

# Political Role of Urban Space Reflections on the Current and Future Scene in Cairo-Egypt

Dalia A. Taha

Architecture Engineering Department, October 6 University, Giza, Egypt

**Abstract** In the aftermath of 25th January Revolution, Egypt examined a revolutionary situation with political and social mobility that aim to reform and rebuild modern Egypt. A call for "Democratic Urban Space Design" has been introduced and it is concerned with the users' rights, freedom of access, and freedom of action in public places in order to find a healthy interface between urban space, and politics. In this context, the paper highlights the need of urban designers in Egypt for a new and revolutionary conceptual thinking to: a) re-establish the relationship between man and place; b) re-reading the relationship between urban spaces and politics (in the shade of changing the concept of "power"); and c) expressing the ideas and goals of the revolution (especially with regard to the achievement of social justice), and accommodates the state of "community audacity" that explode after two revolutions. The objective of this paper is to propose a set of urban design guidelines based on democracy norms and highlight challenges that would face Egypt. In order to reach this objective, the paper will seek answers for the following questions: What are the aspects and factors that shape the relation between politics and urban space? What involves the formation of democratic urban spaces? What are the impacts of political events on the production and re-production of urban spaces? What are the appropriate urban design guidelines that represent the relation between politics and urban spaces? Are these guidelines appropriate and enough in the case of Egypt? Thus, the paper will first study the relationship between politics and urban spaces, highlights the impacts of political factors on the transformation s of urban spaces in Egypt, and provide a set of design guidelines that would enhance and accommodate the political role of urban spaces in the current situation in Egypt.

**Keywords** Political Role of Space, Democratic Urban Spaces, Revitalization of Spaces

## 1. Introduction

The relationship between urban space and politics is both old and new, clear and complex. It is a subject that has been scarcely touched in the Arab World, generally, and in Egypt, in specific.

Political theorists discuss urban spaces as a place of convergence between the people of a community, capable of containing their differences. It is a place of convergence of moral, which includes a set of common values allow people participate in collective deliberation, decision - making and action.

Contemporary urban practices did not realize the real great value and vitality of the public spaces in most Arab and Egyptian cities. Urban public spaces are almost planned to not achieve the function of achieving communications between people. For very long time, governments are trying to keep people away from the public spaces, abort public life, drying channels that can accommodate sincere pulses

of the community and convert those spaces only to be traffic corridors that almost devoid from public seats, [1]. It is always the question "to what degree can the political power allows demonstrations and protests to topple the power?". This conflict gave importance to the science and practices of "political urban planning", where democracy in urban spaces is recognized on the basis of the maximum limits that the city could allow to its residents politically.

The recent political wave of change that sweeps across the Arab World highlights the need to re-understand the role of politics and how it will affect urban spaces' morphology. Hence, a need arises to re-read the transformations of urban spaces in Egypt as the base for future innovation; and reproduce spaces in the context of changing power from dictatorships to democracies, from more power to the ruler to more power to the people.

## 2. Impact of Political Factors on Urban Space Transformations in Cairo

Starting from the middle of the 19th century, A series of political, cultural, and economic transformations has taken place, which allowed for reshaping Cairo historical face and move towards modernization. Pasha Ismail (Khedive of

\* Corresponding author:

dr.daliataha@gmail.com (Dalia A. Taha)

Published online at <http://journal.sapub.org/arch>

Copyright © 2016 Scientific & Academic Publishing. All Rights Reserved

Egypt from 1830-1895) had the vision to change the urban fabric of Cairo based on the model of Paris. Ismail decided to focus on the Western portion of the city by developing a new master plan (of a Polly Radial Pattern) to literally transform Cairo into the "Paris of the Nile", [2]. This led to loosing the identity of architecture and urban spaces, which became only an imitation of the Western model, and thus discontinuity between the extension of the city and its historic center.

The urban development of Cairo downtown at that time had always been tied to the country's political environment; the British occupation of Egypt and the influx of Europeans and foreigners had a significant impact on the architecture and urban spaces of downtown, Figure 1) (a,b).



**Figure 1(a).** Urban Spaces in Kedivial Cairo at 30s

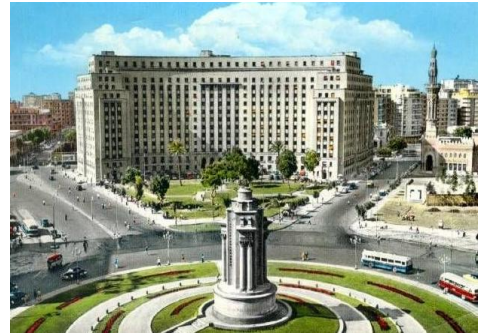


**Figure 1(b).** Architecture of Kedivial Cairo

Downtown Cairo remained the center for the city's elites and the hub for commercial and cultural activities up to 1950s due to the transformation of the political and economic ideology. However, the 1952 Revolution and the reduction of political and economic power of upper classes (the bourgeoisie and landlords) caused a major shift in the social fabric of downtown dwellers sparked by the state's ideological shift from a monarchy to socialist state, [3].

Neglecting of the architecture and urban spaces of downtown Cairo was not an immediate consequence of the establishment of the New Republic in 1952<sup>1</sup> as many believe, on the contrary significant state investments in downtown has started, which created some of today's iconic features of downtown, the expansion of Tahrir Square, the construction of the Mogama building and the eastern Nile Corniche – all of which used to be the British barracks, garden and residence of the British Commissioner during

the monarchy period. These urban development projects (based on state-owned buildings, commercial enterprises and department stores) had the obvious purpose of Egyptianizing downtown's colonial identity and reflect the new identity of the downtown as a place of people.



**Figure 2.** Tahrir Square and Mogama building, an example of urban development that is based on state-owned buildings after the 1952 revolution

With the adoption of the Open Door Policy (1974-1981)<sup>2</sup>, the national urban policy geared towards developing desert land and creating new cities instead of revitalizing the existing urban fabric, leaving central locations such as downtown neglected.

At the beginning of 1977, people came out in large demonstrations against the government because of high prices of food. It was the first time since the July Revolution that witnessing demonstrations against the country's government. This event has been a cause of thinking in the fragmentation of urban public spaces to weakening its socio-political role in creating a collective consciousness. However, most major urban public spaces turned to be a mere traffic corridors where people became under heavy pressures due to overcrowding.

In 1981, after the assassination of President Sadat by radical religious groups, Egypt extended the application of Emergency Law and focus on the security aspect with various repressive forms, which have affected the urban spaces. Tahrir Square, for example exposed to drastic distortion to abort any political role. However, the entrances and exits of the subway have been spread in the square, random bus stations and taxis stops have mushroomed and overlapped, the front court of the Egyptian Museum, which was fully surrounded by a fence, and the pedestrian network is totally destroyed, Figure 3) (a, b).

There was intensification of police and security control at the entrances and exits of the square claiming the existence of key buildings such as the Egyptian Museum - Tahrir complex - American University -the headquarter of the ruling party. Due to these factors, public urban spaces have turned to be mal-planned and ill- defined, giving an image of informality, chaos, noise, and more importantly the

<sup>1</sup> The Egyptian Revolution of 1952 began on 23 July 1952, by the Free Officers Movement, and was initially aimed at establishing a republic.

<sup>2</sup> The Open Door Policy (Infatih) in Arabic language, was Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's policy to open the door to private investment in Egypt in the years following the 1973 October War.

absence of belonging to the space, city, and to the country itself, [4].



**Figure 3(a).** Tahrir Square in seventies



**Figure 3(b).** Tahrir Square before January Revolution, where it becomes a traffic corridor

### 3. The Voice of People: 25th Jan. Revolution: From Virtual Space to Urban Space

On January 25th, 2011, millions of Egyptians set to the streets demanding for 'bread, liberty and social justice'. The 18-day sit-in in Tahrir Square or the "Midan" was crowned by the resignation of Mubarak, who had been in office for 30 years.

The 2011 revolution in Egypt started in virtual public spaces, in a form of social networking sites, which played a vital role in the coordination and mobilization of activist groups. For those activists, the virtual space became to be the "last free space" to express their opinion, where everyone became a sender, receiver, and an active participant in decision making process.

The January Revolution highlights again the physical relationship between man and place. Despite the power of social media in this revolution, nothing would be changed without the presence of an urban "real space" as the tool for pressure. Thus, the "virtual spaces" were not entirely separated from actual, physical ones, [5].

The importance of Tahrir square comes from its proximity to the numerous governmental buildings and thus the occupation of Tahrir would provide a direct confrontation between protestors and symbols of the formal power of the state. Another important aspect in that space is the great visibility where congregation of the masses within a circular space would create an image of intensity and the advantages

of remaining in the eye of international media, Figure (4).



**Figure 4.** The circular shape of Tahrir Square gives an image of intensity

The image of Tahrir Square is widely broadcasted by international media and it inspired many of the current mobilizations in the West and creates a wave of what so called "Occupy the Public Space". This is evident in the attempt by student activists in the UK to occupy London's Trafalgar Square for 24 hours and turn it into Tahrir Square, [6]. More recently, the current wave of 'Occupy' protests has adopted the image of turning various public spaces into a 'Tahrir Square' Figure (5).



**Figure 5.** Occupation of London's Trafalgar Square

The occupation of public squares inspired by Tahrir Square appeared again by the "Indignados" movement in Spain, which is also known as the (15-M Movement). The demonstrations by 15-M Movement made a call to 'take the square' and resulted in the occupation of public squares, most notably the Puerta del Sol in Madrid and the Plaça Catalunya in Barcelona, Figure (6). The influence of Tahrir is evident from the slogan: 'Tahrir de Madrid = Puerta del Sol de Madrid', [7].



**Figure 6.** Occupation of the Puerta del Sol in Madrid and the Plaça Catalunya in Barcelona



#### 4. The Republic of Al-Tahrir: A Redefinition of Urban Space

During the revolution, Tahrir Square was gradually transformed into a city within the city. Within three days, camping areas, media rooms, medical facilities, gateways, stages, restrooms, food and beverages carts, newspaper booths, and art exhibits were established in the square, Figure (7).



**Figure 7.** Post Revolution re-use of Tahrir Square-Street vendors selling National Flag and souvenirs

Tahrir Square became to be known as the Republic of Tahrir, a place of community engagement, collective projects, social discourse and most importantly, freedom of speech and expression.

Tahrir Square proved that public spaces are not just voids but rather an accumulation of social and political history of the city and a process of qualitative shift in the restoration of dignity and the right to public spaces. The newly-gained sense of ownership of public space manifested through occupation of public squares for political activities and protests and encroachments for commercial usages (street vendors). Tahrir Square showed the need to rethink planning and design processes of urban spaces and the city as a whole to accommodate new political and social transformations, [8].

#### 5. From January 2011...to June 2013: Re-visiting Tahrir Square

During the days of the Revolution, stencils and graffiti were the most common form of visual expression utilized by the protestors to express their identity, Figure (8).



**Figure 8.** Graffiti in Tahrir Square

On architectural level, the revolution affected architecture

and urban domains by intensifying the dialogue about the double conflict between "Modernity" and "Authenticity". Although specific trends and features have not been traced yet, most seminars and conferences in architecture and urban development are talking about building a new Egyptian architecture that reflect identity, and where technology play a key role and rely heavily on the use of environmental applications.

Right after the revolution events, many institutions highlights the importance and necessity to re-design Tahrir Square. One of the suggestions was the development of Tahrir Square through a global architectural competition. The objective is present a new perception of Tahrir Square as a symbol of Egypt's Revolution and so that take advantage of physical, historical, and political value of the square.

There were numerous discussions, workshops, and seminars with no clear answer: Does Tahrir Square need to be re-designed to reflect the revolution events and objectives? Or should it keep its original image? Should Tahrir Square be merely for pedestrians? Or should it allow for traffic mobility?, [9].

During few months following January 2011, the square and the surrounded area witnessed new transformations. However, Tahrir Square lost, for some time, its symbol of inclusiveness, which were replaced by chaos and informality. The state gradually reclaimed Tahrir Square through the introduction of physical barriers and limiting access to certain areas of downtown during the ensuing turbulent political events. Portions of Cairo downtown area became highly securitized zones, with walls closing off vital mobility arteries, and increased security presence. The streets and the major public spaces become full of new pattern of micro economic activities and different kinds of urban actions, which have reshaped the physicality of space and how it is used. Informal urban practices also extended to the downtown area (Khedival Cairo). Traffic deviations, extension into the street of existing structures such as cafes, tea stand, food stalls; extension of shops outside of their premises; temporary street vendors; and informal use of parking lots are some of these informality that took place in the Khedival Cairo, which no longer recognized as the cultural heart of Cairo.



**Figure 9.** Upgrading Tahrir Square in 2015

In June 2013, Tahrir Square is again became the forum of the second revolution with increased hope to rebuild the city, socially, economically, and politically. The two revolutions

did not only attached a new meaning to Tahrir Square, but they reshaped the political role of public space and re-view the significance and perception of what public space is and should be.

Following June 2013 revolution, the government implemented an upgrading projects on Tahrir Square and the whole downtown area to regain its appeal and recapture its history and dignity, Figure (9).

## 6. Re: Politics, and Urban Spaces - A New Vision for Interface

The role of the square during the events of the revolution verified that true public spaces within a city can be pivotal in securing social reforms and sharing information and perspectives that are essential to the formation of sound public social policy. The public square could foster civic participation in the democratic process by providing interactive platforms to encourage citizens to voice their views. The new vision for the relation between architecture, urban space, and politics is based on a shift from a political system that builds architecture to express its power, to architecture and urban spaces that produce and build the country's political system.

Thus, a broader and more holistic concept of "Democratic" urban spaces is needed:

- An urban space that is consider the relationships between various stakeholders and the impacts they have on the space.
- An urban space that is achieve alliances between those stakeholders.
- An urban space that answer a pivotal question of "Whose space is it?" not only to predict the future trends of different stakeholders in the urban space, but also to create a win-win situation between them.
- An urban space that is designed to allow for a full experience of citizenship, and which is safe, clean, sustainable, and attractive.

A key function of the urban development profession is to mediate between conflicting needs and between the competing claims placed on society's natural, social, and economic resources. The questions are: How do urban design theory and practice articulate with the rights of democracy and citizenship in the urban spaces? How does urban design respond to the shifting conceptualization of political freedom and state-citizen relations? What can urban designers do to enhance the political role of urban spaces, especially in the shed of current situation where people need to voice their views.

The answers of the above questions are three folds. First, on the policy level, there must be a comprehensive view to develop urban spaces that is consider and buy-in all stakeholders groups. Second, adopting the main criteria of the successful urban public space, which are defined by many researchers to be:

1. Responsive: a public place should serve the needs of the community; provide the citizens with spaces that allow relaxation, discovery, and active and passive engagement.
2. Democratic: Public spaces need to be accessible to all groups.
3. Meaningful: People should be able to make connections between the place, their lives and the world.

Third, on the urban design level, the paper argues the following factors are useful for both evaluating existing spaces and for designing new democratic ones:

**Size:** The size would determine the number of people that can take part and participate in various political events and thus influence its success. It is therefore important to calculate the potential carrying capacity of urban spaces as in what is the maximum number of human beings that can occupy the space.

**Shape:** The shape will determine how people perceive and experience the space. It also affects acoustics and visual contact, which people can establish within the space.

**Diversity:** Democratic urban spaces demands a balanced and controlled mix of user groups and activities, where users from diverse backgrounds can coexist and practicing some similar activities without one group dominating another.

**Accessibility:** The accessibility of a democratic urban space refers to all necessary elements (i.e. access ramps, sidewalks, audible and visual signs), which promote safe mobility.

**Participation& Modification:** Refers to the engagement of the community (as possible) in the process of design and modification of urban spaces.

**Facilities for pedestrians:** Refers to different aspects of comfort, urban ambience, and safety with respect to the physical characteristics such as the quality of pavement, slope, steps, street lighting, tree planting, barriers, and street architecture.

**Traffic Management:** It is an important ingredient, which always used in all proposals for public space democracy. Considerable researches and literature have demonstrated that control of traffic speed contributes to one's attachment or detachment to public space. Traffic management also impacts the effectiveness of the use, access and participation in the space.

**Security:** Is related to aspects of public safety and sense of protection, such as the existence of policing, and areas of "natural surveillance" that means areas with many people in movement and good visibility of the space.

**Comfort:** An urban space needs to be comfortable in order to be democratic. This means adequate shading, seating space, sidewalks, and the presence of public transport with bus stops, routes and cycle lanes etc.

**Visual and Aesthetic Elements:** Character of urban space influenced by certain elements including seating; hard and soft landscaping such as pavement, planting (natural factors); street furniture; shelter and protection

(microclimate); subspaces; lighting, human scale and public art, [10].

## 7. The Case in Egypt

There are some important points for discussion about public urban spaces for democratic discourse and political interaction in Egypt. Those points include:

**Hierarchical society:** Egyptian society maintains a strong sense of the values of hierarchy and respect. This, however, created “communication barriers”, where open, free and frank discussion is an exception rather than a norm. Criticism tend to be taken personally, and people tend to consider having differing points of view as being disruptive to the sense of community. People generally shy away from open disagreement and are averse to giving feedback in a small society. Debate and in-depth discourse is yet to pick up. Constructive democratic discourse is limited under such circumstances, thus developing public urban space, wherein constructive and honest feedback can be shared is a complementary part to achieve democracy.

**Expectations of greater freedom and ensuing responsibilities:** Democracy often comes with an expectation of greater freedom of speech and with expectations that citizens should become more active in taking on the responsibilities of holding the public sector and the government accountability. Technology gave people in Egypt more virtual space for sharing opinions, and media are providing more space for deliberation. People are becoming more aware of their roles and duties as citizens and their need to share views and opinions. Such reaction indicates the need to find channels and urban tools, where such voices could participate in constructive, responsive dialogue and participatory forums.

Moreover, the Egyptian new democracy after the two revolutions has another challenge, where people rely on government to provide for and solve all problems including issues relating to governance. People have not yet realized that they are citizens with rights, duties and responsibilities. The capacity for claiming rights is often developed faster than for taking responsibility and performing duties. There is a need to encourage more sharing of responsibility to participate in the development of social and public policy through dialogue and deliberation.

Therefore, in order to develop public urban spaces that are reflecting a healthy relation between urban design and politics (or in other words "Democratic Spaces"), the state, first, needs to develop a clear comprehensive vision for the development of this space. Then the successful implementation of a comprehensive urban development vision requires a democratic process that buy-in of all stakeholder groups when shaping the space character and form. Urban designers of public spaces needs to recognize that good urban spaces are not designed but rather evolve over time and they are a result from a variety of social, economic, and political forces.

## 8. Conclusions

The 25th Jan revolution, which started in Tahrir square and continued in June 2013 highlighted the difference between how urban space is designed and how it is used. It was also obvious that the urban space has acquired a "new meaning" where the voice of people is an important element in the place design process.

The paper discussed the relationship between politics and urban spaces, highlighted the impacts of political factors on the transformations of urban spaces in Cairo-Egypt. How can we ensure that urban spaces are designed and preserved for democracy? Democratic urban spaces are not possible without a democratic process charged with shaping their character and form.

Thus, the new interventions of urban design processes should be based on a comprehensive vision for development of urban spaces, together with consideration of all stakeholders views and a regulating framework for the development processes. The divergence of the interests between state and people can lead to contradictory plans and actions in the absence of a unified, comprehensive vision.

The paper also discussed a set of urban design guidelines that would enhance and accommodate the political role of urban spaces in the current situation in Egypt. But, on the other hand, urban designers should recognize that good urban spaces are not designed but evolve over time. While careful urban design can enhance the quality of urban space, those spaces are also a result from a variety of social, economic, and political factors.

---

## REFERENCES

- [1] Barfi, B., etal, Revolution and Political Transformations in the Middle East: Government Actions and Response, vol. 2, Middle East Institute Viewpoints, Middle East Institute Publications, 2011.
- [2] Al Sayyed, Nezar, CAIRO: Histories of a City, USA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, page 206, 2011.
- [3] Salama, A., "Cairo's Plurality of Architectural Trends and Continuous Search for Identity", Architecture and Urbanism in the Middle East: A Special Edition of Viewpoints, Middle East Institute Publications, 2003.
- [4] Williams, D., Egypt Extends 25-Year-Old Emergency Law, The Washington Post, 2006 [Online], Available: <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wpdyn/content/article/2006/04/30/AR2006043001039.html>.
- [5] Stroud, S., Ibrahim, B., Youth Activism and Public Space in Egypt, The American University in Cairo (AUC) Press, 2011.
- [6] Gee, T., You Can't Evict an Idea: What Can We Learn from "Occupy"?, Housmans Books, UK., 2013.
- [7] Lopez, M., Juan, E., Social and Political Impacts of the 15M Movement in Spain, 2014, [Online].

- [8] Available: [http://www.miguelangelmartinez.net/IMG/pdf/M15\\_impacts\\_v3\\_0\\_April\\_2014.pdf](http://www.miguelangelmartinez.net/IMG/pdf/M15_impacts_v3_0_April_2014.pdf).
- [9] Rabbat, N., "The Arab Revolution Takes Back the Public Space.", University of Chicago Press, 2013.
- [10] Ravazzoli, E., Rethinking Public Space in Cairo, ArcDuoCitta, 2011.
- [11] John R. Parkinson, 2012, Democracy & Public Space: The Physical Sites of Democratic Performance, Oxford University Press, Oxford University Press Inc., New York, USA. [Online]. Available: [chisineu.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/democracy-public-spaces.pdf](http://chisineu.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/democracy-public-spaces.pdf).