



BUILDINGS AND MEANINGS



Structures such as the iconic Chrysler Building in New York City, which are part of the fabric of everyday life, communicate many messages about the values and aspirations of the people who create and use them.

INTERPRETING CULTURAL EXPRESSION IN ARCHITECTURE PAST AND PRESENT

Distinguished Professor Zeynep Çelik is an internationally honored interpreter — of buildings. Çelik, who has a joint appointment in NJIT's New Jersey School of Architecture and the Department of History, is an architectural historian whose career has been dedicated to interpreting the meanings buildings communicate about the cultures that create them.

Çelik joined NJIT in 1991, following a professional path that began at Istanbul Technical University in Turkey, where she earned a degree in architecture. Although she did qualify as a practicing architect, she says that she was especially attracted to architectural history.

"There were many directions for me to follow in architecture, and I had to decide what I wanted to be when I grew up," she explains with a smile. "My heart was always in history, and the school of architecture I attended had a very strong history department, so the decision was easy."

AT A COSMOPOLITAN CROSSROADS

Growing up in Istanbul, a city rich in history, was a major factor predisposing Çelik to architectural history, as well as to her subsequent focus on the architectural identity of the Ottoman Empire in the 19th and 20th centuries. At its height, this multinational, multilingual empire was a cosmopolitan crossroads of East and West, incorporating territory in Southeast Europe, Western Asia, the Caucasus and North Africa.

Beginning with her first book, *The Remaking of Istanbul: Portrait of an Ottoman City in the Nineteenth Century*, Çelik has engaged in a nuanced exploration of the relationship among politics, social issues and built forms. It is a relationship that she has examined over several decades in many subsequent publications, expanding from the Ottoman to the French colonial context. Her publications include five single-authored and four edited books. She has also curated exhibitions at major museums. Although Çelik says that her blend of interests and disciplines might be considered somewhat atypical for a school such as NJIT, she adds that her work has been enthusiastically endorsed at all levels of the university. And the perspectives on multicultural interconnections that she offers

are attracting increasing interest among students — understandable given the critical ways in which the world's cultures interact today.

Çelik, whose work has garnered significant recognition beyond the NJIT community, has received fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the

American Council of Learned Societies, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. She is the recipient of the Vehbi Koç Foundation's Award for Culture and the George Sarton Medal awarded by the School of Engineering and Architecture of Ghent University. She also holds an honorary doctorate from Bogaziçi University.



PHOTO: LARRY LEVANTI

Distinguished Professor Zeynep Çelik

"FOR ME, THE IMPORTANT THING IS TO UNDERSTAND CITIES AND ARCHITECTURE AS POLITICAL CONSTRUCTS AND TO SEE THEM AS SPACES WHERE SOCIAL INTERACTIONS HAPPEN, WHERE IDEOLOGIES ARE TESTED, AND WHERE POWER STRUCTURES MANIFEST THEMSELVES."

COUNTERING MISCONCEPTIONS

"I look at cross-cultural exchanges in architecture, in urban forms, in visual culture," Çelik says. "For me, the important thing is to understand cities and architecture as political constructs and to see them as spaces where social interactions happen, where ideologies are tested, and where power structures manifest themselves. I've pursued these themes since my doctoral dissertation, which became my first book, on the urban transformations in 19th-century Istanbul."

For many years, the conventional view in America and Europe was that the Middle East was averse to the projects representative of modernity that were reshaping the Western world. Not so, says Çelik.

"I think the history of modernity in the Ottoman Empire, in the Middle East, is very much misunderstood. It is not a recent phenomenon. Modernity was there since the 19th century, and I'm not talking about the end of the century. Beginning in the 1830s, there was a very pronounced shift in the administration of the empire, accompanied by modernizing reforms."

"Modernity," Çelik says, "accommodates a certain level of comfort for large numbers of people, with the help of new technology. With respect to built forms, it encompasses major infrastructure projects, such as transportation networks, and public buildings that include schools and hospitals."

Çelik's new book, *About Antiquities: Politics of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire*, turns to a late 19th-century issue that is very much alive today. By the 1890s, as part of its wide modernization initiative, the Ottoman Empire had expanded the Museum of Antiquities in Istanbul and exerted legal control to prohibit the export of ancient artifacts. Appropriation of antiquities into the cultural identity of the empire marked a historic shift, and the Ottoman commitment to scientific archaeology underlined its claims to contemporary Western scholarship.

Çelik finds an interesting parallel between the Imperial Museum in Istanbul and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in that both were new institutions as opposed to their well-established European counterparts. The Imperial Museum, dedicated to archaeology in the city once known as Constantinople, was endowed with a new building in an impressive neoclassical Greek style. It was expanded twice and acquired its final form in 1908.

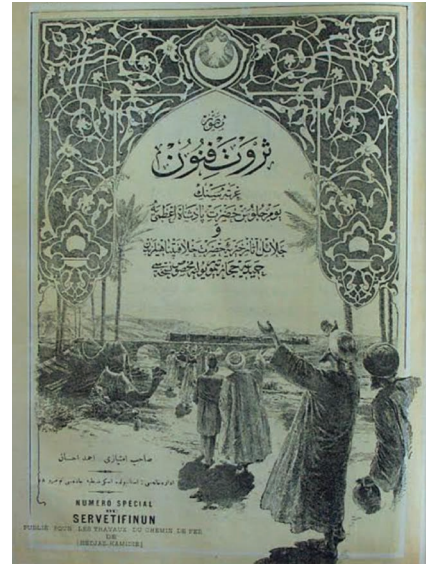
MONUMENTAL MESSAGES

Just as the architecture of the Ottoman Empire invites social interpretation, so does the built environment of other eras and regions. It's a discussion that Çelik carries on in both her writing and her classes, ranging from the cityscape of ancient Athens, the great cathedrals of medieval Europe and comparably iconic present-day structures, to the ordinary buildings and everyday spaces created throughout the ages.

In the course of this discussion, she takes a broad, analytical look at modern utilitarian structures as monuments, emphasizing the social and cultural messages they imbue. While Çelik continues to assess this aspect of the Ottoman experience in her scholarship, she applies the same analytical acumen to the "monumental" messages expressed by the U.S. built environment.

Towering buildings dedicated to business and massive venues for casino gambling; new schools, expanding college campuses and gated residential communities: These are some components of the country's evolving built environment that send diverse, often conflicting signals about our values and aspirations. In Çelik's words, the national portrait to be discerned underscores that we are a "very big and a very complicated country."

And like the Istanbul Museum of Antiquities in the 19th century, U.S. museums have special significance for Çelik in the current century, especially those built in recent years or still under construction. In her estimation, examples such as the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian and the even newer National Museum of African American History and Culture affirm an attractive cultural trait — our capacity for collective introspection and historical reevaluation.



Reflective of the positive attitude toward modernity in the Ottoman Empire, this 19th-century illustration celebrates the railway connection with Hijaz, a region in the west of present-day Saudi Arabia.

As Americans, we are even inclined to reassess the meaning of objects that once would have been put on display in a museum in a very different light — for instance, the B-29 bomber "Enola Gay," the aircraft that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Not too long ago, it would have been presented as not only a technological triumph, but also as symbolizing justified retribution against one of the nation's World War II enemies.

Some 10 years ago, the National Air and Space Museum's announcement that it would display the restored bomber generated intense public debate about the messaging of the exhibit. Many urged that it should convey very mixed emotions, that we should be reminded of the atomic bomb's toll on the people of Hiroshima and the terrible destructive potential of nuclear conflict.

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*This image will be featured on the cover of Distinguished Professor Zeynep Çelik's new book, *About Antiquities: Politics of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire*.*

Such willingness to reconsider the significance of concrete manifestations of our constantly shifting values is clearly a positive characteristic for Çelik. We display objects in one way and then 10 years later we change our minds, she says.

"If there is one generalization that I can make about Americans, it is the flexibility of their thinking. This is one of the best things about American intellectual introspection and reflection. Americans listen to new ideas." ■

LINKS

<http://csla.njit.edu>

<http://architecture.njit.edu>

<http://history.njit.edu>

<http://www.njit.edu/news/2016/2016-011.php>

Author: Dean L. Maskevich is an NJIT Magazine contributing writer.

SHARING THE MEANINGS OF WHAT WE BUILD

In addition to her classes, Professor Zeynep Çelik has shared the cultural nuances of architecture through museum exhibitions that include "Walls of Algiers" at the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles and "Scramble for the Past: A Story of Archaeology in the Ottoman Empire, 1753-1914" at Salt in Istanbul.

Her extensive list of publications includes —

- *The Remaking of Istanbul: Portrait of an Ottoman City in the Nineteenth Century* (winner of the Institute of Turkish Studies Book Award, 1987)
- *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth Century World's Fairs*
- *Streets: Critical Perspectives on Public Space* (co-editor)
- *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers under French Rule*
- *Empire, Architecture, and the City: French-Ottoman Encounters, 1830-1914* (winner of the Society of Architectural Historians Spiro Kostof Book Award, 2010)
- *Walls of Algiers: Narratives of the City through Text and Image* (co-editor)
- *Scramble for the Past: A Story of Archaeology in Ottoman Empire, 1753-1914* (co-editor)
- *About Antiquities: Museums, Their Publics, and Life at the Digs.*



Construction of the Imperial Museum in Istanbul was a significant indication of the Ottoman commitment to scientific archaeology and its role in defining the cultural identity of the empire.