

Johan Lagae
Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, Ghent University
J. Plateaustraat 22, 9000 Gent, Belgium
Phone: 0032 486 86 29 48
Fax: 0032 9 264 41 85
E-mail: johan.lagae@ugent.be

Zeynep Çelik, *Empire, Architecture and the City. French-Ottoman Encounters, 1830-1914*, University of Washington Press, Seattle & London, 2008, 337 pags., 33 color plates, 189 b/w illustrations, ISBN 978-0-295-98779-8

In many ways, Zeynep Çelik's new book is a "tour de force". In discussing the complex and sometimes intertwined histories of two empires, an emerging French one and a dwindling Ottoman one, she spans a time frame of almost a century and covers a large geographical area stretching from Algeria and Tunisia to the Middle East and as far as Iraq and Yemen when they were part of the Arab Provinces under Ottoman rule. Explicitly opting for a comparative analysis that focuses on more dominant tendencies and questioning if there existed a "shared universal imperial culture" in the 19th century, albeit with also acknowledging local specificities, the book demonstrates how the particular French and Ottoman perceptions of modernity shaped notions about their respective colonies. Drawing on an impressive amount of sources, the book fundamentally questions some of the frameworks by which colonial urbanism and architecture are commonly understood, replacing the bilateral axes of east-west and north-south with more complex multidirectional patterns of influence, communication and transfers of expertise.

In line with Çelik's earlier publications such as *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth Century World's Fairs* (1992) or *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers under French Rule* (1997), buildings and urban form are understood here as "social-political documents" (p. 10), and large attention is given to visual culture. Her thematically organized discussion brings to the fore a wide array of cities on the "periphery" of both empires, with the author arguing that such a perspective is more productive, as building and planning practices become more "transparent" and "direct" in the margins than in the imperial centers of Paris or Istanbul (p. 4). The book adds to our understanding of major centers such as Algiers, that "trial and error case of French colonial urbanism" (p. 95), or Beirut and Damascus, Ottoman cities that already have been the subject of some scholarly research, while also shedding new light on the Ottoman planning and building in Trablusgarb (Tripoli) before it became a colonial city under Italian rule.¹ Some lesser known localities such as Constantine (Algeria) receive equal importance in order to make the case that overall strategies of city building were at work throughout both empires, albeit with attention for local specificities.

Cities are analyzed in relation to both a larger, regional scale and the smaller grain of the urban square and the individual building. The chapters are organized accordingly, discussing first how the introduction of infrastructural networks of mobility and communication created "changed landscapes" in the empire. The following chapters present an analysis of urban

¹ One can think here of the work of Jens Hanssen on Beirut, of Stefan Weber on Damascus. For Tripoli, see the recent books of Mia Fuller and Brian L. McLaren on Italian colonial architecture and urban planning.

planning strategies and the introduction of new typologies of public buildings that. Especially in the Ottoman context, such operations created an urban décor representing the emergence of a secularization of society and onto which imperial messages were inscribed via ceremonies and visual mediation. Generic buildings such as military barracks, hospitals, or schools receive as much attention as projects with more ambitious architectural design. As “signs of modernity”, clock towers occupy a particular position in the book. Empire building, Çelik argues, was not only a matter of controlling and organizing space, both also of regulating and synchronizing time in a vast geographical zone. By giving priority to the politics of architecture, Çelik’s discussion of aspects of architectural form and appearance remains limited, however, and especially for the Ottoman built production only rarely goes beyond the “reductive vocabulary” of the contemporary sources.

Via often intriguing cases of cross-cultural exchange, Çelik maps the sometimes complex trajectories of ways in which architectural and urban models, ideas, expertise and practices were disseminated and travelled within a large territory, thereby re-assessing the conventional “center / periphery”-framework. The echoes of Viollet-le-Duc’s unrealized project for a memorial to Napoléon III in Algiers (1865) in the design by an Italian architect for the Telegraph Tower in Damascus (1902) is a case in point. In highlighting the different perceptions of the role of the urban park in the French and Ottoman discourses -viewed by the French as beneficial “lungs of the city”, while the Ottoman administration still critiqued the practice of spending money on “superfluous” “things like gardens and parks” at the expense of “public health” as late as in 1918 (p. 157) – the book provides a forceful reminder that conventional, western frameworks of understanding urban space are not universally applicable and that different notions of modernity existed simultaneously.

Methodologically, this is a fascinating book. Instead of starting from a dogmatic theoretical framework, the narrative emerges in all its complexity out of the source material itself, making the archive into an “agent”. In the chapter on urban planning, the reader glimpses Çelik’s process of analysis that, in the absence of textual documents, often proceeded via close readings of visual documents such as urban maps and historical photographs, and by visiting the built environment today. The multitude of images, drawn frequently from obscure sources such as the magazine *Servet-i-Fünun* (The Wealth of Sciences), are thus much more than mere illustrations. They provide information the reader also has to work with: the well presented urban maps allow to retrace the author’s analysis of the urban fabric and its structuring elements, while the images invite for a careful reading as they often present buildings photographed in their urban setting and showing how people relate to the architecture and the urban space. This makes the book an adventure as much as a though read, especially since one risks at occasions losing sight of the evolving argument within the often long descriptive passages of the organization of particular urban spaces or the formal features of specific buildings. Chapter 4 in which a kaleidoscopic view of building typologies is given, with an important number of building being put to the fore, forms a case in point. As such, it would have been helpful if a more detailed table of content, clarifying the sometimes complex inner structure of the chapters, had been provided.

Çelik presents her book as a “study of empire building from the ‘official’ perspective” (p. 6), stressing that agents who contested the urban policies defined ‘from above’ are absent from the narrative. Even if the often profound role of local governors and policy makers at times is addressed, the intermediate levels of the municipal administrations that make up what Peter

Scriver has coined “the scaffolding of empire”, also remain somewhat obscure.² What kind of technicians managed and controlled the city building locally and what was their space of manoeuvre vis-à-vis policies defined in the imperial center? One would also have loved to learn more about the role of the architects and entrepreneurs of various European origin who, as recent studies show for the case of Italian designers and builders, moved rather freely within both the French and Ottoman empire and whose agency not necessarily converged with the imperial ambitions instigated “from above”, but followed other logics such as personal economy and ambition.³ If Çelik’s new book has the merit of reminding us of more general imperial strategies at work across time and space, it is indeed, as the author suggests, to be read as a complement to existing monographic studies on specific French and Ottoman cities which grasp more fully the ‘messy reality’ of city building on the more local level.

² Peter SCRIVER (ed.), *The Scaffolding of Empire*. Proceedings of the 4th Camea Symposium, University of Adelaide, 2007.

³ One can think here of some contributions in Ezio Godoli et. al. (ed.), *The Presence of Italian architects in Mediterranean countries*. Proceedings of the First International Conference, Alexandria, Maschietto Editore, Firenze, 2008.