SPACE AND POLITICS: CHANGING OF SOCIAL ACTIVITIES IN TAHRIR SQUARE, EGYPT

USAMA NASSAR

Introduction

Urban space is a component of a city that changes during the history of a nation over several periods. While public spaces must provide users with a sense of attachment and identity, both emotionally and visually, certain urban public spaces seem to embody the cities in which they are found. Tahrir Square is considered one of the most important spaces in Egypt. It was originally called "Ismailia Square" after the 19th-century ruler Khedive Ismail, who commissioned the new downtown district's 'Paris on the Nile' design. After the Egyptian Revolution of 1919, the square became widely known as Tahrir (Liberation) Square (Vatikiotis, 1997).

Public space is taken by many to refer to things like the media, the internet, and networks of citizens in civil society, such that 'the literal meaning has almost been wiped out' (Hénaff and Strong, 2001). Thus, this paper aims to examine the dramatic changes in the daily social activities in Tahrir Square over the past few years following political events. To achieve this, the research will start with an overview of the urban context and its historical development for the square up to its recent form, taking into account all the political events which occur there. Following this, the research will monitor all the added social activities and behavioral maps through many tools to reach the main conclusions, which in turn will clarify the direct link between how people react to the space and the major political events.

Urban Context

According to Nezar AlSayyad (AlSayyad, 2011), Tahrir Square came into existence 140 years ago during the time of another ruler who was considered ruthless, Ismail, after he had lived in Haussmann's Paris and saw the changes that came about in France under Napoleon III, leading to his desire to remake Cairo in the image of Paris. Since that, the square has gone through a huge urban development and change of boundaries.

1. Urban growth and visual image

According to Cliff Moughtin, the role as a visual edge to urban development is still performed by rivers such as the Thames in London or the Seine in Paris. A particular treatment of a watercourse and the architecture along its banks can imbue a city quarter or district with unique qualities, distinguishing it from adjacent areas (Moughtin, 2003). The dynamic nature of Tahrir Square and its vital location on the waterfront were the reason for rapid urban growth both in the nearby buildings and major surrounding roads. Figure 1 shows the development of the square since its northern edge was the Ismailia canal, in becoming a vital axis for the 6th of October bridge and Ramsis street.
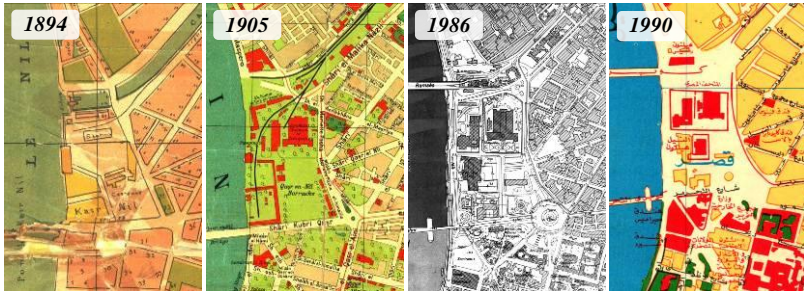

Figure 1 – Urban development for Tahrir Square
(Egyptian Geographic Society Maps, Egypt)

Lynch (1960) describes the urban form experience as 'imageability,' or the ability to stimulate a strong visual image in the eye & mind of the viewer. Tahrir Square is a very significant image for the user, with its unique surrounding architecture and building uses, as shown in Figure 2.
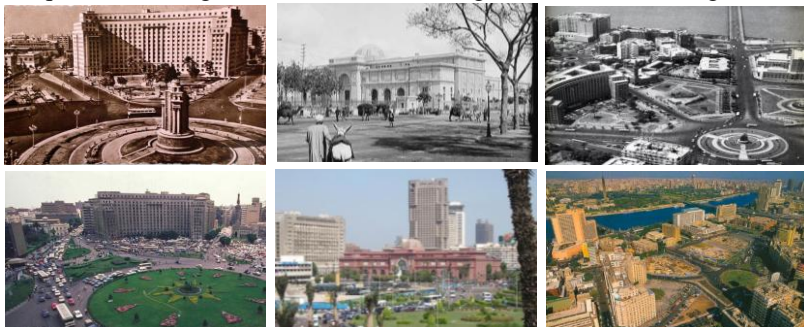

Figure 2 –Visual image change in the square
(Old issues of Alahram newspaper – www.ahram.org.eg/pdf)

2. Tahrir Square today

Tahrir Square is not only the hub of Cairo, it is home to some of the city's most important buildings and a constant headline-maker in the local press. Whatever happens in Tahrir immediately becomes a national concern. (Farag, 1999), and hence it is the place for the most important governmental, political, cultural and touristic buildings. Figure 3 shows the major building uses which collaborate to form the current visual image of the square.

Figure 3 – Current urban form and building uses of Tahrir square
(www.satimagingcorp.com, pictures by the researcher)

Politics and Tahrir Square

1. Public use and demonstrations

Traditionally, the site of any democratic performance has tended to be squares, parks, avenues and plazas where protestors gather to impress their displeasure to their representatives (Bailey and Iveson, 2000). Tahrir Square has been the traditional site for numerous major protests and demonstrations over the years, starting in 1919 when Egypt demanded independence from the UK and up to the revolution in January 2011 against corruption. These political events can be listed as:

1919   *Egypt demands independence from UK*
1946   *Student protests*
1951   *Protests against the British presence in the canal area*
1952   *Riots (the Cairo Fire)*
1972   *Student riots on 24 January*
2011   *Egyptian revolution*

Figure 4 – History of demonstrations in Tahrir Square
(Old issues of Alahram newspaper – www.ahram.org.eg/pdf)

2. Egyptian Revolution in 2011

Recently, Tahrir Square was the main platform for the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, and it became established as a focal point and a symbol for the ongoing Egyptian democracy demonstrations. Figure 5 shows a diagram for the square usage by the protesters, which would later be reflected through social activities and newly added behaviour in the square.
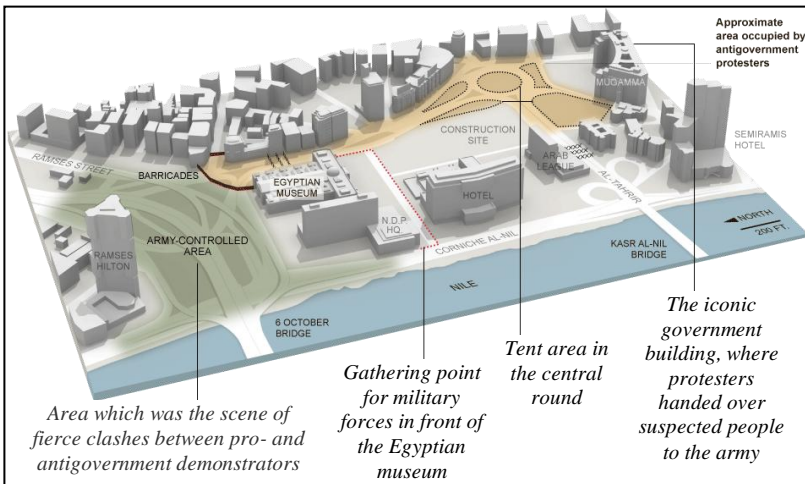

Figure 5 – Diagram of protests in Tahrir Square in January 2011
(New York Times, 2011)

Monitoring Social Activities in Tahrir Square

John Parkinson (2012) states that democracy depends on the availability of physical public space, even in an increasingly digital world. This part of the paper aims to explore how democracy and politics affect physical environment and types of social activities in Tahrir Square, considering values of culture in the Egyptian environment.

1. Data sampling

DeFazio (2011) argues that culture and urban sociology are linked in a strong way, and every social change in the space is always affected by political changes and urban development plans. The research will investigate this through the field study.

In this part of the study, the data were mainly derived from observation, documented pictures during the day and designed questionnaires, which were distributed randomly to the local visitors and hawkers in the square (tourists were excluded), and the questionnaire was carried out all day long. In total, 100 questionnaires were distributed and collected on site. The return of questionnaires was 100%. Finally, 88 respondents who answered all questions and had valid responses to the relevant variables were included for this analysis.

2. Analysis and discussion

The analysis from the expert interview survey data and observation are shown in the form of a diagram and a flow-chart:
• Stage 1: literature overview of the Tahrir Square context.
• Stage 2: research domains (Social behaviour – Day activities - Space perception).
• Stage 3: significant contribution of politics to the place.

This analysis highlights the perceptions of the positive and negative implications of space and politics. The initial data collected from the interviews have also been divided into three stages as a reference for continued research, which are:
• Stage 1: literature review
• Stage 2: survey and analysis
• Stage 3: recommendations from users.

Quantitative analysis in Figure 6 will be followed by behavioral maps showing the distribution of different activities in Tahrir Square (Figure 7), and documented pictures for the space usage (Figure 8).

Stage 1: the literature review

Positive implications:
- Friendly and multi-cultural activities.
- Focal point for all major political events.
- Visual function of connectivity with the Nile waterfront.
- Strong visual image.

Negative implications:
- Lack of future vision for planning.
- Lack of positive nightlife activities.
- Neglect of pedestrian paths.
- Approach to tourism and governmental use rather than local users and recreation.

Stage 2: Survey and analysis

Social Behavior

Perception of positive implications:
- Small discussion circles.
- The square act as socializing tool.
- Interactive behavior & willingness to change.
- Attracting more tourism.

Perception of negative implications:
- Lack of safety, comfort and convenience.
- Aggressive behavior.
- Incompatibility between pedestrian and vehicle movement due to the absence of connection.

Day Activities

Perception of positive implications:
- Passive and active leisure.
- Performance & Cultural events.
- Open photo gallery.
- Graffiti on the walls.

Perception of negative implications:
- A lot of unorganized hawkers.
- Lack of night-time activities.
- Lack of activities for different age groups.
- Unplanned sitting area.
- Illegal car parking.

Space Perception

Perception of positive implications:
- A free place for all the different views.
- Enormous feeling of belonging.
- Symbol for unity and achievement.
- A source of pride.

Perception of negative implications:
- Disorder and lack of respect for others.
- Randomness and lack of security.
- Traffic congestion
- Land use conflict.
- Illegal sidewalk use.

Stage 3: Recommendations from users

Develop positive implications:
- Provide a central pedestrian path running through the square.
- Change the space into an open museum for political events.
- Activate the link between the space and adjacent waterfront.

Address negative implications:
- Design open spaces for local users to adapt democratic discussions.
- Develop urban screen concept as a form of better communication.
- Embrace the creative arts, open galleries and cultural events.

Figure 6 – Quantitative analysis findings on the perception of negative and positive social behavior and activities in Tahrir Square
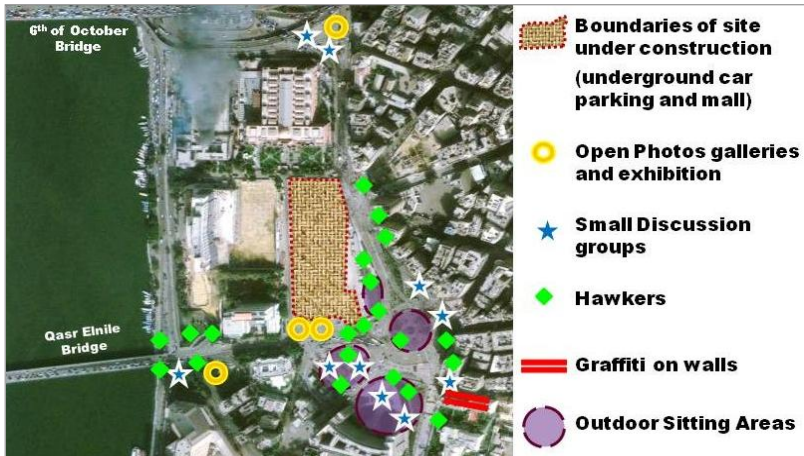
Figure 7 – Distribution of activities in Tahrir Square (the researcher)

Figure 8 – Types of activities in Tahrir Square
(April 2013 by the researcher)

Conclusions

Although Tahrir Square has some negative implications, it has a great potential for capturing the positive activity that enhances the quality of the urban city and to crystallize the meaning of democracy as a place not only to protest, but also to represents the identities and aspirations of the people, such that its transcends the diversity of beliefs.

It is notable that current activities in Tahrir Square were affected by major political events in a form of clear social interaction in the hot spots of the space, especially near Qasr Elnile bridge (the pedestrian entrance).

This paper illustrates the relation of urban space and politics to pinpoint the positive and negative perceptions of experts towards the research domains, which is very important to ensure that any proposed development plans for Tahrir Square will work well with the existing characteristics of community behavior and its needs towards the demands of democracy.

Overall, the research finds that people who are using the square are doing so for social and cultural activities by day, and only for recreation by night. The conducted survey demonstrates that users are from different age groups and genders, indicating that the space efficiently attracts all users and could encourage urban social relations among the community.

Figure 9 shows some recommendations regarding the proposed behavioral activities and uses in Tahrir Square, derived from users' answers and personal observations.
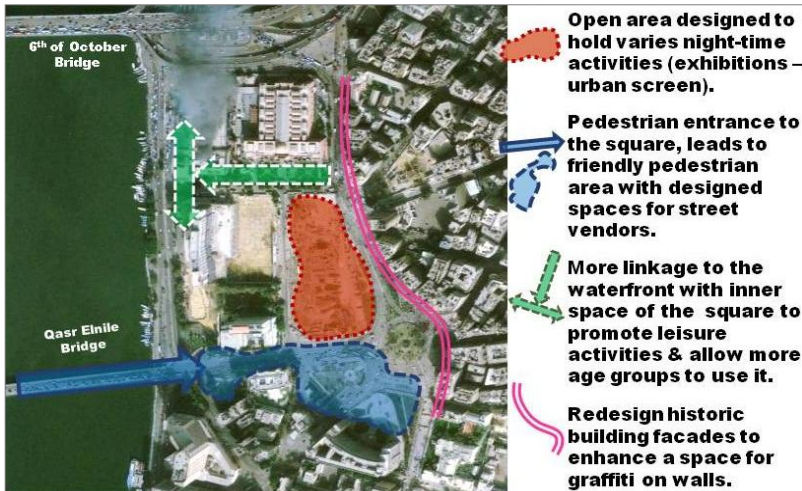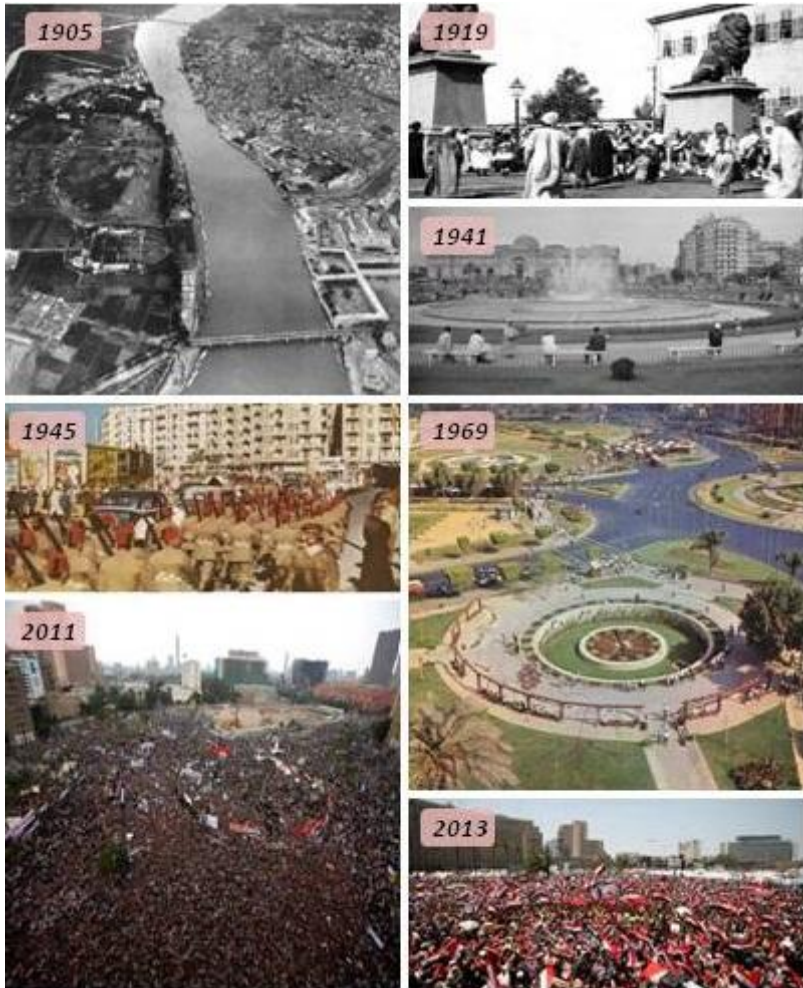

Figure 9 – Proposed activities and uses in Tahrir Square

Appendix

Collage history of Tahrir Square

1905: aerial shot of Tahrir Square.	**1919**: Qasr Elnile bridge
1941: fountain in the main round	**1945**: opening of Egyptian parliament
1969: square landscape areas	**2011, 2013**: demonstrations

Figure 10 –Tahrir Square through history
(1905, 1919, 1941, 1945 and 1969: www.ahram.org.eg/pdf)
(2011and 2013: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news)

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