

Department of Architecture
Faculty of Engineering – Cairo University
5th International Conference 16th – 17th December 2009

New Glasses: Presentation and Representation

Under the Topic:

New Glasses Theory: New Thinking Theory and Mind

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"Them and Us"

**Towards Incorporating the Concept of "the Other"
Between Cairo Subcultures:
An Educational Approach**

ABSTRACT:

Cairo's “informal settlements” have become a controversial issue on most local and global agendas. The responsibilities and challenges emphasize that major changes are to take place in the perception of such communities. Representing a sample of "formal" Cairo society, the paper examines how architecture students perceive "informal settlements", and how the concept of the "other" changes along a particular course. Then, it discusses the potentials resulting from the interaction process between the two subcultures.

The objective is to introduce a new thinking paradigm regarded as crucial educational goal in the realm of community development. The methodology is based on simulating the facilitator-community interaction process to be incorporated in the students' culled experiences; with hands on experience of the informal settlements' of user groups, physical setting and behavioral patterns trio. Observing and discussing changes in students' thinking approaches is expected to enrich the new language of talk in that domain.

Key Words:

*Informal Settlements - Subculture – Community Participation-
Educational Approach*

BACKGROUND:

Informal settlements are considered an urban blight and the festering sore of urbanization. Accordingly, more people will choose or will find themselves living in informal housing, unable to afford any other accommodation and enjoying freedom from rent and civic obligations. The government solutions were sought as one of three physically oriented approaches; upgrading and merging within city formal districts, buffering, or eradication. It seems that social aspects were not at all considered. After three decades of trial and error, the sought approach was involving the communities through participatory development. However, the case of the informal settlements is not yet closed; most inhabitants refuse to leave their settlements, reject proposed rehabilitation projects, and vandalize urban projects proposed^{1,2}.

ONE WORLD-TWO PERSPECTIVES:

*“Sources of power are derived from the capacity of cultural institutions to classify and define peoples and societies. This is the power to represent: to reproduce structures of belief and experience through which cultural differences are understood”.*³

It is argued that imaging the informal settlements as the unwanted “other”, thus dealing with them collectively and treating them as alienated societies that need to be quarantined ***is*** the main cause behind the dialectic of informal settlements⁴. Despite good intentions, the government and the entire “formal” societal institutions of the city contribute in this socio-physical exclusion of the informal settlements. From their side, the informal dwellers' self-perception is vulnerably stimulated, thus developing negative attitudes of mistrust, suspect and rivalry towards the formal “other”. This vicious conflict of perception of “us” and “them” is regarded as ***the*** challenge confronting planners and decision makers working on urban development of informal settlements.

The aim of this paper is to introduce a new thinking paradigm in that domain. The methodology is based on a content analysis of the concept of the “other”. Then, a case study is reviewed where a shift of the concept is challenged throughout a pre-senior course “Socio-Behavioral Studies in Architecture and Urban Design”.

RESPONSIBILITIES AND CHALLENGES:

"The silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world. In this context research becomes a means of moving them beyond silence into a quest to proclaim the world"⁵.

Based on the fact that 47% of Cairo population lives in a number of 81 informal settlements^{6,7,8}, it is clear that the problem of the informal settlements is not confined simply to a housing matter, but should take account of other socio-economic issues and all aspects relating to the living conditions of the local residents and even the surrounding people and neighborhoods⁹.

Lessons learned from World Bank, United Nations Organizations (Habitat, UNICEF, UNDP) and other bilateral donors such SIDA, DFID, GTZ, CIDA, USAID and NGOs emphasize the importance of the communities involvement in developmental projects. However, Cairo society seems to evidence a paradoxical phenomenon in the relationship between subcultures. It is clear that the urban remaking of Cairo is taking place at the expense of visually excluding the mass of the unwanted poor, sharpening class distinctions. The increase in class polarization is witnessed in media and cinema¹⁰. Clues from governmental talks on the issue reveal this fact: “eradication of informal settlements”. How can any community involvement be achieved then? And what happens to the informal settlements inhabitants when they constantly see themselves presented in a very miserable way, and blamed for most of the negative attitude of the Cairene society?! The other way round is no exception, a degrading

look from the formal districts of the city towards their everyday-face to face partners of marginal-yet indispensable jobs; maids drivers, cafe tenders, and 50% of governmental employees¹¹.

THE DIALECTIC OF THE OTHER:

The “*Other*” or constitutive other opposed to the “*Same*”. It refers to a person other than oneself, and is singled out as different. Used in social science to understand the processes by which societies and groups exclude “others” who they want to subordinate or who do not fit into their society. “Othering” involves the demonization and dehumanization of groups, which further justifies attempts to civilize and exploit these 'inferior' others. According to Hegel, seeing separateness between you and another, a feeling of alienation is created, which you try to resolve by synthesis. The resolution is depicted in Hegel's famous parable of the master-slave dialectic¹².

In that respect, marginalization and exclusion are two types of “othering”. The concept of marginalization of informal settlements dwellers is discussed in several literatures. Madanipour discussed different forms of exclusion of certain groups of people in cities; economic, physical, social exclusion,.. etc. He argues that social exclusion is intertwined with lack of access to resources, to decision making, and to common narratives. He distinguishes between economic discrimination, in which members of a group are excluded from access to employment, resulting in more poverty and economic marginalization, cultural exclusion in which the group members are marginalized from the symbols, meanings, rituals, and discourses of dominant culture. He sees exclusion as a continuum from full integration into society at one end of the spectrum to nearly total lack of integration at the other¹³.

THE STUDENTS AND THE INFORMAL “OTHER”:

Typically, representing formal dwellers, informal settlements for our students- as it is for most of us: “*the other*”. If any interaction occurs, the relationship ends with the end of the endeavor.

Introducing the course, and despite the recent media and cinema concentration on the informal settlements, basic knowledge about the issue did not exist. As expected, the students had a stereotypical misunderstanding of the meaning of the term “informal settlements” -literally the word “a’shwaa’eyat”¹⁴. For them, it meant just a “poor district”! Pointing out the term “those people”, it was obvious that many students *do* believe that the main reason of all the problems of the informal settlements is its people themselves, doing nothing to improve their quality of life! Over and above, some students thought that the migrants who came from different rural areas to settle in Cairo in those informal settlements should have not migrated, as they had better lives in their origin home lands!

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IMPLIES COOPERATION BETWEEN SUBCULTURES:

In participation, conduction of the for-search that responds to the social values through the understanding of socio-behavioral contexts¹⁵, leads to a foundation of a humane methodology of the process. From another perspective, participatory development requires three basic endeavors to occur; **knowledge** about local priorities, resources and capacities; **trust building** in the sense that the gap between the parties involved is bridged, together with belief in the validity of the process and the credibility of the “team work” is to be activated, and **shared knowledge** as the essence of participatory evaluation, serves the interests of both the local beneficiaries and development agencies^{16, 17}. We -architects, claim familiarity with participatory design in the works of many of our renowned contemporary architects; Ramsis Wissa Wassef, Abdel Halim Ibrahim, and Hany El-Miniway and others promoting for justice and democracy. However, it is evident that our entire cultural paradigm is individualistic, prone to the single authoritative decision making process on most levels.

Shifting students' perception of “the other” required that our course is designed such that it serves a hidden curriculum behind its

announced intended learning outcomes; leading the students to involve the reactions of various groups in the formation of their plans, enabling them to respond directly to the requirements of the community, entering into an ultimately political process. As a consequence, students are then expected to be aware of the inherent value judgments of any contributions they make to the process. This involvement of the students was sought to work participation levels of: **knowing the community from the students' side, and building trust from the community level and sharing knowledge from both.**

As investigators, the students were intended to establish and sustain a many sided and relatively long term relationship (about 15weeks) with a human association in its natural setting for the purpose of developing a scientific understanding and for the sake of changing their concept of the "other". Students were involved with the community in direct observation, semi-structured interviews, brain storming, and prioritizing sessions. Moreover, they went through assignments of mapping, measurements, diagramming, and gaming and role playing. As groups, forming and reforming and individual tasks according to the work requirements was also demonstrated.

DISCUSSION: THEM AND US:

Course results revealed that some radical changes in students' apprehension of the different perspectives of the issue *did* occur. In the beginning, some barely heard of the garbage area collectors "*Hay el-zabbaleen*" and the fall of "*Douwe'a*" rock. Informal settlements were -for them, associated with terrorism, drug dealing, harassment and other criminal attitudes as seen in the movies that represent the dark side of informal settlements. While movies that discuss cause and effect of social problems had no such effect. Accordingly, their idea of working with that informal "*other*" was frightful.

Working in informal settlements, students were shocked by the physical conditions, proved to be worse than their preconceptions-what they saw in the movies. As for the user-groups, students were astonished to find educated people, governmental employees and university students among. Cooperation and solidarity were the major findings of the dominant behavioral patterns. Students suggested that this was basically due to cultural backgrounds, common agony, and lack of privacy in the physical settings, adding new dimensions to values embedded in the informal settlements' "sub"-culture.

Based on the interviews, students laid hands on the informal settlements viewpoints of the formal "others" through their revealing their lack of trust, asserting that the government ignores them, as if they do not exist. Rivalry was reflected in some cases of the communities' aggressive behavior towards the students and refusal of sharing information with them. However, some inhabitants' sense of pride led to their pretentious attitude of equality with the students, as if there were no differences between them. Factually, most of the students realized that informal settlement inhabitants live alike lives of their own, as one student sarcastically put it: "They eat, addict drugs, people in Maadi and Zamalek, also do so, the only difference is that in informal areas they eat cheap local food, and use cheap kinds of drugs (Bango/Hashish/pills), while in formal areas there is quality expensive food, and expensive drugs (Cocaine, Heroine.)" ¹⁹!

By the end of the course, the students agreed that the informal settlements are marginalized in more than one sense, a cause of the government and the media. However, students suggested that this marginalization and physical/social exclusion is an aspect that has to be overcome by endorsing more dialogue between formal and informal parties, changing their negative images in the media and better representation of their culture in the cinema. Addressing development in more humanistic approaches rather than calls of eradication and demolishing.

**CONCLUSION:
TOWARDS INCORPORATING THE CONCEPT OF
"THE OTHER" BETWEEN CAIRO SUBCULTURES:**

A fresher look at who the informal settlements really are, what do they do for living and how their lives go on implies an instant change of conception of both their social and physical exclusion and marginalization. "Those" communities are the pillars of Cairo's every day life as well as they are part of our national economy. Hence, the dialectic of "*them and us*", informal versus formal is a true myth. It is believed that the persistence of such myth will only put more pressure in the informal areas, which are already provocatively threatening. Accepting the informal "other" is our only anticipated paradigm through.

The fact is that informal settlers *do* communicate with different city districts and inhabitants for work opportunities, and since none of the parties can live independently, therefore *integration is the key*²⁰. Cairo has for long lived integrally, where social and economic gaps existed. What was then the position of the concepts of tolerance, appreciation and respect?

It is expected that informal settlements will increase in size and number explosively. It is our impression that -if this dialectic is not resolved, the case will be turned upside down; dominance of informality on Cairo's urban face. A question here is evoked: *As minority, will "formal" Cairo be socially excluded and physically marginalized in some remaining urban pockets and gated compounds?*

Back to the development talk, knowing the community/building trust and sharing knowledge as **main approach to facilitation and community participation regarded as the only credible approach to the development of the informal settlements**. If this is an accepted debate, then the issue of **integration versus exclusion**

should be put into consideration on the government’s strategic planning levels. It is argued that social integration is prior to physical development. **An educational shift is therefore paramount.** Emphasis on EBS (Environment, Behavior and Society) should then be given more attention; linking physical settings to user groups to behavioral patterns, identifying a particular culture of a particular locale, in relevance to the greater Urban context of Cairo Society, will evidently help resolve the dialectic of the other in the perception of our future architects and decision makers. This in turn will help working on the communities' developmental agendas, within a new talk rooted in trust and respect. Bridging gaps of differences and reinforcing communication channels will thus promote for application of community participation through shared visions and cooperation towards the betterment of our city victorious.

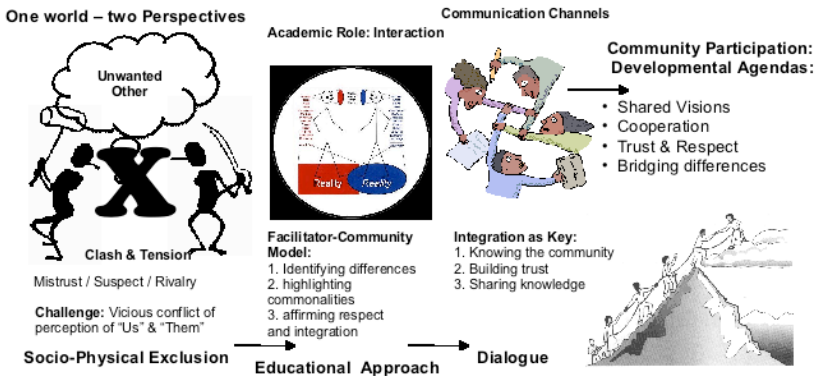


Diagram elaborates the researchers’ view that the concept of “the other” should change, through an educational shift of communication and interaction, as key to integration and hence, participatory development.

¹ According to World Bank Group, 1999-2001. informal settlements/slums/squatter settlements share the same miserable living conditions of lacking:

- Basic physical infrastructures networks such as potable water, wastewater, solid waste system, electricity, roads and emergency access.

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- Lack of basic communities services such as, educational, health and social facilities.
 - Social segregation between slums and better-off neighborhoods increase the tensions in the poorer areas.
 - Unplanned developments of settlements increase the complication in the provision of services.

Quoted in Tag, El-Deen, Zeinab, **Participatory Urban Upgrading: The Case of Ezbet Bekhit, Cairo, Egypt**. Master of Science Thesis in the Subject of Built Environment Analysis, Division of Urban Studies, Department of Infrastructure. Royal Institute of Technology. Stockholm 2003

- ² - *“Informality is the citizen’s holding of land and building on it privately whereby violating the regulations for sound planning such as the building code.”*(El-Diwany, Sherif and Mohamed Kamel)
- *“Informal areas are unplanned spontaneous high density expansions around existing cities or villages.”* (Housing Committee of the Peoples’ Assembly)
- *“Informal Settlements are “traps of poverty and deprivation” or “misery belts”.*(National Council for Social Services and Development)
- Quoted in Ibrahim, Mohamed. **Towards Reliable Spatial Database of Informal Areas in Greater Cairo Region: Identifying Informal Areas in Greater Cairo Region. International Workshop on Spatial Information for Sustainable Management of Urban Areas.** FIG Commission 3 - Workshop 2009. Mainz, Germany
- ³ Ivan Karp. **Introduction: Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture.** in *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*, ed. Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven D. Lavine. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992
- ⁴ Raafat, Aly. **'en'ezal el tabakat awgad el'ashwa'eyyat.** Al Ahram Newspaper, June 23rd, 2009
- ⁵ Tag, El-Deen, Zeinab, **Participatory Urban Upgrading: The Case of Ezbet Bekhit, Cairo, Egypt**. Master of Science Thesis in the Subject of Built Environment Analysis, Division of Urban Studies, Department of Infrastructure. Royal Institute of Technology. Stockholm 2003
- ⁶ Information and Decision Support Center. **Informal Settlements in the Arab Republic of Egypt: Analytical Research for the Current Situation and Different Ways of Dealing 2008**
- ⁷ *”Some 50% of Greater Cairo’s 17 million inhabitants live in informal areas at*

densities of up to 60,000 people per km². The catch-all label of informal areas has recently been subdivided by government into ‘Unsafe Areas’ in which people’s lives and health are at risk and ‘Informal Areas’ which are in some way illegal but do not present an immediate threat to life and limb. A recent limited survey indicates that some 5-10% of informal areas fall into the first of these categories” .P Wakely, B Mumtaz, S Meikle. **Formalising informal areas in Greater Cairo: management training for senior Governorate officials**. GTZ. Participatory Development Programme in Urban Areas (PDP) in Egypt. 2009

8 Information and Decision Support Center. **Informal Settlements in the Arab Republic of Egypt: Analytical Research for the Current Situation and Different Ways of Dealing** 2008

9 Makary, Kamel & El-Diwanly, 2000. Working Paper: **Participatory Urban Management Program, Land Management, Definitions and Perceptions of Informality**. *Ministry of Planning & GTZ, Cairo*.

1 0 Many intellectuals are involved in the debate on the “ cultural gap” between Cairo’s formal and informal cultures, i. g., Mohamed Abul Ghar, “**Hadeeth al-Sa’eekeen and Sokkaan al-Kossour**”. Al-Masry El-Youm newspaper. Wednesday 3rd June 2009. In addition to numerous articles by Galal Amin, Tarek Heggy, and others

1 1 Abaza, Mona. **The Changing Consumer Cultures of Modern Egypt: Cairo's Urban Reshaping**. AUC press 2006

1 2 Hegel, Fichte, Sartre, Husserl, De Beauvoir, Jacques Lacan, Emmanuel Levinas, and Derrida

1 3 Madanipour, Ali. **Urban Sociology Reader: Social Exclusion and Space**. 1998. Publisher:

1 4 Abaza, Mona. **The Changing Consumer Cultures of Modern Egypt: Cairo's Urban Reshaping**. AUC press 2006

1 5 UN-Habitat. Best Practices & Local Leadership Programme: **Community Participation & Urban Governance**.

<http://www.unesco.org/most/bpcomm.htm>

1 6 Edward T. Jackson and Yusuf Kassam. **Participatory Evaluation in Development Cooperation: Knowledge Shared**, Kumarian Press, 1998

1 9 Amr El-Sergany. Pre-senior Student, Department of Architecture, Faculty of Engineering, Misr International University. Spring 2009

2 0 A new paradigm redefining the concept of the “other” is currently being demonstrated in the global talk: President Obama’s speech to the Muslim world (Thursday, June 4th, 2009), identified differences, highlighted commonalities, and stressed respect and integration between two cultures as pivots of a better world.