

TAHRIR SQUARE A Narrative of a Public Space

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Abstract

This paper investigates the patterns of public discourse that occurred in Tahrir Square during the 18 days of the Egyptian Revolution. For protestors Tahrir Square became an urban utopia, a place of community engagement, collective projects, social discourse, and most importantly, freedom of speech and expression. This paper traces these forms of spatial adaptation, and the patterns of social organization and discourse that emerged in the square during that period. The paper builds on Henri Lefebvre's interpretation of space and his three dimensional conceptualization: the perceived, the conceived, and the lived.

Keywords: Tahrir Square; public space; Henri Lefebvre; public discourse; space adaptation.

INTRODUCTION

For decades, the notion of public space has been conceived by average Egyptians as the space that is owned by the government. The term *melk el hokooma* (property of government) was commonly used to refer to the public realm. Egyptians were made to believe that "public" equates "governmental," a conception that shaped their mental image of public space for decades. People were deprived of any social or political practices within the public realm. Under the Egyptian Emergency Laws, the agglomeration of more than five people in a public space could be considered a protest that threatens public safety and can lead to prosecution. On its part, the government tended to minimize people's presence in public spaces and in particular, plazas, by either fencing them or changing their land use. Open spaces were purposefully designed to minimize social gatherings and were continuously monitored by secret police. This managed to hinder all forms of socio-political discourse in public spaces.

Egyptians tended to adapt whatever is available of the public realm in order to use as public spaces. Bridges, street medians and narrow sidewalks became the places of social discourse. These spaces were usually transformed at night to host people searching for a an outdoor public space. Chairs, food and beverage charts, and children playing areas were arranged daily at night and removed before morning. All this was happening informally but under the watch of the government. People were not allowed to engage in any form of political discourse in these places. They were continuously monitored by secret police.

During the last six decades, very few public spaces were introduced to the urban fabric of a city like Cairo. It could be argued that the majority of places that have the capacity of hosting social or political discourse in the city were developed prior to the 1952 revolution. These spaces usually exist either in the medieval district, which includes mosques' *sahas* (plazas) and *souqs* (markets), or the colonial district with its wide boulevards, squares and parks. These places used to host various forms of public discourse until the middle of the twentieth century.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF PUBLIC SPACE

The conception, meaning, and use of public space in Cairo have been transformed over history. During the medieval era, the mosque was a major male dominated place of public discourse. This could be attributed to several factors, Firstly, unlike modern times; the mosque played a major role

in political life. There were strong ties between the state and the religious institution. Keeping a good relation with religious figures and earning their blessings was critical for Caliphs to secure their reign. The mosque on its part was the source of sharia'a education with its social, political and economic teachings. Major mosques included schools, hospitals and dorms that allowed the religious institution to shape public conceptions through teachings and *fatwas*.¹ Secondly, the Islamic tradition of *Gama'a* (congregation) Prayer that takes place five times a day assured a continuous daily public flow to mosques. Major mosques were strategically located at the center of the city adjacent to the market and the Caliph palace. People used to close their businesses and go to the mosque after each *Athan* (call for prayer). This was complemented by the Friday Prayer, which is the main weekly congregation for Muslims and is usually attended by the majority of males. This made the mosque one of the most visited places in the city. Thirdly, because of this continuous public flow, the mosque became a major information and mass communication hub. News was shared and announcements were made after prayers. Its minarets were even used in several occasions to warn people of invasions or make important announcements such as the death of the Caliph or the return of the army.

All these factors allowed the mosque to become the main hub of public discourse in the city and the arena where communication between the public and their government took place. It could be argued democratic practices with its western definition didn't exist in the Islamic World during the medieval era. However, the tradition of *Shura* or public engagement in the process of decision-making was common since Prophet Mohamed times. Many of the meetings with his followers were held in the mosque. Strategic planning for wars and invasions were made in the mosque. After the Prophet's death, Caliph Abu Bakr, delivered his inauguration speech in the Mosque of the Prophet. In his speech Abu Bakr emphasized the role of people in guiding their rulers saying:

"O you people! I have been given authority over you but I am not the best of you. If I do well, help me, and if I do wrong, then put me right... Obey me as long as I obey Allah and His Messenger (saw), and if I disobey them you owe me no obedience. May Allah forgive me and forgive you."

Same concept was emphasized by Omar Ibn Al Khatab, the second Muslim Caliph in his appointment speech at the same mosque. He asked the public to correct him if he deviated from the right path and a Muslim responded by saying "we will correct you with our swords." Although this concept of engaging the public in the process of decision-making was rarely applied during the medieval era, the mosque remained the medium of communication between rulers and the public. It was an absolute space, using Lefebvre term, a sacred place that played a major role in shaping the socio-political life of Muslims. It was the place where social conflicts were negotiated and political opinions were shaped. In the case of Cairo, Al Azhar Mosque played this role for centuries. However, it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that Cairo witnessed an organized revolt originating from Al Azhar. In 1795, almost six years after the French revolution, a major political uprising led by religious scholars protested high taxes and social injustice. This was followed by another organized revolt against the French colonizers in 1798.

During the 19th century, the role of mosques featured gradual decline. This could be attributed to shift towards modernization that was led by Mohamed Ali who ruled Egypt from 1805 to 1848. The gradual formation of a modern state and of the emergence of institutions such as the parliament, political parties and newspapers have shifted political discourse away from the mosque. These institutions have triggered new conceptions of political discourse and redefined the role of public sphere to become the medium of communication between the state, parliament and the people. The introduction of the Haussmanian planning model with its wide boulevards, squares and parks to Cairo during the era of Khedivie Ismail have injected new forms of public spaces that didn't exist in the indigenous city. These new urban spaces were relatively semi-public and were limited to foreigners and local elites. As noted by Nasser Rabbat, "these districts, adjacent as they

¹ A fatwa is a ruling on a point of Islamic law given by a recognized religious authority.

were to the old cities, were nonetheless entirely separated from them by spatial, legal, and behavioral barriers, although some seepage occurred both ways” (Rabbat, 2012). Parks such as Al Azbakiya, Al Orman and the Zoological Garden mainly catered for medium and upper classes while lower classes remained in the old districts exercising traditional forms of social discourse. This has created some sort of social segregation, a dichotomy that was less significant during the pre-modern era. It also limited political discourse to medium and upper classes.

The role of new public spaces and more specifically public squares in shaping political life in Egypt began to flourish by the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1919, the place that is known today as Tahrir Square (*Midan Al Tahrir*) hosted one of the most important revolutions in Egyptian history. It was led by Saad Zaghlul against British Occupation. Since then, the square, which was called Ismailiya Square, referring to khedive Ismail, unofficially earned the name *Tahrir* that means, “liberation.” This *Midan* (square) was originally a greenfield that was supposed to be designed to emulate Charles de Gaulle Square in Paris. This vision was never implemented and the square was gradually shaped over time especially after the construction of the Egyptian Museum in 1902 (see AlSayyad, 2011). It was later surrounded by a series of palaces as part of the new Al Ismailiya district. Since the 1919 revolution, Tahrir Square became the main arena of public protesting in Egypt. However, It could be argued that this place didn’t host significant forms of social discourse compared to other public spaces in the city such as Al Azbakiya and Al Orman Gardens.

The modernization of Cairo featured a gradual process of secularization of government. The state contribution to urban development gradually diminished in favor of both local and foreign enterprises. Western influences were obvious in Cairenes’ way of life during that time. The city was opened to western culture more than ever. The modernization of the city was a movement of the elite who benefited economically and politically from these changes. As noted by Tignor (1984), in the period before World War I, three groups dominated development in Egypt. These were the British political and military establishment; metropolitan capital; and landed oligarchy (Tignor, 1984, p.8). The source of metropolitan capital was European individuals and enterprises. New residential projects such as Al-Maadi, Garden City and Heliopolis began to emerge by the beginning of the 20th century. These residential districts were developed by private domestic and foreign enterprises. Garden City district was developed by Frantz Sofio, Charles Bacos and George Maksud, the owners of the Nile Land & Agricultural Company. Heliopolis district was developed by Belgian industrialist Baron Empain. He started this project in 1905. These developments created new forms of class spatial segregation that didn’t exist in Old Cairo. During the period between World War I and World War II, local industrial and commercial bourgeoisie started to play an important role in the Egyptian economy. This bourgeoisie class was composed of both foreigners and Egyptian business elite (Tignor, 1984, p. 5).

After the 1952 revolution against King Farouk, Egypt experienced a dramatic shift towards socialism. This redefined the meaning of public space in Egypt. After being developed and operated by local and foreign enterprises for decades during the early 20th century, most of public parks were acquired by the Egyptian government under the Nationalization Program. This process simply redefined the boundaries between the public and private realms. It reconfigured the conception of public space. The experience of Cairo was in fact a reversed process of the widely discussed concept of “privatization of Public Space” (see Sennett, 1977; Banerjee, 2001). Many of the public spaces that were limited to social elites were either fully or partially transferred to the government. For the majority of Egyptians, this act was a victory against the Feudal System that controlled the country for decades. Among the acquired properties were lands, real estate projects, major retail chains, theaters, and gardens. And in order to gain public support, the government made many of these properties accessible to the public regardless of their social or economic class. This introduced the concept of *melk el hokoma* (property of government) that occupied Egyptians’ conception of public space for the following six decades.

In 1960, Tahrir Square earned its name officially and became the icon of freedom and liberation in Egypt. However, the tendency of the ruling regime during that time was to hinder all

forms of political opposition have limited the role of public space in political life. Although these places were made accessible to all Egyptians, they were continuously monitored by secret police. This hindered all forms of political public discourse in public spaces. It was not until President Nasser announced his resignation after the defeat in the 1967 war that people returned back to public space protesting his decision. Massive crowds spent the night in the streets and squares of Egypt demanding Nasser to stay in office. It was the first time since the 1952 revolution that people used public space for political discourse.

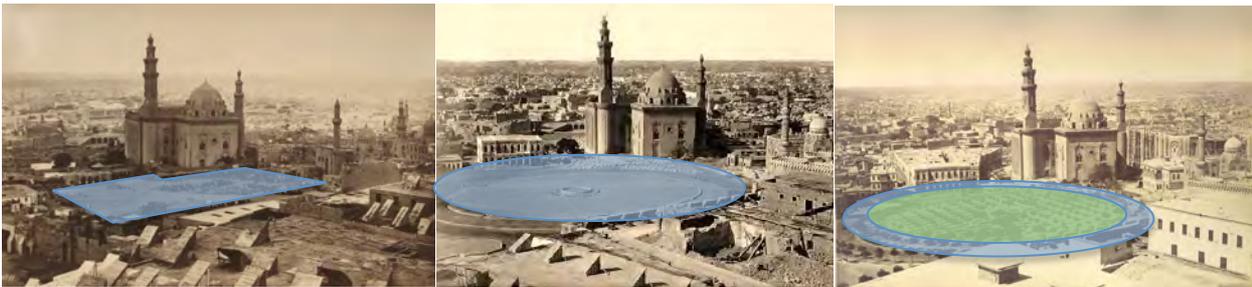


Figure 1: The transformation of the Saha of Sultan Hassan Mosque to a modern square during the late 19th century modernization project (Source: By author on archival photos).

When president Sadat came to power in 1970, he began to gradually abort the rigid socialist ideals that ruled the country for nearly two decades. He embraced the open door policy (*infitah*) and shifted the economy towards capitalism. These economic changes in the market dynamics benefited many local small investors and entrepreneurs who took advantage of the new business opportunities in general, and the starvation of market for imported goods in particular. A new class of nouveaux riche began to emerge mainly in Cairo. This class began to reshape the urban development trends in the city. New trends of social segregation and inequality started to emerge triggering societal conflicts and tensions. This was translated into two forms of public resistance to many social and economic policies. For socialists, public space was the place to protest against capitalism. In 1977, they led a massive riot that is referred to as the “Bread Riots,” against subsidization cuts. Protests sparked in Tahrir Square and then moved to many parts of the city. This reintroduced the role of the square in shaping political life in Egypt. For Islamists, it was the mosque that hosted their secret meetings and political discourse. By the end of the 1970s and after Sadat signed the peace treaty with Israel, Islamists intensified their opposition to the regime. Mosques, and more specifically those in poor neighborhoods and squatters, became the hubs of political Islamic discourse. These were the places where the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamic movements recruited their members. These forms of resistance to secular government reached its peak during the early 1990s when some areas of Cairo such as Imbaba was nearly governed by Sheikhs and was called “The Islamic Republic of Imbaba.”

When Mubarak came to power in 1981 after the assassination of Sadat, his regime tightens its grip on these places and prohibited any forms of public gatherings in mosques except during the times of prayer. It also managed to hinder most of the political opposition activities using emergency laws that were activated after the assassination of Sadat. Mubarak followed the same economic policies of Sadat and started the Privatization Program through which many of the public enterprises were sold to local and foreign investors. This has triggered a new wave of anger and opposition that never materialized into a public discourse until the late 1990s. During that time, the introduction of internet, cell phones and satellite television opened venues for Egyptians to start constructing a new form of public sphere that has the capacity of hosting political discourse away from police watch. The digital world became the main public sphere for Egyptians. Internet penetration has jumped from 0.7% in 2000 to reach 32.6% in 2011. These new technologies contributed to the emergence of what Howard Rheingold (2006) calls “the smart mobs” or groups of people who manage to use communications technology to activate and organize social actions

and events in the real world (Rheingold, 2002). These groups tend to initiate events, call for protests and political activities on the cyber world and then take it to the physical public space. In this sense, public places become hubs for flows of information and ideas generated locally and globally. Political blogs, tweets, emails and Facebook posts created linkages between digital and physical realms. It gradually pushed political discourse back to physical public spaces. These communication tools facilitated the formation of several movements that played a significant role in reshaping the socio-political environment in Egypt. As noted by Herrera (2011):

“Social movements belong to people and not to communication tools and technologies. Facebook, like cell phones, the Internet, and twitter, do not have agency, a moral universe, and are not predisposed to any particular ideological or political orientation. They are what people make of them” (Herrera, 2011).

Many opposition movements in Egypt managed to make use of these new technologies. Opposition movements, being conservatives such as the Muslim Brotherhood, or liberals such as Kefaya used these cyber spaces to spread their ideals and beliefs. Bloggers and political activists focused on recruiting members online and were continuously calling for protests. Blogs, Facebook, YouTube, and many other Internet forums become the new political arenas where people expressed their political opinions and criticized the performance of the government.

It took a few years for this digital public discourse to materialize into physical action. In April 6th, 2008 an activist posted a call for a nationwide one-day civil disobedience. The call was widely spread via emails and SMSs. It was surprisingly successful especially in the industrial city of Mahala where thousands of workers protested against the regime and its privatization policies. Protesters torn down one of Mubarak’s posters and called for change of regime. It was a historic act that paved the way for more protests later on. That day marked the beginning of new era of political discourse in public space. Protests became common in major cities in Egypt. However, participation was always limited to political activists, and in few cases, workers and governmental employees. The majority of Egyptians refrained from these activities fearing prosecution. Places such as the stairs in front of Syndicate of Journalists building, the sidewalks around the Parliament and Prime Minister Office became places of political discourse.

When the revolution in Tunisia succeeded in overthrowing President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali after 24 years in power, Egyptians realized that making political change is possible. A call for a nationwide protest on January 25th, 2011 was posted on Khalid Said’s² Facebook page. In few days, the call was spread across the country and political activists began to campaign for it online. Protests were strategically planned with urban public spaces in mind. Based on previous experiences, activists were aware that security forces tend to attack protests in its early stages before gaining crowds. Accordingly, the plan was to start marching in multiple urban squatters and to keep walking in its irregular narrow streets until a large mass of people is formed. This actually managed to confuse secret police and security forces were suddenly confronted with huge masses emerging from multiple zones across the city. Protests’ leaders didn’t have a plan where to go next. They actually didn’t expect that the protests will survive for long. They started marching to main streets. After couple of hours, protests across Cairo were massive and interestingly, they were all moving towards Tahrir Square. The square was like a magnet that attracted all protests across the city.

The occupation of Tahrir Square and many other public spaces across the country was a statement of rejection of state domination. It was reclamation of people’s right to the public realm. Tahrir Square became the “discursive space,” using Habermas definition of public space, “in which individuals and groups congregate to discuss matters of mutual interest and, where possible, to reach a common judgment” (Hauser, 1998). The square was gradually transformed into a city within the city. In three days, camping areas, media rooms, medical facilities, gateways, stages,

² Khaled Said is a young Egyptian who was assumingly beaten to death by the police in 2010. Since then, the court has not yet reached a final decision regarding the circumstances of his death.

restrooms, food and beverages carts, newspaper booths, and art exhibits were established in the square. It was a process of space adaptation and divergence, using Henri Lefebvre's term, which featured astonishing forms of social organization and administration (see Lefebvre, 1991). For protestors Tahrir Square became an urban utopia, a place of community engagement, collective projects, and social discourse and most importantly, freedom of speech and expression.

TAHRIR SQUARE: THE PERCEIVED, THE CONCEIVED AND THE LIVED SPACE

During the 18 days of the revolution, Tahrir Square presented an interesting case of the power of public space. The square hosted multiple strata of public organization, interaction, and discourse. It was a hub of enormous flows of ideas and ethos generated locally and globally. In this section, I analyze the nature of Tahrir Square during this period using Henri Lefebvre's interpretation of space and his three dimensional conceptualization: the perceived, the conceived, and the lived (Lefebvre, 1991). According to Lefebvre, space is a process of continuous production not an end product. Space is what people perceive (reality), what they conceive (imagination), and how they perform accordingly (lived space).

Tahrir Square: The Perceived Space

The concept of perceived space emphasizes spatial practice which embraces the production and reproduction of space. It accentuates "the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation" (Lefebvre, 1991, p.33). It is the appropriated social space created by spatial practice. It involves actions, signs and symbols. Perceived space is structured on the recognition of form, function and links. It is the reading of what is conceived by designers, planners and even social activists.

In the context of Tahrir Square, it is important to begin with a brief analysis of the physical features of the space. The area that has been referred to as Tahrir Square since January revolution has an irregular shape that extends from Mogamaa Al Tahrir to south to Abd El Moneim Riad Square to the north. The square is located at the far western part of the colonial district, very close to the Nile. It is surrounded by several important building such as the Egyptian Museum, Al Mogamaa (the largest governmental headquarter in Egypt), The Arab League Headquarter, and the old American University Campus. Although the square is accessible from nearly 16 streets, it still provides a sense of enclosure due to the continuous tall buildings that shape its boundaries. The Mogamaa building with its iconic curved design at the southern edge of the square creates a dramatic backstage that directs sight towards its front plaza.

Tahrir Square attracted protests from different parts of the city for several reasons. Firstly, the square is located at the geographic center of Greater Cairo. The metropolitan area has been growing from this center in all directions. Many of the major streets in Cairo such as Tahrir Street and Al Kasr Al Aini Street actually radiate from Tahrir Square. This made that place a very convenient meeting point for all protests. Secondly, the perception of "center" in the case of Cairo is very vivid. For most of Cairenes the city has one center, which is the colonial downtown area. Although the city experienced the emergence of multiple centers during the last few decades, Tahrir area or *wist al balad* (center of the city) as referred to by all Cairenes, remained the prime and most recognized center. The perception of "center" and "periphery" in the case of Cairo is not as blurry as the case of other metropolitan areas. Thirdly, the area of Tahrir Square is accessible from 16 streets many of them extend for miles into the urban fabric of the city. This makes the square one of the most accessible areas of the city. Fourthly, Tahrir Square is surrounded by several governmental buildings including Al Mogamaa which is considered the symbol of governmental bureaucracy in Egypt and the National Democratic Party Headquarters. This makes the occupation of the square a statement of rejection to state domination; reclamation of people right to what is public. Finally, Tahrir Square offered protestors a dramatic stage for media exposure due to its form, name and location. Occupying the largest public square in the country sent a clear message to the world that the revolution is serious. The vast space that extends from the square to Abd El Moneim Riad Square and Qasr El Nil Bridge allowed hundreds of thousands

of people to congregate together in one place creating a dramatic and clearly visible scene in front of media cameras. In the dense urban fabric of Cairo, this scene is nearly impossible in any other place than Tahrir Square. The city lacks public spaces with this scale and visual exposure. It is worth noting that protests in other Egyptian cities occupied spaces with similar features such as Al Ka'id Ibrahim Square in Alexandria and Al Arbaeen Square in Suez.

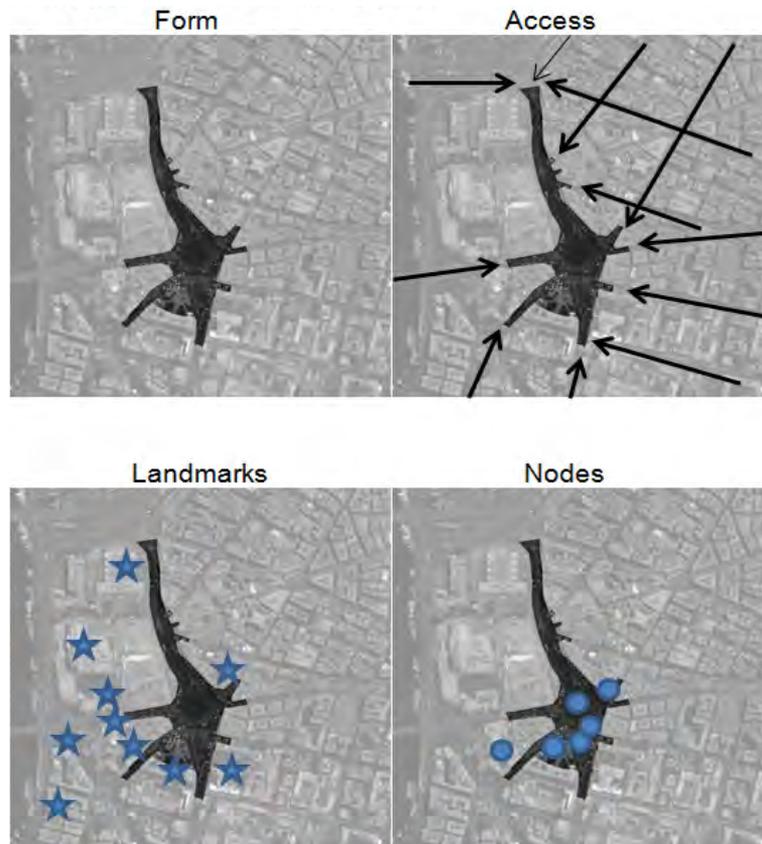


Figure 2: A physical analysis of Tahrir Square (Source: Author).

The patterns of agglomeration within the square featured an interesting dialogue between socio-political practices and space. For example, most of the intellectual and artistic activities took place on the eastern side of the Square with colonial buildings as a background. Newspaper stands, art exhibits and a memorial for martyrs was located on that side. Prayers were held at the center, the most secured area of the square. Services, trash bins and toilets were located on the western side adjacent to a construction site. Clinics were located on the edges of the space to facilitate the transfer of injured protestors to neighboring hospitals. Landmarks such as A Mugamaa, Kentucky Fried Chicken store, the museum and Talat Harb Street entrance became the reference points for people to navigate in the square. This spatial configuration evolved through collective actions that were not planned. It occurred instinctively within the realm of the perceived.

Tahrir Square: The Conceived Space

Before the revolution, Tahrir Square was an abstract space, a generic and socially fragmented realm. It was rationally configured to function as a vehicular circulation open space. During the last century, the square went through many phases of transformation that ignored the social aspect. This huge square never had a café or restaurant on its plaza or surrounding sidewalks. It lacked outdoor seats and its green areas were designed to hinder public use of space. It was simply designed to perform as an open circulation space rather than a place of public discourse. The

square was also commoditized by market capitalism. Being at the center of the city in front of the Egyptian Museum and adjacent to many hotels and shopping areas, Tahrir Square became a tourism hub continuously monitored by secret police and security cameras. Egyptians were not allowed to take pictures of this space for security reasons. Any gathering of more than five people was immediately questioned by the police. For the majority of Egyptians, Tahrir Square was not a place of leisure. Its plazas and sidewalks were rarely used for any activities other than circulation. During the 18 days of the Egyptian revolution the Square was transformed into an urban utopia, an ideal city within the metropolis. For the first time in its history, the square was reconfigured to reflect the needs of Egyptians. A sense of belonging generated by collective participation in the reproduction of the space was clear during that period. The term “our square” prevailed over the old conception of *melk el hokoma*. Reclaiming the square triggered a new spirit of public engagement in the process of place production.

In few days the square was transformed into a public space with all its vital components. This process of reproduction and the patterns of change reflect the imagined public space in the minds of Egyptians. The way the square was reconfigured reveals an interesting collage of local and global influences shaping people’s mental image of public space. Tahrir Square hosted interaction between global flows of information, ideals and knowledge on the one hand, and local traditions and ethos on the other. On the local scale, the mosque was reintroduced as a space for socio-political discourse. Omar Makram Mosque that has been for decades a merely ceremonial mosque became a crucial component of the square during the revolution. It reclaimed its role as a medium of exchange of ideas, a place of socio-political discourse. Its imam, Sheikh Mazhar Shahin became one of the revolution icons. Together with other religious figures, he played a significant role in mobilizing crowds and keeping them in the square. Same role was played by Kasr Al Doubara Church that hosted a clinic and offered support to injured protestors. It was critical for the majority of people in the square to feel that religion is represented in their public discourse. On the other hand, global influences were reflected in multiple aspects of the reproduced space. Flows of information between the square and the global domain were unprecedented. Tahrir Square was connected to the global domain via social networks and world media. Smart phones, tablets and laptops created hubs of communication between this micro urban setting and the whole world. Information was flooding into and from the place. Photographs, emails, tweets, YouTube videos and Facebook posts managed to connect the square with the outside world. Flows of information and ideas were mutually exchanged between the inside and the outside.



Figure 3: Banners, caricatures, and wall newspapers became a communication tool that allowed freedom of expression and communication in the square. For few days, these tools replaced digital social media that was blocked by the government (Photo by Mohamed El Wakeel).



Figure 4: After the end of violent confrontations that took place in the first week of the revolution, Tahrir square became a ceremonial place that was regularly visited by families to take pictures and be part of the historic event (Photo by Mohamed El Wakeel).

The square hosted multiple layers of what Appadurai refers to as scapes of global exchange of technology, ideas, and media. These scapes were gradually appropriated by socio-cultural traditions producing unique forms and urban expressions that portrayed the interaction between the local and the global. This could be traced in the forms of art expressions that emerged in the square during that period. Graffiti was introduced for the first time to the public realm in Cairo. This western form of expression was adapted to reflect the perceptions of people in the square. Bands playing localized western music were entertaining the crowd especially at night. Signs and banners written in English communicating with the international society spread across the square. Many Egyptian jokes and proverbs were translated into English. These patterns of interaction between the local and the global produced a rich contaminated culture, using Anthony Appiah's term, that featured a complicated merge of diverse and complicated ideals and ethos (see Appiah, 2006). It conceived a re-appropriated collective realm that reflects the people's imaginaries of public space.



Figure 5: Expressive banners reflecting local culture and interests spread across the square. It was a creative process of expression and representation (Source: Photo by Mohamed El Wakeel).



Figure 6: Gathering nodes of discussions and entertainment emerged in the square where people exchanged ideas and expressed their opinions (Source: Photo by Mohamed El Wakeel).

Tahrir Square: The Lived Space

The experience in Tahrir Square during the days of the revolution featured dramatic actions, passion and lived situations. The square was transformed from a profane space to a sacred and differential one (see Soja, 1996). For the first time in decades, a political discourse was triggered between diverse religious, political and social groups. Islamists and liberals, Muslims and Christians and men and women participated in a qualitative form of interaction. The rich and poor, political left and political right, and liberals and conservatives were all united. Muslims and Christians held joint prayers. Women with different backgrounds and dress code were engaged in political discourse. Niqabs, hijabs, jeans and T-shirts created together an interesting collage that reflected the social diversity in the square.

Tahrir Square witnessed the generation of new forms of public organization and administration that were not common in Egypt. Committees were formed and discussion assemblages between diverse political, religious and social groups emerged in the square. These nodes of socio-political discourse were triggered spontaneously in response to rapidly changing dynamics of the square. However, they gradually constructed the organizational structure of the place. Community groups responsible for securing, maintaining and administering the square evolved from these nodes. Checkpoints were established at the entrances.

Groups were formed to communicate with global media while others were responsible for communicating global media to locals. Newspapers were pinned up daily on the walls and screens

were playing the news all the time. Volunteers were bringing food, tents and blankets for protestors in the square. In three days, camping areas, media rooms, medical facilities, gateways, stages, restrooms, food and beverages carts, newspaper booths, and art exhibits were established in the square. It was critical to define the boundaries of the place for security and the demarcation of this reclaimed territory.

Gates were formed at all the access points using available materials such as wooden bars and corrugated sheets. Restrooms were built and connected to the sewage system. Clinics were distributed around the square and stages were erected to communicate with protestors. It was a process of space adaptation and divergence that featured an astonishing forms of social organization and administration. For protestors Tahrir Square became a place of community engagement, collective projects, social discourse and most importantly freedom of speech. The square became an ideal city within the city where people exercised their rights, freely expressed their opinions, and together participated in shaping the urban context. It was a place of collective expression.

For protestors, Tahrir Square became the symbol of democracy, freedom and liberation. This was reflected in social practices in the space. Groups were equally represented in the process of decision-making and the square never had a single leader. It featured unity of representation and collective practices. This experience presents a model of the possibility of rapid social reconfiguration, which I argue is crucial for the future of Egypt. What Egyptians have experienced and lived in Tahrir Square during the revolution superseded their imagined urban utopia. It was a moment of practical and emotional experience of space.



Figure 7: Since the resignation of Mubarak, Tahrir Square became the main arena for protesting in Cairo. For the last two years, the square was never empty of protestors (Source: Author).



Figure 8: The walls of the square carry strata of visual representations that document the dynamics of political discourse in Egypt during the last two years (Source: Author).

CONCLUSION

The Egyptian revolution has reintroduced the notion of public space to the forefront of discussions on contemporary urbanism. In days, Tahrir Square was dramatically transformed from an abstract profane space to a sacred differential place. The square hosted forms of social organization and public discourse that rarely existed in Egypt before the revolution. It was a creative and generative space that managed to produce a new culture of social responsibility and engagement among Egyptians. The square was also a place of flows, a hub of communication between the local and the global that yielded sophisticated and unique expressions and practices. These reflections extend beyond the 18 days of the revolution. The walls and ground of the square hold strata of memories and experiences that were overwritten multiple times. It simply documents the process

of socio-political transformation that has been occurring in Egypt since the beginning of the revolution.

Lefebvre's perceived, conceived and lived space conceptualization offers an analytical approach to analyzing the nature of Tahrir Square during the revolution. It facilitates the unfolding and understanding of the sophisticated strata of interaction between people and space. Lefebvre's triad provides a balanced emphasis on the multiple dimensions of the Tahrir narrative. It highlights the importance of understanding the lived experience as a product of a process of space adaptation and divergence. There is much to be learned from the spatial experience in Tahrir. It was a model of place making that featured surprising forms of social coherence, public organization and administration. It was a momentary urban utopia, a construct of collective imaginaries that were generated in the square and then dispersed back into the city.

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