Journal of Urban History
1–36
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DOI: 10.1177/00961442251315107
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Reassembling Phanariots' Masonry Neighborhood in Istanbul: Digital Visualization as Urban Historical Research

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Abstract

Early modern Istanbul, the Ottoman Empire's capital, was a major urban center well-known for its large religious complexes and bazaars, a masonry architecture of lead-covered domes still enduring. In contrast, the residential architecture was mostly timber-framed, and due to the material ephemerality in fires, little is known about and left of the city's residential neighborhoods. This article considers the Phanar waterfront—the neighborhood of a group of Greek Orthodox Christians known as Phanariots—as a significant exception to this urban historiographical enigma. The article visualizes the data on Phanar semi-masonry houses in historical sources with digital three-dimensional (3D) tools as it documents, reassembles, and investigates the neighborhood's main street. Taking the mid-nineteenth century as a hallmark of reliable representation and diachronic analysis, the article aims to demonstrate digital 3D reconstruction as a scholarly method for documenting and researching lost urban heritage.

Keywords

Ottoman city, early modern period, waterfront morphology, residential architecture, source-based 3D modeling

In his 1852 Istanbul travelog, Théophile Gautier, the celebrated French writer, narrated an excursion through Phanar, one of the city's Greek Orthodox Christian quarters, located on the southern Golden Horn between Balat and the city's main harbor. He pictured a striking contrast between "the wretched Balat" neighborhood, a major Jewish settlement, and that of Phanaris, of "a better class of Greeks": "a sort of 'West End' in proximity to an 'Alsatia' or a '*Cour des Miracles*.'"[1] What made Phanar comparable to London's high-class neighborhood while Balat matched Alsace's towns with timber-framed buildings or Paris's old slum district was rather formal and related to residential architecture. Phanar consisted "of houses of stone, of considerable architectural pretension." Some were more ancient and recalled the French mansions of the Middle Ages: "half-fortresses and half-dwellings." After a long poetic description of the house façades, he signified the one-mile-long high street between the fortifications and harbor as "the masonry

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