

# At a time in the past that even those

just turning thirty will easily remember, there were two groups of people determined to make good use of the land in Istanbul: the builders and the street football crowd. Both had activated their radar devices, scanning the city from end to end to find what they were looking for. Parks, gardens, little lots squeezed between streets, abandoned courtyards, even wide sidewalks. Every spot that had the potential for sheltering a few people was a construction site. And a football field. It was quite a contest, and the economy was to be the deciding factor. Some of the families of the football players were among those involved in a commercial way with the builders; and the construction industry won out. The game was over for the kids who spent their childhoods playing really exciting matches on tiny lots, as well as for the guys who rolled up their pants cuffs and joined in after work. Years would pass, and then there would be carpeted mini-fields in every neighborhood, and new community stadiums would be built, and the number of sports schools would multiply. And as if to debunk the old saying, "good football players are made on the street," Turkey began to really do well in football. This new way of doing things was clearly more amenable to systematisation, was more modern, and it was also inevitable. But the kind of game that was to be no more really had a special flavour, and the end of that sort of game also symbolised an even greater loss: Istanbul was no longer to be a natural sports arena.

Why do we say natural arena, even natural sports arena, and not natural football arena? That's because, in that not too distant past we talked about the streets were not just the host for football

games, but also for volleyball matches, with balls rebounding off clothes lines, as well as being sites for pushy basketball games playing themselves out below makeshift hoops. From the shoreline neighbourhoods one could even take a dip in the sea. One could always run into active enthusiasts for any of these sports, not at special sports facilities, but at any juncture in the natural weave of the city. This naturalness, this natural arena, no longer exists. We have new gyms, we have schools of basketball and volleyball, we have luxury communities with private pools. Turkey is one of the most ambitious countries in Europe when it comes to basketball, and it's also not doing badly in volleyball. But what we've been talking about here is a game whose time is over, about something from the past... For many Istanbul residents getting back the feeling of those days, increasingly the objective of a kind of longing, is impossible, and that impossibility is saddening.

There is a place which more than anyplace else symbolises what won't come back, which symbolises the distance that has emerged between sports, the natural weave of the city and the flow urban of life. And, at least within the boundaries of Istanbul, that monument which symbolises the alienation of the ordinary person from the sea is not an urban lot or a garden, but a stadium, and most probably Sheref Stadium. Yes, Sheref Stadium is now a monument.

A rather "cool history" of the stadium presents us with a few facts. The stadium was the seaside garden of the Ciragan Palace, which burnt down in 1910. It was transformed into a stadium in 1934. For many years it was the site of important major league games. When Inonu Stadium opened up in 1947 Sheref Stadium fell from favour a bit. But up until it closed its doors in 1987, the Besiktas team held its practices there. Thousands upon thousands of second and third league games were played at Sheref Stadium, as were thousands of amateur games. Then the bulldozers hit the playing field and the five-star Ciragan Kempinsky Hotel went up on the foundations of the playing field.

It was after all nothing more than a stadium with a dirt field, tiny locker rooms and crooked tribunes. There's little doubt that the erasing of Sheref Stadium from the face of the city wasn't in and of itself really a big loss for the sports enterprise. But when

one thinks of sports along with the city, nature and of course people, everything takes on a different light. That's because what has been lost is a relationship with the sea, an intimate relationship with the sea that perhaps no other stadium in the world has had.

Unlike İnönü Stadium, Sheref Stadium was not just close to the water, it was an intimate part of the sea. Up until the early 1980s, on hot days both teams could spend half-time out swimming. When time out was called one would run into people going to check out their fishing lines suspended in the water, and one would come across some others pulling in sea bream as the game was going full-force. Such things are not like the artificial "unlived nostalgia" for the days when one would have been left speechless by the sight of a man not sporting a tie in Beyoğlu. These are real memories alive even in the minds of those who have not yet reached old age.

Let's continue on... During the 1960s and 1970s two stadiums would carry the load of the second and third league games: Sheref Stadium and Vefa Stadium. The second and third league groups had no special regional characteristics, and Sheref Stadium would host teams from everywhere. And the emotional connections with all the regions in Turkey which sent out migrants to the big city were much greater than they are today. When the team from one's region came to Istanbul, one went to the game, and one renewed his fellow-feeling in the tribunes. I mean, many people who would later be accused of being responsible for the demise of Istanbul as a city of the sea, many migrants who were new to Istanbul, would get down to the water's edge for the first time at Sheref Stadium, would really feel in a deep sort of way that they were living in a city on the sea at Sheref Stadium. This also meant getting a real feeling for Istanbul. Because Sheref Stadium was in every way an Istanbul experience, and with the Bosphorus and the Ciragan Palace and with the view of the plane trees from the street side, and with its plentiful catch of sea bream this place could not be anywhere else but in Istanbul. It could not have been set any other place.

There's no doubt at all that Fenerbache as well as Ali Sami Yen Stadiums are really places with something of Istanbul in them. That's especially so of İnönü Stadium, located right next to

the water. As the neighbour of that other famous palace, Dolmabahçe, and so full of remembrances, it has become one of the spots that symbolise the city. But in the end, one can find stadiums like these, though not exact replicas, in any city in the world. The same applies to the Abdi İpekçi Arena as well as to the Burhan Felek Sports Facilities. With its love of football, there are times when Turkish society moves beyond being a football-lovers' culture and could even be called a "football culture." Where this phenomenon becomes more widely diffused, one finds a genuinely indigenous football culture, and an authentic culture when it comes to other types of sports – and Istanbul is the centre of those cultures. The types of fans, the rich variety of ways of expressing enthusiasm, the celebratory convoys of supporters of the victors firing off guns into the air, the vendors that invade the stadiums and sports arenas – all of these are the elements of a unique culture. And yet, any one of them could be found anywhere else in the world. But Sheref Stadium really was something else, was an incomparable piece of real estate, an "immovable." It was an immovable, but it could be demolished, and indeed that's what happened.

And this is what is important and symbolic about the loss of Sheref Stadium. That it was to be found in an inevitably changing Istanbul among the victims of an irreversible neglect of something so special to the city when it should have been protected, that it was a victim of the most destructive sort of indifference. That it disappeared because it was not able to stand up to a way of looking at the world that valued the economic above all else, a world that was just concerned with profit and income. Of course Istanbul was going to change. Of course it would open its arms to new generations, to new construction. But there is something that we forget, actually a question the answer to which we haven't really looked sufficiently for: Would you be able to bring Sheref Stadium and all the other victims like it back to life even if you were somehow to get all the money in the world to flow into Istanbul? Urban land has value, but do remembrances, does the spirit of the city?

The people who asked such questions were really a different breed than those concerned with urban land and income generation. They weren't on the same frequency and they weren't

in dialogue with each other. And in any case neither side had any intention of listening to the other. What was demolished was done with; what was gone was gone. What a pity. But despite all of this, we are still able to come across the unerased traces of the spirit of the city at unexpected moments, in some unexpected place. Indeed, you can even observe how Istanbul missed the chance to change into a very different lane, one combining the old and the new or at least one accepting their neighborly propinquity. Then, if you'd like, lament the lost opportunity — or alternatively, just enjoy the moment.

For those yearning for such a thing, Barbaros Park located just a few minutes from the old site of Sheref Stadium is recommended. Yes, the park is where one can experience the ever-increasing and exasperating traffic of Besiktas Boulevard in gridlock for just about twenty of every twenty-four hours. But there is also history there in the tomb of Barbaros Hayrettin Pasha. If you look from the street in the direction of the park, again you'll see history: the Maritime Museum located on your right. And across from you is the sea, the ferry station and a landing for smaller passenger boats. With everything just like it was years ago.

Inside the park it is the young skaters who represent the new. Barbaros Park has for some years been the meeting place and training spot for these skaters, bedecked in shorts, tights and colourful tee-shirts, the meeting place for the representatives of a new type of sports lover. As they engage in their acrobatics who, might you think, would be representing the old in the park? Yes, of course, they're the ones, the street football players who from time immemorial have never deserted Barbaros Park. If the season is summer and it's beginning to get dark, you might just see some middle-aged football players with their pants cuffs rolled up, representatives of the 40-45 year old age group, and then you'll really understand that you don't just experience history through static structures and monuments. On top of that you might even get to see a really good game, if, that is, you yourself don't get involved. Though the street football players of Istanbul are not really good at teamwork, they are famous for their fancy leg work and their foils. If they had been good at teamwork, the game would never have ended. And we would not be treating the last

traces of that old game as so many relics of the past...

If saying that the Veliefendi Hippodrome race track is the place that best sums up Istanbul seems too presumptuous, then let's say it's just one of the best places. As the population of Istanbul rapidly increases, in step with the increasing interest in horse racing, Veliefendi gets more and more crowded. During the April to November season people, cultures, social classes, social tendencies, just pour into Veliefendi. The faces of Istanbul have moved to Veliefendi.

The Veliefendi Hippodrome is a typical example of Republican style, with its distinctive architecture, its various components, and its monumental commemorative sculpture. The first version of the track was built during the Ottoman period (1912-1913) and the responsibility for construction was shouldered by German architects and engineers. Maybe this much can be accepted as an extremely brief and very rough summary of our overall architectural history.

It is as if the surroundings of the Hippodrome were especially selected to show how ugly Istanbul has become, and yet at the same time how it still hosts such strikingly beautiful features, such wonderful surprises. The environs of Veliefendi are surrounded by row apartments, buildings constructed without any aesthetic concern whatsoever, small factories, middle-sized workshops, and dusty dirty streets with a dense flow of traffic. Some of those streets – if by accident traffic is moving – are only a few minutes from the Marmara shore road, but it is so easy to forget that you are so close to the sea. And when you do indeed confront the water you might be surprised in the same way for the hundredth time. Veliefendi is both in a place that is far from the feeling of sea blue and from the sense of contentment and relief one gets from the water, and yet so close to them. The blue surprise is just a step away at the edge of the sea and a green surprise awaits one on the other side of the ticket booths. Even as one enters the door of the Hippodrome there is no sign that one will be confronted with such broad strokes of green in the enclosure. Yet in contrast to the gray-white structures just beyond, the Hippodrome is really green. And not just on the track, but also with trees. Under those trees, especially on Sundays, one finds crowded family picnics. Horses race, tea is

brewed, savouries and dolmas are eaten. The father of a family picnicking might be your regular bettor, the guy talking about how he “never placed more than a two-bit bet.”

In the area where the picnickers are to be found you'll meet representatives of the lower-middle and lower classes. But if you take a stroll around the whole of the Hippodrome you'll see people of all social classes. The horse owners and the Jockey Club members seated in boxes in the special tribune are rich. The old bourgeoisie, who have perpetuated horse breeding and equestrianism as a status symbol over the generations, the nouveau riches of Istanbul, the Anatolian well-to-do. But in the tribunes and in front of the ticket booths there is a wide spectrum of people, both in the economic and cultural sense, ranging from the upper middle to the lowest classes. University students, bureaucrats, apprentices, workers, the unemployed, heads of corporations, all kinds of artisans and shopkeepers. And even though one won't see them around the betting booths, one frequently comes across old gray-bearded religious types dropping in to watch the horses, with God knows what in mind, with God knows what sort of dreams in their heads. Then there is the final run, the race is over, and while the buses are filling up with the poor, medium-priced locally made cars make their way into the traffic, followed by the Range Rovers and Mercedes.

Some, though perhaps not all, of the answers as to the question of how all these different kinds of people don't experience a living hell as a result of the great gaps that separate them can, again, be found at Veliefendi. As the races are run one hears the call to prayer from the mosques in the area, and thousands of litres of beer are consumed during every race at the track. About the last thing that is consumed is hope. Though the predominant atmosphere at the Hippodrome is one of continuous complaint, bitching and accusation, one always hangs onto hope until either the last race is run or the last cent is gone. When the six-race ticket fails to produce, one plays the three-race, then the two-race one. In the wide vestibule located in the middle of the tribunes “sixers” are for sale. Depending on the outcome of the races buyers can be found at prices ranging from a few hundred thousand to a few hundred million Turkish liras.

The market for tickets is a typical indicator of how the gears

of the economy turn in the city. The small factories and workshops in the environs of Veliefendi are a sign that production continues on despite everything. But the real dynamic of the economy can be found in non-productive sources of income. The itinerant foreign currency vendors at Veliefendi are crying out, "I've got dollars, marks." For those who'd like to collect on the winning ticket for the last race or on the double or triple ticket winnings and leave the Hippodrome right away there are those who'll buy their tickets for a little below value. If the race is paying nine to one, they'll do seven, if eight it'll be seven. At Veliefendi you'll find itinerant ticket sellers, itinerant foreign currency vendors, and itinerant buyers, but there are few itinerant peddlers other than the kids selling the racing sheets. Anyway, there is no need for itinerant food vendors. You'll find the restaurants and food stands inside the Hippodrome at your service supplying you with the culinary culture of the city, indeed offering a sampler of the culture as a whole. The old and the new: doner, kofte sandwiches in a half a loaf of bread with lots of onions, grilled spicy lambs intestines, pickles, turnip juice, Turkish coffee, Nescafé, Russian salad, microwaved Quickburgers, French fries, pilaf with chickpeas; whatever you'd like to have.

Yes, you'll find everything you're looking for or not looking for, that you're after or not after at the Hippodrome. Veliefendi is like a synopsis of that big town, that complex entity. Though it doesn't also include some radical elements, some extremes of the political or economic scene, still, it's a resume of life that says so much...

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