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Questioning New Public Space Practices in Post-revolution Cairo

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Abstract

Public space plays an important role in understanding the socio-political changes occurring within the rapidly transforming Cairene society. One of the outcomes of the mobilization of the people to the streets in January 2011 was the reclaiming of public space. Based on the observations of new trends of practice in public space, which have lately emerged in urban development around Cairo, the paper explores these new trends from a socio-political perspective. New practices of public space are being dominated by corporate bodies which inhabit open space within their territory of consumption. This has led to the demonstration of neo-liberal practices that originally initiated the uprisings of the January revolution. The main reasons could be narrowed down to the neglect of democracy and lack of equity and social justice. The reflection of these new practices is manifested in new spatial forms and structures that presumably reflect more liberal user-activities and correspond to the slogans of the 25th of January revolution; freedom, livelihood and social equity.

In order to understand this new trend of public space, the paper will adopt a methodology based on primary observations of the new practices, spatial settings, responsive activities and use of public space in the 6th of October city. The outcomes of these observations are then reflected on what could be called the “modern Cairene urban space” developed in the years of Egyptian rule following the 1952 revolution an up to the 25th of January. The reflection questions the transformations in socio-political dimensions and there representative spatial order and user activities. The outcomes of this comparison unveil whether or not this new public space order adopts the slogans of the 25th of January revolution.

Keywords: Public space, New Cairene public space order, New-liberal practices in public space design, Consumerism.

1. Introduction

Public space plays an important role in understanding socio-political changes occurring within the rapidly transforming Cairene society, especially in the shadows of the prevailing neo-liberal market imperatives nowadays. Based on the observations for new trends of public space which have lately emerged, especially in the new developments around Cairo the paper explores the development of public space in Cairo from a socio-political perspective. Those new practices of public space are being dominated by corporate bodies which inhabit open space within their territory of consumption.

In order to achieve this, the paper will adopt a methodology based on primary observations of the new practice of public space in 6th of October city, followed by a review of the development of public space in Cairo during the period of modernization following the 1952 revolution up till 25th of January revolution according to socio-political dimensions and finally critical analysis for one of the new practices of public space is implemented according to spatial characteristics and socio-spatial

impacts. This will aid in understanding the inter-relation between political agendas and public space in Cairo, which will shed light on the fate of public space in the new post-revolutionary republic, claiming to adopt the slogans of the 25th of January uprising calling for equality and social justice.

2. Primary Observations Regarding the Emergence of New Public Space Practice in New Developments Around Cairo

A pattern which recently emerged in new developments around Cairo is the new form of ‘public space’, open to the entire public, yet, dominated by private domain. An example for this is the series of public space spots parallel to the 26th of July Axis connecting 6th of October city to Giza. Those public space series belonging to Arkan Mall, followed by that of ‘Americana Plaza’ then ‘Tivoli Dome’, and the pending ‘Raya Plaza’, as shown in Fig.1 all represent the new trend by private investors to attract the bored residents of the new district by providing new outing spaces other than the controlled, privatized space of the shopping malls.

Fig-1. Layout of series of new public space in Sheikh Zayed, Author, 2014



According to Kazandjian (2012), referring to ‘Arkan’, “the multi-purpose development has quickly become the small town meeting place with a big city attitude”. Those new spaces present new refuge outings for bored residents of 6th of October and Sheikh Zayed where urban design strategies provide plenty of open space, assumable for social encounter, yet, devoid of cultural and economic capitals, which accordingly turn into leftover dead public space, lacking livability, social cohesion and surveillance.

The high profile residents of 6th of October and Shiekh Zayed, with age groups varying from teens, university students and new married couples who started their families at the new developments, have been craving for a dining and entertainment venue within the vicinity of their small town, avoiding the journey along the constantly congested Mehwar, leading to the city center. On the other side, the new spaces of encounter try to offer new and different experiences, for instance, the I-max cinema at the Americana Plaza which represents a major attraction to the vicinity.

However, the main debate revolves around whether those new open space patterns represent a real experience of ‘public space’ or not. Are these spaces a different form of privatized space governed by neo-liberal market economy? Do those spaces reflect any essence of post-revolutionary Cairo or do they represent a continuation of the previous regime strategies regarding the alienation of public space and the dismissal of any public space of real communal encounter? In order to answer those questions, a brief review of the development of the Cairene public space is exposed in the next part, to understand the political and social impacts on the role of public space, following that, analysis of American plaza will be presented based on spatial characteristics and the socio-spatial impacts of those new forms of open space.

3. Tracing Change and Urban Transformations in Cairo between Theory and Practice

The duality of Cairo's public space, both in form and in function has been always in question. And since public space is the mirror reflecting the status of the community, it highly reflected the gap in the much diverse Cairene society. However, it was a moment of full public control over public space when the angry youth boosted the uprising on the 25th of January 2011. The fight was first and foremost the reclaim of public space by the long neglected second class citizens; the middle class and the marginalized. The Tahrir revolution initiated first through electronic media, and then followed by the search for self expression, succeeded in partially claiming the right to the city's public space, and it was the moment of utmost social cohesion and interaction between large sectors of Cairo's residents.

Following this utopian moment of encounter, right to the public space was at times misused, and at times abolished by the authorities of the transitional period, and the successive million marches that took place after Mubarak's resignation reflect the complexity of the social capital in today's Cairo, and the contradictory strands that at times compete and at times clash. This was the result of the long deprive of the right to the city's public space, which initiated in Cairo's modern era as will be briefly exposed.

After the success of the military coup of 1952, the new political regime led by the military officers came with several ideas towards modernizing the country through major transformations in the urban fabric and public space of the city. According to Sims (2000, p.15), in 1958 the Government launched the Nasr City scheme, a very ambitious desert fringe development which was to be executed by the Ministries of Housing and Defense. In this new district, Modernism was the new trend which would equate Cairo to the West. Accordingly, strict planning was applied, yet, with postcolonial aspirations. This was apparent in the 'Egyptianized' design of the 'Unknown Soldier Memorial' and the glory with design of the stadium. However, the master plan of Naser City de-voided the public space from its social role due to the dictator political regime which stood against the strengthening of the social capital, that public space was turned into left-over, no-man's land. And in contrast to this strict military growth of the city, the first informal areas began to appear, according to Sims (2000), dividing Cairo into two cities.

After the end of the 1973 war, Sadaat focused on transforming the country's political agenda completely, from the communist state where the government is responsible for everything into open-door policies, or 'Infitah', where the market is opened to private-sector finance, demand and supply policies and neo-liberal market imperatives. This ideology was exported through American political and economic power and punitive action of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund to debtor nations in the developing world, (Daher, 2011). Sadat started again, modernizing the country with more focus on the initiation of desert cities at the desert plateaus surrounding Cairo. And in parallel to this, spread the growth of informal areas by self-finance of the people.

Sadaat's successor, Mubarak, proceeded with the same political and economic agendas, which led to strengthening the American ideology of neo-liberalism, and this was most apparent in the new developments and the emergence of gated communities in the new cities with the expansion of the central capital Cairo. According to Daher (2011), those new 'cities', dominated by neo-liberal market imperatives and offering 'gated communities' as "emerging urban islands of excessive consumption for the chosen elite together with the internationalization of commercial real estate companies and construction consultancies capable of providing high-quality services", reflect dominant political and ideological practices of power regulated by neoliberal tropes, camouflaged in the legitimacy of the local, throughout promises of "job provision," "new promised lifestyles, and other emancipatory rhetoric, Daher (2011). The consequences of these emerging neoliberal projects on the city lead to urban geographies of inequality and exclusion and to spatial/social displacement.

Thus, Cairo's neighborhoods can be regarded as divided into two extreme sectors, one informally driven by the people and the other led by the utopia of the gated communities. Within these two extreme ends, public space represents the mirror of the social state of each local community. As Abdel Halim (2010, p.10) unveils, the residents of informal areas help each other out and jointly implement activities of mutual interest in a similar manner to traditional communities within public space. This social capital allows residents to seek support and gain access to resources they do not possess themselves. These networks are based on long-term, continuously growing relationships that

often depend on the physical proximity of community members in informal areas. Therefore, social capital can be affected by fundamental changes in the structure and the composition of an area. However, the problems associated with the informal areas remain the fact that they are regarded as second class citizens. This is explained by Abdel Halim (2009, p.4), as street vendors suffer a daily cat and mouse chase by district administration, microbus drivers by traffic authorities, workshop owners by the shop-licensing department, house builders by the building control authorities and so on.

From another side, Shehayeb (2009, p.7) argues that informal areas provide a better value for cost than what planners offer in the alternative, so called 'new communities'. Measures of livability of public space go beyond the initial cost of housing. And informal areas enable women to safely walk their neighborhoods, girls to continue education. They offer access to better nutrition, with the presence of fresh-produce markets within walking distance. In informal areas, people watch out for each other, offering assistance in case of emergency.

As to gated communities in new developments around Cairo, they are seen by Issa and Shehayeb (2009, p.2) as enclaves of private refuge, that provide lacking infrastructural services for the mass population of the city. However, in most cases those pragmatic operations counter modernist planning's segregatory ideas, leading to a seemingly undersigned, chaotic and sometimes undesirable yet actual coexistence. Accordingly, the public space can be well maintained, with picturesque features of landscape, however, lacking the true essence of livability which is to a great extent related to social and economic activities occurring.

4. The New “Privatization” of Public Space in Cairo vs Social Sustainability: New Spaces of Encounter or Refuge Space of Commodification

The main reason for focusing on new practices of public space that emerged recently in new developments around Cairo is to relate the political change occurring to the urban agenda. According to Henri Lefebvre, any revolution that has not produced new spaces “has not changed life itself but has merely changed ideological superstructures, institutions or political apparatus”. Thus, this part will explore one of the new additions to public space in the 6th of October, Americana Plaza and Arkan Mall and thus relate whether any political or social changes have actually been implemented under the new regime.

4.1. Immediate Context

Like many new projects in the new developments around Cairo, the immediate context of Americana Plaza as well as Arkan is mostly under construction or vacant lands waiting for promised developments as seen in Fig.2 and 3. The only attractions remain the adjacent Tivoli Dome, and the nearby hyper market, 'Hyper One', which is one of the major shopping venues for the 6th of October city. Paradoxically facing Americana Plaza on the other side of the street is the Sheikh Zayed communal Housing project as shown in Fig.2, where lower middle income groups reside, yet, with a low capacity of use rate.

Fig-2. Social housing adjacent to Americana Plaza, Author, 2013



Fig-3. Immediate Context Adjacent to Arkan, Author, 2013

4.2. Spatial Characteristics

The main difference between both spaces analysed here is regarding the spatial organization. Americana Plaza is designed to accommodate a central distribution of space based upon a main event taking place in the inside core. While in the case of Arkan, the configuration is linear, resembling a commercial street with seating areas on both sides. However, the use of those space are only limited to each particular outlet, not accessible to the public.

Although the plaza in the case of Americana is open to the entire public, yet, some spatial characteristics ensure the issue of the plaza becoming more of an enclosed privatized space rather than an open public space. First, it is semi-gated, apparently with a welcoming approach, however, the barrier of extended stairs and controlled entry point still dominate.

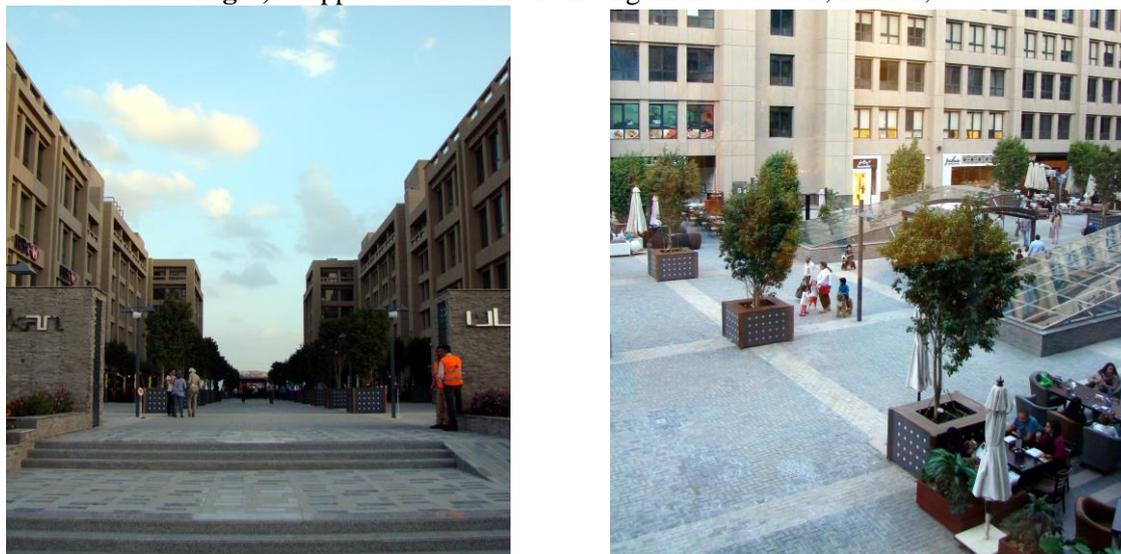
As to the priority of distribution of the outlets within the setting, it is observed that on the periphery of the plaza lay the popular Americana food outlets which are relatively affordable for middle income groups. The approach to those outlets is easy without having to go through the open space or the main plaza, taking into account that they are located on the external boundaries creating the 'wall' surrounding the main open space.

While in the centre of the complex having the view on the heart of the open space it is observed that more expensive cafes are located, with private seating areas cut from the centre of the open space as shown in Fig.4,5. Also on the vista the exclusive I-max cinema entrance is found, utilizing the interesting landscape of the open space as some sort of waiting area for the users.

On the other side, the spatial arrangement of Arkan is completely different. The approach from the outer street is more welcoming. This is due to the lesser number of stairs, and the linear form which enables the passer by to recognize what is occurring inside even without entering the space as shown in Fig. 5, 6. The spatial experience is gradual, and mainly depends on the recreation offered by each outlet, without a major event or climax. This is an important design alteration, which gives more chances for people who only wish to enjoy the space to have more freedom of walking through than in the case of Americana Plaza.

Fig-4,5. Periphery and centre of Americana Plaza, Author, 2013.

Fig-6,7. Approach and Linear Arrangement of Arkan, Author, 2013.



4.3. Socio-Spatial Impacts

The concept of the American Plaza semi-enclosed ‘public space’ and Arkan linear formed street like space is primarily based on the neo-liberal market imperatives, offering well-known and popular food brands for the elite as well as the middle class income. The main activity inhabited within both open spaces revolves around consuming, either food and beverage, or privatized entertainment offered by the I-max cinema.

Both spaces attract almost all ages and classes from the surrounding wide context of Sheikh Zayed and 6th of October, due to the wide price range that can be offered by the different food outlets, however, it has to be realized that this sort of food brands does not respond to the needs of the users of the immediate context of the communal housing in the case of Americana.

As to the socio-spatial implications of this new practice of open space, observations led to the fact that no cultural activities or social interaction between the users occur as seen in Fig.8-11. This is a result of the specific boundaries set for each food outlet, with no activities in the intermediate space, in addition to the lack of general activities which encourage the isolated groups visiting to interact.

Fig-8. Isolated islands of seating areas for each outlet, Author, 2013.



Fig-9,10,11. Interaction Areas in Arkan as boundaries and as islands specific to each shop, Author, 2013.



5. Discussion

The selected examples for the new public space trend emerging in new developments represents but another sort of ‘McDonaldization’ of public space and another sort of interpreting the malls’ food court. The implication of this trend is mainly related to the myth surrounding that they provide more livability in the surrounding neighborhoods; however; still no lively activity pattern is offered in between buildings, on the contrary, they decrease the livability of the surrounding neighborhoods by offering island spots of commodification of public space.

Although the main achievement of the January uprisings was the reclaim of public space, yet still after almost three years no new interpretation of public space is offered either by the government or by private investors. The street and the public square remain the real space of encounter and social interaction since the conservative agenda of the new rulers of the country devoid public space even more from the meanings of social sustenance, precipitates the community into followers and opponents, and turns the public space either to new disguised modes of consumption to benefit those in power or to battle fields between the citizens of the same nation.

6. Conclusion

The paper presented an understanding of the new public space trend emerging in the 6th of October city as an example of new developments around Cairo. The analysis showed that this new public space practice did not offer new space of encounter for the residents of the new neighbourhoods, yet, provided new interpretation of a disguised privatization of public space in the shadows of the still prevailing neo-liberal market imperatives. This was relevant in the two discussed examples of Americana Plaza and Arkan, where in spite of the difference in spatial organizations, the two offered more or less the same experience regarding being consumption spaces rather than interactive space.

Finally, the need for actual liveability experiences has to be questioned in the new regime's agenda, especially after the increasing stress in street confrontations between the supporters and opponents of different political parties. Those confrontations added to the segregation of the community even more, and the public space was used as a method of proving power for each group. The question remains, whether this new strategy of using public space will abolish the reclaim of public space, or attention will be directed towards moving forward to a more uniting communal protocol.

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