Buyuk Valide Han

Historic heritage as a regenerator

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The global condition

Many cities worldwide are globalizing and their historic centres are coping with a similar physical challenge: how to balance the disorder of the existing fabric and the order of modernizing structures to increase efficiency, whilst safeguarding the historical heritage.

Istanbul is also globalizing. The economic and political issues regarding the urban condition in Istanbul are increasingly focused on speculation that puts personal profit above the quality of life in general and disregards the true value of their city's heritage.

Istanbul implements foreign (western) development programmes to cope with the growth and expectations of the global economy. Aimed at capital gain, these developments do not address specific issues of Istanbul. They could be implemented in any globalizing city. This lack of contextual approach, the uncertainty of people regarding possible evection, and the absence of public space other than shopping malls make for a lack of quality in life and identity.

The current developments transform Istanbul into modern anonymous rather than modernize Istanbul.

The local condition

The studio has utopia as a theme. The mentioned conditions make the functioning of the city and quality of life in Istanbul far from ideal. I have focused on the Mercan district, for it contains an interesting aspect regarding utopia.

The district lies in the heart of the historic peninsula along a pedestrian route that connects public transport hubs on the golden horn and the Marmora Sea. Hidden within the blocks are historical hans. These are buildings that house a number of functions and are typologically similar to the caravanserai: Two or three stories of cells along an arcade surrounding a courtyard; the cells thus form a protective wall around a safe open space. They are of an architecture typical to Istanbul.

Formerly the hans were buildings that were central points for trade and social interaction. Through various gates they were very well connected to the surrounding block which contained ancillary functions. The whole block formed one functioning entity, a complex. Over time the explosive growth of the city has caused these connections to clog up and move the formal front of the complex from the courtyard to the perimeter (the street) and the servicing functions into the center: the block turned inside out.

Up until the globalizing process started about fifteen years ago, the han typology was still used in development: a collection of functions sharing a collective courtyard. Due to the enormous pressure on available space the typology of the hans had changed however: From a horizontally distributed complex they became vertical points which stood independently at the perimeter of the block. The collective courtyard of an interconnected building was replaced by a staircase in each individual han. The block as complex had completely disappeared.

The typology of the han is, as we will see, particularly suited for the steps toward utopia: Adding qualitative public spaces of a more quiet character -to balance out the hyperactive shopping streets- and tackling the lack of identity by re-valuing the traditional building types and using them as a basis for development in the city.

A new strategy

My project offers a new strategy to cope with the required developments and solve undesirable conditions by revaluing the typology of the han. The type can be abstracted to a row of cells that demarcates an interior open space and an outer open space in which the characters differ. The analysis of the han as a typology has also shown a trend to maximize intensity and minimize footprint by extending vertically, the lost horizontal connectivity makes that block no longer functions as a whole: some alterations to the typology are thus required.

The strategy proposes a new demarcation zone at the fringe of the block, based on the typology of the han: the cells on each level are horizontally connected by a gallery (older han typology) and the different levels are connected by central staircases (newer han typology) so that a larger interconnected perimeter building emerges. In section the functions are split: production on the top, commercial activity in de middle and services underground. The services are thus incorporated in the typology, instead of occupying the center of the block. This newly introduced perimeter building achieves for the block what the han traditionally achieved for its courtyard: a safe, guarded interior.

The perimeter of the block now serves as one entity containing a variety of functions, instead of disconnected individual functions. The building reintroduces the horizontal connections, on various levels, to bind the block into one complex. By combining the vertical and horizontal connections it becomes possible to create a roof-scape which activates a new public realm: one with a fantastic view. Programmatically such a route can be articulated.

In terms of grain size the traditional structure of the han is limiting functionality, for its load bearing walls do not allow for any larger functions. One cell fits all. By using a domino construction system the interior volume of the new perimeter building becomes free to arrange: larger and higher (public) functions can occupy multiple cells. The basic unit of the new development is still based on the more or less 5x5 m. grid of the traditional han. This grain size is still the most commonly used in the historic peninsula by small retail shops, offices or production rooms. The perimeter building is finally delimited by facades that provide a clear border for development: to stop any ad-hoc development to clog up the block again in the future.

The typology of the han has thus been re-interpreted and used for achieving the desired conditions in the city. The alterations to the typology are: restoring the horizontal connectivity, incorporating the service functions in the lower (underground) floors and allowing for connections to the roofscape. On the scale of the block connections through the block are re-introduced by various gateways in the perimeter building, differentiating the type of public space inside and outside and thus balancing the public spaces in the city.

Projection of utopia

My project shows that the old typology of the han can still be put to use today. Albeit with a few minor alterations, it is able to intensify the block and create a diversity of public spaces. While the current developments do achieve the intensification, they don't add any quality to the public realm of the city. On top of that, being a traditional building typology the han also provides an identity to the developments.

In the case of a different block without any historical building the strategy is still viable. The redevelopment of the perimeter of the block basically frees up the interior to be used for whatever is needed for the balance in the city: Public spaces such as a parks or cultural functions.

In this project an indigenous, traditional typology is reinterpreted to develop Istanbul further as a global city. It shows that local, traditional building types can still have value for the future and through correct interpretation the typology can develop Istanbul in a manner that can make the Istanbullus proud of their city.