

# Rethinking Public Space in Cairo: The Appropriated Tahrir Square

Sahar Attia

## ***Der Wiedergewinn des öffentlichen Raums in Kairo: die Aneignung des Tahrir-Platzes***

*In der Zeit vor der Revolution gab es in Kairo keine öffentlichen Räume, die gleichwertig allen Gruppen der Stadtgesellschaft gedient hätten. Die öffentlichen Räume waren vernachlässigt, segregiert teilweise auch privatisiert, wie zum Beispiel in weiten Bereichen entlang des Nilufers, beziehungsweise einseitig durch politische oder ökonomische Interessen bestimmt. Eine ganze andere Bedeutung und Funktion erhielt der Tahrir-Platz in der Tagen der Revolution. Durch die soziale Mobilisierung wurde der Platz, der zuvor ein bloßer Verkehrsknoten gewesen war, zu einer öffentlichen Bühne der Diskussion, des Protestes und des Widerstands der gesamten Kairoer Bevölkerung. Es entstand ein lebendiger Ort, von allen Schichten gleichermaßen in Anspruch genommen, durch soziale Verantwortung bestimmt (wie die kollektiven Säuberungsaktionen nach dem Sturz des vormaligen Präsidenten zeigen) und mit einer großen symbolischen Bedeutung. Mehr als ein Jahr später stellt sich die Frage, wie sich dieser Wiedergewinn des öffentlichen Raums fortführen lässt bzw. wem der Tahrir-Platz in Zukunft gehören soll. Denn zwischenzeitlich hat sich so etwas wie ein rechtsfreier Raum entwickelt, mit informellen Händlern an jeder Ecke, dauerhaften Zeltbewohnern in der Platzmitte, zum Teil auch chaotischen Zuständen und vereinzelt Sicherheitsproblemen. Die Zukunft des Tahrir-Platzes ist offen und damit auch die Diskussion darüber, wie dieser symbolträchtige Ort demokratisch weiterentwickelt werden kann.*

## **Introduction**

The concept of public spaces has been a topic of great discussion in spatial as well as in social disciplines, examining how places are successful in achieving a vibrant urban environment. Public spaces contribute to the general social and psychological wellbeing. They are inclusive spaces that all people are free to use without consent or justification, thus exercising their citizenship rights. The constant direct involvement of people in urban space is essential since people's values and attitudes in their societies change over time. This relationship between people and space sets the identity and image of the city, which can be lost if the relationship is corrupted. Public spaces therefore act as social outlets that enhance the general wellbeing of individuals, as well as the general wellbeing of collective society. It is therefore suggested that the lack of public spaces can threaten public welfare and social harmony within the urban realm.

The situation of public spaces, specifically in developing countries has been a major topic of debate, specifically in post-revolutionary cities that have experienced major transformations in the roles of public spaces on urban society, raising issues regarding the production of community public spaces and socio-spatial justice. As a citizen and a professional urbanist, I have always questioned the relationship between the Cairene citizen and the city, stressing on the issue that Cairo is marked by a clear absence of a public realm or venue that accommodates all members of the Cairene community. Cairo's public spaces represent contested spatial, social, and symbolic configurations that are a product of the

growing multiplicity embedded in the urban fabric. In a debate on the production of public space, it is commonly asked: what involves the formation of successful people-scaled places? Does design foster this relationship or do society's initiatives create successful spaces? Who suffers from the loss of successful places? Only the urban poor, or all social classes?

Cairo's Tahrir Square (Fig. 1) is one major example of socio-spatial transformation, as it transformed from a physically led mode of development to a socially led typological process. The article will illustrate the changes in uses within the square following the political uprising, thus highlighting forces that shape the public space in Cairo.

## **The Production of Urban Space**

The production of space is a complex process of spatial, as well as social configurations that evolve through time and in accordance to cultural patterns. Urban forms are not only made up of materials, volumes, colours and heights, they are also constructed through uses, flows, perceptions, mental associations, systems of representations whose significance changes with time, cultures, and social groups (Lynch, 1960, cited in Castells, 1983). However, it is commonly debated whether it is the design of public spaces, which invites human flourishing, or whether its success is dependent on people's involvement and inclusion in public space. According to Kropf (2001), there are two main processes of change in the representation of urban space: ontogenetic versus phylogenetic change, or in other terms spatial development versus spatial evolution.

Phylogenetic change or spatial evolution involves the evolution of spatial function or typology. This process is also referred to as a typological process that is based on human agreement over the use of space. As described in Kropf's *Conceptions of Change in the Built Environment* (2001), the term typology or type assumes a form and function that is agreed upon by society and represents a common conception of a certain spatial element. This interaction between humans, their ideas and conceptions, and their environment suggests the emergence of typologies to be a product of cultural habits and societal patterns. Therefore the evolution of spatial typologies involves the direct interaction between individuals and their surroundings, where they acclimatize to a certain environmental situation and thus seek difference to accommodate common evolving needs. This model of spatial change highlights the importance of the social element in the production of space, involving the spatial function as well as the symbolic meaning manifested therein. Society is therefore responsible for creating vibrant community spaces, as the form and function of space is directly dependent on inclusiveness in the design process of shared spaces. However the plurality of results embedded in today's urban fabric suggests that urban change is based on social conflict in the function and meaning of space, hindering progress while increasing socio-spatial fragmentation. As the relationship between people and space sets the identity and image of the city, it is lost when this relationship is corrupted.

The second method of change, according to Kropf (2001), is ontogenetic change or spatial development that involves the development of the physical form of single separate entities in their physical configurations, rather than its spatial type. This process suggests that successful lively spaces are a product of physical entities in urban space that make up elements of the public and private realm. Spatial development is usually the product of political, economic and social forces that favour a certain method or pattern of development, pushing the development process towards a certain direction. The urban realm is therefore injected with political, economic and social significance that reflects the nation's

drivers of change and desired image. In contrast to the typological process, ontogenetic change is achieving spatial development through design cues that shape behavioural patterns and the ability to use space. However, this mode of development, as it influences behaviour in space, limits the capacity for human flourishing and community led change. It rather imposes social patterns and frames the urban fabric. As spatial design can be a facilitator towards successful community spaces, it can also produce controlled spaces with limited accessibility thus compromising people's rights to occupy publicly owned space.

The rights to occupy, or citizens' rights of the city, are reflected in three claims as according to *Cities for Citizens* (1998, cited in McCann, 2002):

- the right to voice, where citizens can claim presence in urban space,
- the right to difference, where citizens can participate in the development process of the use, function and meaning of space,
- the right to human flourishing, where citizens have the ability to live life fully.

The absence of these rights suggests the existence of power over citizenship. It therefore suggests that achieving spatial democracy is dependent on the capacity of citizens to use and adapt public spaces to their needs.

### Where Do Public Spaces Stand in Cairo

The city of Cairo is marked by a clear absence of a public realm or venue that accommodates all members of the Cairene community. Citizens are separated into social groups or classes and are placed into separate realms. This socio-spatial distribution thus creates separate identities based on their social levels within the larger community. Consequently, the urban public realm becomes contested with diverse ideologies, leading to a general decline in the use of public spaces.

### References

- Castells, M. (1983) *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press
- Castells, M. (2003) *The Process of Urban Social Change*. In A. Chuthbert, ed. (2003) *Designing Cities: Critical Readings in Urban Design*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 23-27
- Hawkes, A. / Sheridan, G. (2009) *Rethinking the Street Space: Evolving Life in the Streets*. In: *Planetizen* [blog] 10 August. Available at: <<http://www.planetizen.com/node/40066>> [Accessed 23 June 2012]
- Kropf, K. (2001) *Conceptions of Change in the Built Environment*. In: *Urban Morphology*, 5 (1), pp. 29-42
- Levy, A. (1999) *Urban Morphology and the Problem of the Modern Urban Fabric: Some Questions for Research*. In: *Urban Morphology*, 3 (2), pp. 79-85
- Madanipour, A. (1998) *Social exclusion and space*. In: R. LeGates / F. Stout, eds. (2007) *The City Reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 158-165

Figure 1: Overall view of Tahrir Square





▲ **Figure 2:** Tahrir Square in the 1940s, a recreational central plaza/public space in front of the Egyptian Museum. Source: Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Tahrir\_Square\_in\_1941.jpg]



▲ **Figure 3:** Tahrir Square as a traffic node before the revolution (2011) (Source: www.iamegypt.org)



▲ **Figure 4:** People gathering in Tahrir Square during the revolution (6 February, 2011) (Source: www.iamegypt.org)

This decline occurring at all levels within Cairo's river sides, residential communities, public gardens, and even public squares, is the result of a social segregation which affects the production of successful places in the city. These occurrences are a result of the place-making approach that has taken a rigid ontogenetic approach, where changes in spatial configurations are made through the development of single entities, imposing behavioural patterns in urban space. The importance of good design to incorporate political, economic and social significance while inviting and enabling a natural production of social space is often overlooked and overpowered by the demands of certain groups of society in control of the decision making process. This is greatly reflected in Cairo's street patterns and the use of space, as well as the physical and social elements that make up boundaries between private and public spaces. This increasing social injustice is also reflected in the privatization of waterfronts. As the river Nile represents one of the most important factors in Cairo's urban fabric it is thus used by private institutions, high-end restaurants, clubs and floating boats. Available space for the general public is very limited considering the length of the river-side in Cairo and Giza.

Cairo's city squares, as in most historical cities, were decorated with fountains, monuments, statues, and other works of art (Fig. 2), while the public space was used for public celebrations, state proceedings and the exchange of goods and services (Madanipour, 2003). Particular celebrations include *Mulids*, which are traditional festivals taking place in the public streets of Cairo, celebrating culture and traditions. Social conflicts however have pushed these celebrations away from major public spaces as they are not generally accepted by the intellectual and elite population, who tend to separate themselves from the general public. Despite these and other festivities displaying cultural folklore, the middle and upper class regard them as chaos representing a distorted image, as they are commonly led by lower class citizens (Schielke, cited in Singerman, 2009). The reality of urban society is based on the conflict over social organization, as each group aims to communicate their own social interest through the expression of urban meaning (Castells, 2003). This therefore becomes a conflictive process and a struggle for symbolic dominance. However, the urban realm tends to reflect the interest of the dominant class, while other groups are regarded as a threat to public wellbeing and thus displaced from social space through physical, social and symbolic barriers.

Other forces that have shaped the urban public realm include increasing economic interests, which in turn seek to privatize urban space in favour of capitalizing land value, as well as the exclusion of societal threats. Accordingly, the development of shopping malls, gated communities, and protected walkways has become a popular approach to the production of space as single privatized entities favouring the interest of a particular group.

The consequences are the deterioration of the general conditions of public spaces as they become neglected, as well as the disappearance of social and cultural spaces. Streets, which had also been a major space for public gathering and spatial integration, have been reduced to a "simple space for movement" (Levy, 1999),

killing streets as public spaces and destroying traditional typological configuration that had developed through time and through human interaction with space. In reference to *Mulids* and other major public festivities that take place in public streets of Cairo, general space for the public has become limited or controlled, threatening socio-spatial distribution as high earners reclaim the city through gentrification and urban regeneration away from social space.

Finally, the major factor shaping the urban public realm is the political power that manifests within the urban fabric. Public spaces have always symbolized the power of the state, as they serve various functions. Other than being used for national parades and state affairs, public spaces further demonstrate the degree of oppression by the state, where the use of public space is controlled, prohibited, or regulated. Whilst society is anticipated as a threat to social wellbeing, spatial barriers are promoted in the urban realm as a method to control accessibility and manage crime. However, crime can be justified as a counterclaim towards exclusionary forces, which breed more anti-social behaviour and marginalization, making the control of public spaces more essential in the power balance of society (Madanipour, 1998). Festivities attracting great masses, such as the example of *Mulids*, are therefore not allowed in public spaces as they are displaced from modern urban life, generating a common feeling of the loss of ability to participate in public spaces (McCann, 2002). According to Singerman (2009), those are controlled by the presence of government officials monitoring and regulating behaviour, as well as acting as symbols of power over citizenship.

These social, economical, and political forces shaping the urban realm limit the capability of the general population to practice their rights to the city, as their rights to voice and participate in social and physical space are limited, increasing socio-spatial injustice in Cairo's urban realm. The production of space is therefore shaped based on the concept of "whoever controls the streets, controls the city" (Atkinson 2008, cited in Madanipour, 2003).

### Transforming Tahrir Square

As public spaces symbolize the power of the state, they are also used to challenge that power. According to Madanipour (1998), public spaces are ritualized outlets for public displeasure against rulers and their policies and are used for demonstrations and revolutions. Struggle for socio-spatial rights in the city has led to a popular uprising in Cairo's Tahrir Square, a public space that had been reduced to vehicular pathways killing its social space. Through social mobilization and a public initiative, the square was transformed into a public platform for discussion, resistance, and political confrontation, which created a common collective goal between the Cairene community. Although the public realm is made up of social conflict over the use, function and meaning of space, the social integration in public space towards a common goal redefined urban meaning, forming the basis of a negotiated adaption of urban function to the square. The reproduction of Tahrir Square as public space took a phylogenetic or evolutionary approach to spatial typology, where new functions of space were adopted based on human interaction with space.



▲ **Figure 5:** Tahrir Square used as a social space a few days after Mubarak stepped down (14 February, 2011). (Source: www.iamegypt.org)



▲ **Figure 6:** Post-revolution appropriation of Tahrir Square (2012): informal vendors have established (Source: www.iamegypt.org)



▲ **Figure 7:** Post-revolution appropriation of Tahrir Square (2012): street vendor selling water and hot drinks in front of his tent (Source: www.iamegypt.org)



▲ **Figure 8:** Post-revolution appropriation of Tahrir Square (2012): informal functions. (Source: www.iamegypt.org)

**Figure 9:** Aerial view of Tahrir Square in 2012 showing vendors' use of space after the revolution ▼



- Flag vendors
  Shirts and accessories vendors
 Tea vendors
- Tents/ Sit-in
  Informal booths selling various products
 Egyptian Beans and food vendors
- Blood donations

Spatial typologies were created, such as commercial uses designating spaces for street vendors, open platforms for public speaking, spaces for public restrooms, spaces for medical rehabilitation, and spaces for storing medical and food supplies. A natural spatial organization occurred as a result of direct human interaction with its environment, adopting space to needs. The rights to occupy space were claimed allowing people to flourish and create a vibrant community that challenged physical, social and symbolic barriers. In fact, during the days of protesting it was a new scene for Cairenes to see the merge of social classes all unified for a cause. Even the non-protestant would visit the square to watch the scene, or to be part of the crowd. Families would go with their babies and kids to hang out, enjoy sweet potatoes, hot corn, or to buy and wave the Egyptian flag. I used to walk around to watch this socio-political phenomenon that proved how much people have lacked the simple right to enjoy public space. They have found the lost urban space.

Public space was thus socially driven and its success in providing a vibrant, human-scaled environment is due to the interaction between people and space. However, its design as a large square flexible in design and highly accessible facilitated the emergence of a mixed-use zone. Following the 18 days of intensive protesting in Tahrir Square, the public gained an increased sense of ownership over the space, which was reflected in their public initiatives in cleaning up the square following the ousting of the former president. This behaviour emerged with a symbolic image of Tahrir Square being claimed and owned by the public to serve public needs. Furthermore, the emergence of graffiti covering the surrounding murals is another example of the renewed approach to public spaces, where art was used as means to voice and express national identity. Jane Jacobs highlights that "cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when they are created by everybody".

### **For Whom is Public Space? New Role of Tahrir Square**

Following the occupation of Tahrir Square and the reclaiming of spatial control, the functionality of public spaces have been redefined by the public, as they contributed in regaining social democracy for the Cairene community, acting as mediators throughout the Arab Spring. As the square became the space for intervention, the question is how to sustain this rebirth of the image of Tahrir, maintain the socio-spatial configurations it has developed, and transfer these configurations onto existing public spaces to create vibrant community spaces throughout Cairo, holding political, economic and social significance. In this case, what kind of intervention can support this social change that is manifested in urban space? And does this new role have other impacts on the use of Tahrir Square?

Today however, the conditions of Tahrir Square are no longer reflective of the socio-political uprising or its established symbolic meaning. As people have claimed that space, and claimed absolute rights towards its occupation, it has also transformed into a law-free zone with unauthorized vendors in every street and tents in the centre, causing a general deterioration of the spatial

conditions, as well as compromising safety. This transformation has brought up major issues and questions regarding spatial ownership and to what extent public spaces should be public. Does taking away spatial barriers liberate the community, or does it create spatial chaos? To what degree should people have control over spatial typologies and the flexibility of controlling spatial distribution?

To understand these new relationships between people and space, a survey was carried out in Tahrir Square documenting the evolution of space appropriation in two different time frames, as well as a questionnaire involving some of the unauthorized vendors that have claimed their space for commercial functions.

The figures represent the process of change in the use of space. Figure 3 shows Tahrir Square as a traffic node before the revolution. In Figure 4, people gather in the centre of Tahrir Square focusing on a clear common socio-political goal a few days into the revolution in February 2011; space is used as a platform for protesting, discussion and solidarity. In Figure 5, the same space is used as social space a few days after Mubarak stepped down. Tahrir Square gained a new symbolic meaning that invited people to flourish. Figures 6 to 8 show the post-revolution appropriation of Tahrir Square: a year after, vendors are spread all over the square. Figure 7 shows a street vendor selling water and hot drinks by his tent, where he settled and makes his living.

The first spatial analysis was made after the ousting of the former regime. It shows the variety of uses that have evolved around the square, documenting the location and type of activity carried out. With the second analysis undergone a few months after, the comparison of uses in two different time frames shows the degree of their sustainability and reflects on how vendors or occupiers of the square have established and claimed their live/work space (Fig. 9). When comparing figures of both analysis in terms of the sustainability of their positions in Tahrir Square, it becomes clear that most vendors have stayed in their exact location over time, establishing a degree of ownership to the specific claimed space of activity.

The results of the interviews with various vendors of Tahrir Square shows that within a few months the behaviour towards Tahrir as an owned public social space had vanished due to the emerging chaos that has filled the place. Vendors of all types (selling juices, cigarettes, flags, sunglasses, accessories etc.) have well settled and established their clientele in the area. According to them it is their only source of income. They have no permit like all Egyptian vendors, so their existence in Tahrir Square is informal. Moreover, some brought their own set of seats and welcomed passers-by for tea. When they were asked if they would leave their informal vendor settlements, answers were variable: some would leave if they find a better opportunity elsewhere, others would like to stay in Tahrir Square and sell their products legally with a license to sell. They believe they have a strategic location and have become well known amongst the people: "If I get evicted, I will come back" (flags vendor). Others confirmed they would gladly leave, as the square will never be like the first days of the revolution, stating that it has become

a chaotic place, and that the government has to enforce laws and regulate the use of space. But when vendors hear there is a threat of eviction they pack up their goods and disappear for a while, to be back when it is safer for them.

The sit-in camps are of two categories: few are still there as a political statement, willing to stay unless evicted by force; others are there because according to them they have nowhere else to go. Most of the passers-by and existing store owners are not happy. For them it is a complete chaos and destructive of the image of Tahrir Square. The intensity of use has attracted more people to the area, however it has also left the area filthy and sometimes unsafe. Store owners definitely do not want unauthorized vendors in front of their shops, disturbing their business. However this increase in commercial density can be successful attracting more clients in the area if legalized and regulated by law.

### Conclusion

This new spatial organization is in need of a structural intervention to sustain its symbolic role and revived social dynamics. A phylogenetic and an ontogenetic approach to spatial change cannot achieve socio-spatial democracy if they are pursued separately. As Hawkes (2009) stated, "good design supports the function of a desired use", which suggests that vibrant spaces are produced through design interventions that foster spatial organization and public participation in the decision making process, while facilitating a natural progression of social integration in public space. The use of public spaces today reflects the need for flexible community-led places that allow citizens to flourish naturally. No doubt that with their vibrant uses and functions, successful people-scaled public spaces can re-inject social inclusiveness, integrity and solidarity into the Egyptian society. Currently although there are still political differences that escalate into struggles, central urban spaces have remained for the past 15 months the forum for inclusion of various factions, strata and ideologies. These are places for discussion towards agreements, consolidations and the affirmation of democracy. Tahrir Square has thus gained a new role: it is not only a traffic nodal square, but also a venue for events, festivals, and demands.

Right after the uprising events, many associations and institutions launched the idea of the necessity to re-design Tahrir Square in efforts to sustain its revived image. Facebook pages emerged: "Al Tahrir Competition", and "Tahrir from Thought to Realization", where Tahrir Square became the focus topic. Students' and professionals' interests were reflected as well in projects, workshops, and seminars. And the questions remain with no definite answers: should Tahrir Square be exclusively for pedestrians? Does Tahrir Square need to be re-designed to cope with its new functions? Or should it keep its original configuration and image, which reflects the originality of the event it hosted in January 2011 and by which he became the icon of democracy worldwide? A series of questions arise every day as the space witnesses new vendors, traffic deviations, and increased efforts to recapture its history with dignity. Tahrir Square is not only the "political arena", it is now a symbol for an urban hope in Cairo.

### References (cont.)

- Madanipour, A. (2003) Why are the Design and Development of Public Spaces Significant for Cities? In A. Cuthbert, ed. (2003) *Designing Cities: Critical Readings in Urban Design*. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 139-151
- McCann, E. (2002) Space, Citizenship, and the Rights to the City: A Brief Overview. In: *GeoJournal*, 58, pp. 77-79
- Singerman, D., ed. (2009) *Cairo Contested*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press

### Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my team, Farida Farag, Rehab Sobhi and Ahmed Zenhom, for their interest, and effort in surveys, and photography. And thanks to all vendors, passers by, or shop owners for their contribution.



### Sahar Attia

is a Professor of Architecture and Urban Design at the Faculty of Engineering at Cairo University, with a PhD in Urban Planning from the Urban Institute of Paris, University of Paris 12, France. She has over 30 years of experience in the academic and the professional field. Her specialization includes sustainable urban and community development, urban revitalization with emphasis on upgrading the built environment, and education.