



ISTANBUL UNBOUND

Environmental Approaches to the City

A conference organized by the [Istanbul Research Institute](#) and [Pera Museum](#)

Dates: April 8–11, 2021

Location: Pera Museum, Istanbul

Over the past twenty years, Istanbul, as a “world city,” situated at important cultural and geographic crossroads, has witnessed rising academic interest. Historians, sociologists, geographers, and city-planners have contributed to our understanding of the myriad ways in which the city has been continuously made and remade, with specific attention given to architectural histories and the formation of public spaces.

However, the study of Istanbul still lacks an integrated perspective that would bridge the divides between urban and environmental, city and nature. While there has been growing interest in the city’s most recent expansion towards its peripheral natural zones, such an environmental critique has yet to become integral to the city’s historiography. Very scant attention is devoted to interrogating how the boundaries of the city and its various parts have been shaped and challenged through material as well as ideological processes. Finally, nonhuman actors still find very limited representation in Istanbul’s urban studies. There is ground for optimism, however, as Istanbul and its connected geographies are slowly becoming part of global environmental histories. 2018 conference *City’s Nature* held at the Boğaziçi University provided a brilliant precedent. With the ongoing environmental struggles attached to mega infrastructural projects, new challenges created by climate change, and the looming expectation of a major earthquake, Istanbul and its surroundings promise to be a very fruitful venue to explore the merits of environmental and political ecological approaches in the study of the city.

This is now bound to accelerate. This conference has been in the making for over a year, but its call for papers has now been finalized by the organizers, stuck at home due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This nonhuman actor, the “severe, acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2,” spreading through human and nonhuman networks, has rapidly forced millions into a global lockdown and the entire human population into a unique global moment, despite being experienced in endless layers of inequality. Istanbul is the epicenter of the outbreak in Turkey and one of the hardest hit metropolises in the world as of May 2020. The memories of past outbreaks, from the Plague of Justinian in the sixth century to the cholera outbreak of 1865–66, which had their fair shares of impact on the way in which the city changed over centuries, loom large on the “empty” spaces of the present-day city.

While it is still very early to project with certainty how this pandemic will change city planning and environmental policies as well as public health practices in the future, one thing is for sure: the humanistic focus of humanities and social sciences to analyze the past, present, and future of cities is no longer sustainable. This has been true for a long time, but the COVID-19 pandemic has made it obvious for not only academic circles but also a large part of the global public. Cities cannot be analyzed nor governed by separating them from their environments, nor the lives of their human inhabitants from their nonhuman cohabitants.

With these propositions, this international conference seeks to offer new insights on the complex layers of Istanbul’s urban landscape. It brings together innovative studies in the field of environmental history, political ecology, and critical art studies that utilize transdisciplinary methods and transcend predetermined scales and clearly delineated boundaries between the histories and stories of humans, nonhumans, and the built environment. It also aims to bring together academics, activists, policymakers, and the public to discuss Istanbul’s environment, especially in a time when short- and long-term environmental risks are increasing on an unprecedented scale. In the mid and long terms, based on the new networks created at the conference, the organizers aspire to achieve continued collaboration with organizations and collectives working on Istanbul’s environment, and to raise awareness among Istanbul’s residents, policymakers, and academics on the city’s historical and current environmental issues, the agency of nonhuman actors in the making of the city, and the ways in which we can reorient our thinking on Istanbul toward environmental justice and inclusivity.

The conference language is English. All proposals will be reviewed by the conference committee. We welcome contributions from all humanities, social sciences, architecture, and urbanism related fields. There is a fifty percent gender quota for the total number of conference participants, and every session will include at least one female speaker.



Possible paper topics include but are not limited to:

- Earthquakes in Istanbul's past and future
- Power and resistance in urban environmental struggles
- Istanbul in the history of epidemics and pandemics
- Mega-projects and Istanbul's fringes
- Cemeteries, parks, and other "urban natures"
- Gendered environments of Istanbul
- Environmental justice and Istanbul
- Feeding Istanbul
- Infrastructure and environment
- Artistic responses to ecological crises and challenges
- Human-animal relations

There will be four plenary roundtables organized in collaboration with several local and international collectives and institutions:

1- *Connection Points*

co-organized with [birbuçuk: Ecology and Art Studies](#)

birbuçuk ("one-and-a-half") aims to reinterpret and re-discuss the information, knowledge, and suggestions revealed through scientific and sociopolitical works around ecology and through social movements on our planet and in our geography and to deliberate them with reference to visual arts, performing arts, and design platforms. The program for the conference was designed by birbuçuk with the aim to contemplate on current socio-ecological issues embedded in our everyday life. Placing the concept of socio-ecological metabolism at its center, the program aims to explore the possibilities of a dialogue at the intersections of science, social movements and the arts and through topics such as water, energy, justice, climate, agriculture, city, waste, gender, commons, and the future.

2- *Governing Istanbul: Scientists, Technologies, and Ecologies*

co-organized with [IstanbulLab: Science, Technology and Society Platform](#) (open call)

What is the role of technoscience in governing and shaping the relationship between nature and society in an increasingly toxic city with problematic infrastructure? This roundtable aims to expand political and ecological inquiries of Istanbul through the conceptual and analytical tools of the transdisciplinary field of Science and Technology Studies (STS). It approaches the city as a socioecological and technoscientific process, and invites contributions that address the role of experts and knowledge in governing Istanbul, material-semiotic networks that refigure nature-society relations, and urban infrastructures in causing and/or responding to environmental problems and human health concerns, among others.

3- *Responses to Sudden Onset Events and Extreme Weather in Istanbul: Past and Present*

co-organized with [KTH Environmental Humanities Lab Occupy Climate Change! Project](#) (open call)

Istanbul is a megapolis that is exposed to multiple hazards (and following the late Neil Smith, we can assert that there is no such thing as a natural disaster) from hydro-climatic, epidemiologic, and geologic perspectives. But what does it mean to respond to the looming climate extremes ravaging the city today from a socially just, environmentally sustainable, inclusive, and politically democratic perspective? What can historical analogies teach us particularly on the self-organization and care of the most vulnerable populations in times of severe hydro-climatic shocks? This roundtable will feature contributions from transdisciplinary perspectives across the broad spectrum of environmental social sciences and humanities on the past and present of sudden onset weather events (including but not limited to floods, landslides, storm surges, among others). By that means, we particularly invite contributions focusing on the societal dimensions of climate extremes in, against, and beyond the state responses to climatic hazards, loss, damage, and adaptation to such hazards.

4- *Environmental Policies and Their Discontents in the 21st Century Istanbul*

co-organized with [Heinrich Böll Stiftung – Turkey](#)

The world is facing a great climate crisis: global climate change is threatening the lives of various species. Careless consumption of natural resources and the unquestioned acknowledgement of economic growth

causes global and local environmental problems. Maintaining the existent economic system magnifies those problems even further. With its large population and endless burden on the natural resources of its surrounding regions, Istanbul is a hotbed of such problems. This roundtable strives to bring policy and opinion makers working on Istanbul's environment together and to put forth various policy alternatives for the immediate and long-term future.

The deadline for abstract submissions is **September 1, 2020**. All paper abstracts, along with the presenters' CV's, should be sent to mehmet.kentel@iae.org.tr. Please indicate in the email whether the proposed paper is intended to be part of one of the plenary roundtables with open calls.

A selection of the papers presented in the conference will be published in a special issue of *YILLIK: Annual of Istanbul Studies*, the open-access journal published by the Istanbul Research Institute.

The last day of the conference will be devoted to a guided walking tour into the northwestern fringes of Istanbul, given by contemporary artist Serkan Taycan, as part of his *Between Two Seas* project.

The conference program also includes film screenings, organized in collaboration with Pera Film.

The organizers closely follow the global situation created by COVID-19, and work on an accessible virtual alternative, in case the public health concerns will not permit to hold the conference in its physical form in Istanbul. The transition to the virtual conference will be decided well in advance, and in consultation with the local and international collaborators, as well as the public health experts in Istanbul.

Istanbul Unbound, a conference endorsed by the European Society for Environmental Historians (ESEH), follows the sustainability and diversity guidelines of the Society.

Organizing Committee: K. Mehmet Kentel (Istanbul Research Institute), Yasemin Ülgen (Pera Museum), Özlem Altinkaya (Özyeğin University & Hanzehogeschool Groningen), Gülru Tanman (Istanbul Research Institute), Emir Alışık (Istanbul Research Institute), Ulya Soley (Pera Museum), Onur İnal (University of Vienna), Ethemcan Turhan (KTH Environmental Humanities Lab), Duygu Kaşdoğan (IstanbulLab: STS), Menekşe Kızıldere (Heinrich Böll Stiftung-Turkey)

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