Public Parks Going Private: A Ground Fact or Just a State of Mind

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Abstract: Privatization of public parks refers to the claim of ownership of public parks by a specific socio-economic class with certain types of commercial, social and/or sports activities. The situation triggers an unofficial hidden process of transformation of public parks into private parks. The transformation process starts when other socio-economic classes have a no-go-space state of mind where performed activities do not match and/or invite them to participate. In other words, it results in a ground shift in the planned socio-cultural ecosystem.

The Paper presents a literature review on the principles underpinning the functioning of public parks as public spaces with specific reference to the socio-economic aspect. It aims to highlight the reasons behind the privatization of public parks by specific socio-economic causing class exclusion and affecting parks' spatial settings. Hence, it also aims to help localities understand the development process of public parks in order to maintain a balanced socio-cultural Ecosystem.

The paper uses the case of The International Park in Nasr City, Cairo, Egypt (i.e. *Alhadeka Aldawlia*) to analyze the gap between the existing and planned socio-cultural ecosystems and their impact on users and surrounding socio-economic classes' perceptions.

Keywords: Privatization, Public space, Public Parks, Socio-Cultural Ecosystem

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of the 21st century, public spaces, including public parks, have been faced with new kind of threats that do not only involve the misuse of space. It rather includes its management and users behavior where certain socio-economic groups and classes have been excluded from using public spaces reducing social and cultural diversity. A discussion on public spaces raises few questions: how can we define public space? Who is it for? and how does ownership affect public space?. In reality, public space is the meeting ground of interests of diverse social groups. In order to understand how public space works, develops, used and valued, needs and agendas of different stakeholders must be identified.

The literature has covered the effect of privatizing public spaces through gated communities, shopping malls, and private clubs. It also highlights the related social exclusion of socio-economic classes. Nevertheless, there has been a gap in the literature of what actually happens when it comes to public parks. What actually happens when a certain socio-economic class claims ownership of a public park?

2. HOW PUBLIC IS A PUBLIC SPACE

Public spaces could be categorized into various forms such as streets, street markets, shopping precincts, community centers, parks, gardens, playgrounds, and neighborhood spaces in residential areas. (Worpole and Knox 2007; Abou El-Ela *et al* 2010). Williams and Green (2001) point out that there is a lack of clear definition of public space. The nature of public space varies greatly between public spaces that are publicly maintained; public spaces that are privately managed; public spaces that are privately used; and private spaces that are privately managed yet considered by others as public space (El-Sadek, 2011). Yet, the ownership of a certain public space and its appearance do not define the public space but rather its shared diverse range of activities by different people (Worpole and Knox 2007).

Ownership is a direct form of spatial control, which could be real or symbolic. Real ownership is the legal ownership either by the government, private sector or community that are in charge of the space management (Altman and Zube 1989; Abou El-Ela *et al* 2010). Yet, Symbolic Ownership has a psychological dimension that controls the way users belongs to a public space. Ownership, real or symbolic, has both positive and negative consequences. It might lead to exclusion of groups, social classes and/or individuals who would like to use a space. They could be physically denied access to space and/or mentally feel no longer welcomed to use the space. On the contrary, ownership could also serve to invite groups, social classes and/or individuals into space via communicating a sense of caring and responsibility (Altman and Zube l989; Jorgensen and Stedman 2006; Abou El-Ela *et al* 2010).

Public spaces play a vital role in the social life of communities. They act as a 'self-organizing public service', a shared resource in which experiences and value are created and shared. Yet, such social advantages may not be obvious to outsiders or public policy-makers. The social value of Public space lies in its relevance to the local context and in people's memory of places (Whyte 2001). Successful public spaces can provide opportunities for social interaction, social mixing, and inclusion, and facilitate community ties.

The success of a certain public space doesn't always lie in the hands of the architect, urban designer, or planner, but also relies on the people using and managing the space. They set, maintain and/or change its value to the community while integrating it into their lives. People make spaces more than spaces make people. Consequently, public space is a co-product of spatial and physical settings activated by dynamic and changing social patterns according to certain activities, cultures, and timetables. This explains why particular places are associated with particular social class, specific class culture and/or social and economic activities with both negative and positive results (Bowers and Manzi 2006; Worpole and Knox 2007).

3. PRIVATIZATION OF PUBLIC SPACES

Public spaces are becoming increasingly privatized by owners and managers as a result of decreased state intervention and active auditing. They are assigned to certain social and economic activities which encourage specific socio-economic groups and social classes to claim ownership of space (More 2005). The result is a large number of public spaces which excludes certain socio-economic groups instead of being everybody's, "my public space is no longer your public space". (Kuppinger 2004). A concern with security has widely been raised and expressed in a fenced off security public space. Although many have based their concern on fear of crime, this anti-urban reaction is often translated into the fear of "others" (Bowers and Manzi 2006). This usually happens when different social groups self- segregated themselves according to interest, activities, or even social class in their "own public space' where no longer the word "public" can be applied. (Gehl 2012).

There is a common agreement in the literature that criticizes the idea of privatizing public spaces through gated communities, exclusive clubs, and/or fortified public spaces. It stresses that they create "a sense of fear" rather than reducing any actual threat, which results in a lack of social cohesion. (Bowers and Manzi 2006; El-Sadek 2011). Moreover, public spaces have been facing not only threat that is related to misuse and behavior of users, but also that of design and management resulting in social exclusion and reducing social and cultural diversity within public spaces. In some cases, the exclusion is deliberately done by privatization, commercialization, and historic preservation resulting in specific socio-economic groups to feel welcomed (Ploeg 2006; Vaswar 2009; Low 2000; Low *et al* 2005).

Mean and Tims (2005) stress that not everybody is equal in public spaces. Some people are not always welcomed in public spaces, some groups cannot afford to enter exclusive clubs and shopping malls, and some groups can be privileged over others. For example, the commercial function of many fortified public spaces- shopping malls- often favor those with spending power, with the result that some people are excluded. The target groups are usually classes with high spending power thus excluding people who are deemed lower-value users. (Mean and Tims 2005; Ploeg 2006). Local parks are no difference. It may often be used by lower income class families, school students and couples for hanging out. In the absence of other facilities or spaces for these groups, this might be regarded as legitimate, as long as no harm is caused to others, yet their behavior sometimes could be seen as a draw off for other groups. (Worpole and Knox 2007; Vaswar 2009).

Low *et al* (2005) points out that the numbers of public spaces are decreasing worldwide as more are being privatized, gated or fenced, closed for renovation or redesigned to restrict certain

activities and exclude some societal groups. Excessive privatization of the city decreases the public spending on a city scale since more investments go into the "privatized public space" in terms of malls, private clubs, and public spaces within gated communities and so on. In the developing countries elite and middle classes are disappearing from the publicly owned and managed space, hence less care for enhancement -financially and intellectually- is given to public spaces management on the national scale from planning and development officials. Consequently, they become deteriorated which reflects upon the community as a whole (Williams and Green 2001; Mean and Tims 2005; El-Sadek 2011).

4. SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY AND CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM

Throsby (2001) refers to social sustainability as evolutionary or lasting qualities that maintain a "Cultural Ecosystem" that supports and maintains a specific cultural life, socio-economic activities, and human civilization. He also defines sustainable development as the preservation and enhancement of the environment through the maintenance of natural ecosystems, while culturally sustainable development refers to the preservation of arts and society's attitudes, practices, and beliefs. This is also reflected in the words of Low *et al* (2005) as follows:

> "Social sustainability is a subset of cultural sustainability; it includes the maintenance and preservation of social relations and meanings that reinforce cultural systems. Social sustainability specifically refers to maintaining and enhancing the diverse histories, values, and relationships of contemporary populations. " (*ibid*: 31)

She also stresses that in order to truly understand social sustainability three main concepts must be critically recognized: place preservation, cultural and social ecology, and social and cultural diversity. Cultural ecosystems are located in time and space. Hence, for a cultural ecosystem to be maintained or conserved, its place(s) must be preserved (Low *et al* 2005; Low 2002; Low 2004; Fleury-Bahi *et al* 2016). In other words, in order to conserve a culture ecosystem place preservation is required. It is crucial for culture ecosystem preservation to critically maintain activities and physical settings and even patterns of use of public space.

Anthropologists employ a variety of theories of how cultural ecosystems work in particular places over time. Gehl (2012) and More (2005) point out that pioneers as Bennett (1968) modeled the ecological dynamics of natural systems to understand socio-political changes in the cultural ecosystems of farmers. Cohen (1968) developed a cultural evolutionary scheme to predict settlement patterns and socio-cultural development in the developing regions. Although theories, approaches, and frameworks to understand cultural and social ecology have been subjected to extensive critiques, there is a common agreement between theorists and academic that dynamic and predictive aspects of cultural ecosystem models are useful when examining social change on a particular site (Srivastava 2005; Mean and Tims 2005).

Cultural ecology is a finely balanced system, and any intervention without studying users, patterns and physical setting of space, it may not be able to maintain itself and eventually collapses. The case of historic Parque Central in San José, Costa Rica shows that an intervention took place overlooking the social and cultural balance of the setting and activities and even users. Part of the users was intended to be excluded from the newly developed park, after the redesign the park failed to maintain a well-balanced community where it became abandoned by the previous users and faced major security and safety issues (Low 2000; Worpole and Knox 2007).

Cultural diversity became a "politically correct" catchphrase during the 1980s, but it has not been addressed in urban planning and design practice or in terms of sustainable development till late 1990s (Mean and Tims 2005). While sustainable development includes "maintaining cultural diversity" as a conceptual goal, there is little agreement on what it means. Nevertheless, cultural diversity provides a way to evaluate cultural and social sustainability and is one observable outcome of the continuity of human groups in culturally significant places (Low *et al* 2005).

> "Social sustainability is the successful maintenance of existing cultural ecosystems and cultural diversity. It is safeguarded when the systems of social relations and meanings are inclusive, rather than exclusive. In this sense, social sustainability is fostered by understanding the intimate relationship between history, values, cultural representation, and patterns of use in any culturally diverse context. In fact, the inclusion of local people, their histories, and their values ultimately strengthens any park's long-term social sustainability."   (*ibid*: 64)

5. ANALYTICAL INDICATORS

Many scholars and academics such as Whyte (2001), Low *et al* (2005), Battesti (2006), Worpole and Knox (2007), Attia (2011), El-Sadek (2011) and Fleury-Bahi *et al* (2016) conclude main indicators to promote and maintain culture diversity and social interaction and consequently a balanced cultural ecosystem within public parks, each is derived from one or more of park ethnographies studies.
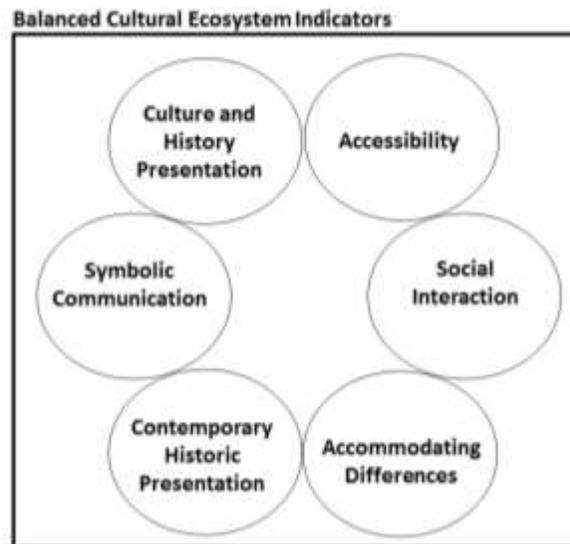

Figure (1): Balanced Cultural Ecosystem Indicators
Source: Adapted by the Researcher from various References

Nevertheless, they all stress the rule that such indicators may not be applicable in all situations, however, are meant to provide an evaluation framework for culturally sensitive decision making in park planning, management, and design. They can be summarized in the following six statements as shown in figure (1): (1) If people culture are not represented in historical national parks and monuments or, more importantly, if their histories are erased, they will not use the park. (2) Access is as much about economics and cultural patterns of park use as circulation and

transportation; thus, income and visiting patterns must be taken into consideration when providing access for all social groups. (3) The social interaction of diverse groups can be maintained and enhanced by providing safe, territories for everyone within the larger space of the overall site. (4) Accommodating the differences in the ways social class and different groups' use and value public sites is essential to making decisions that sustain cultural and social diversity. (5) Contemporary historic preservation should not concentrate on restoring the scenic features without also restoring the facilities and diversions that attract people to a park. (6) Symbolic ways of communicating cultural meanings are important dimensions of place attachment that can be used to promote cultural diversity.

Such indicators will be tested in the context of the International Park of Nasr City, Cairo, Egypt in order to document the perception of surrounding community compared to the actual settings of the park.

6. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As a first step in the exploration, analysis and documentation of the current context of The International Park, Nasr city, Cairo, Egypt, the author divided the study population into six distinct groups: Government officials (i.e. Ministry of Culture, Ministry of Tourism, Cairo Governorate, and local government), surrounding residents, security and management officials, owners and workers of economic activities, users of various ages and gender; academic and professionals. The fieldwork was carried during a period of 2 months. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect primary qualitative data to a sample selected through different sampling techniques (see Table 1).

Table 1: Study population, methods and sampling techniques

Study Population		Methods	Sampling technique	No. of Interviewees
Government Officials	Ministry of Culture Ministry of Tourism Cairo Governorate Local Public Council	Semi-structured interviews	Purposeful then snow-balling	6
Residents	Surrounding residents of the Park	Semi-structured interviews Direct observation Group discussions	Purposeful Stratified random sampling then snow-balling	14
Workers and owners of economic activities	Restaurants, Cafés, Cafeterias, vendors	Semi-structured interviews Direct observation Group discussions	Stratified random sampling then snow-balling	7
Security and Management Officials	On site	Semi-structured interviews	Purposeful then snowballing	4
Academics and Practitioners	Academics and practitioners	Semi-structured interviews	Purposeful then snowballing	5
Users	Males (various age groups) Females (various age groups)	Semi-structured interviews Direct observation Group discussion	Stratified random sampling then snowballing	17

Semi-structured interviews were judged more appropriate than structured interviews due to security and other resource limitations (i.e. time, funding, safety and security context), as well as the type of data required. Criteria based analysis is then developed through the six indicators, previously stated in section 4, for a Socio- cultural Ecosystem in case study. Briefly, a total of 53 interviewees of all groups were interviewed. This was in addition to direct observation and group discussions over a total period of 2 months (January - February 2016). The researchers have also made use of several secondary data sources, mainly documentation and archival records, while seeking to triangulate data to confirm the validity and reliability of both primary and secondary data collected. On multiple site visits with different groups of middle class students age 18-25 to International Park, we were asked by security guards on entrance about reasons to enter the parks, and cameras were allowed for a fee of 5 LE/Camera. Guards refused to answer any questions regarding activities done in the park, or anything involving the park's current state. They claim they are not allowed to answer any questions.

7. THE INTERNATIONAL PARK, NASR CITY, CAIRO, EGYPT

The International Park is considered by local authorities, users and surrounding residents as the largest public park that inhibits almost all public events, culture and sports activities in Nasr City. The park is located in the eastern part of Nasr City, the 7th District, to the east of Cairo as shown in figure (1). The district population has been estimated nearly 550,000 in 2010 within an area of 227.35 km2. The residents of Nasr City district are mostly upper middle and high income citizens. The park was opened to public in 1987 as a theme park that hosts 16 pavilions representing 16 countries all over the world. Each pavilion presents the most famous features of its country. The construction of each pavilion was financed by its representing embassy in Egypt.
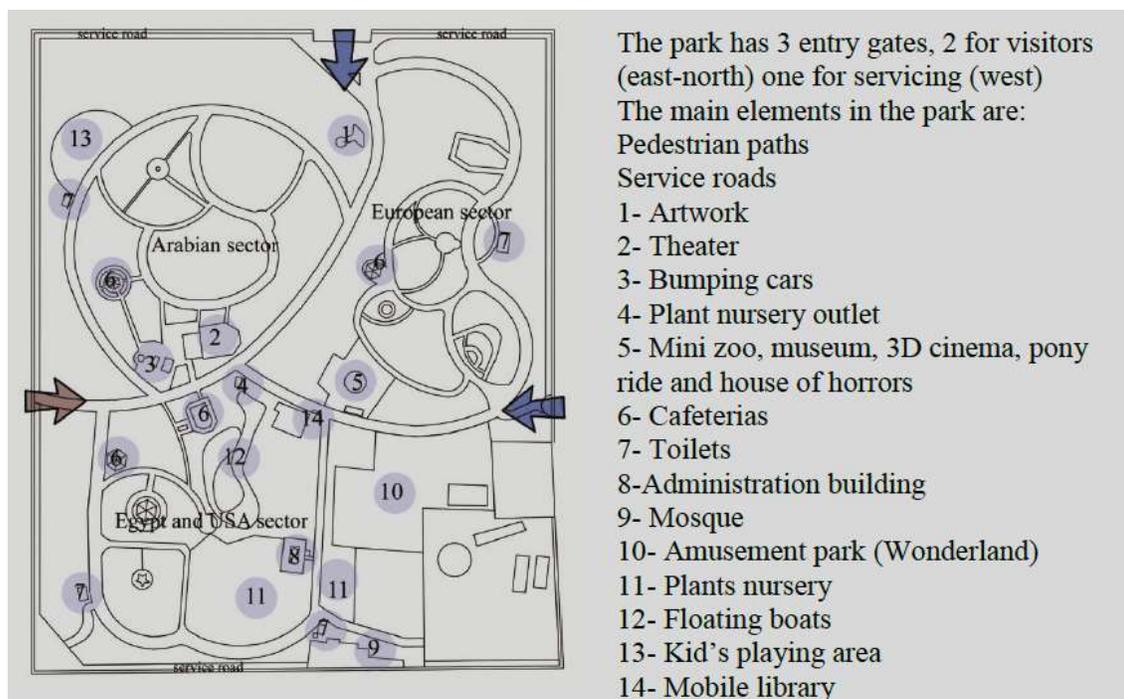

The park has 3 entry gates, 2 for visitors (east-north) one for servicing (west)
The main elements in the park are:
Pedestrian paths
Service roads
1- Artwork
2- Theater
3- Bumping cars
4- Plant nursery outlet
5- Mini zoo, museum, 3D cinema, pony ride and house of horrors
6- Cafeterias
7- Toilets
8-Administration building
9- Mosque
10- Amusement park (Wonderland)
11- Plants nursery
12- Floating boats
13- Kid's playing area
14- Mobile library

Figure (2): Distribution of activities and uses in the International Park of Nasr City
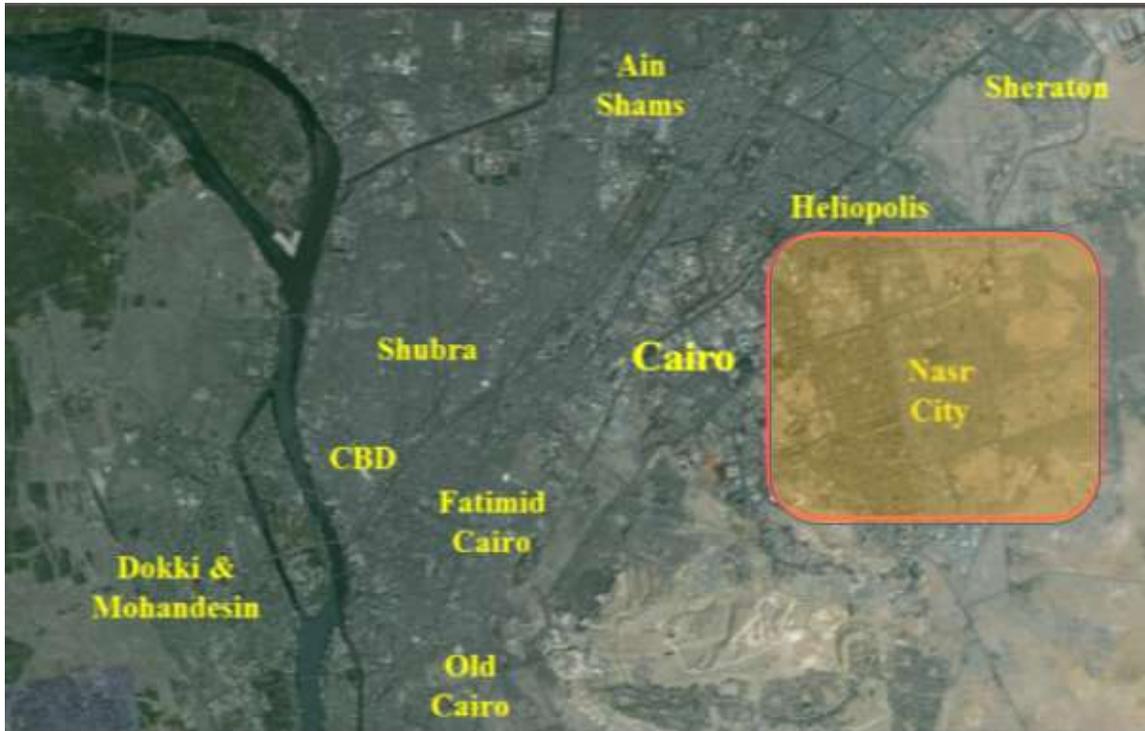**Source:** (Abd Al Aziz 2012)

Figure (1): Location of the International Park of the 7th District in Nasr City, Cairo
Source: adapted by researcher

The park area, 231000 m2, is divided into three main sectors, each was provided with service zone that includes toilets and cafeteria. The first sector, the Arabian Sector, includes the pavilions of Saudi Arabia – Kuwait – UAE – Morocco – friendship garden. The Second Sector, the European Sector, includes pavilions of France – Greece – Argentina – China – Korea – Japan – Romania – Holland – Germany). The third sector includes the pavilions of Egypt and USA as shown in figure (2).

7.1 Culture and History Presentation

Given the fact that the park was planned to express the history and culture of the world and to be an international open museum, the Egyptian culture and history are expressed in a very shallow manner. The Egyptian section, like all other section, is limited in size and activities (i.e. social and economic). The park is recognized by users as an open green area rather than providing a remarkable deep Egyptian theme even within the Egyptian section as expressed by one of the interviewees as follows:

> "People come to the park mainly to play sports and enjoy the green areas especially during the weekends and public holidays (…) it is just like any open area but larger in size and much greener. Sometimes there are music concerts and open theatre shows but not that continuous and systematic like a yearly plan (...) there is nothing Egyptian about the park it is just a large green area"

It is also has been evident that the park is providing a safe haven for young lovers and drug addicts. 'What is the reason for your visit?' is the usual and repeated question asked by security guards to the park visitors before entering the park. On one specific incident guards even prohibited the entrance of some large family groups claiming that the park is for couples only. This perception of guards shows more evidence on how the public park is being looked at. This also has been evident in the words of some surrounding residents overlooking the park as follows:

> "The security guards already know the park users, they call each other by their names, the users are mostly low- income families, preparatory and secondary governmental school students, and young and middle-age lovers (...) They enter the garden as groups of boys and/or girls. We can see all "bad" activities from the balcony. You feel this is not our culture – this is not our religion teachings – this is not the ethics we have been raised upon (…) it is a petty this all happens in the middle of a very busy neighborhood"

7.2 Accessibility

Studying the visiting and socio-economic patterns to evaluate accessibility to the park by different socio-economic classes is crucial. The park includes three cafeterias, only one of them is working well however it provide only drinks. The other two are working on an on-and-off basis. Also the ceremony hall, and the open theatre are usually abundant most of times unless there is a concert and/or a show. The park entrance fee on usual days is 10 L.E/person. and 40 L.E./person on special events. Given such very low fees, more and more low-income families and individuals are visiting the park. During Feasts and public holidays, low income families and young couples go the park where it holds events, shows and activities in its theatre also directed to those societal groups.

More and more the park lost its glory where official funding is less and less cut down and the park management is pushed to find other sources of funding. This is evident in the words of the park management personnel as follows:

"in the past, there was an agency within each governorate responsible for its parks and gardens' renovation and maintenance (...) four years ago new regulations regarding public parks management have been put to action, where every park has to promote sources of income for itself. Every park became responsible for its own renovation, maintenance, and services (...) This results in imposing some fees for the use of cameras and some park services (…) even though we are always short of funding hence we usually go for mass audience events"

Consequently, the park has lost its "public" goals due to lack of maintenance where it became not attractive to middle and high-income families. People used to jog and/or spend their time in the park; and middle and high income class private schools who used to organize trips to the park, do not go anymore. The park with all its social and economic activity patterns only attracts low-income class families, couples and individuals. This is also evident in the words of surrounding residents' interviewees as follows:

"I used to watch people jog in the park every day until it gradually stopped (…) I used to go to the park on school trips as a kid, but now I never go there. It is not safe to go anymore and it does not include any interesting activities anyway"

7.3 Social Interaction

As discussed above, The Garden lost its sense of place, its goals and activities. It has been substituted by different types of activities and certain users' behavior patterns. This has been imposed by mainly lack of funding and lack of vision for the public park's mission and goals. The park definitely became a no-go zone for certain socio-economic classes where safety became a major issue for them. This also has been echoed in the words of surrounding residents and park management and also park users respectively as follows:

"it is not safe without a doubt for us. I cannot let go my daughter go there (…) sexual harassment is a systematic activity and the guards usually turn blind eyes if they are evident in any incident (…) we sometimes see live porn in the park so how would you expect us to even think go there (…) for us the park is just a nice view for our flats that ensures very good market value"

"we sometimes are forced to turn away some visitors because of certain groups in the parks for safety reasons (…) we lack enforcement and the police is not that cooperative and responsive as we all know (…) there are many incidents where we caught couples having sex and yet they come to the park the next day"

"man they are not like us to enjoy the park. They are just snobs who do not have any sense of humor (…) we do not want to make fun of them but sure they deserve it. They walk as if the park belongs to them (…) they are just show offs"

The above words indicate some serious psychological barriers more than physical driven by such lack of safety and security within the park boundaries. It is evident that no sense of social interaction exists and yet the park territory is not for everyone to enjoy

7.4 Accommodating Differences

The Park started to deteriorate and alternative private spaces greatly appeared over the time (i.e. gyms, cinemas, shopping malls, private clubs, etc...). Middle and high income socio-economic

classes stopped going to the park causing imbalance within the park's cultural ecosystem. There is more and more evidence confirming that the park's intended users have changed and became exclusive to certain socio-economic groups of low-income class, the space has lost its social diversity. This defect in the aims of any public park has been seen very normal and not problematic by government officials as follows:

> "Middle and high income socio-economic classes have their own private clubs and gated communities facilities to enjoy. It is a "public" park where the "public" (i.e. low-income class) can enjoy a place they do not see and/or enjoy in their residential areas (…) even if we tried our best to sustain activities for such classes they will not participate we know it for sure (…) we are struggling to financially sustain all public parks and only the "public" class will do this for us via mass participating events and paid activities"

Such repeated statements show some hard evidence of actual privatization of the park. The word "public" does not mean public anymore. A physical and psychological separation between socio-economic classes has been consciously officially adopted and consequently the cultural and social ecosystem has been disturbed to the core.

7.5 Contemporary Historic Presentation

As the contemporary historic preservation should not only concentrate on restoring the scenic features but also restoring the facilities and diversions that attract people to a park, the lack of funding eradicates both dramatically. Actually, it is not only the lack of funding bust also the lack of vision and mission of the park towards the community. From direct observation, a small number of gardeners have been spotted and facilities are not as efficient and well maintained as they should be. An explanation of the park's current status has been evident in the words of practitioners and academics as follows:

> "They (i.e. government officials and parks management) are focusing on the very wrong socio-economic class and its attached activities and patterns. They should not be the only class to focus on as they have less money to pay for the use of the park. They need to attract the middle and high income classes to use the park (…) they lack resources and they lack vision hence the mess of our public parks in general (…) it is just like running in circles: no money and no vision – more mass audience events with little fees – more physical deterioration – more need for money – more of such events and more consequent deterioration – pushing away middle and high income socio-economic classes"

There is enough fieldwork evidence to confirm growing class segregation and less class diversity and community interaction. It is evident that parallel communities and socio-economic classes co-exist in the very spaces and time.

7.6 Symbolic Communication

From the evidence collected during the various fieldtrips and consequent interviews and direct observation, it has been noticed that the park does not promote culture communication and diversity and yet does not provide a unified cultural meaning to the research study population. Government officials perceive the park as both a financial burden as well as a must provide service for the low income class. Surrounding residents can see the financial gains out of the market value

of their residential units overlooking the park. Current users and visitors deal with the park as a very large green space they lack in their neighborhoods to enjoy specific social activities. Finally, academic and practitioners perceive not only the concerned park but also all large public parks as ticking social bombs that promote class segregation and destroys community spirit and culture ecosystem.

8. CONCLUSION

The literature review, the various case study review within literature and this research case study analysis provide a different perception on the reasons for public parks' deterioration. Analyzing and documenting socio-economic and cultural dimensions underpinning established ecosystem draw decision-makers attention to the root cause of public parks' deterioration via conscious public parks privatization. Privatization of public parks is not only a process that causes the unconscious exclusion of certain socio-economic classes from using public parks but also the absence of major societal groups and classes from balanced ecosystem within public parks.

Safety became no longer about security measures but rather a matter of social balance, diversity, communication and interaction; and definitely not achieved through conscious and/or unconscious privatization of public parks. The best way to ensure safety in public parks is ensuring its continuous use by all socio-economic classes in the community and their actual on the ground presence and interaction via diverse collective activities that suit all. Public parks should become places of inclusion for "people" that suffer social exclusion and should be responsive to the entire community, free of exclusion, and literally a spatial interpretation of participatory responsibility and a democratic arena to share culture and experiences.

To ensure a well-balanced cultural ecosystem within public parks there have been six indicators to achieve that are: culture and history presentation, accessibility, social interaction, accommodating differences, contemporary historic presentation, and finally symbolic communication. Such indicators have been tested in the context of the International Park in Nasr City and there has been concluding ground evidence that the park lacks all. There also has been mounting evidence of socio-economic class segregation, imbalanced cultural ecosystem, lack of social diversity and interaction, lack of resources, future vision and goals, and bad management.

It has been practically proven from the fieldwork evidence as well as some case studies within the literature, as discussed above, that the of privatization of public parks (consciously and/or unconsciously) for certain socio-economic class/classes systematically results in a vivid mental segregation to the other socio-economic classes. In other words, the privatized parks are not physically but rather mentally denying access to certain socio-economic classes and groups. Furthermore, from the fieldwork evidence, it is practically confirmed that the privatization state is both a ground fact and an actual state of mind in the case of the International Park. The word "public" no longer means public to government officials and agencies that help to create a state of parallel communities within the very same time and space edges of localities. The International Park, as a public park, is no longer a tool to ensure social communication, interaction, and diversity that collectively bonds communities but rather became a source for class segregation and social unrest.

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