



Superpool

Profile



The studio of Superpool in Istanbul's Tophane district

For many people Istanbul is one of the most exciting places on Earth at the moment. For years now the city, which marks the border between Europe and Asia, has been growing quickly in all directions. Its now almost 20 million inhabitants strive for eastern and western cultural values, breaking conventions with many of them looking to Europe. Right now, anything seems possible here.

No architectural duo could possibly embody this momentum better than Selva Gürdoğan and Gregers Tang Thomsen. Wearing a black blouse and a headscarf, Selva stands by her desk in the 400-square-meter office suite and pours a cup of coffee. Gregers, tall and blond, sporting a white shirt pulls a couple of chairs over. We have a whole hour for our meeting before the vernissage begins in the new SALT cultural center.

The two met eight years ago at Rem Koolhaas' studio. Gregers (born 1974) had come from architecture school in Aarhus, Selva (born 1979) from the Southern California Institute of Architecture. In 2006, after four years at OMA in Rotterdam and New York they relocated to Istanbul to found their own studio, Superpool.

What was new cultural territory for Gregers coming from Denmark was a return to her roots for Selva. As a child she lived with her family in Ankara, then in Jeddah in Saudi Arabia, where her father taught at the university, and later spent her teenage years in Istanbul. The fact that the clothes she wears reveal her Muslim faith was perhaps a decisive turning point in her career. Given the ban on headscarves at Turkish universities she was unable to study in her home country. At the Institute of Architecture in Los Angeles on the other hand, it was not an issue at all.



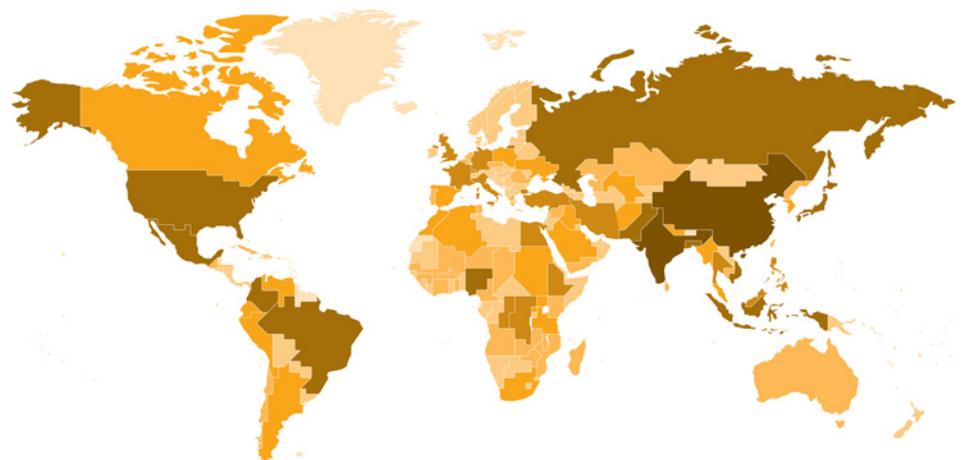


Selva Gürdoğan,
Gregers Tang Thomsen

Anyone who fits in with the market mechanisms in Istanbul can do a lot of building there. There is little skepticism towards things that are young and new. In this respect, Superpool's credentials could not be better: an education at western universities and impeccable references from their time at one of the most respected companies worldwide. On top of which, depending on the client's preference, coming from two different cultures gives them a strong negotiating basis. But as their projects reveal this was not the reason they came to Istanbul. Selva and Gregers intend to do more than just build; they intend to change the city, and in doing so they are seemingly uncompromising in their approach.

Their portfolio neither corresponds to one's expectations of a successful architecture studio that has construction project flooding in, nor is it manifested in the size of their building sites and the square meters. Rather, Superpool's projects are to be found in books and exhibition venues – not to mention on the Istanbul art and cultural scene, whose protagonists speak of the studio as if it were an old acquaintance. There was method behind its selection; it is intended to bring to mind the car-pool lanes in Los Angeles, which are reserved for vehicles with more than one passenger and according to the duo's credo, architecture, can only emerge as the result of a joint effort from all those involved.

The best example of this is their book "Mapping Istanbul", which was published in collaboration with the city's Garanti Gallery, New York graphic designers Project Projects and geographer Murat Güvenç. The maps published in the book, which visualize statistical data on the city and indeed the entire country, were Superpool's visualization of a previously unknown picture of Istanbul: of the level of education of its inhabitants, the safety of its buildings in the event of an earthquake and land usage. They see such maps as a basis for public discussion on urban development, which is still in its infancy in Turkish culture. Not least of all because the information is not readily available.



Number of inhabitants

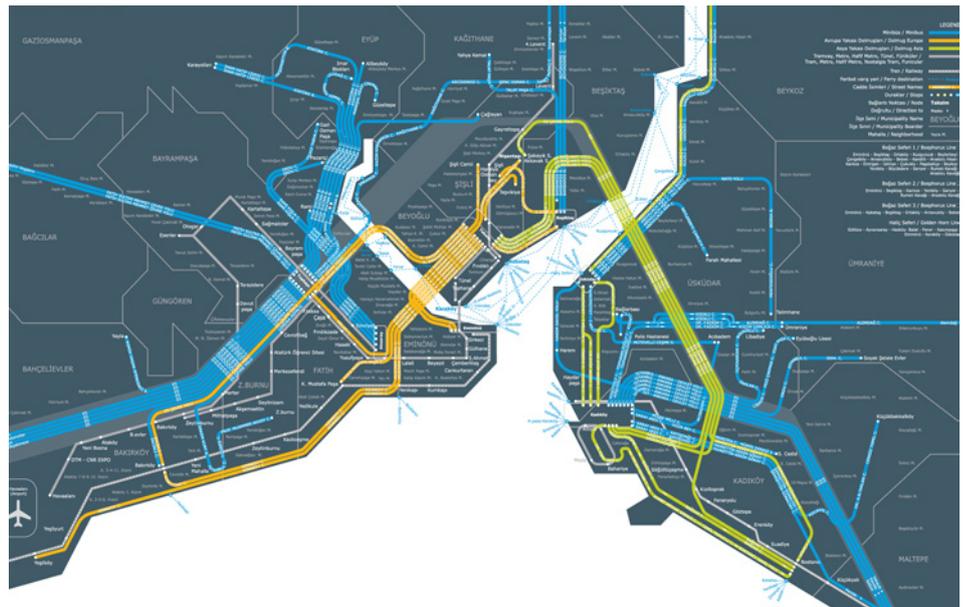


MAPPING ISTANBUL
BOOK PUBLICATION
Istanbul, Turkey 2009

People nonetheless find their way in this urban jungle. Somehow. In places that aren't served by the public transportation system, the gap is filled by private minibuses, called the dolmuş. Yet woe anyone should want an overview, let alone a timetable. Selva and Gregers spent a year traveling round the most remote corners of the huge city mapping the improvised routes used by the dolmuş. Even if the routes have long since changed, their efforts nonetheless resulted in a website that provides information.

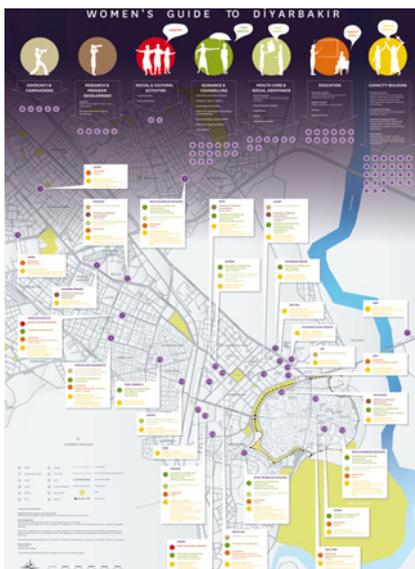
DOLMUŞ AND MINIBUS MAP

Istanbul, Turkey, 2007



WOMENS GUIDE TO DIYARBAKIR EXHIBITION / MAPPING

IABR Rotterdam, Netherlands, 2009



Maps and research results, which Superpool distributes on behalf of several parties, are like a common theme that runs through the list of their projects. In this sense Selva and Gregers represent the predominantly western influenced generation of architects, who consider their role first and foremost as a social and political one.

It goes without saying that Superpool is also involved in planning and construction projects. A small house for a family of four is currently close to completion, and on the Asian side of Istanbul, in the up-market district of Dragos Hills, they have designed two high-rises. They are quite unperturbed by fact that the building permission process is currently bogged down in the relevant authorities. This is not an unusual situation for architects in Istanbul; building here is a tough process.

For this reason several projects run in parallel, as indicated by their desk, which is full of polystyrene models. The range of different scales is extreme. On the one hand the two-square meter designs for a small Istanbul carpet maker and on the other those for the three million-square meter master plan for a university in western Turkey. And on behalf of the EU they are conducting research with 14 other partners from universities and manufacturers into a new technology for producing low-cost individual concrete shapes. They decline to give any details, as it is all still confidential. Instead, like a joker in a game of cards, they produce their latest map. Once again it is to do with traffic, which makes its way heavy and aggressive through the hilly city. It is certainly no fun for cyclists, which is why there are hardly any in Istanbul at all. Not yet. Using pink and black graphics, Selva and Gregers have marked those roads which, because of the gentle incline, would be suitable for cycling - and in the process have opened yet another round of discussions.

BECOMING ISTANBUL
EXHIBITION DESIGN
Istanbul, Turkey, 2011

Parallel to the Istanbul Art Biennale their exhibition "Becoming Istanbul" is just opening. It showcases developments over the past ten years from the perspective of photographers, artists, architects and authors. Selva and Gregers have given the presentation, which was displayed in the Architecture Museum in Frankfurt/Main back in 2008, a complete makeover and expanded it to fill the two stories of the SALT cultural center. There is an event planned every day. The exhibition is intended to enter into dialog with the visitors and encourage them to help design the city. As the name Superpool suggests.



Interview



Selva Gürdoğan,
Gregers Tang Thomsen

En route to the Superpool studio you pass electrical goods shops and watch makers. Two streets further the ferries bob up and down on the waves of the Bosphorus, and the Istanbul Museum of Modern Art is just around the corner. In the entrance of an office building that is perhaps 40 years old hangs a wooden sign with old-fashioned lettering “3. Kat Superpool”. The white floor brightens the giant office suite. Those present are seated at five long tables positioned between the columns. Plans on the wall reveal detailed drafts of a single-family dwelling. Boxes and files fill a metal shelving unit. They have just moved in.

The architecture scene in Istanbul is still undefined. There is still a lot to be done.

Why did you setup your studio Superpool in Istanbul of all places?

Selva Gürdoğan:

After seven years abroad I wanted to get back to Istanbul.

Gregers Tang Thomsen:

The architecture scene in Istanbul is still undefined. We thought that would be exciting, there is still a lot to be done.

At the time you were just 27 and 33 years old.

Selva Gürdoğan:

Well, architects do work day and night. You can calculate their age in dog years.

Had you already landed a contract when you arrived in Istanbul?

Selva Gürdoğan:

No. We had a wedding present from my parents. Some start-up capital.

Gregers Tang Thomsen:

And an office on Taksim Square, for which we didn't have to pay any rent. The tenants had shut down their company but had to be reachable there for another year. That is what the law says.



The studio of Superpool in Istanbul



Selva Gürdoğan:

So we had their letterbox and the tea man.

A tea man?

Selva Gürdoğan:

Yes, he makes tea all day long. Every company in Turkey has one.

And where is the tea man in your new studio?

Selva Gürdoğan:

We no longer have one. We prefer to spend the money on our nanny.

Aha. Now it's clear why there are a few toys peeking out of the shelves

What part of the city are we in here?

Gregers Tang Thomsen:

In Tophane. Right by the cruise ship terminal. There are lots of small shops here. You really can buy anything and always find someone to help you. The shop owners work together, they rely on each other. These are well-functioning networks, self-contained ecological systems.



The studio of Superpool in Istanbul

Selva Gürdoğan:

Tophane still has character. You can be eating lunch with people who have been working here for 20 years. That's nice, and typically Istanbul.

Typically old Istanbul? That doesn't exactly sound like enthusiasm for transforming the city.

Selva Gürdoğan:

In the old days the import and export trade flourished here. The big customs unions, the many notaries public and service providers have since disappeared. The Chambers of Architects and Engineers have moved in in their place. The area is now also filling up with creative studios.

Gregers Tang Thomsen:

Moving to one of the new business quarters would not be fitting for us. We're not a corporate office.

Selva Gürdoğan:

We have already lived in so many cities and tend to look for places which make the city unique. But in fact we don't know the city very well ourselves.



Excuse me? I thought you knew Istanbul like the inside of your pocket.

Selva Gürdoğan:

Nobody knows this city really well. Information is kept very vague. It seems to be a political issue. Of course it leads to a lot of speculation, but there are perhaps some positive sides to it as well. That is eastern culture for you. Maps, like the ones we depend on in Europe, are not very common here. People tend to find their way around through social contact and verbal instruction. Along the lines of: make a left at the mosque.

If we neither understand the city nor talk about it, we cannot improve it.

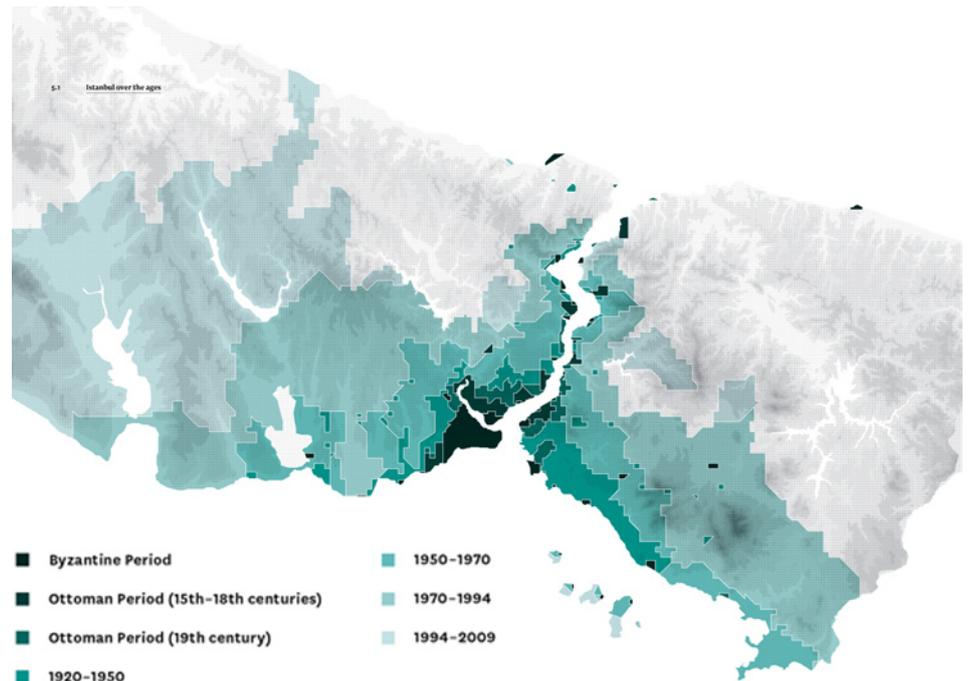
MAPPING ISTANBUL
BOOK PUBLICATION
Istanbul, Turkey, 2009

With “Mapping Istanbul”, the book that maps the social and economic differences in the city’s different districts, were you intending to change this culture?

Gregers Tang Thomsen:

If we neither understand the city nor talk about it, we cannot improve it. Planners need maps for their drafts. Regardless of whether they are in Europe or Asia.

Rem Koolhaas began mapping parts of the world from the point of view of planners years ago. Do you see yourselves following in this tradition?



Selva Gürdoğan,
Gregers Tang Thomsen



Selva Gürdoğan:

It has been a trend in the West for 20 years now. And in general it is quite simply a good way of communicating swiftly and comprehensively. We learned that at OMA. When we worked there we had never had much time to explain our ideas to Rem. Anything we wanted to say had to be clear in a visual sense.

I’m trying to imagine the course of your conversations with your clients. Selva, the Turk, Gregers, the blond northern European.

Selva seems to have been waiting for this question.

Selva Gürdoğan:

We use it to our advantage; some clients find speaking to a woman difficult, some speaking to a foreigner.

Can you speak Turkish, Gregers?

Gregers Tang Thomsen:

Not well enough to conduct negotiations. But 50 percent of our clients speak English.

Selva Gürdoğan:

I’m the one that normally does the speaking. In tricky situations it’s Gregers’ turn.

Gregers and I are an unusual combination. We bring opposites together.



Selva Gürdoğan,
Gregers Tang Thomsen

How do these negotiations proceed?

Gregers Tang Thomsen:

We pinpoint the problem, say how we intend to solve it and explain the advantages of our solution.

Selva Gürdoğan:

We recently attended a presentation by a German architect. He stood in front of his design and said: "I think this building is magnificent." You can enjoy success this way too.

Gregers Tang Thomsen:

But we are more interested in dialog.

This becomes clear in our discussions as well: Selva answers as if she were hitting a back-hand smash in a tennis match. Gregers, in contrast, attempts to keep our conversation balanced.

The two of you are living out the connection between East and West. Could one refer to Superpool as a synonym for what makes Istanbul the city it is?

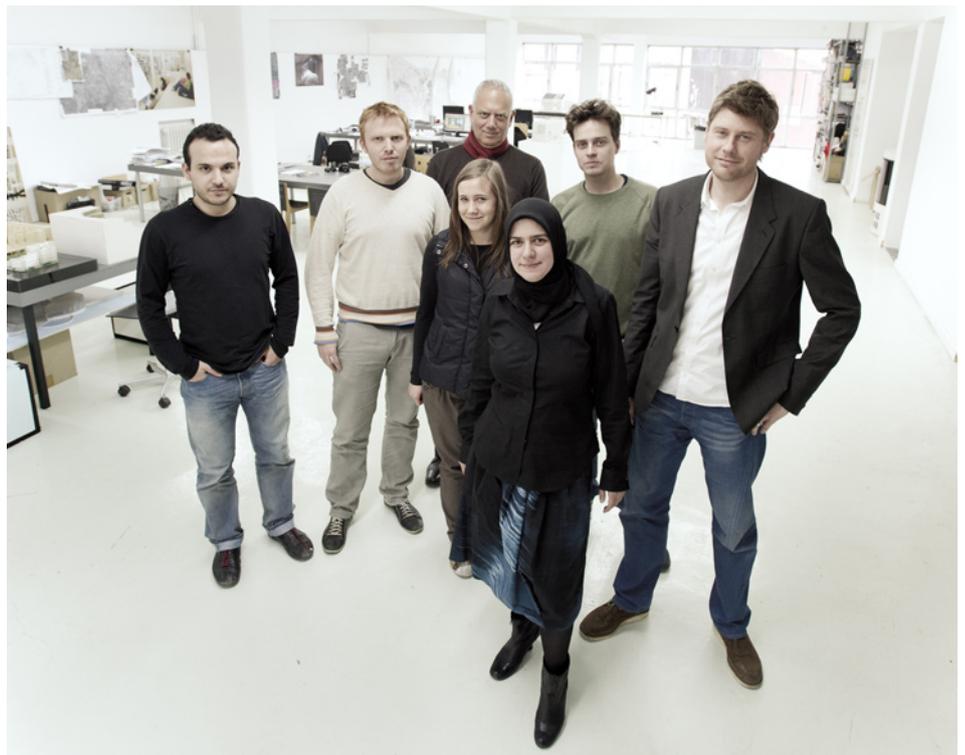
Selva Gürdoğan:

In a way, yes. Gregers and I are an unusual combination. We bring opposites together.

Does that apply to your employees as well?

Gregers Tang Thomsen:

At the moment we are a team of four architects and three interns, among them two Germans and a Hungarian. We have had employees from Korea, Canada, Denmark, and Spain, for example ...



The team of Superpool

On their office chairs they both roll across to the neighboring table, on which there are any number of polystyrene models. They explain the ideas for the presentation of the works of art for the United Arab Emirates' entry to this year's Venice Biennale, and for the "Becoming Istanbul" exhibition, which just opened in the SALT, a prominent art institution in Istanbul.

Lots of your projects can only be seen as images. The Open Library in the exhibition room at Garanti Gallery ran for a limited period of time, as did the exhibition Open City you designed with the support of 2009 Rotterdam Biennale. How come you primarily build temporary things?

Selva Gürdoğan:

Because in some cases the major construction projects move forward very slowly. Exhibitions are only ever on display for a few months, and so there is far more leeway in terms of design.

Selva produces a purple leaflet.

BIKE MAP

Istanbul, Turkey, 2011



Selva Gürdoğan:

Here's our latest map. It shows the flat roads in Istanbul on which one could cycle. Of course at the moment that is pretty dangerous, as drivers are not used to cyclists. But the city could negotiate, for example, for bicycles to be allowed on busses where the roads are too steep to cycle. The newspapers already ran a report on the subject. They printed our telephone number and now every other day we have someone calling and wanting a copy of the map.

What is luxury for you?

Selva Gürdoğan:

Being able to work with great people. Like, for example, the New York graphic designers Project Projects on the "Mapping Istanbul" book.

It really isn't easy to find architecture that is based on creative ideas here.

Gregers Tang Thomsen:

It all becomes far more interesting if we are able to bounce ideas around with someone, if there are various approaches on both sides.

Selva Gürdoğan:

Things get complicated if there is no designing involved. For this reason we recently turned down a contract to fit out a company's offices. We don't want to just pick something out of a catalog and ask for money for doing so, or plan interior fittings for people who want a specific style. We don't want to be sticking stucco on ceilings.

It would appear, though, that only a few of the almost 40,000 registered architects in Istanbul think that way. Most of the new buildings here look just like those in international real estate catalogs.

Gregers Tang Thomsen:

It really isn't easy to find architecture that is based on creative ideas here.

Selva Gürdoğan:

Much of it comes about using the copy-and-paste principle, not as a result of a problem having been given serious consideration. That, however, is the case elsewhere too. When clients approach an architect they often have a clear picture in their mind. This is a picture they have seen countless times, there is no way it can be state-of-the-art architecture. We can only ever try to propose something different.



UAE PAVILION
EXHIBITION DESIGN
Art Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2011

In Germany there is widespread discussion about restoring "Old Town" quarters. Is this an issue in Istanbul as well?

Selva Gürdoğan:

There were rumors about demolishing all the concrete buildings in the Old Town and building new ones that look old in their place. Like a museum.

Is there any public discussion on the matter?

Selva Gürdoğan:

Istanbul has no culture for debate, at best “yes or no” discussions. Those “discussions” on a third bridge over the Bosphorus, for example; that could not be called a constructive process.

Gregers Tang Thomsen:

There is no infrastructure for debate in the field of urban development. Political topics are a different matter. There is endless debate over politics.

Did 2010, the year of the European Capital of Culture in Istanbul, change anything?

Gregers Tang Thomsen:

People learned that they can and indeed should be involved in their city. Foundations were established to give grants for projects, which take the city as their theme. This triggered several platforms for discussion.

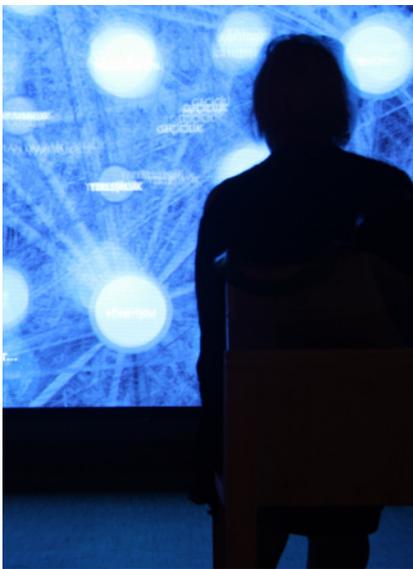
Selva Gürdoğan:

There are now lots of Turkish artists who are well-known worldwide, but the names of Turkish designers and architects are yet to reach an international audience. There are plans for a Design Biennale in 2012 in Istanbul, which is intended to establish the scene on the global stage. The “Becoming Istanbul” exhibition, which will be showcased in September at SALT is also intended to play a role in this.

Friederike Meyer conducted the interview.

Friederike Meyer studied Architecture in Aachen and graduated from the Berlin School of Journalism. She is a member of the editorial staff of Bauwelt.

project management: Andrea Nakath / Ines Bahr

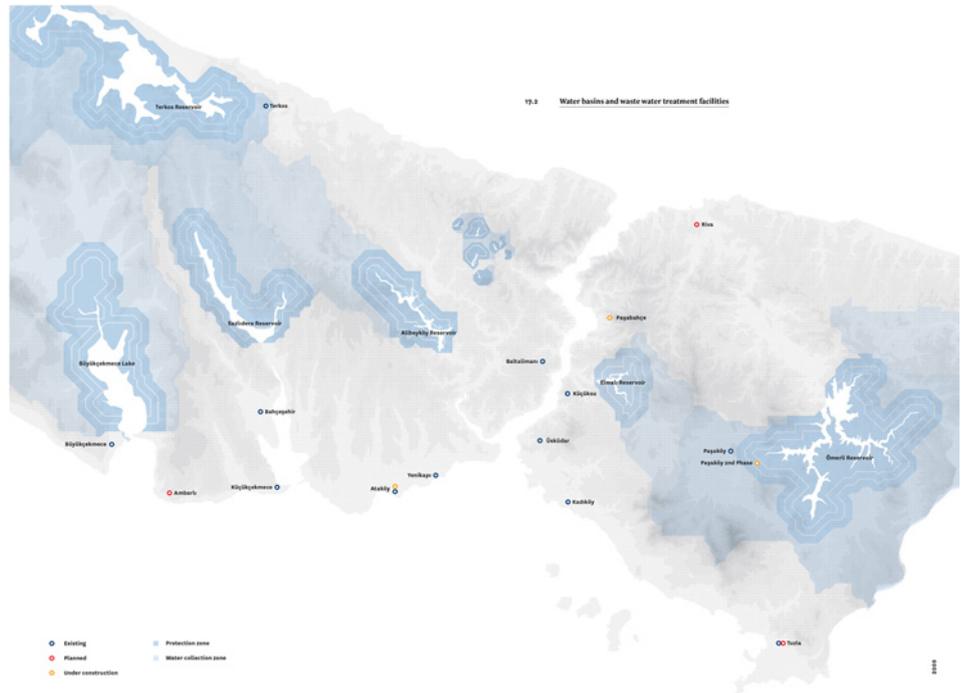


BECOMING ISTANBUL
EXHIBITION DESIGN
Istanbul, Turkey, 2011

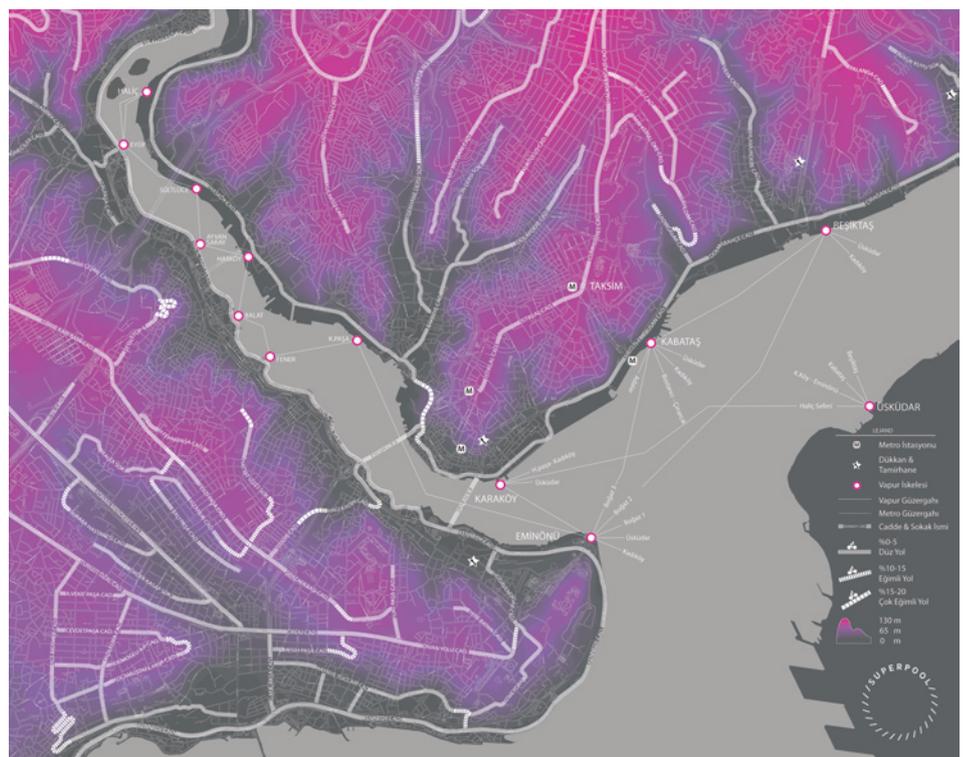


Projects

MAPPING ISTANBUL
BOOK PUBLICATION
 Istanbul, Turkey, 2011



BIKE MAP
 Istanbul, Turkey, 2011



OPEN LIBRARY
EXHIBITION DESIGN
Istanbul, Turkey, 2007



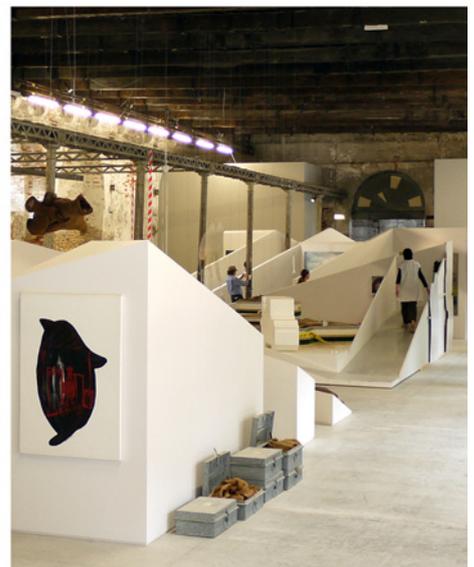
OPEN CITY EXHIBITION
EXHIBITION DESIGN
Istanbul, Turkey, 2010



BECOMING ISTANBUL
EXHIBITION DESIGN
Istanbul, Turkey, 2011



UAE PAVILION
EXHIBITION DESIGN
Art Biennale, Venice, Italy, 2011



**KILIM DESIGN FOR DHOKU
CARPET DESIGN**

Istanbul, Turkey, 2006



**ZK01 HOUSE
RESIDENTIAL BUILDING**

Istanbul, Turkey, 2010 - ongoing

