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The Palimpsest City and the World Expo: A Framework for Representing Layered Urban Identity

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Abstract

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This paper examines how cities whose identities are characterised by deep historical complexity can be represented within the World Expo format, using Istanbul as the analytical subject. The Bureau International des Expositions regulatory framework structurally favours concentrated, singular national narratives, placing palimpsest cities at a representational disadvantage that existing scholarship has not addressed systematically. The paper develops the Narrative Spatial Framework, an integrated analytical apparatus combining six theoretical pillars: Ricoeur's narrative mimesis (1984), Zumthor's architectural atmosphere (2006), Tschumi's event-space (1994), Frampton's critical regionalism (1983), Said's representational politics (1978) and Lefebvre's social production of space (1991). Applied to Istanbul, the framework produces six representational principles demonstrated through two analytical scenarios. Istanbul's palimpsest complexity is not a representational liability but its most analytically honest and generative condition. The framework offers a replicable apparatus for other cities of analogous historical complexity.

Keywords: Architectural narrative; World Expositions; Istanbul; Urban Palimpsest; Narrative Spatial Framework; BIE Convention.

1. Introduction

World Expositions have functioned since the nineteenth century as a concentrated arena in which nations narrate their identities through architectural form, material, spatial sequence and curated cultural display. Rydell (1984) established that this narration has consistently served ideological purposes, from the imperial assertions of nineteenth-century exhibitions to the soft-power diplomacy of the contemporary format. The Bureau International des Expositions, whose 1928 Convention and successive revisions have governed Expo participation for nearly a century, structures the format around a preference for legible, memorable, globally recognisable pavilions communicating cultural identity within bounded spatial and temporal encounters to audiences with minimal prior knowledge of the represented nation (Bureau International des Expositions, 1972). Mitchell (1989) reads this as an epistemological practice that organises the world as an exhibition available for inspection by a global gaze whose conventions encode specific relations of power. The result is a structural bias toward singular national narratives.

This bias produces a specific and largely untheorised challenge for cities whose identities resist singular narrative. Some cities are shaped by accumulated historical layering, successive cultural inscriptions that coexist without resolution across centuries, producing urban identities that are plural, contested and resistant to the singular image the Expo format rewards. The challenge is not architectural ambition but analytical honesty: how to engage the format in a way that holds the city's complexity visible rather than suppressing it into false unity. Psarra (2009) shows that architectural narrative is constituted through the interaction between spatial configuration and the cultural frameworks visitors bring to built form. For a palimpsest city, this interaction must hold multiple cultural codes simultaneously without privileging any one. No existing study has systematically addressed the representational disadvantage that the BIE regulatory framework produces for palimpsest cities.

Istanbul presents the challenge in its most concentrated form. A city spanning two continents, whose urban fabric carries simultaneous traces of Byzantine, Ottoman, Republican and contemporary inscription, Istanbul is described by Turgut (2021) as an urban palimpsest: a spatial text constituted by successive engravings that have never fully erased what preceded them. What makes Istanbul the most analytically demanding test case available is not its historical depth alone but the structural simultaneity of its layers, Byzantine structural logic, Ottoman spatial organisation, Republican

modernisation and contemporary global transformation do not represent phases through which the city has passed but conditions that remain co-present in its living fabric, each making competing representational claims that cannot be resolved without distortion. This is the structural condition that places the highest analytical demand on any representational framework, and it is why Istanbul is the right subject for developing one.

Recent work in postcolonial architectural theory (Lin, 2023; Ang Mo et al., 2022) and contemporary Expo scholarship (Honisch, 2024; Cull, 2022; Jones, Di Vita, & Ponzini, 2022) has examined the institutional and representational logics of the Expo format and the Orientalist visual economy within which non-Western participation is staged, but has not produced an integrated analytical apparatus for cities whose identity is constitutively layered. Istanbul's position within this visual economy is historically specific, shaped by the Ottoman Empire's documented internalisation of Orientalist representational conventions at nineteenth-century Expos (Celik, 1992) and compounded by the contemporary persistence of the minaret-Bosphorus-bazaar visual shorthand in global tourism imagery.

This paper develops that apparatus. The research question is: how can a palimpsest city whose identity is formed by irreducible historical complexity be represented within the World Expo format without falsifying that complexity, and what integrated analytical framework does such representation require? Two secondary questions follow. First, what structural conditions does the BIE regulatory framework impose on the representational possibilities available to cities of historical complexity? Second, what concrete architectural principles does an analytically honest engagement with Istanbul's palimpsest identity demand within that environment?

The paper's original contribution is the Narrative Spatial Framework, an integrated analytical apparatus combining six theoretical pillars in a configuration not previously assembled for Expo architectural analysis. The argument advanced is that Istanbul's palimpsest complexity is not a representational liability but its most analytically honest and generative condition, provided the architectural approach is grounded in this framework. The epistemological position is interpretive and qualitative, consistent with the tradition described by Groat and Wang (2013), in which meaning is produced through cultural discourse, historical context and spatial experience rather than through quantifiable variables.

2. Materials and Methods

The methodology combines theoretical framework construction, comparative case-study analysis and analytical scenario development. The approach is documentary, textual and theoretically grounded, treating published architectural analyses, official Expo documentation, regulatory texts and urban scholarship as the primary evidential base. No primary fieldwork is conducted. The diagram below presents the structure of the study.

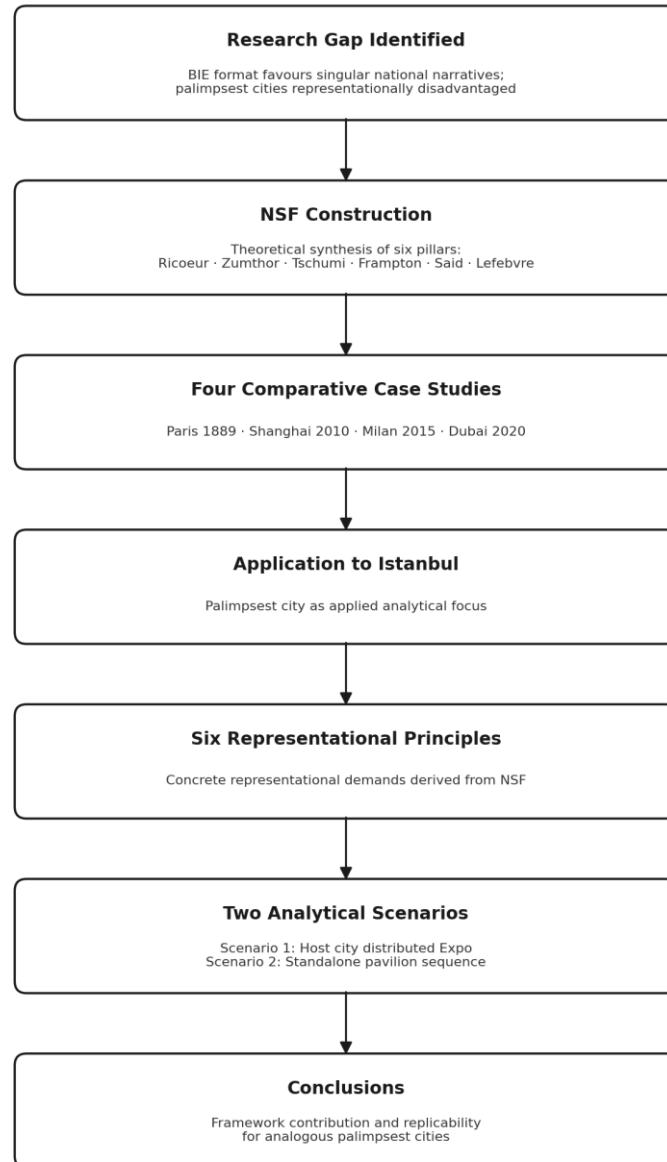


Figure 1. Structure of the study (developed by authors).

The Narrative Spatial Framework is constructed through theoretical synthesis. Six established frameworks, whose individual analytical contributions are well documented in the literature, are integrated into a single apparatus for Expo architectural analysis. The integration follows a compounding logic: each pillar addresses a dimension that the others do not capture, and their combination produces analytical capability unavailable from any pillar in isolation. Ricoeur's (1984) narrative mimesis operationalises the temporal dimension, allowing analysis of how spatial design configures meaning from prefigurative cultural conditions. Zumthor's (2006) atmosphere operationalises the pre-reflective sensory and material register through which architecture communicates before iconographic recognition. Tschumi's (1994) event-space operationalises the performative dimension of spatial sequence and the moving body. Frampton's (1983) critical regionalism operationalises the tectonic mediation between universal construction logic and local cultural specificity. Said's (1978) representational politics, extended through Celik (1992) and Bhabha (1994), operationalises the analysis of the Orientalist visual economy and the structural inequality of the representational field. Lefebvre's (1991) social production of space operationalises the BIE's institutional regulation as a productive spatial force rather than an external constraint.

Four Expos are examined comparatively to establish the pattern of institutional constraint and narrative negotiation within which Istanbul's representational challenge is situated: Paris 1889, Shanghai 2010, Milan 2015 and Dubai 2020. The cases are selected for analytical productivity, not statistical representativeness. Each demonstrates a distinct configuration of the relationship between BIE thematic mandate and narrative strategy, allowing the variable degree of cultural specificity each pavilion achieves to be examined against the institutional conditions producing it.

Two analytical scenarios apply the framework to Istanbul. The scenarios are analytical demonstrations rather than design proposals: they specify the theoretical conditions an analytically serious engagement with Istanbul would have to satisfy, not the architectural form such engagement would take. The paper produces no design output.

3. Results

3.1 The Palimpsest City: Theoretical Grounding

The concept of urban palimpsest provides the most precise model for cities whose spatial identity is created by accumulated historical layering rather than by sequenced replacement. Turgut (2021) develops this model specifically in relation to Istanbul, arguing that the city's built fabric is the product not of sequential historical replacement but of layered coexistence: Byzantine structural logic, Ottoman spatial organisation, Republican modernisation and contemporary global transformation are not phases through which the city has passed but layers that remain simultaneously present in its living fabric. The Republican layer's specific cultural and ideological imprint on Ottoman urban space has been examined extensively by Bozdogan and Kasaba (1997), whose analysis of modernity and national identity in Turkey establishes the political and aesthetic conditions under which the Ottoman fabric was selectively repurposed and overwritten. Sarihan and Lovra (2024) extend this analytical perspective through morphological analysis of Ottoman urban fabric in Türkiye, demonstrating how layered historical strata persist within contemporary spatial organisation. This morphological persistence of historical strata within the contemporary urban fabric is what makes the palimpsest not a metaphor of romantic complexity but, as Lanz (2024) argues, a critical analytical category with direct implications for any representational engagement that claims architectural honesty. Any spatial configuration of the city that concentrates on a single historical layer therefore produces an analytically dishonest account of what structurally defines Istanbul.

Ricoeur's (1984) theory of narrative mimesis provides the framework for understanding what the palimpsest condition implies for representational practice. The tripartite mimetic process, prefiguration, configuration and refiguration, establishes that narrative begins from inherited cultural and historical understanding, shapes it into composed form and produces transformation in the audience's experience. Applied to Istanbul, this framework establishes that the palimpsest is the city's prefigurative inheritance: any representational act must begin from the prior understanding that Istanbul's identity is constituted by multiple coexisting and sometimes contradictory historical layers whose simultaneous presence cannot be reduced to a single narrative without distorting the prefigurative material itself. Figure 2 presents the Hagia Sophia vestibule mosaic, a Byzantine inscription preserved within a structure that subsequently became Ottoman and then a mosque, making the palimpsest condition architecturally legible. Figure 3 presents a panoramic view of the Istanbul historic peninsula skyline ca. 1880–1893, demonstrating how Ottoman spatial organisation inscribed a visual hierarchy over the Byzantine substrate without erasing it.

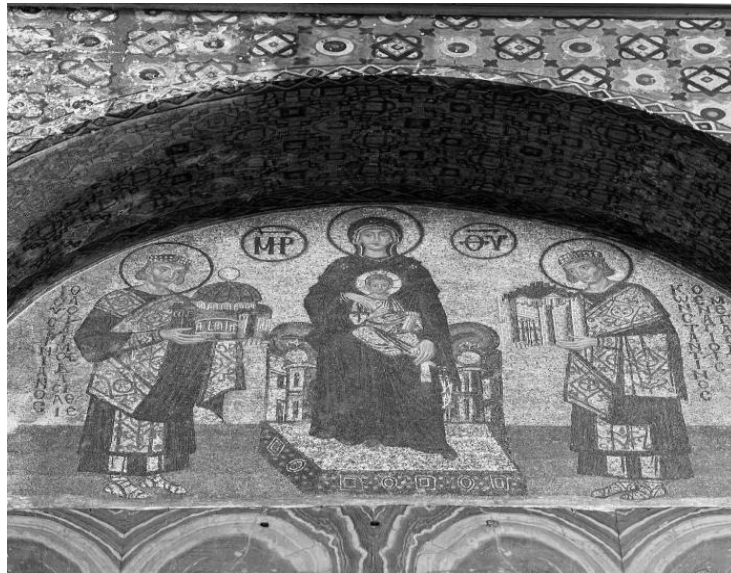


Figure 2. Hagia Sophia vestibule mosaic, Istanbul, showing Byzantine cultural memory inscribed within a structure that subsequently became Ottoman. Source: Pexels (n.d.).



Figure 3. Panoramic view of the Istanbul historic peninsula skyline, ca. 1880–1893. The mosque silhouettes against the Bosphorus rest on a spatial fabric whose underlying logic is Byzantine. Source: Pera Museum (n.d.).

Oncu and Weyland (2010) examine how this layered complexity operates in Istanbul's contemporary condition, arguing that the city's engagement with globalisation has produced new forms of cultural hybridity that resist both the Orientalist reduction of the city to its picturesque historical imagery and the multicultural assimilation that would dissolve its specificity into generic global urbanism. The result is a productive friction characterised by the simultaneous presence of multiple cultural logics whose interaction produces forms not reducible to any single tradition. Bhabha's (1994) cultural hybridity reinforces this position: what might appear as the city's representational liability, its resistance to singular narrative, is in fact a positive ontological condition. The city's complexity is not the absence of identity but its most distinctive form. Table 1 presents Istanbul's four historical layers and their representational characters.

Table 1: Istanbul's Four Historical Layers: Spatial Logic and Representational Character.

Layer	Period	Key Spatial Logic	Representative Structures	Representational Character
Byzantine	330–1453 CE	Centralised dome, masonry enclosure, monumental civic scale	Hagia Sophia, Hippodrome, sea walls, cisterns	Foundational layer; structural mass, civic and religious monumentality
Ottoman	1453–1923	Mosque-centred spatial hierarchy, organic residential grain, covered bazaar network	Suleymaniye Mosque, Topkapi Palace, Grand Bazaar	Dominant visual layer; skyline definition, commercial urbanism
Republican	1923–1980s	Axial planning, secular public space, modernist civic building over Ottoman fabric	Atatürk Boulevard, Taksim Square	Rupture layer; ideological modernisation, spatial discontinuity
Contemporary	1980s–present	Financial towers, gentrified districts, global commercial infrastructure	Levent–Maslak financial district, Balat	Global integration layer; selective heritage mobilisation alongside new contradictions

Source: Authors, 2026.

3.2 The Expo Format and Its Representational Logic

The World Expo is an institutionally structured event whose representational possibilities are conditioned by the BIE's regulatory architecture. Lefebvre's (1991) tripartite theory of the social production of space provides the most analytically productive framework for understanding this conditioning. Lefebvre distinguishes conceived space (the space of planners, architects and institutions), perceived space (the space of material practice and everyday spatial behaviour) and lived space (the space of inhabitation and imagination through which users invest spatial environments with symbolic meaning).

The BIE Convention and its protocols operate at the level of conceived space: they establish thematic mandates, plot allocations and design parameters that determine the formal conditions within which national pavilions are produced (Bureau International des Expositions, 1972). Honisch's (2024) analysis of Expos 2010 and 2015 demonstrates that host cities have consistently exploited this conceived space as an instrument of urban repositioning, confirming Gold and Gold's (2011) argument that the BIE framework is a productive force shaping not only individual pavilions but the broader urban and cultural narratives within which they are made.

Said (1978) identifies Orientalism as a systematic discourse that produces the non-Western world as exotic, timeless and fundamentally different from the modern West, serving both aesthetic and political functions in international cultural representation. Mitchell (1989) extends this analysis to the exhibition format specifically, arguing that the world exhibitions established an interpretive practice through which the world was reorganised as a display available for inspection and ordering by the Western gaze. Celik (1992) demonstrates that the Ottoman Empire's pavilion strategies at nineteenth-century international exhibitions were shaped by awareness that Western audiences expected and rewarded a specific form of oriental exoticism. The most analytically significant dimension of this dynamic was not the Western construction of non-Western otherness but the internalisation of Orientalist conventions in non-Western self-representation: Ottoman pavilion design choices were shaped by anticipated audience expectations as much as by cultural intent. This historical pattern is directly continuous with the structural pressure that Istanbul's contemporary representational strategy must navigate. Lin (2023) and Ang Mo et al. (2022) examine the persistence of these dynamics in contemporary Asian and maritime contexts, showing that the postcolonial architectural condition continues to be structured by the representational asymmetries Said identified. Figure 4 presents the Turkish Pavilion at the Exposition Universelle de Paris 1900, in which the architectural vocabulary deployed was selected at least in part for its legibility to Western audiences already primed to receive a particular kind of Ottoman imagery. Figure 5 presents an Orientalist landscape painting of Istanbul from the Bosphorus, demonstrating the constructed pictorial conventions through which the city was made visually available to Western audiences and which any contemporary representational engagement must contend with.

The Expo format's representational logic has shifted significantly since 2015. The post-2015 turn toward sustainability, digital atmosphere and immersive experience, visible in Dubai 2020's distributed thematic districts and its integration of digital media at architectural scale, has produced new forms of institutional mandate that extend Lefebvre's conceived space into the domain of affective and atmospheric experience (Cull, 2022). This shift has consequences for cultural specificity: when the BIE's conceived space mandates not only formal parameters but experiential registers, the range of atmospheric strategies available to participating nations is simultaneously expanded and constrained. Nations that can align culturally specific atmospheric registers with the BIE's experiential mandate, as China did in 2010 by grounding the dougong reinterpretation in both tectonic specificity and soft-power legibility, achieve the highest degree of cultural honesty within the institutional field. For Istanbul, this post-2015 shift is productive: the city's palimpsest condition is precisely the kind of layered atmospheric complexity the contemporary Expo format, at its most analytically demanding, is structured to receive.



Figure 4. Turkish Pavilion (Pavillon de la Turquie), Exposition Universelle de Paris, 1900. The architectural vocabulary deployed was selected at least in part for its legibility to Western audiences already primed to receive a particular kind of Ottoman imagery. Source: S.I.P. Paris. (1900). Pavillon Ottoman, Exposition Universelle de Paris [Photograph]. Public domain.



Figure 5. Orientalist landscape, Istanbul from the Bosphorus. The pictorial formula reproduces conventions Said (1978) identifies as constitutive of the discursive production of the Orient. Source: Pera Museum (n.d.).

Table 2 maps the representational logic of four Expos across more than a century. The pattern shows that the degree of cultural specificity achieved is directly proportional to the analytical sophistication with which each participating nation engages the BIE's conceived space rather than passively submits to it.

Table 2: Four Expos: BIE Mandate, Narrative Strategy and Cultural Specificity Achieved.

Expo and Year	BIE Thematic Mandate	Narrative Strategy Deployed	Primary NSF Pillars Activated	Cultural Specificity
Paris 1889	National technological supremacy, colonial display hierarchy	Axial spatial hierarchy, Orientalist colonial display, imperial monumentality	Said; Lefebvre; Tschumi	Low for non-Western participants; high for France through monumental spectacle (Rydell, 1984)
Shanghai 2010	Better City, Better Life	Dougong bracket reinterpretation as tectonic argument; urban soft-power projection	Frampton; Ricoeur; Zumthor	High: China Pavilion achieved tectonic cultural grounding (Honisch, 2024)
Milan 2015	Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life	Sustainability narrative; atmospheric experimentation in selected pavilions	Lefebvre; Zumthor; Tschumi	Variable: UK Hive achieved high atmospheric specificity; many pavilions at minimal compliance (Jones, Di Vita, & Ponzini, 2022)
Dubai 2020	Connecting Minds, Creating the Future	Distributed thematic districts, immersive digital atmosphere, multi-scale narrative	Tschumi; Zumthor; Lefebvre	High: distributed strategy matched the representational complexity of 192-nation participation (Cull, 2022)

Source: Authors, 2026.

3.3 The Narrative Spatial Framework

The Narrative Spatial Framework is an integrated analytical apparatus combining six theoretical pillars into a single instrument capable of examining Expo pavilions across temporal, sensory, cultural, institutional, political and social dimensions simultaneously. Psarra (2009) argues that architectural narrative is constituted by the interaction between spatial configuration and cultural codes, a position that demands precisely the multi-dimensional analytical apparatus the NSF assembles. No existing study of Expo pavilion design has brought these six frameworks together in this configuration; the analytical insight the combination produces is unavailable from any single pillar applied in isolation. The first pillar, Ricoeur's (1984) narrative mimesis, establishes the temporal logic through which spatial design configures meaning from prefigurative cultural conditions. For Expo pavilion analysis, the mimetic triad establishes that architectural narrative is a temporal performance whose meaning is produced through the encounter between spatial design and the cultural understanding visitors bring. The second pillar, Zumthor's (2006) architectural atmosphere, addresses the pre-reflective sensory register in which architectural narrative is first received, prior to iconographic recognition. Atmosphere is the primary medium through which cultural identity communicates to visitors who may have no prior knowledge of the represented nation.

The third pillar, Tschumi's (1994) event-space, establishes that architectural meaning is produced in the dynamic encounter between spatial sequence and the moving body. The visitor's route constitutes the narrative act: entry, circulation, threshold, pause and departure compose the story the pavilion tells. The fourth pillar, Frampton's (1983) critical regionalism, addresses the cultural-political tension between global legibility and local specificity, requiring that any architectural claim of cultural rootedness mediate between the universal logic of contemporary construction and the specific tectonic, climatic and cultural conditions of its site.

The fifth pillar, Said's (1978) politics of representation, extended through Celik's (1992) architectural analysis and Bhabha's (1994) hybridity, introduces the structural inequality of the representational field. For Istanbul this pillar is analytically indispensable: representational choices are conditioned by the anticipated expectations of an audience whose cultural framework encodes historical relations of power. The sixth pillar, Lefebvre's (1991) social production of space, provides the framework for understanding the BIE's institutional regulation as productive spatial force rather than external administrative constraint. Table 3 presents the framework's six pillars, the dimensions each addresses and the analytical question each enables.

Table 3: The Narrative Spatial Framework: Pillars, Dimensions and Analytical Questions.

Principle	Theoretical Source	Dimension Addressed	Analytical Question
Layered Temporal Simultaneity	Ricoeur (1984)	Temporal narrative across historical registers	How does the pavilion hold multiple historical registers simultaneously without false resolution?
Tactile Atmospheric Specificity	Zumthor (2006)	Pre-reflective sensory and material experience	How does the space communicate cultural identity through bodily experience before iconographic recognition?
Movement as Historical Passage	Tschumi (1994)	Performative spatial sequence and visitor trajectory	How does the visitor's trajectory produce the palimpsest condition as embodied temporal experience?
Critical Double Mediation	Frampton (1983)	Tectonic cultural grounding and material honesty	How does the architectural language engage building-traditional intelligence without stylistic historicism?
Explicit Representational Awareness	Said (1978); Celik (1992); Bhabha (1994)	Representational politics and Orientalist field negotiation	How does the approach negotiate the Orientalist visual economy without reproducing or naively dismissing it?
Conceived Space Negotiation	Lefebvre (1991); BIE Convention (1972)	Institutional framework engagement as productive condition	How does the strategy identify and work the narrative latitude within BIE regulatory constraints?

Source: Authors, 2026.

3.4 Six Representational Principles

The principle of Layered Temporal Simultaneity, derived from Ricoeur (1984), demands that representational configuration hold several temporal registers simultaneously rather than selecting a single historical period as primary narrative. A representational approach that narrates Istanbul through its Byzantine or Ottoman layer alone produces a false configuration analytically dishonest to the prefigurative complexity it inherits. The principle demands a spatial organisation in which Byzantine structural logic, Ottoman spatial hierarchy, Republican modernisation and contemporary transformation are present as structural conditions within a single spatial experience. It rules out single-period historicism. Figure 6 presents the layered urban fabric of Balat, where Byzantine substructures, Ottoman timber houses, Republican-era modifications and contemporary interventions coexist within a single field of view. This is the spatial condition the principle demands the representation hold rather than simplify.



Figure 6. Layered urban fabric in Balat, Istanbul, showing the coexistence of historical strata at street scale. Source: Bubi Istanbul (n.d.).

The principle of Tactile Atmospheric Specificity, derived from Zumthor (2006), demands that the primary communicative register be sensory and material rather than iconographic. The minaret–Bosphorus–bazaar visual shorthand confirms global audience expectation rather than producing genuine encounter with Istanbul. The principle demands atmospheric registers drawn from the city's specific material culture: the weight of Marmara travertine, the acoustic character of a domed enclosure, the quality of light filtered through latticed timber. Figure 7 presents the atmospheric register of the Spice Bazaar interior, demonstrating the sensory specificity this principle demands over iconic visual shorthand. It rules out the deployment of iconic imagery as primary representational register.



Figure 7. Spice Bazaar interior, Istanbul. The atmospheric quality produced by diffused light, acoustic resonance, material warmth and the spatial relationship between vaulted ceiling and human scale constitutes the culturally specific sensory register Zumthor's (2006) principle of tactile atmospheric specificity demands. Source: Pexels (n.d.), Son Yildiz Duserken [Photographer].

The principle of Movement as Historical Passage, derived from Tschumi (1994), demands that spatial sequence be choreographed as temporal accumulation rather than chronological illustration. The visitor moves through thresholds whose materials and spatial registers shift from Byzantine density through Ottoman enclosure to Republican transparency to contemporary simultaneity, carrying the spatial memory of each threshold into the next.

The threshold is the critical spatial instrument of this principle. It does not merely mark the boundary between two spatial conditions but carries the memory of the preceding condition into the next, so that the visitor never fully leaves what has been traversed. Each threshold is architecturally marked, through material change, ceiling height, acoustic quality, light level, in a way that makes the historical transition spatially felt before it is intellectually identified. This is what distinguishes temporal accumulation from chronological illustration: in the former, each register remains active throughout the entire sequence; in the latter, each is completed and closed before the next begins. The palimpsest condition is produced in the visitor's body through the former, not communicated as information through the latter.

The principle of Critical Double Mediation, derived from Frampton (1983), rules out the deployment of Ottoman or Byzantine formal vocabulary as decorative overlay applied to a generic contemporary spatial envelope. The principle demands architectural language grounded in Istanbul's spatial culture, generated through the tectonic properties of materials and constructional systems. It rules out stylistic historicism. Figure 8 presents Byzantine sea walls alongside an

Ottoman fountain, an architectural configuration in which two historical registers meet in a single spatial frame without resolution. This is what Bhabha (1994) identifies as hybridity at the level of built form: not a mixture of two pure traditions but a new spatial condition produced through their encounter.



Figure 8. Byzantine sea walls alongside an Ottoman fountain, Istanbul, demonstrating the spatial coexistence of historical layers. Source: Pexels (n.d.), Eyupcan Timur [Photographer].

The principle of Explicit Representational Awareness, derived from Said (1978), Celik (1992) and Bhabha (1994), demands that architectural choices be made in critical awareness of the Orientalist visual economy, with deliberate sophistication in their negotiation. It demands neither unreflective reproduction of Orientalist conventions nor reactive counter-assertion against them, but engagement through the productive ambivalence Bhabha identifies as hybridity's most sophisticated mode.

The principle of Conceived Space Negotiation, derived from Lefebvre (1991) and the BIE Convention (1972), demands active engagement with the BIE's institutional framework as productive condition. The thematic framework must be read for the narrative latitude it offers as well as for the constraints it imposes. The institutional relationship is a negotiation whose terms can be shaped by the analytical precision of the representational strategy brought to it.

This negotiation is not passive compliance with the BIE's thematic mandate but active reading of the institutional field for the narrative latitude it contains. Every BIE thematic framework, from Better City, Better Life to Connecting Minds, Creating the Future, carries within it a set of concerns broad enough to accommodate culturally specific arguments that genuinely engage the theme rather than merely performing it. The analytical task is to identify the point of alignment between the BIE's global concerns and Istanbul's specific spatial contributions, and to construct the representational strategy at that point of alignment. The BIE's institutional field does not determine the representational outcome; it structures the conditions within which analytical precision either produces or forfeits genuine cultural contribution.

3.5 Analytical Scenarios

The six principles are demonstrated through two analytical scenarios. Both are analytical constructs rather than design proposals: they specify what the framework demands of architectural practice, not what a specific architectural solution would look like.

Scenario 1: Istanbul as Host City. Applied at host-city scale, the framework first demands that the city itself be understood as the exhibition rather than its backdrop. A distributed Expo organisation in which the historical peninsula, Beyoglu and the contemporary financial districts of Levent and Maslak constitute distinct but interconnected exhibition zones produces a site whose spatial organisation is the primary analytical argument. The visitor moves between zones, between layers of the city's historical identity, and the productive friction between these layers becomes the content of the experience rather than a problem to be resolved. Keyder (2013) identifies how Istanbul's engagement with globalisation has produced spatial and cultural tensions whose suppression in official representations distorts what the city actually is. A host-city Expo organised around the framework would treat these tensions as analytically honest material. The BIE's thematic framework would provide the institutional envelope within which the argument is staged, with conceived-space negotiation directed at identifying genuine alignment between the BIE's global concerns and Istanbul's specific spatial contributions.

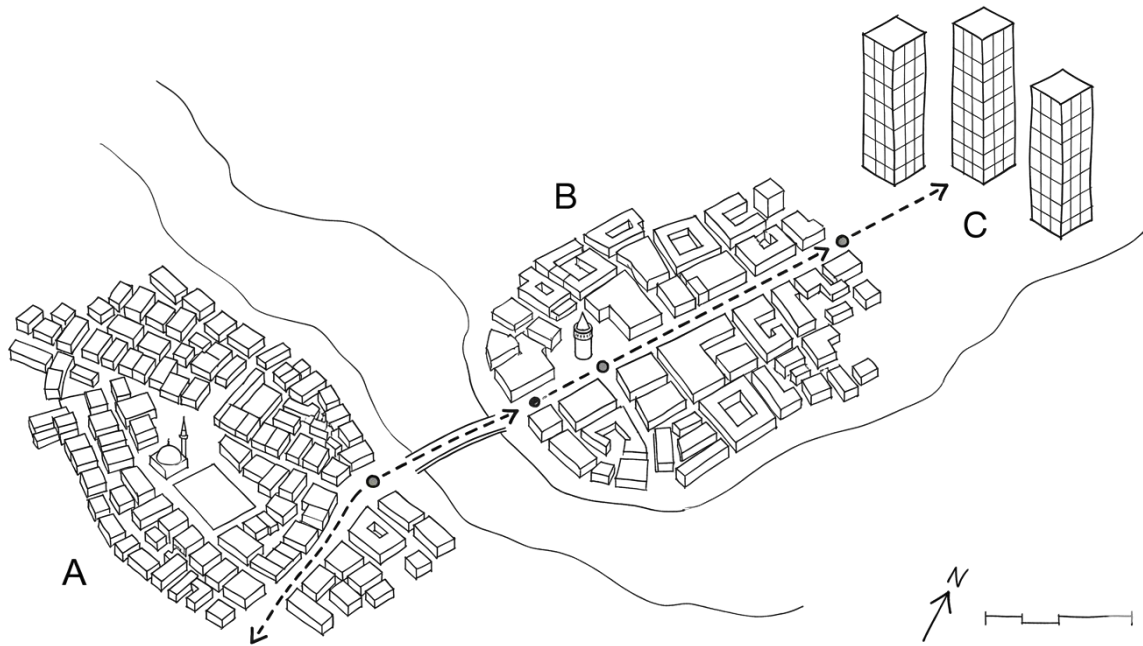


Figure 9. Scenario 1: Visitor trajectory across the three historical districts of Istanbul at host-city scale (A = Historic Peninsula; B = Galata/Beyoglu; C = Levent/Maslak). Developed by the authors.

The framework demands that the visitor experience begin not at an Expo gate but at the threshold between the city's historical layers. Movement northward from the historic peninsula through Galata and into Beyoglu constitutes a Tschumian event-sequence at city scale, each district functioning as a spatial event in the trajectory and the visitor carrying the spatial memory of the previous district into the next. The productive friction Oncu and Weyland (2010) identify becomes the organisational logic. The strategy does not smooth transitions between spatial registers; it designs them as deliberate thresholds, architecturally marked moments at which the shift from one historical layer to another is spatially felt rather than intellectually processed. Frampton's (1983) critical double mediation at urban scale demands that Expo infrastructure engage the material and tectonic specificity of each district rather than impose a generic international exhibition aesthetic across the whole. Figure 10 presents a Beyoglu street, a threshold condition between Ottoman and Republican built fabric, demonstrating the kind of culturally specific spatial register from which the host-city scenario must be built.



Figure 10. Istanbul street-level spatial quality, Beyoglu, demonstrating the city's spatial complexity beyond iconic imagery. Source: Pexels (n.d.), Omer Gulen [Photographer].

Scenario 2: Istanbul as Standalone Pavilion. Applied at the intimate scale of a standalone pavilion, the framework's demands concentrate into a single architectural sequence that must carry the entire representational argument within the constraints of a self-contained building. The entry threshold offers no minarets, no Bosphorus panorama, no bazaar exoticism. Celik's (1992) analysis of how Orientalist visual conventions are reproduced through the internalisation of

audience expectation demands that the entry sequence be legible as deliberate refusal of that economy. The threshold is narrow and materially dense, Marmara travertine, surface warm and worn, the spatial compression of Byzantine gate logic producing an atmospheric register of enclosure and historical weight through low ceiling height and heavy material presence. This is not a representation of Byzantine architecture but a spatial condition derived from the structural intelligence of Byzantine threshold design and engaged through contemporary construction, in the precise way Frampton's (1983) critical double mediation requires.

The compression opens into a transitional space whose structural logic is derived from the Ottoman principle of dome carried on pendentives, the material translation into contemporary construction legible as structural honesty rather than historical pastiche, the acoustic quality changing perceptibly as the volume increases above the visitor. Tschumi's (1994) event is generated not by spectacle but by the spatial and sensory surprise that allows the body to register the transition from threshold to domed enclosure before the mind identifies its historical precedent. A passage organises lateral movement through the central volume, its spatial character drawn from the bazaar street as a structural principle rather than a nostalgic image: covered, graduated in transitions between light and shadow, oriented toward spatial incidents that invite attention to material detail. Light enters from above through a latticed timber screen whose geometry is derived from Ottoman mashrabiya design, producing on the stone floor a field of moving illumination that activates the travertine surfaces in a way specific to this atmospheric condition. This is the quality Zumthor (2006) identifies as architecture's most fundamental communicative mode: an atmospheric register culturally specific because produced from Istanbul's spatial culture rather than from generic architectural convention. At the pavilion's culmination, the visitor arrives at a space whose character is deliberately unresolved. The materials of all previous spaces coexist without hierarchy. This produces Bhabha's (1994) third space, defined not through cultural content or didactic explanation but through spatial form. The visitor inhabits, for the duration of the encounter, the palimpsest condition Turgut (2021) identifies as Istanbul's most essential spatial characteristic.

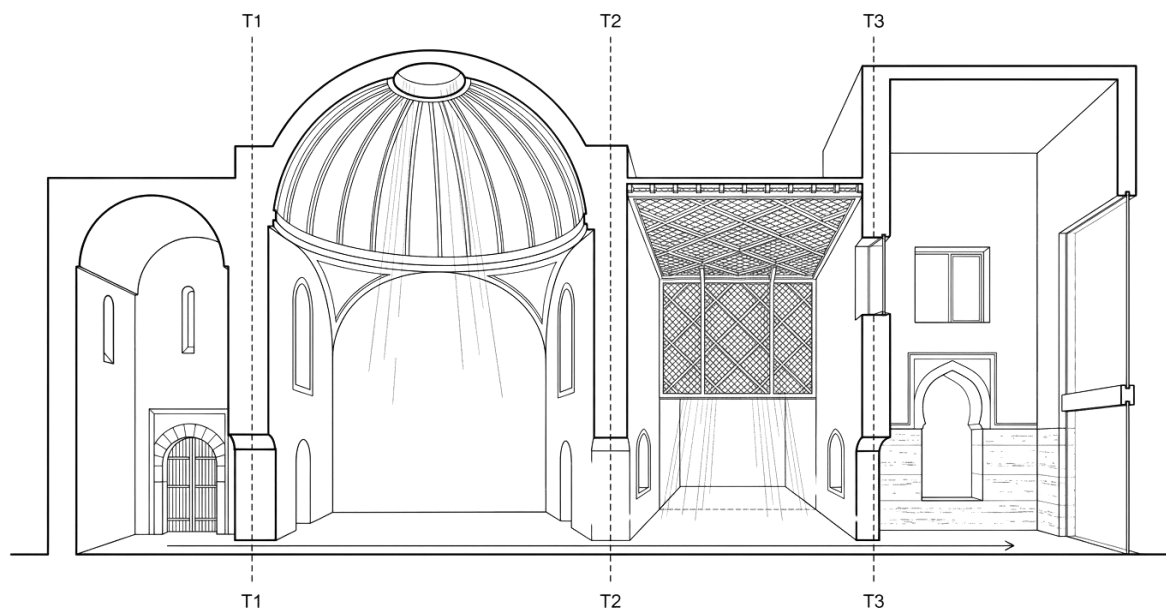


Figure 11. Scenario 2: Spatial sequence of the standalone pavilion across four threshold conditions (T1 = Byzantine threshold entry; T2 = Ottoman domed volume; T3 = Bazaar passage and unresolved space). Developed by the authors.

4. Discussion

The six principles and two scenarios constitute the paper's principal findings. Three implications follow. The framework provides an integrated analytical apparatus that no existing single framework replicates. Psarra (2009) demonstrates that architectural narrative operates through the interaction between spatial configuration and cultural codes, but her framework does not address the institutional conditions under which that interaction is constrained. Existing Expo governance scholarship has not theorised the phenomenological dimension of pavilion experience. Studies of representational politics have not engaged the atmospheric and tectonic conditions through which cultural meaning is spatially produced. The framework addresses this fragmentation directly. The compounding logic operates as follows: Ricoeur addresses temporal configuration but not sensory register; Zumthor addresses sensory register but not visitor trajectory; Tschumi addresses trajectory but not tectonic specificity; Frampton addresses tectonic specificity but not representational politics; Said addresses representational politics but not institutional production; Lefebvre addresses institutional production but not narrative configuration. Each pillar covers a dimension the others do not, and only their integration produces an apparatus capable of examining the Expo pavilion as a complete representational act. Some scholars argue the Expo format is more culturally open than this analysis suggests; Honisch's (2024) study documents significant variation in representational latitude across host contexts. The argument here is not that the BIE framework is

uniformly constraining but that it structures the representational field in ways that demand awareness rather than passive acceptance.

The qualitative interpretive methodology adopted is not a limitation requiring quantitative validation but the appropriate analytical mode for the questions the paper addresses. Groat and Wang (2013) establish that the interpretive tradition in architectural research produces meaning through cultural discourse, historical context and spatial experience, none of which is reducible to quantifiable variables without analytical distortion. The framework's claims are about how architectural meaning is produced through the encounter between spatial form, cultural inheritance and institutional condition. These are conditions of possibility, not measurable outcomes. The question is whether the framework yields analytical insight not produced by any single existing framework, and the six principles derived from it answer that question affirmatively.

Istanbul's palimpsest identity, properly engaged through the framework, offers a model for how other cities of historical complexity might approach Expo representation without sacrificing their most distinctive qualities. Cairo, Beirut, Mexico City and Thessaloniki present analogous palimpsest conditions whose representation at international forums would benefit from the systematic analytical engagement directed here at Istanbul. The challenge for all such cities is not to reduce historical richness to global legibility but to discover the architectural means through which complexity is communicated as a positive condition. The Expo format's representational logic is not a barrier to complex cultural identity but a productive institutional field within which analytical accuracy generates genuine original contribution. The four cases examined demonstrate that the most analytically significant pavilions engaged the BIE framework as a generative condition rather than a limitation. For Istanbul, the BIE thematic framework is the institutional field within which the framework's six principles can produce the most productive representational contribution available.

5. Conclusions

The World Expo format's structural preference for singular, globally legible cultural narratives places palimpsest cities at a representational disadvantage that existing scholarship has not systematically addressed. Through the development and application of the Narrative Spatial Framework, this paper has demonstrated that Istanbul's palimpsest complexity, constituted by four millennia of layered Byzantine, Ottoman, Republican and contemporary spatial inscription, is not the city's representational liability but its most analytically honest and generative condition. The six principles derived from the framework constitute the first systematic analytical account of what architectural seriousness toward the city's identity demands within the World Expo context.

Four limitations require honest acknowledgement. The absence of primary fieldwork constrains the phenomenological precision of the atmospheric analysis; Zumthor's (2006) framework is applied through mediated documentation rather than direct sensory encounter. The Istanbul analysis concerns a prospective and hypothetical Expo engagement that cannot be tested against the material evidence of a specific architectural response until Istanbul participates in a World Expo. The four case studies were selected for analytical productivity rather than statistical representativeness, and the framework has not been tested against less-resourced Expo participants whose representational conditions may differ. The framework represents one of several possible theoretical configurations; different choices would not produce contradictory findings but would produce different analytical emphases.

Three directions for further research follow. Primary ethnographic and observational research at a future World Expo, gathering visitor experience data through structured observation and post-visit interview, would allow the framework's atmospheric and performative claims to be tested against the phenomenological complexity of actual spatial encounter. Extension of the framework to other palimpsest cities beyond Istanbul would test its claims across substantially different cultural, geopolitical and political contexts, assessing replicability and identifying conditions under which its analytical logic requires modification. A longitudinal study of Expo narrative legacies would examine how representational frameworks produced within the BIE regulatory environment continue to shape host-city identity and urban planning over decades, advancing understanding of the relationship between institutional narrative framework and long-term urban identity formation.

The original contribution of this paper is the Narrative Spatial Framework: an integrated analytical apparatus combining Ricoeur, Zumthor, Tschumi, Frampton, Said and Lefebvre into a single instrument for examining Expo architectural representation across the dimensions no single existing framework can address. Istanbul is not a city with a difficult story to tell. It is a city whose story, in its difficulty and richness, demands a level of architectural thinking the framework makes possible. The Narrative Spatial Framework offers that level of thinking, and its replicability across analogous cities such as Cairo, Beirut, Mexico City and Thessaloniki is the measure of its broader contribution to architectural scholarship on cultural representation at international forums.

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Funding, Conflicts of Interest

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Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analysed in this study. The research is based on published academic literature, official Expo documentation and regulatory texts, all of which are cited within the paper.

Institutional Review Board Statement

Not applicable. This study did not involve human participants, animals, or any form of primary data collection requiring ethical approval.

CRedit Author Statement

Hauwa Sani: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing of original draft, Writing of review and editing.

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