

## Chapter 10

# If walls could talk

## Exploring the dimensions of heterotopia at the Four Seasons Istanbul Hotel

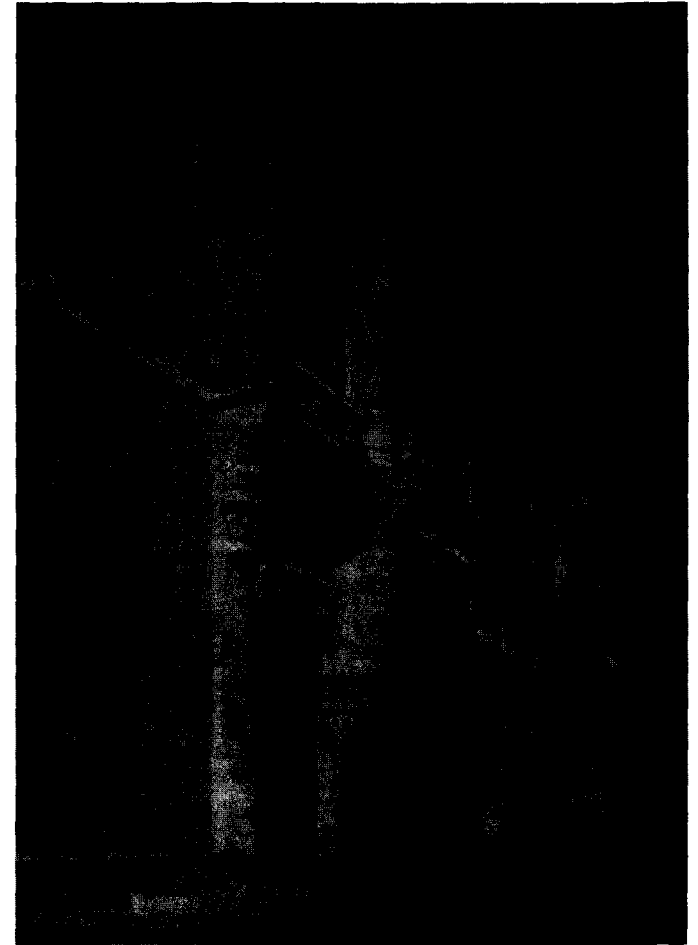
*Zeynep Kezer*

### Introduction

The Four Seasons Istanbul Hotel was inaugurated with a series of high-profile invitation-only receptions spread over the course of three nights in early October 1996.<sup>1</sup> The opening events created quite a splash, receiving extensive coverage in the Turkish media. Four Seasons Regent Hotels and Resorts and its local partner Sultanahmet Turizm AS had spared no expense to create an intimate and soothing atmosphere in this sophisticated boutique hotel and the results were remarkable<sup>2</sup> (Figure 10.1).

The restoration and retrofit of the eighty-year-old structure, which had been chosen to house the hotel, was commissioned by Dr Yalçın Özüekren, one of Istanbul's most experienced and reputable experts on preservation and adaptive reuse. The interiors bore the signature of METEKS, under the direction of Sinan Kafadar, a rising interior designer with an international practice, who had already worked on some critically acclaimed projects for Yapi Kredi Bank, the parent company of Sultanahmet Turizm AS.<sup>3</sup> Both Özüekren and Kafadar strived for an understated style and an overall visual coherence throughout the hotel.<sup>4</sup> Their choice to highlight the archi-

10.1  
Entrance of the  
Four Seasons  
Istanbul Hotel



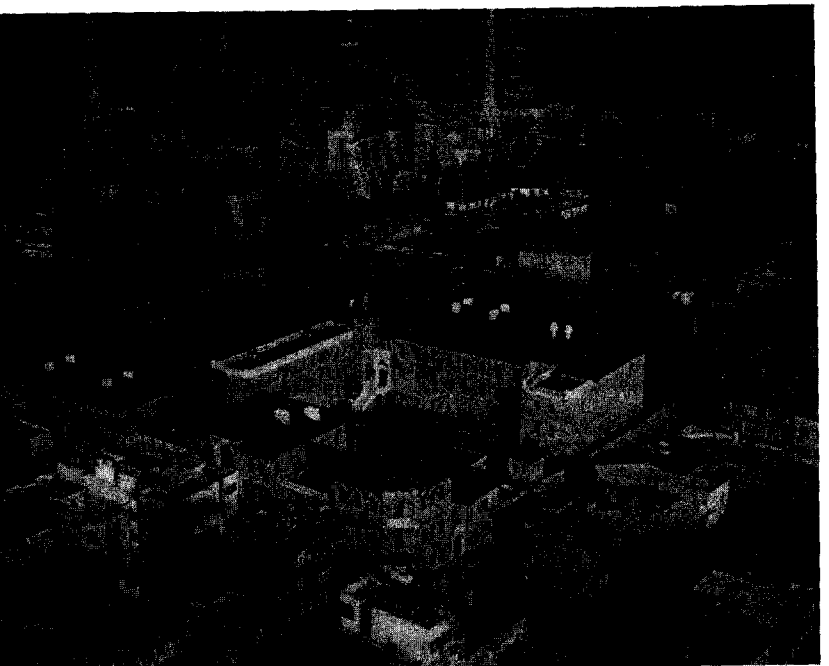
tectural characteristics of the existing building and to focus on well-executed details called for a labour-intensive process. According to Mr Kafadar's office, about 200 subcontractors were hired for the construction of the interiors alone – an unprecedented number for a project that has a relatively small square footage.<sup>5</sup> To achieve the desired effect, chairs and sofas were imported from the US, hand-selected lamps were shipped from Paris, and Mr Kafadar's custom-designed chandeliers were manufactured in Murano, Italy.<sup>6</sup> Scouts were dispatched to Istanbul's antiques dealers to collect unusual pieces of furniture to complement the design. Moreover, thirty paintings to be displayed primarily in the public areas of the hotel were commissioned to Timur Kerim Incedayi, a Turkish painter residing in Italy. Mr Incedayi's

paintings, the general themes for which had been preselected by the interior designers, shared similar themes and colour palettes, conferring the interiors a general sense of unity.

Within just a few years since its opening, the Four Seasons Istanbul Hotel has proven to be a winning enterprise. As an establishment that combines 'Western amenities' with a decidedly 'Eastern character', the Four Seasons Istanbul is considered, by many, to bring together the best of both worlds.<sup>7</sup> The building is located at the heart of Istanbul's historic peninsula, in the Sultanahmet district, which takes its name from the Sultanahmet Mosque – better known as the Blue Mosque to English-speaking audiences. Other venerable historic structures in the immediate vicinity of the hotel include Topkapi Palace, the Hagia Sophia, the Grand Bazaar, and the Basilica Cistern, to name a few (Figure 10.2). Inside, the painstakingly renovated structure comprises 65 spacious guest rooms (including 11 suites) all of which offer excellent views of the neighbourhood's famous landmarks. Turning the challenge of working within the constraints of an existing shell to their advantage, the designers have created rooms in various shapes and sizes that break the monotony of a typical hotel floor layout. Moreover, the display of original artwork and one-of-a-kind antiques further reinforces the individual character of each room. For the modern day business traveller the hotel provides computers on demand and the rooms are equipped with high-speed communication access. Not surprisingly, with its tasteful atmosphere, unmatched location, and the attentive service, for which the chain is renowned, Four Seasons Istanbul has quickly garnered some of the most prestigious awards within the hospitality industry, including a vote for the best hotel in Europe by the readers of the Condé Nast Magazine.<sup>8</sup> It also became a favourite destination for affluent travellers. The roster of rich and famous guests so far has included the likes of Mikhail Gorbachov, George Soros, Jeremy Irons, Cameron Diaz, Olivero Toscani, and Frank Gehry among others.

Interestingly, this building, which now houses the Four Seasons Hotel, has had a long history of hosting famous guests. In an ironic twist of fate, for the better part of the last century, some of Turkey's most revered writers, poets, artists, and political activists also stayed in this building – albeit in its previous incarnation as a prison.<sup>9</sup> These so-called 'thought criminals' shared their quarters with drug users and dealers, pimps, and murderers and wrote extensively about their experience behind bars in what came to be known as the country's most famous – or infamous – prison. In effect, for decades, the people of Istanbul used 'going to Sultanahmet', or more accurately, 'being taken to Sultanahmet', as a euphemism for being imprisoned. Especially in the 1960s and 1970s, the building's image as the visual

10.2  
Aerial view of the  
Four Seasons  
Istanbul Hotel and  
its immediate  
surroundings. The  
large building at  
the back of the  
Hotel is Hagia  
Sophia.



embodiment of incarceration acquired nationwide recognition through countless Turkish films, which often featured melodramatic plots and in which the disgraced heroes and heroines would be sentenced to prison and, almost without exception, they would be sent to 'do time at Sultanahmet'.

Traces of the building's previous use as a prison are still quite clearly evident on the surrounding landscape. The hotel's address alone, Tevkifhane Sokak, 1, which translates as '1 Jail Street', invokes this unfortunate history. The marble frieze atop the main entrance features the building's former title in Ottoman script 'Dersaadet Murder Jail' and its year of construction 1327 (1916/17).<sup>10</sup> The service entrance, which once served as the prisoner release gate, faces Kutlugün Street – that is, Celebration Day Street – in acknowledgement of the joy of regaining freedom. Nowadays, this gate, by which once newly released inmates facing bleak prospects ambivalently celebrated their newly regained freedom, is used to bring in the most exquisite imported delicacies from around the world, the crispest linens, and the plushest towels. These days, only those who can pay at least \$290 before taxes can spend a night at the Istanbul Four Seasons Hotel – and that is roughly 3.5 times the official monthly minimum wage in Turkey.<sup>11</sup>

As I have tried to sketch with these brief observations, the reincarnation of the former prison as a luxury hotel has radically transformed this building's relationship with the physical and social fabric around it and with its own history, rendering it as a heterotopic site. Heterotopias, as identified by Foucault, are places that are 'capable of juxtaposing in a single real space, several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible'.<sup>12</sup> A heterotopia is necessarily a relational phenomenon: no site is heterotopic by itself, it only becomes so through its juxtaposition with other sites around it. Heterotopia arise from physical and temporal adjacencies which reveal the existence of alternative social orderings, incommensurate meanings, and incongruous spatial practices.<sup>13</sup> Within this context, the conversion of the former Sultanahmet Prison into a luxury hotel has generated heterotopic relationships in the following ways. First of all, and most dramatic, is the slippage of meaning that occurred between the current and former uses of the building. Ironically, despite the incommensurability of the two, the conversion was achieved with surprisingly little modification to the layout of the original plan. Second, Four Seasons Istanbul is a generic presence in an exceptional place. It relies on the uniqueness of its location for attracting business. Yet, by framing that location as one among many the Four Seasons chain can offer its discriminating guests, it also reduces that uniqueness to ordinariness and commodifies what would otherwise be priceless. Last but not least, the hotel embodies two conflicting meanings depending on the audience. While for its primarily foreign clientele staying at the Four Seasons is a journey to the East, for the people of Istanbul, the hotel marks their city's accelerated integration with the West and the Western-dominated spatial logic of global capitalism.

In the following pages, after providing a brief history of the Sultanahmet Prison and its environs, I will discuss in further detail the heterotopic relationships generated by the conversion of the former detention facility into a luxury hotel.

## **Sultanahmet prison and its environs: a brief background**

During the final decades of Ottoman sovereignty, Sultanahmet Square and its environs underwent considerable change. In 1863 the Ottoman royal family moved from Topkapi Palace, which had, for four centuries, served as the imperial residence and the administrative seat of the Empire, to Dolmabahçe Palace, located further north, along the Bosphorus shore. The historic peninsula retained most of the administrative functions, but its fabric changed

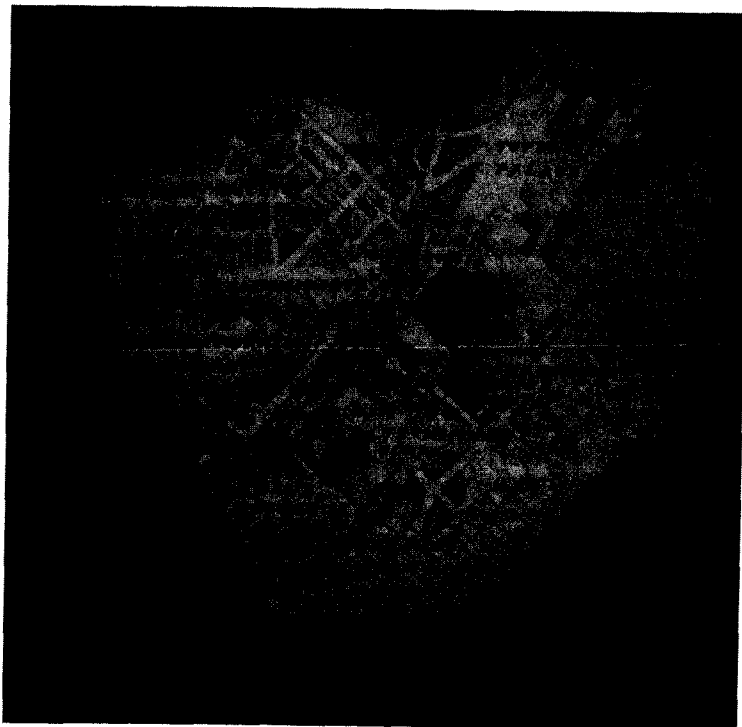
with the addition of new buildings assigned to the new governmental and institutional services, which had been conceived as part of the wide-ranging nineteenth-century bureaucratic reforms to modernize the Empire.

One such new building was the College of Sciences (Darülfünun) wedged between the Hagia Sophia Mosque and the Topkapi Palace, a block away from Sultanahmet Square. The massive three-storey neoclassical structure, designed by the Swiss architect, Gaspare T. Fossati, consisted of two large square-shaped blocks, each with a courtyard in its middle. The building, completed in 1854, however, was never used for its original purpose, rather it served variously as the French Army Hospital during the Crimean War (1854–1856) and as the seat of the short-lived Ottoman Parliament (1876–1878). The building remained vacant for almost 30 years after Sultan Abdülhamit II dissolved that parliament and restored his absolutist rule. Finally, after the Constitutional Revolution of 1908, it was converted into the Ministry of Justice and began also to be used as Istanbul's Main Courthouse. The Sultanahmet Prison was built in 1917, as an annex to the newly dedicated Ministry–Courthouse complex, primarily to hold indictees awaiting trial. Designed according to the dictates of the Ordinance Regarding the Management of Jails and Penitentiaries, which was issued in 1880, as part of the modernization efforts, the Prison was the first modern purpose-built detention facility in the Ottoman Empire and was generally seen as a model to be emulated in similar facilities to be built in the future. The Sultanahmet Prison was a stately, handsome building, executed in the Ottoman Revivalist style, which, at the time was extensively used, both in Istanbul and the provinces, in a variety of public buildings, including banks, offices, schools as well as small utilitarian structures such as ferry stations.<sup>14</sup> Although dwarfed in size by the more imposing Courthouse, with its carefully executed façade, featuring custom manufactured blue tiles and handcut stone details, the Sultanahmet Prison held its own in the company of some of the most prestigious buildings of the Ottoman capital.

The Sultanahmet Prison building consists of three three-storey blocks wrapped around a central courtyard (Figure 10.3). Initially, male inmates were assigned to Blocks 1 and 2 which conjoined to form an L-shaped mass enclosing the northeast and northwest sides of the courtyard. Each floor was designated as a self-contained unit and in order to monitor circulation between them, checkpoints were placed on each level at the entrance to the hallway from the stairwells. Beneath Block 1 and Block 2, half sunken underground, were ten solitary confinement cells, where prisoners deemed particularly dangerous or those being punished for rebellious behaviour were locked up. Facing the courtyard on the lower level, there were also a few dormitories designed to hold approximately 40 juveniles, who were often incarcerated for

minor infractions and many of whom were destitute and without known relations. Across the courtyard, facing Tevkifhane Street, was Block 3, which contained administrative offices, the warden's residence, and an infirmary. It also housed a small library with an eclectic collection, which had been formed over time, thanks to book donations from departing inmates. Along Kutlugün Street, the courtyard was defined by a high wall, with a guard tower over the prisoner release gate. The inward facing elevations of the blocks, unlike their tile-clad elaborate exteriors, were unadorned. The only exception was the small masjid, which was built off-centre toward the south side of the courtyard. The diminutive free-standing building resembled a jewelbox, set off from the rest of the austere looking courtyard with its rich tile decorations in green, turquoise and deep cobalt blue covering its surface.

Although the prison was originally designed to hold approximately 1,000 inmates in 50 large communal wards, the total number of prisoners is known to have approached 2,000 at peak times. Over the years, the building underwent several modifications. Block 3 was remodelled to make room for 65 female inmates and the courtyard was subsequently partitioned to create



10.3  
Site plan with  
important  
historical  
landmarks in the  
neighbourhood

separate outdoor spaces for the daily outings of the male and female inmates. The most important change came with the subdivision of the large wards to smaller clusters of cells designed – officially – to accommodate 6 to 12 inmates, although overcrowding was a chronic problem. The need to provide individual restrooms to each of these new clusters entailed a major reworking of the plumbing system, and the original mosaic-tiled floors, which had rather attractive patterns, were raised and re-slabbed in concrete to accommodate the pipes. Except for those facing the courtyard, the cells variously had views of the Sultanahmet Mosque, the Hagia Sophia, or the Marmara Sea. Although the windows were too high to enjoy these sights comfortably, the prison administration, suspicious of the intentions of the inmates, eventually had them covered with iron sheets cutting off not just any visual connections the prisoners could make with the street outside, but also the light. In protest or out of frustration the prisoners tried to puncture these iron curtains which enveloped their quarters since their dark and dank cells became all the more inhospitable for inhabitation with only a sliver of sunshine. Henceforth, contingent on the weather, the two one-hour outings in the morning and the afternoon became the inmates' only opportunity to get fresh air and sunlight. And even this was regarded by the prison administration as a privilege that could be revoked anytime. Describing his unquenchable yearning for freedom, light, and air, Nazim Hikmet, arguably one of Turkey's most gifted poets who spent several years in this prison wrote:

Today is Sunday,  
They let me out in the sun for the first time today,  
And I just stood there – awestruck,  
Realizing, for the first time in my life just how far away the sky is,  
how blue, and how wide.  
Then humbly I sat down on the soil.  
I leaned back against the wall.  
For a moment there, no trap to fall into, no struggle, no freedom,  
no wife.  
Just earth, sun, and me . . . I am content.<sup>15</sup>

With the demise of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the First World War and the subsequent relocation in 1923 of Turkey's capital to Ankara, Istanbul's fortunes were reversed. The building of a new capital in Ankara diverted resources and attention from Istanbul, which lost its focal position in the country and its elite bureaucratic population. Along with other central government agencies, the Ministry of Justice also migrated to the new capital, leaving the Ministry-Courthouse complex to serve merely as the Istanbul

Courthouse and Detention Center. Then in December 1933, a fire ravaged through the complex. While, the Courthouse was reduced to little more than ashes and rubble overnight, the Prison building escaped the disaster unscathed.<sup>16</sup> After the blaze, the Courthouse was rebuilt on another lot bordering the northwest side of the At Meydani (Byzantine Hippodrome), not far from the site of the original. Meanwhile, once the debris of the former Courthouse was cleared, the Sultanahmet Prison remained as the only building on the entire block, standing in stark contrast to the dense fabric of its surroundings.

The Sultanahmet Prison remained in service until 1969, when a larger and more modern prison was built in Sagmalcilar. Following the closure, a proposal to convert the building into the Istanbul Coroner's Office met with fierce resistance from the neighbourhood residents, who complained: 'For years we had to put up with the prison: Convicts escaping, guards firing, and uprisings constantly disturbing our peace and quiet. And now they want us to live with cadavers in our midst! We will do anything in our power to stop that from happening!'<sup>17</sup> The project was eventually tabled and the building remained vacant. In 1975, the Ministry of Justice, which still owned the property, began to use it as a warehouse to store old files and surplus furniture. But without maintenance, the building became a rather eerie presence 'housing only the detritus of its former life' and in which 'the homeless took refuge and thieves broke in to steal whatever could be carried away and sold'.<sup>18</sup> In July 1980, during a period of martial law declared amidst violent political unrest, the Prison was reopened and used specifically to house political prisoners. The building's tenure as a detention centre finally came to an end in 1982 with the completion of the Metris Prison on the outskirts of the city.<sup>19</sup> Thereafter, the old Sultanahmet Prison lay fallow for another ten years until the process of converting it into a hotel started in earnest in the early 1990s.

## From prison to luxury hotel: the story of an ironic conversion

Istanbul began to emerge from Ankara's shadow as the country's prime city in the 1950s. The urban development that accommodated the city's phenomenal industrial and financial expansion took place mostly outside the historic peninsula, which was densely packed with old neighbourhoods and landmarks. Meanwhile, even though it was home to Turkey's most prominent cultural heritage sites, the Sultanahmet District, suffered from neglect and deteriorated considerably, having failed to generate investment. The presence

of the prison – and its later abandonment which turned it into a shelter for transients by fiat – did little to improve the district's prospects. Well into the 1980s Sultanahmet was a tourist destination only during daytime. At night it was known to be a somewhat seedy neighbourhood with cheap hostels, which catered to travellers on a shoestring budget and other indigents. Things slowly began to change in the 1980s. Successful enterprises pioneered by Turing Club (Turkish Touring and Automotive Club) ushered the new trend for the adaptive reuse of historic buildings. Among them, the Sogukcesme Street Project immediately behind the Hagia Sophia revealed that the Sultanahmet District was ripe for upscale touristic development. The addition of a few more boutique hotels and shops in historic buildings with the initiative of the Turing Club and the Ministry of Tourism and Culture and the support of an enterprising city government cemented the direction of changes to come.<sup>20</sup>

The possibility of converting the former prison into a hotel was brought up in 1990 and the permit to develop and lease the building was given to Aslan Nakliyat. It was unclear whether Aslan Nakliyat really intended to get into the hotel business, since the family-owned company was known more for its long distance moving business rather than its interest in the hospitality industry. However, the owners of the Aslan Nakliyat did take the initiative to hire preservationist-architect Dr Yalçın Özüekren who began to work on converting the former prison into a three-star hotel targeted primarily at an upper middle-class clientele. In 1992, Aslan Nakliyat turned their permit over to Sultanahmet Tourism AS. The executives of Sultanahmet Tourism AS were interested in converting the project into a high-end high-profile enterprise and for this purpose sought the partnership of the Toronto-based Four Seasons Regent Hotels and Resorts. In short order, Dr Özüekren was asked to scrap his plans to design a hotel with far fewer but more spacious rooms and more lavish amenities that would appeal to a wealthier and more discriminating clientele.

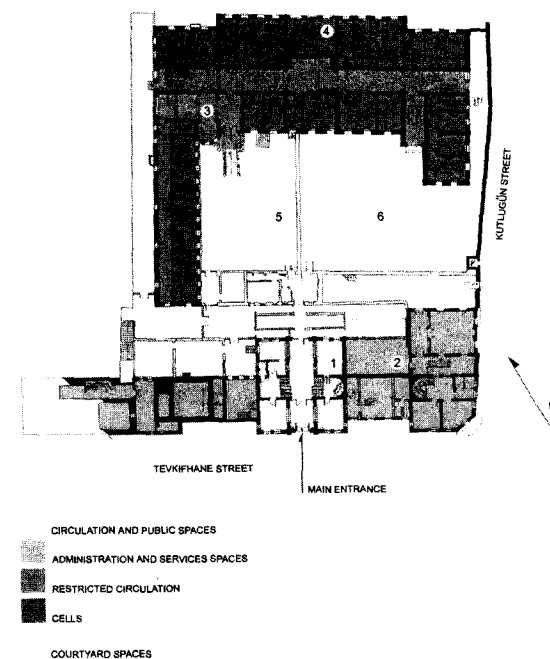
The High Commission of Monuments, which reviewed and issued the license for the conversion, stipulated that the building's interiors could be modified as long as the original façade remained intact.<sup>21</sup> In the case of the Sultanahmet Prison, this meant restoring the original façade, which through multiple modifications and the ensuing years of dilapidation had changed beyond recognition. Very few modifications were made to the overall mass of the building. These included the construction of glass passages connecting the formerly detached blocks and the addition of a square-shaped glass and steel structure to accommodate the hotel's famous Seasons restaurant on the south corner of the courtyard. In the summer, the sliding glass doors of the restaurant, which resembles a winter garden, are flung open to provide

al fresco dining experience in the hotel's secluded courtyard. More importantly, the project Dr Özüekren and Sinan Kafadar proposed honoured not only the building's façade but preserved much of the original plan layout as well.<sup>22</sup> Although many of the walls and slabs had to be torn down to structurally retrofit the building in a seismically active area, a comparative examination of the floor plans of the prison and the hotel reveals that Dr Özüekren had used the original loadbearing walls as a guide for demarcating spaces in the hotel. Apparently, the proportions and sizes of the former public rooms and the prison cells lent themselves relatively easily for reuse as lounges and hotel rooms respectively. This should not be so surprising, since, both uses call for cells/rooms flanking long corridors, service spaces (such as kitchens, laundry, offices, and storage, etc.), and semi-private gathering areas. In other words, if we look beyond interior treatments (such as furniture, fixtures, surfaces, etc.), which obviously set the two apart, the prison and the hotel share much in common as distinctively modern building types. Interestingly, the similarity was not lost on the prisoners who sarcastically referred to the Sultanahmet Prison as 'the Hilton' long before anyone thought of such a conversion (Figure 10.4).

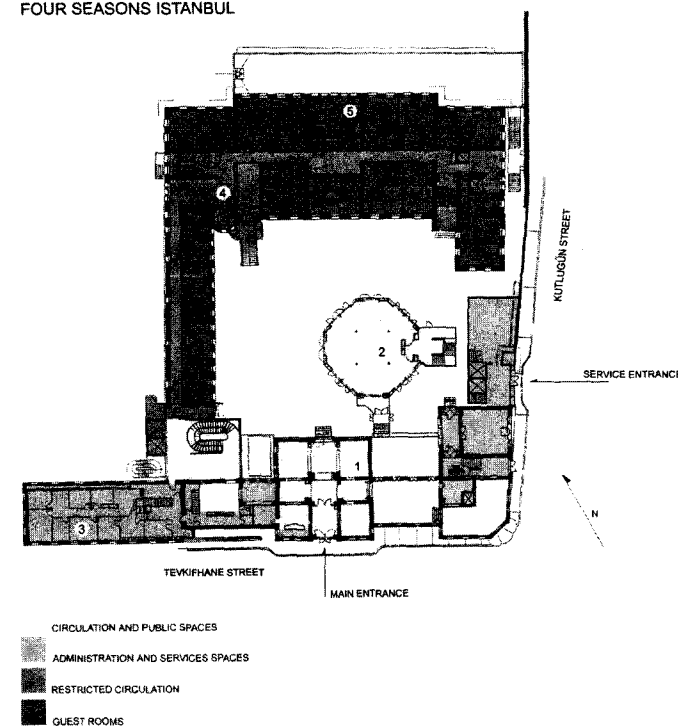
This observation implies that what endows a prison or a hotel with a distinctive character and the attendant socio-cultural meanings are the particular practices through which each of these buildings is produced as a space. A comparison of the degrees of privacy the prison and the hotel afford their respective residents brings this point into sharp focus. Privacy may be defined as an individual's ability to control the timing and degree of his/her interaction with other individuals. This definition is useful, because it acknowledges the centrality of choice and control for privacy. Hence, forced solitary confinement can no more be seen as an exercise of privacy than being compelled to share the same limited space with a large number of people on a constant basis, but choosing to remain anonymous in a crowded urban space can. When we take this definition of privacy as an axis of comparison, the socio-spatial practices that produce the prison and the hotel within the same shell stand in stark contrast to one another.

Even a sheer numerical comparison begins to reveal how density affected the experience of privacy in each of these settings. The Sultanahmet Prison was built to hold 1,000 inmates, but was known to have accommodated close to 2,000 at peak times. To deal with the day to day operations, it employed 50 personnel including the warden. In contrast, the remodeled hotel consists of 65 rooms, including its 11 suites. With a remarkable ratio of three bilingual and professionally trained personnel per room, the management strives to meet the needs of even its most demanding guests twenty-four hours a day. More fundamental are the differences in specific

SULTANAHMET JAIL



FOUR SEASONS ISTANBUL



10.4  
Plans of the  
building new  
and old

practices and privileges that produced space, defined boundaries, and affirmed subjectivities in the prison and the hotel. At the Four Seasons Istanbul, the stated goal of the management is 'to make the guests feel as though they were in their own home' which arguably is the ultimate site of personal privacy. The guests are given full control over a wide range of choices for preserving their privacy whether they prefer to remain in their room, get a massage, or linger in the lounge.

In contrast, when the detainees arrived at the Sultanahmet Prison, they were thoroughly searched, deloused and then sent to the solitary confinement cells on the lower level for fifteen days to 'facilitate their transition'.<sup>23</sup> Only once a week, on Tuesdays, were they granted permission to meet with their loved ones, but that too was a restricted arrangement. Male and female visitors were allowed on alternating weeks, had to wait in line and get thoroughly searched before being taken inside the building in groups of fifteen; and they were always separated from the inmates who sat behind iron bars. Visitors whose last name did not match with that of the inmate had to obtain a special permit from the district attorney's office every time. Similarly, meetings between the inmates and their lawyers were limited to Thursday afternoons and almost never took place in private. Incoming and outgoing letters were monitored and suspicious correspondence duly intercepted. Inside the prison, even the most individual sorts of activities were regulated.<sup>24</sup> One could not stay behind reading on a sleepless night or listen to the radio to fight boredom. Everyone had to turn in at the same time every night because the lights were turned off. In addition to those imposed by the prison administration, there were other unwritten rules one had to learn to survive in this alternate society, which brought together toughened gangsters, first time offenders, political prisoners, and those who considered themselves 'victims of fate'. Each inmate was 'situated' in a pecking order which determined how much one forked out for collective purchases of cigarettes, tea, or drugs; who washed the dishes after a common meal; and how and where one moved in the courtyard during the daily outings. In short, every aspect of an inmate's life was under surveillance – whether by the wardens or by the leaders of the local prison gang to whom the wardens often deferred.

The swiveling of spatial meanings, uses, users, and intentions defines Sultanahmet Prison/Four Seasons Istanbul as a distinctively heterotopic site. The irony is made all the more poignant since relatively few modifications were made to invert the prison's patterns of circulation, accessibility, levels of privacy, and strategies of surveillance to accommodate the hotel. As one local newspaper remarked sarcastically: 'The Sultanahmet now accommodates volunteers in the space of the prison . . . The mechanisms of

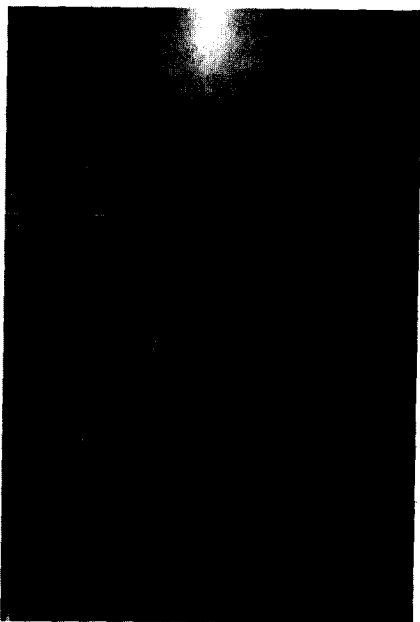
surveillance have been reversed, rather than holding the insiders from going out, it serves to keep the outsiders from coming in.'<sup>25</sup> This remark seems to be in line with Foucault's observation that heterotopic sites 'always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable'.<sup>26</sup> In other words, they have a threshold-like quality: they modulate and manipulate the complex relationships between the alternate social and spatial orders inside and outside of themselves. Entrances to and exits from heterotopic sites are restricted, they are mediated by highly monitored physical obstacles and/or are contingent, submitting to rites and purifications. In that sense, the prison is an archetypically heterotopic site; but the building's newly expanded biography complicates this interpretation calling for a more layered analysis. Locating heterotopic relationships is relatively easier when the boundaries between being inside and outside are clearly marked or coincide with the physical boundaries of a given space. Identification becomes more difficult when boundaries are blurred and exclusion and inclusion no longer fully overlap with visible, physical markers. There are, however, other sites which, as Foucault acknowledges, 'seem to be pure and simple openings, but that generally hide curious exclusions'.<sup>27</sup> These are sites where gaining entry is just an illusion and where being inside is a condition of exclusion. The hotel is an example of this more elusive sort of heterotopic site, where what appears to be a public space is, indeed, carefully monitored and only selectively accessible and where no effort is spared to make the guests feel 'as though they were in their own home' but never really are. This is not simply because all stays at a hotel are, by definition, temporary or because just about all human interaction is, in effect, business. Rather, an international hotel at the turn of the twenty-first century is also a point of sale, a node at which information is gathered and conveyed to the global nerve centres of data processing to be catalogued for further use in consumer research, sales, and marketing. In other words, bodily privacy comes at the expense of the privacy of personal information. Sultanahmet Prison/Four Seasons Istanbul Hotel is remarkable because it brings together two uses that are heterotopic in their own right in both of its incarnations, generating yet another layer of heterotopic relations by inverting the spatial meanings they engender.

## Unique and ordinary, all at once

Contrary to expectations, suppressing the memory of its existence as a prison does not seem to be necessary for a comfortable sojourn at the hotel. Although in its initial season, the hotel's use as a prison was de-emphasized,

the management, having realized that it actually adds to the hotel's cache, does not try to hide the history of the building. As a matter of fact, nowadays the transformation is touted as a remarkable success story. The well-stocked folder guests find in their rooms contains – in addition to maps, city guides, informational fliers about the hotel's amenities, and magazine offprints about its award-winning design and service – information about the building's history as a prison. In a leaflet that describes the conversion as 'sewing a silk purse out of a sow's ear' the building's previous life is advertised as yet another feature that makes it a unique place to spend an unforgettable holiday. Inside the hotel, the elevator lobbies feature the mosaic tiles of the former prison floor, which had been slabbed over when the dormitories were subdivided into smaller cells. Even more striking is the unhindered display of the etchings made by the inmates on the marble columns of the lobby (Figure 10.5). The guests who are familiar with twentieth-century Turkish history, curiously ask the hotel personnel where Nazim Hikmet, the poet, penned his laments or Ibrahim Balaban, the painter, made his sketches. The memory of the inmates' ordeal is thus commodified, it becomes just another item for consumption.

Nevertheless, the conversion from prison to hotel was not uncontested, to the contrary, it encountered a significant degree of publicly voiced opposition. When construction began, Mehmed Ali Aybar, the late leader of the Turkish Communist Worker's Party who spent 'more years at the prison



10.5  
Image of a column in the  
elevator lobby, with etchings  
made by inmates

than he could count', expressed utter disappointment. Aybar stated that the prison had an honourable place in Turkey's history because many idealist intellectuals who had had the courage to take a critical stance against the government during the formative decades of the Republic had done time at Sultanahmet. Aybar argued that converting the former prison, which had such an important place in the nation's collective memory, was historically insensitive. The Istanbul branch of the Chamber of Architects of Turkey, spearheaded by its chairman Oktay Ekinçi, similarly opposed the project stating that the former prison was a container of Turkey's architectural, political, and cultural heritage. In a note of dissent, filed alongside the Professional Report on Environmental Impact, the expert witnesses representing the Chamber of Architects noted that the proposed project overlooked the historical and cultural significance of the building and that its potential for growth threatened the integrity of the urban fabric around it.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, Ekinçi, a public intellectual by avocation, repeatedly critiqued the exclusive nature of the project, in his columns of the left-leaning daily, *Cumhuriyet*.<sup>29</sup> He called for a more publicly accessible use for a building that had a central place in Turkey's national patrimony.<sup>30</sup> A third contingency who opposed the project were Classical and Byzantine archaeologists who decried the expedited issuance of construction permits because evidence strongly suggested that the building site was atop the buried ruins of the Byzantine Palace. Indeed, part of the Byzantine Senate and Archives were unearthed while digging a new basement for the hotel and construction continued much to the consternation of the academic community. Today, the process of uncovering what is estimated to have been the largest palace complex in medieval Europe continues on the vacant portions of the hotel property. As specific requests by some guests to be assigned rooms with a view of the excavation suggest, the archaeological work, itself, has become part of the hotel's attractions.

As this very brief sampling indicates, every single one of the criticisms raised against the project acknowledged the uniqueness of the building, its architecture, its site, and history as a prison, which, coincidentally, are precisely the attributes the Four Seasons management also promotes to its clientele. Describing the hotel as an 'an oasis of luxury' situated at 'the Cradle of Civilization' a booklet contained in the guest information packages placed in every room boasts:

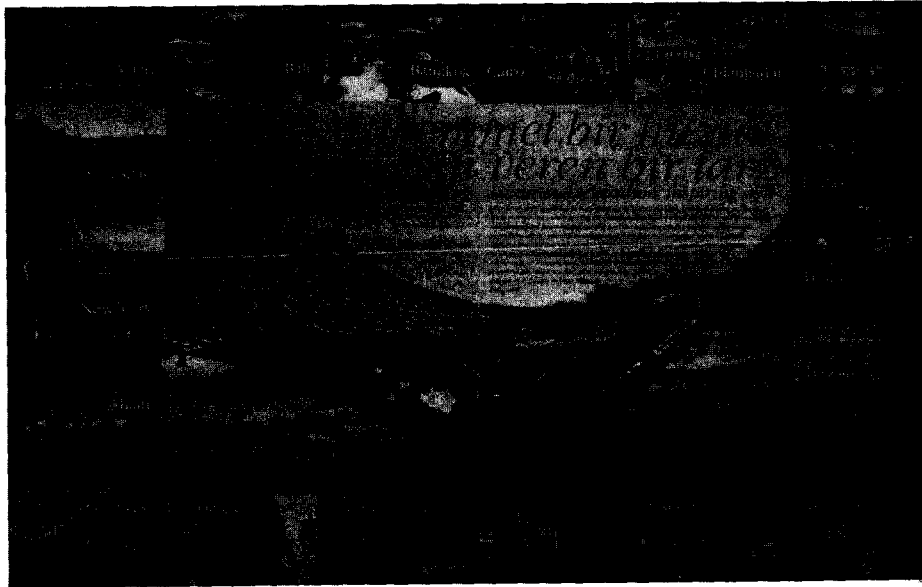
As the capital of three great empires and with a history spanning more than two millenia, Istanbul offers the traveller a treasure house of diverse architecture, art and culture. And within the most historic quarter of this truly historic city waits Four Seasons Istanbul.<sup>31</sup>



Indeed, continuously populated since the foundation of the city, the first hill of the ancient peninsula is a palimpsest of Istanbul's history under Greek, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, and modern Turkish rule. And Four Seasons Istanbul is situated so strategically in this district that a short walk in any direction will lead you to one of the city's most revered monuments. Its proximity to such remarkable historic sites, its unusual story, and the striking views it commands have made the former prison a particularly desirable site for touristic development.

Moreover, this relatively smooth conversion of history and memory into marketable commodities in a global emporium highlights the second dimension along which the hotel may be considered a heterotopic site. While the Four Seasons management uses these unique attributes to attract business, it also frames the Istanbul Hotel as just one among the many in its rich repertoire of equally exceptionally appointed hotels. Thus, by the same token, uniqueness is reduced to ordinariness and what would otherwise be priceless is commodified. For those willing to pay the price and go the distance, this is just another luxury hotel offering comparable amenities whether in Istanbul, Bali or Milan – all inflected with incidental details that provide just the right amount of local colour (Figure 10.6).

10.6  
Luxurious  
relaxation,  
inspiring style:  
Four Seasons  
Hotels and  
Resorts poster  
featuring images  
from available  
choices around  
the world



## Sultanahmet Four Seasons at the nexus of divergent geographical imaginations

The challenge of defining Four Seasons Istanbul simultaneously within its actual geographical context and within a supranational web of comparable spaces serving an affluent global elite highlights the third dimension of heterotopic relations instigated by the conversion. To better assess this, we need to briefly look at the historical and cultural context at the time of the prison's construction. The distinctive well-proportioned façade unmistakably identifies the building as an example of Ottoman Revivalism. The signature characteristics of this style, which became fashionable during the last two decades of Ottoman sovereignty include volumetric compositions inspired by Ottoman domestic architecture with a pronounced horizontality, articulated with multiple cantilevers and wide eaves; the stylized use of pointed Ottoman arches; handcrafted tile ornaments; wrought iron tracery and window grills mimicking wooden residential precedents; and carved marble details. Such formal accents were frequently used by Ottoman – and later republican – architects in modern institutional buildings like banks, railway stations, or government offices. In their appropriation of Ottoman-inspired elements, the architects were eclectic – they delved into the ornamental repertoire of Ottoman architecture, but deconstructed it, borrowed selectively, and used conventional forms out of their customary contexts in unconventional ways. Architects Kemalettin and Vedat were the prime exponents of Ottoman Revivalism – and the building has been variously attributed to both.

The practice of coupling modern design programmes with a visual ornamental vocabulary that reaffirmed the distinctiveness of national origins also had parallels in other contemporary European cities and in other areas of cultural production, such as music and literature. Structures such as the Sultanahmet Prison – built during the apogee of the first wave of European nationalism – had an unenviable double duty. On the one hand they had to satisfy the utilitarian requirements of their respective programmes. On the other, they also had to serve as articulations of the rather uneasy marriage of the universalizing principles of modernity with the distinctive local – read national – traditions.

Preserving the building's façade while rebranding it under the Four Seasons logo inevitably reinvokes the unresolved tension between preserving local identity and asserting modernity. But the change of ownership also reframes the original design solution. Through the language of Ottoman revivalism, reformist Ottoman bureaucrats and architects had sought to assert their claim to modernity while retaining what they saw as their own identity. But when taken over by Four Seasons and retrofitted with more

Ottoman-inspired interiors than any comparable building of that period, 'Turkishness' or 'Ottomanness' becomes an attribute conferred to the building from without, by enterprising entities that stand to make a profit from 'orientalizing the hotel'.

Nowhere is this tendency to 'orientalize' more apparent than in the publicity photos taken by the Four Seasons chain's inhouse photographer Jaime Ardilles-Arce. His frames portray the hotel and, by extension, Istanbul, as 'even more eastern than we are' says interior designer Sinan Kafadar who had paid particular attention to having understated interiors with none of the gimmickry such as tiles, copper urns, ceramic bowls, hand woven and embroidered textiles featured in many of the hotel's widely circulated images in the media. A most striking image, which is featured, among other places, on the hotel's homepage, shows the restored courtyard in the middle ground and the Hagia Sophia in the background – the latter standing as the symbol of Istanbul's mixed heritage between the East/Islam and the West/Christianity (Figure 10.7). The image is framed by the stylized modern decor of the room and the amenities offered by the hotel – a long stemmed yellow rose in a vase, a bowl of fresh fruits. In the foreground, the glass of wine, the eye glasses, and the open book suggest the room is occupied. And it is no accident, that the guest in question is looking at one of Ingres' famous paintings of imagined naked female bathers in a Turkish bath, for a stay at the Four Seasons Istanbul is truly intended as a journey to that imagined East.

In contrast, for the people of Istanbul, the hotel is yet another sign of their city's integration with the West and the Western-dominated spatial logic of global capitalism. In order to account for this alternative interpretation we need to situate it within the larger context of economic and political changes which facilitated the introduction of a luxury chain such as Four Seasons into the Turkish landscape. Two major developments, both of which took place in 1980 are widely considered to be turning points in recent Turkish history. First, on 24 January, jolted by incessant political unrest and grave economic crisis, the government signed an agreement with the International Monetary Fund, which, by all accounts, constituted the country's first step toward integration with the global economy. This agreement – and several others that have since been signed – required the abandonment of protectionism and state-driven planned development that had characterized Turkey's economy during the first sixty years of the republic. The second important event that year was the military coup which took place on 12 September. Military rule effectively brought an end to the street violence, but it also dissolved the parliament, annulled the constitution, and imprisoned many who were involved in political activities. Without political discourse and constitutional protections, under the military regime, structural changes to Turkey's

10.7

A publicity photo, featured in the homepage of the Four Seasons Istanbul Hotel. The same image is used widely in folders and posters promoting the hotel



trade and financial policies were implemented virtually without opposition.<sup>32</sup> Gradually an economically liberal approach that encouraged the sweeping privatization of state-owned economic enterprises, promoted partnerships with international investors, and favoured integration with the supposedly self-regulating global free market, was adopted.

As Turkey's prime commercial city, Istanbul was the first to open itself up to the global economy and the first to experience dramatic changes in its social and physical fabric. The arrival of foreign investment and multinational corporations in the Turkish economic scene was a boon for those working in the financial sector and information technology, whose buying power and patterns of consumption were comparable to their counterparts elsewhere in the world. Many worked in business-parks or high-rise office buildings that had begun to change Istanbul's silhouette and wanted to live in gated-developments. As a well-educated, well-travelled, multilingual elite they demanded goods and services that hitherto had been rare in Turkey. Membership-only sports clubs, five-star hotels, designer boutiques, enclosed

shopping malls, and gourmet restaurants offering international ethnic menus never before seen, mushroomed around upscale neighbourhoods of the city old and new.

Today, navigating from one destination to the next along the web of new highways and bridges, it is possible to by-pass most if not all of Istanbul's ills further exacerbated by the recklessness of a global laissez-faire economy: the agony of the displaced, the squalor of its growing slums and squatters, the city's aging infrastructure. As a rapidly globalizing city of the second tier, Istanbul now offers local manifestations of global homogeneity in its hermetically sealed privatized spaces which provide an identical standard of experience with comparable developments around the world. And for the thin stratum of privileged professionals in Istanbul, the Hotel is a place where they can plug into that larger imagined global society with shared patterns of consumption and exacting high standards for goods and service.

In conclusion, within this complicated and multilayered context, Four Seasons Istanbul is an unsettling in-between presence. It is heterotopic because it simultaneously engenders conflicting definitions, uses, and remembrances. It is a luxury hotel that thrives on the site of a former prison; its unique history and extraordinary location are precisely what incorporate it into the circuit of generic spaces of global consumption; and to reiterate the tired cliché, it is simultaneously a vessel for a journey to the East and an instrument to plug into the West. Through its ambivalence, the hotel not only calls into question the meanings we attribute spaces, but the very processes by which such meanings are produced.

## Notes

1 I would like to thank Journalist Andrew Finkel, Architect Dr Yalçın Özüekren of Kovuk Insaat, Interior Designer-Architect Sinan Kafadar of METEKS, Professor Erendiz Özbayoglu of Istanbul University, and Leven Gürsoy, Director of Sales and Marketing at Four Seasons Hotel Istanbul. They generously shared with me valuable information and insights which were indispensable for the realization of this chapter. In addition I would like to thank Mary Gatti at the corporate headquarters of Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts in Toronto, who assisted with the images. Dell Upton's insightful comments prompted me to examine the concept of heterotopia as embodied in this prison/hotel in further depth.

2 Peppiatt, M. (1997). 'Hotel Four Seasons Istanbul: A Luxurious New Presence in the Heart of Turkey's Ancient City'. *Architectural Design* (May 1997).

Four Seasons Hotels and Sultanahmet Turizm AS have not purchased the building. Rather, they have a 49-year lease on it from the Turkish Government, which still owns the building and the larger site around it. At its completion, the entire renovation project cost \$25,000,000. The lower unit-construction prices and cheaper labour accounts for the relatively low cost of the project in comparison with similar projects in Europe or North America. According to METEKS, 20 per cent of the entire budget was spent on the interior, whereas generally for a project of this type this percentage is estimated around 35 per cent. However, because the site is located in a seismically active area, the structural retrofitting comprised a relatively higher percentage of the total costs.

3 Kovuk Insaat, headed by Dr Özüekren, designed and oversaw the construction of the project, as well as the interior design for the basement service spaces. Sinan Kafadar's firm, METEKS, was responsible for the interior design of the hotel's public spaces and rooms.

4 Peppiatt, M. (1997). 'Hotel Four Seasons Istanbul: A Luxurious New Presence in the Heart of Turkey's Ancient City'. *Architectural Design* (May 1997), 92.

5 Personal interview with architects Didem Çaliskan and Murat Önal, who supervised the implementation of the interior design at the site on behalf of METEKS (5 February 2002, Istanbul).

6 Personal interview with Sinan Kafadar (5 February 2002, Istanbul).

7 Peppiatt, M. (1997). 'Hotel Four Seasons Istanbul: A Luxurious New Presence in the Heart of Turkey's Ancient City'. *Architectural Design* (May 1997).

8 Four Seasons Istanbul was voted the best hotel in Europe and ranked third in the world by the readers of *Condé Nast Traveller* magazine (see (2001) 'Readers Choice Awards: Best in the World'. *Condé Nast Traveller*).

The hotel has also been ranked sixth in Europe in 1999. The Four Seasons Hotels and Resorts Chain garnered top rankings in 15 of the 60 categories of the coveted AAA Five Diamonds Awards.

Four Seasons also has a reputation as a good employer, consistently being ranked among the Top 100 Companies to Work For by *Forbes Magazine*. Employees' job satisfaction, suggested Mr Gürçay and Ms Erdem, has a direct influence on guest satisfaction and subsequent rankings of the hotel.

9 Prominent intellectuals and artists who served time at Sultanahmet include Kemal Tahir, Aziz Nesin, Nazim Hikmet, Çetin Altan, Mehmet Ali Aybar, Rifat Ilgaz, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, Yasar Kemal, Orhan Kemal, Nail Çakırhan, Hasan İzzettin Dinamo, Vedat Türkali, Zihni Anadol, İbrahim Balaban, Yalçın Küçük. Some of Turkey's most high profile criminals such as Sülün Osman, Gangster Fahrettin, İdamlık Ali also were inmates at this facility.

10 Dersaadet is one of Istanbul's many poetic Ottoman names meaning Domain of Bliss, thus the literal translation is quite ironic: 'Domain of Bliss Murder Jail'. This main entrance opens unto Tevkifhane Street – i.e. Jail Street. The year 1327 indicates the construction date according to the Islamic Calendar that was still in use prior to the Republic. The years 1916–1917 are the equivalent according to the Gregorian Calendar.

In addition to Sultanahmet Prison, the facility was known by many different names such as Dersaadet Murder Jail, Sultanahmet Penitentiary, and Istanbul Jail and Penitentiary which were used interchangeably throughout its long life. This was due to occasional changes in the use of the building, which has variously housed detainees awaiting trial only and a mixture of detainees and convicts. To avoid confusion, I will refer to the building as Sultanahmet Prison throughout the text.

11 The instability of the current Turkish economy is reflected in high inflation rates and constant decrease of the currency in international markets. Although real wages have been eroding rapidly in the last couple of decades, in the last few years, the monthly minimum wage has been hovering around \$100–110.

12 Foucault, M. (1986). 'Of Other Spaces'. *Diacritics* (Spring), 25.

13 In his seminal article, rather than providing a short and universal definition, Foucault describes the phenomenon in terms of its manifest characteristics. (Ibid., 24.) Hetherington notes that several nuanced reinterpretations of heterotopia have been provided by various scholars but that they all concur on the relational character of the phenomenon. The heterotopia, as identified by these authors, include sites that are constituted as incongruous, or paradoxical, through socially transgressive practices; sites that are ambivalent and uncertain because of the multiplicity of social meanings that are attached to them, often where the meaning of the site has changed or is openly contested; sites that have some aura of mystery, danger or transgression about them; sites that are defined by their absolute perfection surrounded by

- spaces that are not so clearly defined as such; sites that are marginalized within the dominant social spatialization. Hetherington, K. (1997) *The Badlands of Modernity: Heteropia and Social Ordering*. London, Routledge, 7, 41.
- 14 Bozdoğan, S. (2001). *Modernism and Nation-Building: Turkish Architectural Culture in the Early Republic*. Seattle, University of Washington Press, 18.
  - 15 Nazım Hikmet (1938). Translation by the author.
  - 16 The fire which raged for 24 hours, killed two employees of the Courthouse and burned almost all of the files stored in the building. The prison was evacuated. Interestingly, none of the inmates escaped during the emergency.
  - 17 Four Seasons Hotel (forthcoming). *Sultanahmet Hapishanesinin Tarihçesi*. Istanbul.
  - 18 Finkel, Andrew (forthcoming). 'Essay on Four Seasons Hotel, Istanbul', unpublished and unpaginated typescript.
  - 19 Finkel, *ibid.*
  - 20 Turing Club's adaptive reuse projects date back to the late 1970s. The organization restored several small palaces and mansions in Istanbul and opened them as cafes and restaurants, serving primarily an upper middle-class clientele. In 1986, it inaugurated the Sogukcesme Development, which was an entire street of small townhouses, which were to be used as bed and breakfast accommodations. This was the largest project undertaken to date by Turing Club and came under fire for being kitschy and inauthentic, since many of the 'restored' houses were not 'historic' in the first place and the whole development looked more like a stage design than a revitalized typical Ottoman street in Istanbul.
  - 21 The permit was issued based on ruling no. 1302 (1 July 1961) and no. 3514 (11 June 1967) of the High Commission of Monuments.
  - 22 From a strictly preservationist standpoint, the view that modifications were minimal is somewhat dubious, as Dr Özüekren himself argues. Dr Özüekren states that although the footprint of the original loadbearing masonry was retained in most places, floor slabs were taken out and the levels were modified. He also argues that the additions such as the glassed-in restaurant disrupts the formal integrity of the courtyard and the glass passages between the different blocks were serious violations. Also, as he and the opponents of the project suggest, the rather reckless excavation of the courtyard damaged the Byzantine archaeological site underneath the building. In the initial phase of the project, Özüekren asserts that most compromises were done at the expense of keeping a harmony between the external façade and its interior. Personal interview 7 February 2002 and Özüekren, Y. (1997). 'Cezaevi'nden Otel'e'. *Yapı* 187 (June 1997).
  - 23 Most of the information about daily life in the prison provided in this paragraph originates from the manuscript of the book in preparation by Four Seasons Hotel. (Forthcoming). *Sultanahmet Hapishanesinin Tarihçesi*. Istanbul.
  - 24 Durbas, R. (1989). 'Yalnızlığa Mahkum bir Cezaevi'. *Cumhuriyet* (4 December).
  - 25 Turgut, A. (1996). 'Sultanahmet Cezaevi Artık Tarih Oluyor'. *Ibid.* (2 September).
  - 26 Foucault, M. (1986). 'Of Other Spaces'. *Diacritics* (Spring), 26.
  - 27 *Ibid.*, 26.
  - 28 Chamber of Architects of Turkey (1992). *Mimarlar Odası İstanbul Büyükkent Subesi*, Istanbul.
  - 29 Ekinci, O. (1992). 'Yokedici "Turizm" Anlayışı'. *Cumhuriyet* (20 December); Ekinci, O. (1995). 'Kültür Turizme Kurban Edildi'. *Ibid.* (19 April); Ekinci, O. (1996). 'Sultanahmet Cezaevi Otel Olurken'. *Ibid.* (3 September); Ekinci, O. (1998). 'Sur İçinde Arkeoloji'. *Ibid.* (6 August).
  - 30 *Tempo* (1995). 'Sultanahmet Cezaevi Otel Olurken Arkeoloji Kulübü Çok Dertli'. (18–24 May).
  - 31 Cradle of Civilization.
  - 32 Keyder, Ç. (ed.) (2000). *İstanbul: Küresel ile Yerel Arasında*. Istanbul, Metis Yayınları.
- Keyder's article in this edited volume provides a succinct overview of Turkey's fast integration into global economy.

## Chapter 11

## Ritual as radical change

## The burial of the Unknown Soldier and 'ways of using' the space of Washington, DC, 11 November 1921

Hélène Lipstadt

## 'Ways of using' as 'another production'

Benedict Anderson famously considered tombs of Unknown Soldiers to be the most 'arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism', observing in *Imagined Communities* that

the public ceremonial reverence accorded these monuments . . . has no true precedents in earlier times. . . . Yet void as the tombs are of identifiable mortal remains, . . . they are nonetheless saturated with ghostly *national* imaginings. (This is why so many different nations have such tombs without feeling any need to specify the nationality of their absent occupants. What else could they be *but* Germans, Americans, Argentinians?).<sup>1</sup>