

The Great Fire and the Reconstruction of Beyoğlu Streets: A Conundrum of Local Government (1870-1910)

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ABSTRACT

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Streets constitute not only the physical framework of urban life but also a key site through which social organization and governance are articulated. During the nineteenth century, European cities underwent major transformations through the paving, widening, and regulation of streets, establishing new standards of urban planning. In contrast, the streets of Istanbul remained narrow, irregular, and largely lacking infrastructural support. With the establishment of the Sixth Municipal District in 1857, urban authorities intensified efforts to reorganize Beyoğlu—an area shaped by Levantine and foreign populations—into a modern urban center. The Great Fire of 1870 marked a critical turning point by enabling large-scale reconstruction and intervention. This article examines the reorganization of streets in post-fire Beyoğlu not merely as a technical process of improvement

but as a field in which the limits and priorities of urban governance became visible; drawing on Ottoman archival records and contemporary newspapers, it argues that municipal interventions did not resolve urban disorder but restructured it, producing an uneven urban landscape characterized by differentiated patterns of infrastructure, service provision, and spatial inequality.

Keywords: Fire, streets, municipality, Beyođlu, İstanbul.

ÖZ

DOĐAN, Cem, **Büyük Yangın ve Beyođlu Sokaklarının Yeniden İnşası: Bir Yerel Yönetim Açmazı (1870-1910)**, CTAD, Yıl 22, Sayı 44 (Bahar 2026), s. 63-91.

Sokaklar kentsel yaşamın yalnızca fiziksel çerçevesini değil, aynı zamanda toplumsal örgütlenme ve yönetsel müdahalenin temel zeminini de oluşturur. On dokuzuncu yüzyılda Avrupa kentlerinde sokakların asfaltlanması, genişletilmesi ve kaldırım düzenlemeleriyle yeniden tasarlanması, modern şehir planlamasının belirleyici unsurlarından biri hâline gelmiştir. Buna karşılık, aynı dönemde İstanbul sokakları dar, düzensiz ve çođu zaman altyapıdan yoksun bir görünüm sergilemekteydi. 1857’de Altıncı Daire-i Belediye’nin kurulmasıyla birlikte, özellikle Levanten ve yabancı nüfusun yoğun olduđu Beyođlu’nda kentsel mekânın yeniden düzenlenmesine yönelik müdahaleler hız kazanmıştır. 1870 tarihli “harik-i kebîr”, bu süreci derinleştiren ve geniş ölçekli müdahalelere imkân tanıyan kritik bir kırılma noktası olmuştur. Bu makale, yangın sonrası sokakların yeniden düzenlenmesini yalnızca teknik bir iyileştirme süreci olarak değil, kentsel yönetimin sınırlarını ve önceliklerini açığa çıkaran bir alan olarak ele almaktadır; Osmanlı arşiv belgeleri ve dönemin basınına dayanan analiz, müdahalelerin kentsel düzensizliđi ortadan kaldırmak yerine yeniden örgütlediđini ve altyapı, hizmet dağılımı ve mekânsal eşitsizlikler açısından farklılaşmış bir kentsel yapı ürettiđini ileri sürmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Yangın, sokaklar, belediye, Beyođlu, İstanbul.

Introduction

During the late nineteenth century, İstanbul's streets were a central arena in which the empire's modernization project became materially visible. Shaped by the political transformations of the Tanzimat, recurrent large-scale fires, and the institutionalization of municipal governance, urban space was reconfigured through the partial imposition of Western planning principles. This transformation extended beyond the physical environment, reorganizing patterns of sociability, everyday practices, and neighborhood life through new spatial arrangements. The nineteenth-century streetscape thus functioned not merely as a reflection of imperial change but as a medium through which it was produced and enacted. From the mid-century onward, interventions in the urban fabric operated simultaneously at practical and symbolic levels, reshaping circulation,

visibility, and authority. Haussmann's boulevards in Paris provided a powerful model, and in districts such as Galata and Beyoğlu, straight avenues framed by masonry buildings came to signify modernity. However, these interventions did not produce a uniform urban order; rather, they introduced a differentiated spatial regime in which modernization unfolded unevenly across the city.

With the Tanzimat Edict of 1839, the Ottoman government took an increasingly active role in urban space to maintain public order and ensure social welfare. The *Ebniye Nizamnamesi* (Building Regulations) of 1848, which provided for standardization of street widths, building alignment and fire safety measures, was part of these reforms. It was a law designed to discipline Istanbul's organic street life in line with Western urban principles. These new standards have become particularly important in the reconstruction of neighborhoods devastated by fire. In the nineteenth century, authorities interpreted several large fires across Istanbul as an opportunity to modernize street development. During the town's reconstruction following the Great Fire of 1870, and to accommodate the growing population, extensive stone promenades, wider avenues, and parallel streets were constructed. These interventions reflect a new image that contrasts the old wooden town with its narrow streets and integrates open, car-oriented urban spaces similar to those in Western cities. The introduction of European-style squares, particularly in areas such as Galata and Beyoğlu, has significantly impacted the city's physical fabric. This article argues that the reconstruction of Beyoğlu's streets did not resolve urban disorder but reorganized it, producing a spatially uneven pattern of infrastructure, service provision, and environmental conditions.

The analysis here proceeds through a threefold methodological approach. First, it identifies recurring references to street conditions, infrastructure, and environmental disturbance in Ottoman archival records and the francophone press, treating them not as isolated observations but as structured forms of problem articulation. Second, these references are situated within the urban fabric of Beyoğlu, allowing the reconstruction of spatial patterns of intervention, neglect, and uneven service provision. Third, the analysis traces how such problem-sites were translated into municipal action, examining when interventions occurred, when they did not and how these divergences reveal the selective operation of urban governance. Rather than treating sources as descriptive accounts, the article reads them as records of how urban space became legible, governable, and unevenly organized through administrative practice. This approach allows the analysis to move from isolated observations to patterned forms of intervention, linking micro-level disruptions to broader structures of urban governance.

Urban Disorder and the Limits of Pre-Fire Infrastructure

A city is composed of a complex stratum and an integrated web of practices. The spatial character of a place informs us about its history, culture, and natural environment, while also revealing the economic, political, and social characteristics of its inhabitants.¹ Urban space in Beyoğlu, in this sense, did not simply reflect social structure; it actively organized it through uneven access to infrastructure and services, shaping the urban fabric. We can understand how, in Ottoman Istanbul, social groups were divided into well-defined geographical areas within the city that developed over centuries, particularly along religious lines. Certain areas in a city offer opportunities to engage in the labor market, the informal economy, and the workforce, as well as to interact with diverse groups. This way of life in a community includes institutions that protect individuals from social exclusion and enhance cohesion, albeit within a limited social and geographical context.²

Groups of different ethnicities, religions, and nationalities that made up the population did not regularly align with the social structure in terms of wealth distribution and social status; however, these groups commonly preferred to settle in specific city districts.³ Beyoğlu was a predominantly Christian community whose needs differed significantly from those of the surrounding area in terms of religion, lifestyle, and business activity. The rise of Beyoğlu as a trading hub in the nineteenth century, along with its extensive dealings with the far-flung relations of the Ottoman Empire, prompted people to demand public policy intervention to improve their quality of life—this increased pressure on city policies for local services.

Improving local services in Beyoğlu was a matter of symbolizing international prestige and pride for municipal authorities. Istanbul, the Ottoman capital, was not only the principal focus of the nineteenth-century new economy but also had an efficient network of information and communication.⁴ Beyoğlu was the multicultural and cosmopolitan center of Istanbul, thanks to its location on the

¹ Nilay Özlü, “A Modernization Utopia: Galata and Pera during the Late Ottoman Era”, *Aurum Journal of Engineering Systems and Architecture*, Volume 3, Issue 1, 2019, p. 114.

² Gideon Bolt, Jack Burgers and Ronald van Kempen, “On the Social Significance of Spatial Location; Spatial Segregation and Social Inclusion”, *Netherlands Journal of Housing and the Built Environment*, Volume 13, Issue 1, 1998, p. 85.

³ Irem Maro Kırış, “Re-Exploring Late Ottoman Buildings in Today’s Istanbul”, *International Journal of Architectural Research*, Volume 7, Issue 2, 2013, p. 318.

⁴ M. Burak Buluttekın, “A City Right at the Core of Global, Political, Economical and Social Changes of the 19th Century: Istanbul”, *Dicle Üniversitesi Hukuk Fakültesi Dergisi*, Volume 19, Issue 30–31, 2014, p. 156.

Golden Horn and its modern Western-style neighborhoods. As a European city in the heart of the East, particularly so in the eyes of foreigners, it separated itself from Istanbul, where Muslims resided.⁵ In the Ottoman Empire, having a foreign nationality was considered a sign of superiority, and the capitulations created a privileged class of foreigners.⁶

During the 1800s, the Ottoman state's economy was largely dependent on imports, which significantly affected the social welfare and capital formation in cities. The capital's energetic urban life contributed to high population density and the upward trend of the economy. Despite this, Istanbul's infrastructure was causing many problems for urbanization.⁷ As a commercial hub, Beyoğlu transformed into a pioneering area in Istanbul during the second half of the century. The area developed urban innovations that served as a model for the rest of the city's planning.⁸ Between the Tanzimat in 1839 and the proclamation of the Second Constitutional Monarchy in 1908, significant shifts in the administrative structure and social organization of Istanbul reflected themselves in the physical space.⁹

In the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution brought radical changes to street design. Growing city populations, rising demand for heavy transportation, and urgent worldwide attention to healthcare issues required greater order in street layouts and greater organizational efficiency. In this context, Haussmann's plan for the redevelopment of Paris, which began in the mid-nineteenth century and extended beyond street construction, was one of those pivotal turning points for streets. Major thoroughfares also bear the marks of this process. Open, broad boulevards, along with modern infrastructure, became characteristic elements of a European city.

To make urban modernization appealing, officials believed it was necessary to impose a new composition entirely in line with Western municipalities in

⁵ Seza Sinanlar, "19. Yüzyıl İstanbulu'nun Resim Üretim Ortamı Pera", in Feridun Emecen (ed.), *İmparatorluk Başkentinden Kültür Başkentine İstanbul*, Kitabevi Yayınları, İstanbul, 2011, p. 363.

⁶ Rinaldo Marmara, *Osmanlı Başkentinde Bir Levanten Senti Galata-Pera*, Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, İstanbul, 2019, p. 31.

⁷ Pınar Bayram, "19. Yüzyıl Osmanlı Devleti'nde Kentleşme: Yönetmelik Reformları ile Osmanlı Aydınlarının Kent Üzerine İzlenimlerine Dayalı Karşılaştırmalı Bir İnceleme", *LAÜ Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, Volume 8, Issue 2, 2017, p. 228.

⁸ Asiye Nisa Kartal, "Changes, Losses, and Challenges on Transformation of the Urban Place: A Narrative on İstiklal Street, Istanbul from the 1900s Until Today", *Urbe. Revista Brasileira de Gestão Urbana*, Volume 13, 2021, p. 4.

⁹ Melis Bilgiç, "Osmanlı Kentlerinde 19. Yüzyıldaki Dönüşümler: İstanbul, Fener Örneği", *Meltem: İzmir Akdeniz Akademisi Dergisi*, Issue 6, 2019, p. 68.

general and with those of Paris in particular. Seeking to address the municipal problems that had emerged since Istanbul's incorporation as a municipality in 1854, the Ottoman government established the Municipal Commission (İntizâm-ı Şehir Komisyonu) in 1856 and founded the Sixth Municipal Department the following year.¹⁰ Four years later, the commission intimated some proposals to the government. These tasks included erecting pavements, installing drainage and water pipes, lighting the streets, establishing an accounting institution, and collecting taxes from the population.¹¹

Islamic urban planning in Ottoman cities had a significant influence on architecture; neighborhoods of different social and economic classes naturally mingled, creating a coherent link between individual communities and the broader society. For better or worse, the narrow, winding streets of these rundown cities, with their dense populations, were the main conduits for social interaction. In particular, the changes of the nineteenth century brought about several rapid socioeconomic developments in Istanbul, which became a center of unstable political and economic affairs. Istanbul gained international recognition as a world capital during the Tanzimat period and underwent a major urban transformation that significantly reshaped the city. The same Westernization, which was more profound and distinctive, was also evident in Beyoğlu. Renovation in the area focused precisely on the areas that had suffered trauma, destroyed by disasters and social disruptions. Such a dense reconstruction not only altered and redefined the material environment it surrounded but also demonstrated itself as a dynamic force behind the rise of a new middle class within the bourgeois community, which would reconfigure the region's socioeconomic ecology.¹²

Tekeli highlighted five major problems in Ottoman cities, including Istanbul, during the latter half of the nineteenth century. First, the reconstruction of the city's central part was driven by new institutions and organizations founded on new economic relations within the city, along with their administrative innovations. Second, there was a shift toward new forms of housing differentiation arising from the social stratification accompanying the economic

¹⁰ Yasemin Avcı, "Tanzimat Döneminde Osmanlı Belediyeciliği Üzerine Karşılaştırmalı Analizler", *Pamukkale Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, Issue 24, 2016, pp. 168–169.

¹¹ Osman Nuri Ergin, *The Historical Development of Local Government and Urbanism in Turkey*, Marmara Belediyeler Birliği Kültür Yayınları, İstanbul, 2016, p. 67. See also, "Sokaklara Dair Nizâmname", *Düstur*, Tertip 1, Cilt 2, Matbaa-yı Âmire, Dersaadet, 15 Safer 1290 (14 Nisan 1873), pp. 478–490.

¹² Sevin Aksoyulu, "Transformation of the Urban Patterns of Istanbul under the Effects of the Modernization during the Ottoman Period", *International Journal of Architectural Heritage*, Volume 1, Issue 3, 2017, p. 304.

and administrative restructuring. Third was a series of new residential neighborhoods in the burgeoning city. Fourth was the need for new infrastructure and urban services (such as roads and transportation) demanded by a new type of urban form, and fifth was the need to reduce the number of fires, which broke out too often because most of the city was constructed of wood.¹³

As Jane Jacobs stated, streets and their sidewalks are the main public places, the most vital organs of a city.¹⁴ Because the street mirrors the lives of the people. Behind what we see on a street lies a rich history, sociology, geography, and psychology.¹⁵ In the modern era, central governments have reinterpreted space. They have reconceived urban streets as a physical space and cultural concept in which users can perform speed, which means that they needed to exclude slow-moving users from roads by either constructing large-scale streets or pavements.¹⁶ The urban design of Western European cities addressed this problem through public memorials that used symmetry, axial perspective, distant views and streets or street-based views, in contrast to the views in Ottoman architecture.¹⁷ In the late 1830s, however, the short, crowded streets of Istanbul were irregular in their layout and width, with frequent detours and dead ends.¹⁸

Consequently, these constituted the primary reforms implemented in Istanbul during the reform period: the widening and upgrading of streets and avenues, and the creation of a more functional urban structure through improved planning. Pervious pavement, wide, light-filled streets, sidewalks paved with contemporary technology, traffic-capable roads, and solid-brick buildings were the fundamental components of the urban fabric. Istanbul's central government

¹³ İlhan Tekeli, *İstanbul'un Planlanmasının ve Gelişmesinin Öyküsü*, Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, İstanbul, 2013, p. 41.

¹⁴ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Vintage Books, New York, 1961, p. 29.

¹⁵ Hafize Şahin and S. Dilek Yalçın Çelik, "Gündelik Yaşam ve Toplumsal Hayat Perspektifinden Bir Mikro Tarih Denemesi: Şinasi'nin Kaleminden XIX. Yüzyılda İstanbul Sokaklarına Bakış", *Erdem*, Issue 58, 2010, p. 295.

¹⁶ Angela Jain and Massimo Moraglio, "Struggling for the Use of Urban Streets: Preliminary (Historical) Comparison between European and Indian Cities", *International Journal of the Commons*, Volume 8, Issue 2, 2014, p. 517.

¹⁷ Maurice Cerasi, *The Istanbul Divanyolu: A Case Study in Ottoman Urbanity and Architecture*, Verlag, Würzburg, 2016, p. 153.

¹⁸ Zeynep Çelik, *The Remaking of Istanbul: Portrait of an Ottoman City in the Nineteenth Century*, University of California Press, California, 1993, p. 4.

invested heavily in infrastructure development.¹⁹ *Şehremâneti* (Istanbul Municipality), established in 1855, played a significant role in institutionalizing the Beyoğlu street scene. It has taken over road construction, paving, street lighting, and cleaning. During this period, the idea that streets should be designed to serve as a forum for representation, sanitation, and transport gained traction. The municipality planned new roads, street widening projects, and other tangible improvements to enhance the urban environment.

However, the grumblings about street revitalization persisted for years. *Journal de Constantinople* reported that Istanbul's asphalt was of poor quality; the streets were always dirty, and on some occasions, they were impassable. The only option was to remove the entire asphalt system and install a new one that avoided its drawbacks. Given that Muslims in Córdoba began using paving in 850, and various techniques were experimented with throughout Europe, an eclectic solution to street and avenue improvement could be the cure.²⁰

The 1870 Fire as a Moment of Urban Reconfiguration

Edhem Eldem's account of Istanbul's nineteenth-century integration into the world capitalist system finds a particularly visible expression in Beyoğlu, where the district emerged as the empire's occidental interface, shaped by new socio-political formations and expanding commercial networks.²¹ By the 1840s, neighboring Galata had consolidated its role as a major trading port, while the circulation of imported goods—visibly displayed along the Grand Rue de Péra—reconfigured urban space as a site of consumption, exchange, and imperial projection.²²

A significant turning point was the Crimean War (1853–1856), which brought in a large number of foreigners and well-known figures to Beyoğlu. This, in turn, fueled the demand for a well-paved street system, streetlights, and numbered residences. In the winter, Beyoğlu was like an impassable fortress for pedestrians. Those who left their residences were in danger of sinking knee-deep into mud or of twisting an ankle. Tensions rose even more at night. By taking advantage of

¹⁹ Zafer Orha, *Osmanlı Devleti'nde Modern Belediyeciliğin Doğuşu ve Altıncı Daire-i Belediye Örneği* (Unpublished Master Thesis), İstanbul Üniversitesi, İstanbul, 2008, p. 70.

²⁰ "Intérieur", *Journal de Constantinople*, Volume 4, Issue 206, 24 December 1849, p. 1.

²¹ Edhem Eldem, "Istanbul: From Imperial to Peripheralized Capital", in Edhem Eldem, Daniel Goffman and Bruce Masters (eds.), *The Ottoman City between East and West: Aleppo, Izmir, and Istanbul*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999, p. 139.

²² İlke Tekin and Asiye Akgün Gültekin, "Rebuilding of Beyoğlu-İstiklal Street: A Comparative Analysis of Urban Transformation Through Sections Along the Street 2004–2014", *METU Journal of the Faculty of Architecture*, Volume 34, Issue 2, 2017, p. 159.

the darkness, criminals were spreading all over the streets.²³ In many places, the city was deprived of drafts, for the rich, who covered the streets with their buildings, left the filth and darkness to the poor and strangers. There were thefts, murders, and abominable crimes committed, which the darkness encouraged.²⁴ In Pera and Galata, inhabited exclusively by Christians, not a day passed without hearing of robberies and murders.²⁵

Due to their location in a depression between hills, Beyoğlu and Galata roads were in poor condition, with unpaved areas turning into dirty pools of stagnant water when it rained. Such recurring breakdowns point to the absence of a sustainable maintenance system rather than to a failure of individual interventions. Animals carrying construction materials for new structures further aggravated the situation by applying extremely high pressures on the road. When work on stone buildings was discontinued during the harsh winters, rain often flooded open areas or scattered loose building materials and waste stone across the middle of the public way.²⁶ For example, the streets of Beyoğlu were impassable due to excavation and piles of earth, concrete, and paving stones, making the winter of 1855–1856 a nightmare for the locals.²⁷ Leveling the surface, paving it with fine, compacted gravel, rounding its profile slightly downward from the center, and building sidewalks of good width on both sides, with a lower graded overall profile than that of the street and covered by paved gutters or drainage channels below it, and proper, well-compacted, smooth cubic block gutter stones at its top could have made the streets ideal.²⁸

Beyoğlu was the center of the city's European section, and the foreign (mostly Western European) population used it as a hub for trade, finance, and recreation. In Beyoğlu, embassies were the center of life. The area was inhabited by a significant foreign population, which contributed significantly to the historical and urban development of Beyoğlu.²⁹ However, it was not immune to fires due to its masonry structures and was often ravaged by them, along with almost the

²³ “Intérieur: Pavage, Éclairage et Numérotage des Rues et des Maisons de Péra”, *Journal de Constantinople*, Volume 10, Issue 573, 15 February 1855, p. 1.

²⁴ Louis Enault, *Constantinople et la Turquie*, Librairie de L. Hachette, Paris, 1855, p. 102.

²⁵ Abdolonyme Ubicini, *La Turquie Actuelle*, Librairie de L. Hachette, Paris, 1855, p. 329.

²⁶ “Intérieur”, *Journal de Constantinople*, Volume 6, Issue 81, 19 January 1851, p. 2.

²⁷ Brendan Freely and John Freely, *Galata, Pera, Beyoğlu: A Biography*, Yapı Kredi Yayınları, İstanbul, 2023, p. 109.

²⁸ “Intérieur”, *Journal de Constantinople*, Volume 6, Issue 81, 19 January 1851, p. 2.

²⁹ Müge Özkan Özbek, “Tarihsel Süreçlerde Taksim Meydanı ve Beyoğlu Bölgesinin Morfolojik Evrimi ve Sentaktik Analizleri”, *Tasarım Kuram*, Volume 17, Issue 32, 2021, pp. 35–36.

entire city of Istanbul. In 1831, the left-hand side of the main road between Taksim and Galata was destroyed by fire; again in 1839, and the section Sakızağacı was destroyed by 1856. Nevertheless, Beyoğlu's worst disaster was the 1870 fire.³⁰

On June 5, 1870, around two in the afternoon, a fire broke out in a house on Valideçeşme Street in Taksim. Driven by strong winds, the flames quickly intensified and engulfed the entire neighborhood. According to the Greek journal, Neologos, the fire broke out in a Greek house. Since the family had left for Kağıthane on a Sunday, nobody was home when the fire started. Two theories were put forward regarding the cause of the fire. The first possibility was that flames spread from a stove left unextinguished. The second was that the Virgin Mary lamp, a customary feature in Greek homes, had fallen over due to the wind blowing into the room through an open window, igniting the surrounding furniture.³¹



Figure 1- View of Pera fire from Petits Champs. Source: SALT Research Archive, code: AHISTBEYO102.

Despite the efforts of the local fire brigade, the flames spread from Macar and Tarlabası to Taksim. One end of the fire reached the street formerly known as İstiklal Street, located opposite Galatasaray High School (Mekteb-i Sultânî). Another branch ran down to the Bülbülderesi, extending from there to the Emin Bey Mosque and from the Süruri border to the Aynalıçeşme area, including Galatasaray High School and the British Embassy. A separate branch has moved

³⁰ Orhan Türker, *Pera'dan Beyoğlu'na: İstanbul'un Levanten ve Azınlık Semtinin Hikâyesi*, Sel Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 2016, p. 18.

³¹ Cem Doğan, *İtfâyye-i Hümayûn: Osmanlı İstanbulu'nda Yangın, Modernleşme ve Kent Toplumu (1871–1921)*, Libra Yayınları, İstanbul, 2019, p. 61.

towards Kalyoncu Kulluğu, burning many of the houses in its path. The Italian Embassy, along with over 500 houses and shops, both brick and wooden, was saved from the flames. Still, the fire had already destroyed approximately three thousand houses and shops.³²

To address this, the Ottoman government responded quickly, setting up tents and providing food, water, and other essential supplies. Aid commissions collected funds. People sent aid directly or through ambassadors from all parts of the empire and from abroad. The disaster disrupted social life, families perished, fire left children stranded, and some scammers and thieves took advantage of the ensuing chaos. As this activity continued, the authorities destroyed the remaining buildings to contain the fire, and the Sultan ordered his officials to draw up maps. Thereafter, the Ottoman government rebuilt Beyoğlu from the ground up, and as a result, it has reached its present appearance.³³

As far as the municipality is concerned, we can assume that this fire was considered a regrettable but necessary shake-up for altering the urban structure. This idea is supported by numerous rumors circulating among the general public, alleging that members of the municipal government deliberately set fires to clear land for new construction projects. In 1906, Alexander van Millingen wrote that:³⁴

“Owing to the narrowness and steepness of the streets of Constantinople, the transportation of heavy loads through the city by means of wheeled vehicles has always been a difficult, and often an impossible, undertaking. Much has been done in recent years to widen and grade the chief thoroughfares. The authorities are even accused of having occasionally secured that improvement by setting fire to the houses along an old, narrow but picturesque lane to take advantage of the law, which states that when a house is rebuilt, the municipality has the right to appropriate a part of the old site to broaden the public way, without giving compensation to the owner of the ground.”

Corroborating evidence to support such accusations is almost unreachable. However, there is no denying that these incidents significantly influenced Beyoğlu's architectural landscape over the course of the century. It took considerable time to complete the reconstruction in the district after the fire. The Ottoman-era urban planning and redevelopment of Beyoğlu occurred in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, following the establishment of the basic legal

³² Mustafa Cezar, *Osmanlı Devrinde İstanbul Yapılarında Tabirbat Yapan Yangınlar ve Tabii Afetler*, Berksoy Matbaası, İstanbul, 1963, p. 51.

³³ Merve Cemile Keyvanoğlu, “1870 Büyük Beyoğlu Yangını”, *OTAM*, Issue 41, 2017, p. 188.

³⁴ Alexander van Millingen, *Constantinople*, A. & C. Black, London, 1906, p. 206.

and municipal frameworks. One might assume that the government was not interested in street planning, street extensions, or development concerning dead-end streets at that time.³⁵

Many disputes arose following the municipality's decision to purchase the damaged parts of Beyoğlu from local landlords. Those with property suffered severe wealth losses after a fire, leading the privileged classes to disdain the town's new cadastral plans. Recovering the area destroyed by the fire at low cost could now make it a business-friendly Beyoğlu. Inadequate street width and access were also partially resolved during reconstruction. Walking was the only practical way to get around Galata and Pera because of the hills, but horseback riding was possible elsewhere in Istanbul, which was flat. So arduous was this journey that the amply inhabited did not change places, unless they were compelled to do so.³⁶

Generally speaking, Istanbul's street system was narrow, with main streets and alleys ending in cul-de-sacs in residential areas. As Turkish officials rebuilt and reorganized the city to cope with the new and expanding traffic filling its streets, the network of railways and roads transformed the whole country.³⁷ To this end, the Sixth Municipal District undertook numerous projects within its service area that would have a crucial impact on urban morphogenesis. These projects included tearing down mud-curtain walls, expanding graves and docks, lighting up streets, repairing the Galata Bridge, and constructing masonry houses rather than wooden ones.³⁸ However, it proved impossible to prevent the fires. Théophile Gautier described a fire in Beyoğlu, which he had come across on a trip to Istanbul in the mid-nineteenth century:³⁹

“Three or four nights later, Pera rekindled from the other end, toward the great Field of the Dead (le Grand Champ-des-Morts); about twenty wooden houses burned like matches, sending showers of sparks and flames into the blue night sky, despite the water with which they were being flooded. The main street of Pera presented the most sinister aspect; companies of *sakas*, their pumps on their shoulders, were trotting along it, knocking over

³⁵ Sinan Çakır, *1870 Beyoğlu Yangını ve Sonrasındaki İmar Faaliyetleri* (Unpublished Master Thesis), İstanbul 29 Mayıs Üniversitesi, İstanbul, 2019, pp. 9–10.

³⁶ Nassau W. Senior, *A Journal Kept in Turkey and Greece in the Autumn of 1857 and the Beginning of 1858*, Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, London, 1859, p. 14.

³⁷ Sevin Aksoylu, “Transformation of the Urban Patterns of Istanbul under the Effects of the Modernization during the Ottoman Period”, *International Journal of Architectural Heritage*, Volume 1, Issue 3, 2017, p. 303.

³⁸ Figen Orçun Kafescioğlu, “19. Yüzyılın İkinci Yarısından Günümüze Galata/Karaköy’de Kent Morfolojisi ve Yapı Türlerinin İncelenmesi”, *İdealkent*, Volume 7, Issue 18, 2016, p. 199.

³⁹ Théophile Gautier, *Constantinople*, Michel Lévy Frères, Paris, 1853, pp. 265–266.

everything in their path, as is their privilege, for they are ordered not to turn aside for anyone; *muhbir*s on horseback, followed by a squad of fierce valetaille running on foot behind them, like the Turkish Patrol of Decamps, cast strange silhouettes on the walls by the torchlight. The dogs, trampled underfoot, fled in packs, uttering plaintive howls; men and women passed by, bent under bundles; *seyis*es dragged frightened horses by the halters: it was terrible and beautiful. Fortunately, a few stone houses stopped the spread of the fire.”

Landscaping was at least as significant as, if not more so than, the structural and functional aspects of a street in densely populated urban areas. A detailed review of street trees, as published in *Servet-i Fünun*, provides evidence to support this claim. By emphasizing Paris's street trees, the author advocated constructing tree-lined streets and thoroughfares in Istanbul's highly trafficked areas.⁴⁰ It was the nineteenth century (particularly its second half) that saw widespread public health problems in the Ottoman Empire. So, it was not much of a surprise when nearly all the petitions submitted by Beyoğlu's residents, who repeatedly requested street hygiene, regular garbage collection, and the installation of organized sewerage, concerned their own streets. Since they produced fresh air for people's homes, streets were oxygen-rich goldmines.⁴¹

According to late-nineteenth-century reports, Beyoğlu was far from modern urban standards. The streets of Beyoğlu have served as a test site for the local government. Numerous problems, including budget deficits, difficulties in raising new resources, poor infrastructure and related organizational planning issues, continue to hinder street development. Beyoğlu, except for the main street, had neither streetlights nor decent pavement. Early-season rains often disrupted transportation.⁴² In an article published in 1871, Basiretçi Ali Efendi, a renowned journalist, observed that rain was falling so frequently that some people were struggling to get by, hiring porters to take them to their destinations instead of walking and getting wet. Prevailing social norms allowed only men to participate in this process.⁴³

⁴⁰ “Sokak Ağaçları”, *Servet-i Fünun*, Volume 5, Issue 124, 27 July 1893, p. 310.

⁴¹ Server Kamil, *Hıfzıssıhhat*, Vol. 2, Milli Matbaa, İstanbul, 1927, p. 236.

⁴² Nur Akın, *19. Yüzyılın İkinci Yarısında Galata ve Pera*, Literatür Yayınları, İstanbul, 2011, p. 103.

⁴³ Basiretçi Ali Efendi, *İstanbul Mektupları*, prepared by Nuri Sağlam, Kitabevi Yayınları, İstanbul, 2001, pp. 26–27.

Reconstruction and the Redistribution of Urban Disorder

Cities are not uniform entities but composite formations structured through uneven spatial logics and differentiated patterns of development.⁴⁴ In the case of Istanbul—long a diplomatic, political, and commercial nexus—this complexity was continuously reshaped by processes of expansion, transformation, and disruption. Disasters, in particular, functioned not merely as moments of destruction but as critical junctures that enabled large-scale intervention, reorganization, and redefinition of urban space. Reconstruction, therefore, operated not simply as recovery but as a process through which actors selectively reconfigured existing urban forms and produced new spatial hierarchies.⁴⁵

Istanbul's urban pattern, in this sense, was characterized by narrow, winding streets that often ended in cul-de-sacs. Residential neighborhoods had gradually emerged around mosques, churches, synagogues, and other local landmarks, producing an irregular urban fabric that reflected historical settlement patterns rather than centralized planning. This inherited street network posed growing challenges for circulation, access, sanitation, and municipal service provision as the city expanded during the nineteenth century. Street maintenance and construction activities consequently assumed greater importance with the new interventions introduced in the late Ottoman period. Municipal authorities accelerated efforts to reshape the urban environment through street widening, paving, illumination, drainage improvements, and the introduction of more regular street alignments, seeking to facilitate movement and improve the functioning of the city's expanding infrastructure.⁴⁶

In practice, however, the fires, which often destroyed entire neighborhoods, never altered the crooked street network, as reconstruction in burned areas always followed pre-existing paths until the catastrophe of 1870. Such grotesque figures were everywhere and followed no pattern whatsoever.⁴⁷ Even then, narrow, dirty streets and a lack of transportation infrastructure were in plain sight as the ultimate proof of the problematic nature of urban modernization in the

⁴⁴ Rémi Louf and Marc Barthélemy, "A Typology of Street Patterns", *Journal of the Royal Society Interface*, Volume 11, 2014, p. 5.

⁴⁵ Mustafa Malhut, "Istanbul's Ordeal with Disaster: The British Embassy-House and Sir Henry Elliot in the Pera Fire of 1870", *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 49, Issue 5, 2022, p. 1.

⁴⁶ Serkan Şenel and Abdullah Ekinci, "19. Yüzyıl Osmanlı İstanbul'unda Sokak: Yapı ve Değişim", *Bingöl Araştırmaları Dergisi*, Volume 8, Issue 1, 2021, pp. 111–112.

⁴⁷ Murat Gül, *The Emergence of Modern Istanbul: Transformation and Modernisation of a City*, I. B. Tauris, London and New York, 2009, p. 14.

capital of the Ottoman Empire.⁴⁸ Regardless of traffic volume, the best streets were those with inexpensive, easy-to-repair surfaces that did not deteriorate or swell.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the cumbersome nature of municipal bureaucracy often hampered the development of the logistical infrastructure needed to pave the streets. As Stamboul said, Beyoğlu's main street was lopsided, “*paved with good intentions*” like hell's roads.⁵⁰



Figure 2 - 1870's Fire map of Beyoğlu⁵¹

In fact, authorities established several legal regulations governing the urban fabric and organizing residential areas to accommodate the growing population both before and after the creation of the Sixth Municipal Department. The laws, while on the books, were seldom enforced. Even with the creation of individual municipalities to improve the efficient distribution and implementation of services within urban areas, as the widespread unrest in Beyoğlu demonstrated, the idea of a modern municipal government remained very distant. However, one should not overlook entirely the fact that the Sixth Municipal Department contributed to Beyoğlu's structural transformation. Grande Rue de Péra is an example of post-fire development, as it was expanded after the 1870 fire, which

⁴⁸ Koca Mehmet Kentel, *Assembling 'Cosmopolitan' Pera: An Infrastructural History of Late Ottoman Istanbul* (Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis), University of Washington, Washington, 2018, p. 11.

⁴⁹ M. B., “Asrı Şehir Sokakları”, *Fen Âlemi*, Volume 2, Issue 16, 1926, p. 280.

⁵⁰ “La Rue de Péra”, *Stamboul*, 18 September 1879, p. 1.

⁵¹ Dr. Brunetti, *Épisode de la catastrophe de Péra*, Constantinople, Typographie et Lithographie Centrales, 1870, p. 3.

began in the Taksim area and burned much of Tarlabası, Taksim, the Grande Rue de Péra itself, and Galatasaray, including Mekteb-i Sultanî.⁵²

According to Jacobs, for a city street to be safe for strangers—to be an asset in itself, rather than needing protection—three main conditions must be met. First, there must be a clear demarcation between public and private spaces, and the latter must be maintained. Second, the people who are the natural proprietors of the street must be present. Third, the streets must have busy sidewalks. The presence of more people on the street strengthened informal surveillance by increasing the number of observers and encouraging those in adjacent buildings to watch the street.⁵³ The area between the building front and the upland is an essential element in a street's image and character. Ground-floor uses and the public pavement formed a mutually reinforcing relationship. Urban designers design street frontages to integrate them well into their surroundings, enhance streetscapes, and foster a sense of connection between the street and the building, which they consider a key objective.⁵⁴

Following the devastating 1870 fire that burned much of Beyoğlu, attempts at urban renewal continued for decades. To satisfy the demands of contemporary urbanity, the municipality asked that streets passing Jacobs' three tests be widened and opened, or those that did not be rearranged. Revitalization, of course, also had to include European-style buildings and beloved places like restaurants, pubs, cafés, clubs, arcades, and traditional inns. Beyoğlu was a cosmopolitan and affluent area, home to a significant number of foreigners, including Levantines, and, to a much lesser extent, Muslims connected to other communities through the constantly evolving business and entertainment sectors. The 1870 fire temporarily disrupted traffic on the district's main roads. It caused significant destruction to many streets, necessitating numerous interventions by the Sixth District.

Subsequently, the Beyoğlu municipal authorities faced a major problem in the streets. This problem was not only due to a lack of funds, an uneven workforce, or a lack of knowledge in the field, but also to residents thinking creatively when seeking services in the neighborhood. Both Muslims and non-Muslims who made up the vast majority of the population in Beyoğlu were either immigrants or had previous exposure to the superstructure and urban infrastructure of large

⁵² Enno Maessen, *Representing Modern Istanbul: Urban History and International Institutions in Twentieth Century Beyoğlu*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2022, p. 16.

⁵³ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Vintage Books, New York, 1961, p. 35.

⁵⁴ Adel M. Remali et al., "Street Quality, Street Life, Street Centrality", in Laura Vaughan (ed.), *Suburban Urbanities: Suburbs and the Life of the High Street*, UCL Press, London, 2015, p. 107.

European cities. They desired that Beyoğlu, if not all of Istanbul, be refurbished by a liberal and pro-government administration in the image of Paris, London, Berlin, and Vienna.

Along with efforts to classify the street network, the city implemented a new rule requiring all development to be carried out under city-approved plans. If anyone—a person or a company, for example—wanted to develop an empty piece of land, they would submit plans to the government, which would consider whether it served the "public good." We also required replanning for the burned-out areas. Following the fire, the Sixth District began reconstructing Beyoğlu. We requested an initial fire map to help assess the damage. The fire gutted many premises. Psychological damage was also significant, and the fire burned out most of the district's eastern part. Once the initial shock of the disaster had worn off, authorities were quick to tally the reconstruction costs. They presented a detailed memorandum to the Sublime Porte outlining the costs of building new roads and establishing essential utilities. The total cost to restore Beyoğlu's infrastructure and compensate for expropriated land amounts to 23,461,157 piastres, with an additional 2.5 million piastres required to widen the Grand Rue de Péra from 10.20 to 13.60 meters.⁵⁵

The municipal engineering department prepared a project to support the redefinition of street boundaries. This followed extensive street studies conducted to meet the demand for wider streets and intersections and to improve urban mobility. Expanding Beyoğlu through land expropriation, which is fraught with predictable socio-political difficulties, was also considered. On a larger scale, many believed that rearranging the streets would both standardize and significantly expand the coverage of public areas while also reducing enclaves or private spaces, thus transforming the urban environment more broadly.⁵⁶

Although the City Council and the Sixth District's early coordination was bumpy, they managed to widen the streets. However, the absence of a systematic approach has allowed chronic problems to reemerge. Accessibility and longevity soon became major issues: the streets were initially constructed with substandard materials and craftsmanship. So they rotted quickly, and rain and heavy vehicles washed or drove them into big floods. As Ahmet Rasim noted, indeed, streets were the places where people fell and got their heads cut open, their legs broken, and their arms injured.⁵⁷ These incidents were not accidental but reflect the

⁵⁵ *BOA*, İ.DH., 623/43351, 27 October 1870.

⁵⁶ *BOA*, İ.DH., 618/43001, 16 August 1870.

⁵⁷ Ahmet Rasim, *Şehir Mektupları*, prepared by Nuri Akbayar, Oğlak Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 2017, p. 365.

structural incompatibility between expanding urban mobility and inadequate street design. The materials used to build streets and avenues quickly wore out, leading to frequent accidents involving pedestrians and horse-drawn carriages. A news report from 1875 states that when it rained, the street's paving material became very slippery and dangerous for horses.⁵⁸

One of the recurring complaints from residents was the ineffectiveness of municipal interventions aimed at improving Beyoğlu's streets and drainage infrastructure. Measures intended to facilitate circulation and address persistent sanitary problems frequently generated new inconveniences and hazards. In one instance, the municipality ordered the excavation of ditches along both sides of Taksim Avenue as part of a drainage project. Contemporary observers complained that these works offered little relief from the problems they were meant to solve and instead created additional difficulties for pedestrians and vehicles, particularly during periods of heavy rain and poor visibility. The risks became apparent when a two-horse carriage traveling at night along Dinar Street overturned after falling into one of the ditches. The accident left the horses injured and caused substantial damage to the vehicle, illustrating how efforts to improve urban infrastructure could themselves become sources of danger within the streetscape.⁵⁹

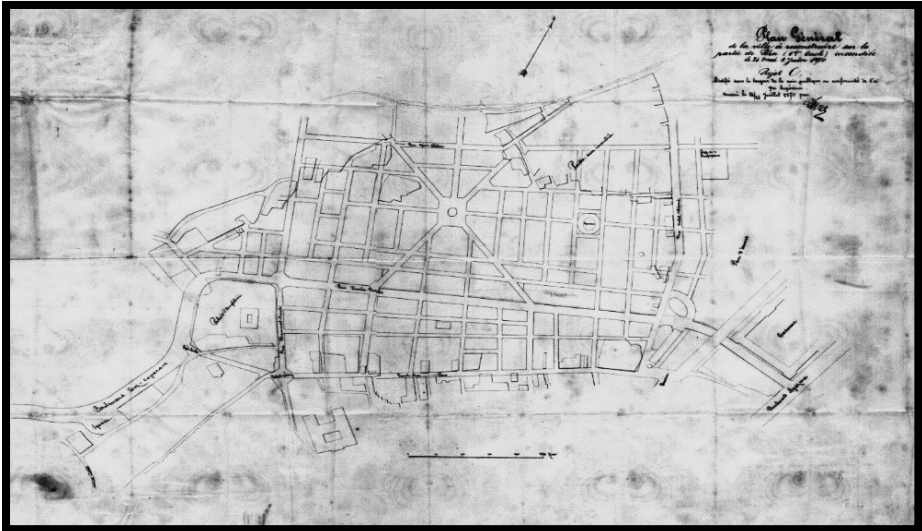


Figure 3- The levelling map of post-fire Beyoğlu⁶⁰

⁵⁸ "Le Pavage de Constantinople", *Stamboul*, Volume 1, Issue 44, 6 October 1875, p. 2.

⁵⁹ "La Municipalité du VI Cercle", *Stamboul*, 9 November 1876, p. 1.

⁶⁰ *BOA*, İ.DH., 623/43351, November 19, 1870.

It appears that the city authorities were often uncertain about which materials to use to reconstruct Beyoğlu's streets following the fire. One of the few approaches to simplify the use of roadways was paving, particularly in areas with concentrated vehicle traffic and pedestrian footfall. Officials insisted on using cobblestone for street paving despite objections. In 1898, road surveyors from Glavani Street proposed paving the street with asphalt, which would serve as a meeting point for multiple streets. So were Venedik, Derviş, and Asmalımescit, lateral streets to the Grand Rue de Péra. The cobblestone was not strong enough to withstand vehicle traffic. However, laying these four streets with granite, rather than cobblestones, could have made them more durable and less expensive.⁶¹

Mis, one of the main thoroughfares in Beyoğlu, was not much different. Big, irregular stones surfaced this unpaved road, which was deep in mud and nearly impassable to vehicles. Since the builders laid the stones without a firm foundation, the soil and sand beneath could not hold them securely. Over time, the stones deteriorated and became unevenly distributed across the street.⁶² Indeed, traffic accidents such as these had become a part of daily life in Beyoğlu, a relatively advanced region. Some even included some compelling people. The German Ambassador, Baron Werther, and the British Ambassador, Sir Henry Elliot, left Beyoğlu to attend the Ottoman parliamentary meetings for the holiday. Upon reaching Şehzadebaşı Avenue, the carriage broke down, forcing the ambassadors to disembark. With no other carriage available, they were forced to walk through the muddy streets.⁶³

Like most of Istanbul, strolling the streets of Beyoğlu in winter took courage. Not only did the rain turn the streets into a swampy morass, but the slippery mud also caused accidents. As mentioned in an 1886 article lamenting the issue, anyone who went out after dark risked falling into two-meter-deep mud pools.⁶⁴ A decade after this complaint, authorities destroyed the wooden shanties on the Grand Rue de Péra in 1897, but they had not paved the surviving mud floor. An old lady had to take refuge in the mud to avoid being run over by an automobile. As she struggled to get out, she slipped in a foot of mud. She attempted to pull herself free, but with no success. Two people walking by rushed in to help her escape the mud-covered location. In another scene, a man had fallen into the

⁶¹ "Le Pavage des Rues Transversales de Péra", *Stamboul*, Volume 30, Issue 207, 9 September 1898, p. 1.

⁶² "Question de Pavage", *Stamboul*, Volume 32, Issue 121, 30 May 1900, p. 1.

⁶³ Basiretçi Ali Efendi, *İstanbul Mektupları*, prepared by Nuri Sağlam, Kitabevi Yayınları, İstanbul, 2001, p. 376.

⁶⁴ "La Municipalité", *Stamboul*, 23 December 1886, p. 1.

mud, injuring his elbow and ankle. Additionally, the ditches that filled up on the streets were essentially open sewers, stinking when it rained.⁶⁵

Street safety was also on the table. Although the streets of Beyođlu were not entirely without risk during the day, they were especially perilous at night due to inadequate lighting. Beyođlu, which is known for its 24-hour nightlife and small bars that act as "drinking joints," had a high rate of mugging, robbery, and pickpocketing. Moreover, the local authority's failures to light up numerous roads and thoroughfares, including some of its more popular streets, made them difficult to navigate—and all the more dangerous after dark. In 1875, residents of Jurnal Street (one of Beyođlu's famous streets) complained to the Stamboul newspaper. There had been no lighting in the street, and there had been a neglect of the footpaths.⁶⁶



*Figure 4- A street view in Beyođlu (1912)*⁶⁷

⁶⁵ "Un Pavage Indispensable", *Stamboul*, Volume 29, Issue 144, 16 December 1897, p. 1.

⁶⁶ "Plaintes", *Stamboul*, Volume 1, Issue 98, 9 December 1875, p. 1.

⁶⁷ D partement des Hauts-de-Seine, mus e Albert-Kahn, n . A1108.

People in the streets had to bear with animal carcasses, too. Not only did they represent visual pollution, but their stench was also sickeningly disgusting. Distressed by the issue, Basiretçi Ali Efendi had noted that the removal of the dead dog and cat bodies on the streets would be a notable success for the authorities.⁶⁸ For centuries, Istanbul's travelers and diplomats were astonished by the stray animals, mostly dogs, which threatened the cleanliness and safety of the streets. It was no easy thing to gain a foothold on the street without treading upon a dog or on its tail. As scavengers, they found the streets filled with mounds of scraped-up refuse. When they died, their carcasses were thrown into street middens or on vacant lots or even onto the sidewalks to lie there. There was an unsanitary situation on the streets due to the smell of dead bodies. Rotting animal carcasses were not the only concern; they also posed risks, including poor appearance, foul odors, and health hazards. The persistence of such conditions indicates that urban sanitation operated unevenly, producing zones of concentrated neglect rather than uniform regulation. The manure and liquid filth from living animals—particularly horses and other species—also fouled the roads. People were unable to get through the entrance of Kartal Street, near Galatasaray, because of the long string of horse-cabs with their horses. The street entrance had become a sewer because the horse owners did not wash their animals.⁶⁹

Garbage collection was often inefficient and sluggish. People often threw their garbage in the streets. Municipal workers, however, were too few in number to clean the entire district or disinclined to clear garbage beyond a specific geographical point. Therefore, the common practice was to leave discarded refuse in streets and empty lots for weeks or months. Most property owners were dumping their construction materials on the streets during the construction and repairs. In 1892, residents of Aşıyan, Sarnıç, and Rakkas Street had requested that the authorities remove the debris that had accumulated at Aşıklar Street, as it obstructed pedestrian traffic.⁷⁰ Likewise, Kabristan Street, which leads to the German Hospital—between Zappion School and Taksim Street—was blocked by mounds of debris. Ambulances carrying patients had to be rerouted because cars could not pass through the area. Even Dames de Sion had to turn around

⁶⁸ Basiretçi Ali Efendi, *İstanbul Mektupları*, prepared by Nuri Sağlam, Kitabevi Yayınları, İstanbul, 2001, p. 306.

⁶⁹ “L’État de nos Rues”, *Stamboul*, 18 August 1879, p. 2.

⁷⁰ BOA, DH.MKT., 2018/75, 8 November 1892.

the pickup service that it ran in the mornings for its younger students who were going to school at home.⁷¹

Finally—and perhaps the most concerning—were the sidewalks. Despite high demand, the sidewalks in Istanbul's Beyoğlu, a comparatively urbanized area, were in terrible shape. Interestingly, almost all newspapers and travelogues focused on the awful roads or even the complete absence of sidewalks, rather than the roads themselves. To put it briefly, Beyoğlu's streets faced problems beyond mere roadworks: egregious deficits in public infrastructure, the environment, and sanitation. Given the dilapidated condition of the streets, walking along a busy street, for example, required intense physical exercise. Derviş Street, where hundreds of people walked towards the Jardin des Petits-Champs, was another. Driving along this road was necessary only in emergencies because of its giant bumps.⁷²

Some documents suggest that the Sixth Department did not perform well in the development, servicing, and repair of Beyoğlu's streets and avenues after the fire. Şehremâneti was aware in 1901 that the roads of Istanbul were yet in a deplorable condition, and it ought seriously to have set about ameliorating them.⁷³ The roads could hardly contain the heavy traffic of wagons and people, even at the turn of the nineteenth century. Vehicle technology might be at fault here. However, it is also clear that city leaders did not know how to design streets that strike a balance between safety and capacity. In 1909, observers reported that freight carts and porters interfered with traffic in the Galata, Beyoğlu, Bâbüâlî, and Divanyolu districts.⁷⁴ Perhaps one of the most pleasing interventions for Beyoğlu residents, and even for those in Istanbul, amidst the infamous series of functional and landscape renovation projects, was the visit of many foreign monarchs to the city. Formal or informal, accommodating a foreign—and particularly Western—sovereign and their entourage was a flexion of considerable status. Officials thus rolled up their sleeves and set about a swift round of sprucing up, at least the urban sites where they had planned to visit. Preparations for the visit of the German Kaiser and his wife, who decided to visit Istanbul in 1889, included the refurbishment of streets:⁷⁵

⁷¹ “Nos Rues”, *Stamboul*, 14 November 1894, p. 1.

⁷² “L'Édilité”, *Stamboul*, 27 June 1895, p. 1.

⁷³ BOA, DH.MKT., 2450/54, 7 February 1901.

⁷⁴ BOA, DH.MUİ., 2/26, 3 September 1909.

⁷⁵ *Stamboul*, 24 October 1889, p. 1.

"Preparations for the visit of Their Majesties, the Emperor and Empress of Germany, are being carried out with enthusiasm." Not a single section of wall along the roads and main thoroughfares has been left unplastered. The old awnings over the shops have been replaced, and the poorly paved streets have been repaired or are currently being repaved. Paving works are also progressing rapidly in the villages along the Bosphorus. Improvements are being made everywhere. As for the various residences that the august visitors will grace, they will be truly worthy of their distinguished guests. The legendary magnificence and splendor of the Orient will be on full display: the welcome and honors accorded to Their German Majesties will leave nothing to be desired, and the sovereigns will leave Constantinople with the most pleasant and memorable of impressions."

The streets were also in such bad condition because a municipality concerned with public welfare was trying to cover up a tarnished reputation. After all, they were the guardians of public space. In 1895, officials deemed it necessary to address the state of neglect in which Voyvoda Street lay. The traffic congestion caused by street vendors selling their wares wherever they chose also exacerbated the situation for prestigious businesses that appealed to governments. As the municipality did not respond positively to the Sixth Chamber's appeal for funding, the Sixth Chamber sought assistance from the Russian Embassy and the British Consulate for the redevelopment of Voyvoda Street. It was one of the significant symbols of the capital (*pâyitaht-ı saltanât-ı seniyyenin en mühim bir cibeti*), and this situation was not permissible in Beyoğlu, where mostly foreigners resided (*ecânibin mahall-i ikâmeti olan Beyoğlu ve civarı tarafının yâr ü ağıvara karşı bu halde bulunması gayr-i câiz bulunmuş olmakla*).⁷⁶ In fact, the Sixth District was quite adept at producing projects tailored to its circumstances. It reported directly to the Grand Vizier and had an advanced local economy. People expected the municipality's service record would improve over time as their living conditions did.⁷⁷ We should not overlook the role of financial constraints in the failure to properly rebuild Beyoğlu's streets, despite the numerous projects undertaken by local authorities and businesspeople following the Great Fire. Frankly, the City Council (*Şehremâneti*) allocated insufficient funds to the municipality for street repairs. No wonder everything kept falling apart—maintenance and repairs were doomed from the very beginning.

Access to the benefits of urban modernization remained highly uneven. The sewage system, street lighting, road improvements, tramways, and electricity enhanced everyday life above all for affluent residents of Beyoğlu, especially

⁷⁶ BOA, BEO., 554/41536, 20 January 1895.

⁷⁷ Tarkan Oktay, *Osmanlı'da Büyükşehir Belediye Yönetimi: İstanbul Şehremaneti*, Yeditepe Yayınları, İstanbul, 2011, pp. 26–27.

those living along the Grande Rue de Péra. Especially in areas with minorities (Greeks, Armenians, or Jews), fire became an opportunity to change the urban fabric. In the fire-cleared areas, city planners rearranged the street system into a more uniform grid and either preplanned new lotting systems or stipulated them later when assigning lots.⁷⁸ However, neighborhoods such as Kasımpaşa, parts of Taksim, and Pangaltı, where lower-income Armenians, Greeks, and Turks lived, were unable to benefit from the newly built infrastructure. This uneven distribution of improvements demonstrates that reconstruction functioned through selective investment rather than comprehensive urban reform. It is also significant to note, in this context, that the economic fault line running through the district divided different communities not only along ethnic or religious lines but also along class lines.⁷⁹

Conclusions

After the 1870 disaster, urban planners greatly expanded Beyoğlu's streets, in contrast to their previous narrowness. They expected this transformation not only to increase traffic flows and urban activity but also to improve public perception of the district and strengthen its status within the city. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, large commercial spaces developed, especially in Beyoğlu, to serve an emerging consumer culture. Widening streets and alleys made vehicle movement easier, but it also created more space for pedestrians, shopping, circulation, and display. After the fire, the municipality expropriated many plots and buildings, compensated owners at market value, and used these acquisitions to restore damaged streets. This process included private property and smaller acquisitions related to consular premises, showing that reconstruction operated simultaneously as infrastructural repair, spatial reorganization, and political negotiation. Street improvement, therefore, did not simply rebuild what the fire destroyed; it converted disaster into an instrument for redefining access, movement, and municipal authority.

One of the most visible reconstruction efforts after the fire was the rebuilding of the Grand Rue de Péra. Filled with Western-style shops, entertainment venues, cafés, clubs, arcades, and inns, the street became a central axis of consumption, sociability, and urban display. Embassies located along and near these streets also served as visible expressions of imperial diplomacy and international prestige. The Grand Rue was not used only by non-Muslims; the Muslim elite also frequented it, making it an integral part of late Ottoman urban life. Its

⁷⁸ Pierre Pinon, "The Parceled City: Istanbul in the Nineteenth Century", in Attilio Petruccioli (ed.), *Rethinking XIXth Century City*, Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture, Cambridge, 1998, p. 48.

⁷⁹ Enno Maessen, *Representing Modern Istanbul: Urban History and International Institutions in Twentieth Century Beyoğlu*, I. B. Tauris, London, 2022, p. 16.

commercial intensity, social diversity, and symbolic value explain why it became one of the first spaces rebuilt after the fire. The priority given to the Grand Rue reveals that reconstruction followed not only practical needs but also a hierarchy of visibility, prestige, and political representation. Municipal authorities prioritized the district's most prominent thoroughfare, concentrating resources where commercial activity, diplomatic presence, and public visibility converged.

However, this very success exposes the central paradox of Beyoğlu's reconstruction. The fire created a rare opportunity to impose order on a damaged urban landscape, but municipal intervention did not yield a uniformly modernized district. It concentrated improvement in areas with the greatest visibility, commerce, diplomacy, and prestige, while less prominent streets continued to suffer from poor paving, mud, darkness, debris, animal waste, and infrastructural neglect. Beyoğlu's post-fire reconstruction, in this regard, did not resolve the disorder of the old city; it redistributed it. Modernization was most evident in the spaces chosen for display, while its limits remained visible in the streets left behind. Following the 1870 fire, urban transformation did not produce a modern city but a divided order in which improvement and neglect coexisted, structured by uneven visibility, investment, and administrative reach.

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