close relationship with the public, religious and administrative changes in the city. While the new (con)texts are written overlapping one another continuously, the co-existence of these writings can be seen apparently in the historical process during the long-life of the city. In other words, although each new civilization wrote its own (con)text, it has to live synchronously with the previous one for a while at least, and this situation points a commonly accepted beauty criteria for different life necessities and viewpoints. In this way, the boundary between the past and present become indefinite and it results in a body of readings consisting of overlapped writings which can be read differently by each person. Individual preferences are examples of such readings today. For example, while the Greek configuration of the city is not studied sufficiently and the sources are too limited, the Byzantine period is on the rise and the Ottoman architecture and urbanism of the city is still a popular research topic for different disciplines with numerous interpretations in literature. For example, two of the writers cited in this article, architect Wolfgang Müller-Wiener analyses all the periods of settlement at the site from Greek colony to Istanbul; while Doğan Kuban focuses on the Ottoman period to the expense of the previous settlement layers.

It is clear that Istanbul allows to multiple readings changing according to the perspective. For example, when the transformations and re-writing processes are analyzed from the palimpsest analogy via the Acropolis, there is no trace signifies the previous writing of the area before Byzantion, because the first visible structuring activities began with the Greek temples on the hill. But, if the Wabi-Sabi understanding is taken into account, the

previous buildings and conditions can be estimated with reference to the existing structures of the area and in this way, although the lack of any visible trace of former (con)text, the implicit condition can come to light.

In other words, when the palimpsest analogy may not be sufficient for reading different (con)texts, the limit of the legibility gains a different viewpoint with the Wabi-Sabi philosophy. The more re-writings of Istanbul increase, the more different individual interpretation enters in the process. So, each individual preference constitutes a different reading and in this way, throughout the passing years, the new writings of Istanbul will increase and become illegible to read from a common viewpoint. At this point, each new writing causes a deformation on the urban texture of the city and the perspective of the reader has vital importance for the future readings of the city. Even though, the legibility of the (con)text is getting more and more puzzling; the light of the Wabi-Sabi teaching will illuminate the shadowy traces of the past.

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### **İstanbul Tarihi Yarımada'da yeniden yazma ve okunabilirlik sınırları: Wabi-Sabi felsefesi ışığında bir yorum**

Japon felsefesi Wabi, güzelliği gündelik hayatın kusurları ve kaçınılmaz dönüşümlerinin bir sonucu olarak görürken; bu kavramla eş zamanlı olarak kullanılan Sabi öğretisi, bu fikri, güzelliğin geçen yıllar ve yaşanmışlıkla artacağını savunan bir bakış açısıyla destekler. Wabi-Sabi çerçevesinden bakıldığında dönüşüm kaçınılmaz, her aşamasında kusurlu, ama her zaman güzele doğrudur. Bu makalede Japon felsefesi Wabi-Sabi öğretisinin gündelik hayattaki dönüşümlerine ve kent üzerine referanslar, etkinlik teması "kusurluluk" ve yaşanmışlık üzerinden, kentin ilk yerleşim

zamanından itibaren kademe kademe okunacak ve kentin tarihi boyunca geçirdiği dönüşümler “palimpsest kent” kavramı çerçevesinde yorumlanacaktır.

Coğrafi konumu itibariyle verimli ve bereketli bir yaşama olanak sağlayan bugünkü İstanbul toprakları, sağladığı yaşamsal üstünlüklerle tarihin ilk zamanlarından itibaren toplumlar tarafından tercih edilen, yerleşilen ve bu yerleşimin doğal bir sonucu olarak devamlı değiştirilip dönüştürülen bir bölge olmuştur. Bugünkü kentte bu değişim dönüşümlerin izleri okunduğunda, bölgedeki yaşama “kent” niteliği kazandıran İ.Ö. 7. yüzyıl Megara kolonisi Byzantion ve Chalcedon, ticaret limanlarının ve Pagan yaşam geleneklerinin ürünü tapınak ve kutsal alanların çevresinde oluşan dokular olarak karşımıza çıkar. Yerleri, bölgenin topografik özellikleri dikkate alınarak belirlenen bu kutsal alanların geçen yıllar içinde yaşanmışlıkla artan güzelliği, kentin daha sonraki dönüşümlerinin referansları olarak ele alınmalarına neden olmuştur. Bu duruma verilebilecek bir örnek olarak, Megara kolonisi için kentin en önemli noktası olan Athena Ekbasia kutsal alanı ile bugünkü Topkapı Sarayı'nın aynı bölge üzerinde bulunması İstanbul'u palimpsest kent yapan öğelerden bir tanesidir. Benzer şekilde, Pagan yaşam geleneklerinin, Roma İmparatorluğu hakimiyeti altında Hıristiyan yapıları ile bir arada sürdürdüğü yaşam, kentin yeni katmanı ile bir önceki arasındaki ortaklığın ve kaçınılmaz olan dönüşümün “palimpsest kent” Byzantium'u yavaş yavaş silerek Konstantinopolis'i nasıl yazdığının göstergesidir. Bu süreç, tamamen farklı yaşam geleneklerine ve dini inanışlara sahip iki farklı toplumun, ortak bir kent dokusu üzerinde eskiyi ve yeni olanı aynı anda var ettiği bir dönemi işaret eder.

Benzer biçimde, kentin kamusal ve törensel çekirdeğini oluşturan bölgeler, Megara yerleşimlerinden başlayarak bugüne referans veren kent içi konumlanmalar gösterir. Antik dönemden bu yana süren bu silinip yeniden yazılmaların yönü, Byzantion'un en yüksek noktası Akropolis'ten batıya doğrudur ve farklı medeniyetler, kendilerinden önceki yaşanmışlıkların güzelliklerini koruyup kusurlarını dönüştürerek kendi kentsel çekirdeklerini yaratmışlardır. Bu devamlı dönüşümün en üstünde kalan yazı, altta kalan ve silinen izlerle birlikte bugünkü Sultanahmet Meydanı ve Hipodrom çevresinde karşımıza çıkmaktadır.

Diğer bir bakış açısıyla, Byzantion'un artan kent nüfusuna dar gelen kent sınırları, Roma hakimiyeti döneminde surların genişletilmesine neden olmuş ve açılan alan daha sonra Aya Sofya'nın inşa edileceği Augusteion Meydanı'na dönüştürülmüştür. Osmanlı hakimiyeti ile birlikte, güzelliği ve yaşanmışlığı geçen yıllarla artmış şaheseri Aya Sofya, minare eklemeleri ve iç mekan düzenlemeleri gibi çeşitli dönüşümlerle, ama belli ki yine “kusurlu” bir hale dönüştürülmüş olmalıdır ki, yapı şu anda müze işlevindedir ve bu işlev de mercek altındadır.

İstanbul'un ilk zamanlarından itibaren yaşadığı devamlı dönüşüm Wabi-Sabi anlayışı ile ele alındığında, sosyo-kültürel, politik ve teknolojik dinamiklerin değişim ve gelişim hızındaki artışla beraber, İstanbul'da yaratılan yaşanmışlık ve palimpsestleşme hızlanmaktadır ancak meydana çıkan her yeni dönüşümle birlikte, eskiyi silip değiştirerek daha güzel olana dönüştürme imkanı da aynı ölçüde azalmaktadır. Bu tıpkı, bir kağıdın defalarca silinip yeniden yazıldıktan sonra, kağıdın hem silinemez hem de üstündekilerin okunamaz hale gelmesine benzer.

Bu makalenin özünde, temel alınan Wabi-Sabi felsefesi ışığında, bugünkü gündelik hayatın akışını engelleyen tüm kusurlarına rağmen, Tarihi Yarımada'nın geçen yıllar ve yaşanmışlıkla artan güzelliği yatmaktadır.