

“The Beirut Conference on Public Spheres,”

International conference to be held on October 22-24, 2004 in Beirut, Lebanon
The Social Science Research Council (New York) — SSRC Program on the Middle East and North Africa
The American University of Beirut — Center for Behavioral Research at AUB.

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- ❖ Short Abstract (350 words and less):

The uses of urban public spaces in Cairo have undergone a profound transformation over the last four decades. Beginning with the reign of Muhammad Ali and continuing under khedive Ismail, a Haussmannian model of urbanization and gentrification prevailed. Until the 1960s and 1970s, these modernized urban spaces (found primarily in the new downtown area) can be defined as the location of a *bourgeois* public. In *Wast el-Balad* (downtown) Haussmannian architecture was a key site for the articulation of new “modern” spatial practices, identities, and sociabilities. This new downtown was to provide a kind of display window of Egyptian modernity. Since the 1970s the meanings, uses, and publics associated with modernist urban space have undergone a radical inversion. Talaat Harb Street, for instance, has become a popular *paseo* and public gardens like the Giza Zoo are a favorite place to have a *baladi* picnic on the grass. Such spaces, once the showcase of Egyptian modernism and civility are no longer places frequented by elites or associated with elite culture. The old bourgeoisie today is *déclassé*, replaced by the upper class created by *infitah* (Sadat’s liberalization), which is now more or less confined to clubs (*nâdî*) and gated communities in the surrounding suburbs. As a result, urban public spaces are increasingly being claimed by new sorts of publics engaging in new sorts of spatial practices. With such a radical transformation of the public space, is there a concordance of the *dispositifs* of the space and the *dispositions* of its Cairene public? How do various publics use the space today? What kind of city-show is built? What kind of control is exerted over public spaces and by whom?

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Saturday, October 23rd 9:00 – 11:00 am

Panel 7 – *Cities, Semiotics and Spaces of Sociability*

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Dedication

“Cairo means the most to me for two reasons. One its spectacular setting and the majesty of some of its architecture and the bustle of energy of its local street life. And the other is its people. [...] I like the play of language and the sound of the words against the traffic and the theatre of it. Cairo seems to me a bustling theatre of words and sounds that is for me like no other city”

(Edward Said, 2003)

Change in the Uses of Urban Public Spaces by Cairo People (With a special focus on public gardens)



At first, it is a distant murmur melted in the confused hum of the traffic. The acoustic level does not increase for such a small thing; the random-like symphony of horns is going on. However, it is this sort of signal with no misunderstanding about it. All heads in this upper part of Talaat Harb Street turn to the source of this murmur. A fellow runs quickly from a sidewalk to the other one, crosses the street through the perpetual traffic jam, forces

his way through the crowd, but not enough quickly. There were four or five other guys running after him. Now, as by magic, they are twenty, swiftly fifty men overtaking him. As soon as the fellow is caught, a masculine crowd surrounds him, slates him, and starts to mistreat him. The more external persons of the circle push themselves as a centripetal force. They do not even know what is happening in the inner part of the circle, and do not know why the runaway deserves that: they push, actually for these reasons. They want to know, and before knowing what — should the occasion arise — they can help other people the answer: “*ḥarâmi!*” (a thief!) At this stage, the entire street is aware of the “incident”, and more and more people arrive to intervene, to form, and to express their opinion. At this point, teenagers whistle at their peers: they gather, even run to literally jump on the circle. The point for them is just adding ambiance, and having fun of this opportunity. In the inner circle, the alleged “*ḥarâmi*” still makes useless attempts to extricate him from the situation. Some people seem more concerned by the dispute and do not want to drop the shirt of the so-called thief. Others try to calm down the whole situation: a part of them tries to separate the belligerents taking the thief aside, the other part tries to cheer the likely victim, by kissing him, seizing him round the waist, showering him with “*maalesh*” (“doesn’t matter”). The whole circle, a dense pack of gesticulating bodies, moves by its own force of inertia during two, three long minutes, slipping from the sidewalk to the middle of the street (paralyzing definitively the traffic). Suddenly, two policemen in uniform and one in plain clothes (appearing from nowhere) split the mob, and collar the fellow (who is at that time half sheepish half protesting his innocence). The police officers take him away with the authority of their duties, followed by a crowd, which will scatter slowly, with some few guys still trying to kick or punch the (now) prisoner. They pass by other policemen, who have not give a slight move to intervene in the street dispute, but a smile for the situation (they are responsible of the traffic only). (September 2004, Downtown Cairo, 21:00 pm) Collective reaction for a lonely deviant behavior; involvement of the bodies of a large body of people before the forces of the law and order: has this sort of scene always taken place in *Wast el-Balad* (Downtown) of Cairo? Is it a *chic* attitude for a *chic* district?



Plan général de la ville du Caire, dressé et publié avec l'autorisation de S.A. Ismail Pacha.
Pierre Grand Bey, 1874. University of California, Berkeley ©

Urban public spaces of Cairo have changed a lot these last four decades. Everybody states it positively, in different ways. In this old city, it is not only a matter of architecture, that means a matter of arrangements in the urban landscape, but also a matter of urban uses, behaviors, sociabilities, and norms. The turn of this change seems to have occurred gradually during the sixties-seventies of the twentieth century. The focus of this paper is on Modern Cairo, the now *déclassé* downtown, and on the public gardens: both are an invention of the same period of the nineteenth century, they shared the same changeable users, and have known the same fate. This change is not only an objective degradation of structures and buildings (“our national character”, wrote ironically the novelist Sonallah Ibrahim in *Dhât*, 1992), but also a change in the spaces-goings. The ways to frequent these public spaces changed with the class of people that frequents them.

Downtown (*Wast el-Balad*) and public gardens.



Lehnert and Landrock ©, 1920 ca, Cairo

Cairo, capital of old urban tradition, and its mega-pole dimension are well known. Today, the population is about thirteen millions. The density of this population has greatly increased during the twentieth century. Traffic-jams are usual, and passers-by are numerous on the sidewalks of the city, often also on the streets when the sidewalks are also congested. The precedence is given to automobiles rather than walkers, so the pedestrian mobility is not always easy (actually, the share of the street between cars and pedestrians sounds like sometimes a *corrida*). This is particularly true in some areas as the Cairo downtown, which concentrates many different functions (commercial, politic, representation, prestige, entertainment...). This paper focuses only on one aspect of Cairo downtown and public gardens: uses of the public spaces, especially as a place of “leisure”. This *Wast el-Balad* is roughly delimited by the garden of al-Azbakya on the east, the Ramsis railway on the north, Ramsis avenue on the west and ‘Abdîn palace on the South. However, the public gardens are not located only in this area, but on Zamalek island (Fish garden), Giza (Giza zoo and Orman), near the Islamic Cairo (Fustât Garden) or even in the suburbs (International Garden, in Medinat Nasr or the Japanese Garden in Helwan), plus dozens of smaller green spaces.

While some Old-Cairo lovers fear a gentrification of the Islamic Cairo because of its actual renovation/rehabilitation (by governmental and international agencies), the inverse move just took place for the areas that used to be the “Modern Cairo” issued of the Europeanization of the Egyptian capital during the nineteenth-century. Even a short history of these

Cairo public spaces will not find its room in this paper (see Raymond, 2001 and Arnaud, 1998). However, to quickly quote Stewart (1999), let's say that in "the case of Cairo, European values were quickly appropriated by the Egyptian elite who began incorporating them into life in the city. By the middle of the nineteenth century, they were already establishing new Europeanized sections of Cairo, leading to a bifurcation of the city into 'traditional' and 'modern' sections. A new 'European' Cairo had been created by 1882 when formal British rule replaced Ottoman control. [...] Cairo became divided into two realms which can be depicted as either east/west or traditional/modern, each defined in stark contrast to the other." A Haussmannian model of urbanization, but also of urbanity, a Parisian "*chic*", together with a hygienist concern (the nineteenth-century idea of this issue) prevailed with Muhammad Ali and then especially the khedive Ismail.



The public space, in its modern meaning, seems to have a recent history in Cairo. Beyhum and David (1997) give us the point of view of "Westerner observers, orientalist of the nineteenth-century and of the colonial period in general [who noted] the absence of typical spatial forms of western public space in Arab cities they contemplate before the modernization of the urbanism." Historically, the first manifestation of this westernization of Cairo was an area with together buildings and a garden, *al-Azbakya*. This garden was a Mohammed Ali's will, in 1837, to procure a *promenade* (in addition to the Shubrâ avenue) for the Cairo public and especially Europeans. The regent changed what was a lake, the *birket Azbakya*, in a *park à l'Européenne*. A triple concern motivated this enterprise: a showcase of modernity, a concern of public health, and a concern of morality. Mohammed

Ali, affected by hygiene issues as Europe was during this period, wanted to improve the sanitation by draining this lake, which level was fluctuating with the swelling of the Nile, and planting trees ("The trees increase the circulation of the air, the diffusion of the light and above all absorb the miasma that leaks from bowels of the man or the factories" Nourry, 1997). On the other hand, he wanted to substitute for the dens of vice (gardens of pleasure, coffees, prostitutes and peddlers) sane activities of leisure, modern and moral. His first architect was Murtan Bey (Mohammed Ali sent to study in Europe). Later, the khedive Ismail entrusted Gustave Delchevalerie (Delchevalerie, 1897) with the task to rebuild this garden in a French style (by cutting off and selling a part, which gain allowed the remaking of the rest). De Barillet, Parisian architect (maker of the Bois de Boulogne) designed the garden; he drew his inspiration from the Parc Monceau in Paris too (Behrens-Abouseif, 1985). The khedive Ismail was very impressed by the Parisian urban planning during his visit to the Paris Universal Exhibition of 1867. The khedive inaugurated this new park himself in 1872.



Even though they are not useless anecdotes, we will not go deeper on the details. We will remember that the modern urban planning and the creation of a new urbanscape is a high-handed government action, and that the recipients were not the working or popular class of Cairo but the aristocracy and *bourgeoisie*, both local and expatriate.

Until the sixties-seventies' shift in Cairo, public space, in its modernist meaning, that is to say excluding the popular districts of Cairo (where was developed another segmentation of the space, for instance with the famous *harât*), has actually a *bourgeois* public. If all

the public was not namely from this old *bourgeoisie* or aristocracy, on the other hand the *ethos* seemed to be. I write “*ethos*” to cut a long story short, but we have to understand it as a combination of behaviors, norms, manners and sociabilities... And working classes seem to have been confined in their own areas. Obviously, Cairo is *Um el-Duniya*, but a “Mother of the World” that could be dissected in many different and connected worlds. *Wast el-Balad* is different from Islamic Cairo, which differs from Maadi, Mohandessin, or the different desert new cities, bloomed later. The Haussmannian architecture put in place (and of course relocated) in Cairo *Wast el-Balad* came also with a conception of a kind of urban pastime (and of course relocated), the promenade. Many testimonials relate that the strollers were chic, *très* stylish (clothes, behaviors...), the area also was clean, a kind of display window on the modernity (Egypt should take no longer part of Africa but Europe, said once the khedive Ismail). “This day, the promenade of the Esbekieh was really splendid, especially the evening when all these European ladies in formal dress filled the chairs, that ornament the alleys of the square, in the same way than on our boulevards. There were also many Greek and Armenian families.” (Conte Ch. de Pardieu, 1851: 54) From its creation until the middle of the twentieth century, the downtown accumulated all the function of a modern city: commercial, residence, symbolic locations of power (ministries, palaces, and embassies), and center of communication.

The new use of public places



The sixties-seventies seem to have been a turn in the fate of Downtown area and public gardens. And since the seventies, both may have changed greatly, at least according to the Cairo inhabitant's comments. The nowadays Downtown and public gardens going has not decreased, not at all, but has drastically changed. The Talaat Harb (ex-Soliman Pasha) Street, for instance, turned to a real popular *paseo*, even late in the night (especially the summer), and the public gardens like the Giza Zoo, Orman Garden, Fish Garden or Fustat Garden rank among the most favorite places to have a *baladi* picnic on the grass (or the asphalt): they are not anymore place to strut as they used to be. Question of frequentation?

Of course, it shall not be heuristic to tackle the question of behaviors in public space if we forget the public. Publics, actually. Who is practicing these urban center public spaces? Everybody, we can say (since they are open spaces), but not without sociological regularities. These regularities are quite difficult to define accurately. "*Wast el-Balad* was a residential area (*Hay sakanî*) and turned increasingly to a commercial area (*Hay tagârî*)." (A woman of Downtown) Demographic census statistics demonstrate that this area loses population for three decades. Nowadays, many apartments belong to insurance companies and remain empty. Who settled there? It was the upper class, both local and foreign, and rentals were very high (as suggested by Neuray, 1908). For instance in the area of Tawfiqqiya, the foreigners (62.3%) were the majority population in 1927 (Raymond, 1977). Progressively, foreigners left Egypt; with the 1952's revolution, a part of the aristocracy lost its wealth (and apartments); then the old bourgeoisie lost its way of life and is today *déclassé*, replaced by the new upper class stemmed from the *infitah* (Sadat's liberalization), which is now more or less (self) confined in clubs (*nâdî*) and gated communities in the surrounding suburbs or at least settled in Maadi (South Cairo) and Mohandesin (on the Left Bank of the Nile). So, who are the users of the Downtown public space? Not really the residents, as they are not anymore numerous. If *Wast el-Balad* is still over-crowded, it is because it is the place to be for many people: on foot, by buses, minibuses, taxis, or private cars, it is the place to go. A part of the people comes there to work; the numerous shops and third sector companies are huge employers.



These commercial activities draw also a crowd of window-lickers, strollers going up and down Talaat Harb, Qasr el-Nil, 26-Yuliu, Sherif, Shawarbi streets. It is all along shop windows displaying new season collections of shoes, clothes, underwear, and other articles. Without being as “*chic*” as it was, the area is not either the (modern) souq of ‘Attaba (in the east side of the Azbakya garden), and has still a power of attraction for poor classes. Old bourgeoisie members say the “the popular frequentation has disfigured the district”. Let us say indulgently that the urbanscape has been recomposed. A vital function was amplified along the years: the coffee shops flourished as quickly as the Egyptian fast-foods (*fûl û taamiya*), and popular restaurants got their tables out to welcome customers at all hours of the day (and night). In one word, downtown is no more a *promenade bourgeoise*, but a crowded recreational area (not to mention cinemas and cabarets). Streets became strolling places more or less consumerist, real *paseo* of the evenings.



To define more properly the origin of these walkers is an arduous task. Obviously, they are not from the upper class (*aristûcracî* and *bûrgwâzî* in local terminology). Lower classes? Cairo people use the term of *sha'ab* to designate them, but it is sometimes more cleverly subdivided in *tabaa sha'abiya* (popular class) and *tabaa mutawasata* (middle class)¹. Most of the public space users of this area are not really the poorest population of Cairo. For instance, people of the Islamic Cairo do not consider the nineteenth-century modern part of the city as their natural playground. However, they come there sometimes, but this outing takes always the shape of an exceptional event, haloed of a confused prestige. “You know what? Last night, I have been in Tawfiqqiya for a stroll with my wife, and over there, they sell [this and that] we cannot find here in Darb el-Ahmar!” (A man of Islamic Cairo) It is not without difficulties we can define an Egyptian middle-class, as it will not be the equivalent of the Western middle-class.

¹ According to the Egyptian National Statistic Authority (CAPMAS), the 2000 Survey on incomes, expenses, consumptions and budgets of households, and the data François Ireton proceeded (non published), we can split the Egyptian urban population in three categories: “poor and popular classes” (less than EGP 12 000 of expenses per household per year), “middle classes” (EGP 12 000-29 999), and “well-to-do and rich classes” (EGP 30 000 and more). The first category gathers 68.12% of the households (63.83% of the population), the second 27.31% of the households (31.41% of the population), and the third 4.56% of the households (4.76% of the population) in urban areas. Urban areas, so, have a real “middle class”: real in the way that they represent between a quarter of the households and a third part of the population. Thus, their expenses are still limited (USD is currently about EGP 6.20).



However, the Egyptian economist Galal Amin (2000: 18) argues its existence and focuses on the fact that during the last three decades the “rate of social mobility [was] probably greater than anything Egypt has experienced in its modern history.” He adds that large numbers of the population went up the social ladder, who traditionally had belonged to the lowest levels of society, and were allowed to compete successfully with sections of the middle class who found their social status rapidly declining. Therefore, to put a category name on users of downtown public spaces, we can put forward that they are from a class made up of a mix of “upper lower class” and “lower middle class”. So, yes, the public spaces of downtown Cairo are open spaces but not shared by everyone. Nevertheless, this subset alone provides enough elements to insure the *zahma* (congestion), and so the ambiance of these walking, drinking, eating, shopping, brief, enjoying places. We can add: “and these gardening places”. Public gardens and parks do share the same population of users. This similitude is perhaps emphasized because, as in downtown, the crowd does not (of course) settle there: they come, here or there, to enjoy an ambiance. For sure, certain modalities of appropriation and use are different, but many features also sound similar.



If we deal here with this part of the population, upper lower class & lower middle class, what about the two other substantial minorities of the Cairo population (“very” substantial for the poor)? They are the two extremes of the Cairo social ladder. The poorest are worthy of interest in the way they are the origin of the present users of the public space. The wealthiest are interesting too as they were the former users of the same spaces. In the first place, representatives of the higher class ran away from this new affluence of the poor. Or, because this affluence, the crowd, but also the degradation of the area, the emergence of the *mekaniki* (garage) in the neighboring of Champollion Street etc. expelled them from the place. They took refuge in districts still glamorous. “The traditional urbanity, in the Middle East as in other contexts, has to face the necessity to manage the differences in the proximity. The answer provided was strengthen the differences while preserving a modesty in their expression, a reserve, which allow to spare confrontation.” (Beyhum and David, 1997)



Foucault analyzed the partitioning, the obstacle to the movement, and the shutting as connected to the rise to power of the rationalist modernity and capitalism. However, in this contemporary period, we observe contradictory changes: the occupation (according to some codes) of the public spaces by lower social strata meanwhile the wealthiest find a haven in the shutting. During the nineteenth century, hygiene and moral prevailed, and the *bourgeoisie* was the recipient: urban (gardens, boulevard) or suburban promenades (Qanater dams) have been invented for them. Nowadays, the Egyptian well-to-do classes “are going to precise places, between which they do not establish a connection. They frequent the city in a fragmented way, avoiding being in the street, even if they remain, as all the motorists, victims of the Cairo traffic jams. Henri Lefebvre (1968) expressed it by writing ‘the Olympians and the new *bourgeois* aristocracy (...) do not settle somewhere anymore. They are going from place to place or from castle to castle; (...) they are everywhere and nowhere.’” (Gillot, 2002) It is easy to collect evidence of women from the upper bourgeoisie who regard as weird the idea of walking in town. For them, they do go somewhere and not take a walk in town. They could go to the public gardens as they go to the *nâdî* (the club), but, in these territories abandoned to the working classes, they fear (as in town) the spreading of some contaminations dreaded from the popular districts they think hostile, dirty, and criminogene.



While the old (and still rich) *bourgeoisie* and the *nouveaux riches* never set foot in the popular districts (“why should I go there?” said a young woman from Heliopolis, though her father is from Darb el-Ahmar origin), the lowest class of Cairo does what the population targeted by this paper has done for ages: they stay at home. Actually, the lowest part of the Cairo society was (from a public space point of view, and not a network one for instance) the less subject to the massive move of these last decades. Nevertheless, a part of the poor started to come out from their area, and to get a handhold on the public gardens and downtown district. It is not so much to elect domicile in the neighboring but to take possession, in a physically and omnipresent way. “At the end of the sixties, people [from Islamic Cairo] didn’t go out. People, popular families were staying at home. [...] From their district (*man-teqa*), they didn’t walk out! Not a lot. They paid a visit to their relatives, mutually. But there isn’t [for them] public gardens (*hadâiq*), there isn’t cinemas, there isn’t ... In the cinema, were going the bourgeois (*bûrgwaziin*), in the public gardens were going the bourgeois, and in the casinos, in the cabarets, the bourgeois were going. When started the sixties, people started then to learn to go out.” (A woman of Islamic Cairo) Michel de Certeau (1990) talked about a “concept city”: of course, the city is shaped from the top (and Foucault, 1994, recommended this approach, as it is the produced global space that makes sense), but a city also retrieved from below: by the house, the street, the square, and, in particular, by the pedestrian. We will see according to which modalities in Cairo these popular pedestrians practice, mold, and create the city and its gardens.



The specific activities aimed by this paper are not related to the work or the constraint. These are recreational, discharging, unselfish, and hedonist activities: the space of the distraction (the Merriam-Webster Dictionary gives for distraction the etymology: Middle English, from Latin *distractus*, past participle of *distrahere*, literally, to draw apart). This quality of these spaces does not save its users having to control their behaviors: there are, here or there, always specific plays of constraints, poses, reactions when this distraction is on the public space. Working classes gained possession of parts of the city, but they do not behave as they want, they do not do everything... but a lot. If we had to draw up quickly a catalog, it could be said to bear a superficial resemblance to poet Jacques Prévert's famous inventory (a hotchpotch): people stroll, eat, rest, dance, play, talk, quarrel, chat up, pray, sing, bargain, observe, strut about, buy, watch, listen, sit, shout... They trade also, not only in the street but in the gardens too, refreshments, balloon rubbers, cotton candies, sandwiches, and the ultimate gadget. It is maybe easier to describe these practices by the negative: there is no administrative events, no political or religious demonstrations (but blood donations for the Palestinian *Intifada* in some gardens).



So, a lot is done as it is, with always some peculiar behaviors according to surrounding place and people, in other words, according to the situation (for instance, people do not eat in the same manner in the street or in a garden). The form of festive sociabilities may vary also. For instance, the public gardens seem appropriate to take in the peculiar celebrations for the *aid al-fitr* at the end of the Ramadan, and for the *aid al-adha*: the public gardens of Cairo open their doors for this occasion to thousands and thousands of visitors (see Battesti, forthcoming). The *mawalid* (saint festivals) of Cairo, which gather popular levels from the capital and the provinces, are famous to be an intense and extra-ordinary space-time of the city life, but they occur inside the old districts of the city, and redraw the internal urban territories. The life of the gardens is much less known, but they gather as many people inside their iron railings. The out of age spring festival (*shem el-nesim*) is especially dedicated to the gardens (and celebrated consequently). People get out of their place, get out of their neighboring to meet in public gardens and downtown and to create there a recreational urban ambiance.



At first sight, the measure that distinguishes, in the public gardens, a feast day or a public holyday from a weekend (especially the Friday) and from a weekday is the amplitude of the frequentation. The actors themselves put this scale of frequentation forward as the criterion of success of the outing, or as the criterion of success of the ambiance (*gaw*) of the place (which seems to be equivalent). This density variation seems to justify the changes in the users' behaviors and the activities vary, in that way, from a peaceful outing to public festivities that can assume a carnival appearance (for the values inversion: "It has often been observed that popular festivals lead to excesses, causing people to lose sight of the boundary between the licit and the illicit." Durkheim, 1985) This is not only due to a date on the calendar, but also to a place, which has its own quality, pre-existent and reaffirmed by these activities. When last year, during the daytime of the four days of festivities at the end of Ramadan (November 2003), the Giza Zoo had reached a state of effervescence — sometimes-even delirium —, at the same time, the Downtown streets were incredibly deserted. The very few persons met on the sidewalks do not allow guessing the ambiance in the popular public gardens.



In some degree, the difference between public gardens and public spaces of the *Wast el-Balad* is related to an issue of amplification. You do in the gardens what you can do in the Downtown district... and more. Not really because it is authorized here and not there, but because of the quality of the place. The public gardens are generally appreciated according three main criteria: the cleanness, the green environment, and the safety. By way of green recreation, popular families often are content with a grassy roundabout, but of course they are much more satisfied with a real lawn in a public garden to set up the picnic, to put down the *bûtâgâz* (portable stove) for the lunch... if the garden is not too far, the entrance not too expansive, not too late in the day (or the night), etc.

Controls in the public spaces

What is the police that controls, adjusts or normalizes the behaviors of these crowds in Cairo? Beyhum and David (1997) underline that, for the contemporary Westerner, the term of public space “evokes first the spatial opening and the accessibility: it is a space of free access, opened to the circulation of people, possibly to the exchange of good and information. [...] Since the nineteenth century, the public spaces *par excellence* are the public square, the public garden, the avenue or the boulevard, in theory opened to everybody without restriction other than the observance of law and order.” This limitation itself has a variable-geometry as the norms of “law and order” change according to the situations. This elastic “public order” brings together, concretely, two distinctive ideas: the normative observance of political and judicial nature, and the normative observance of moral nature.



Tolerances and intransigencies are organized according to the places. The situation of anonymity is one of the main characteristics of the public places, in respect to the situation prevailing in residential popular neighboring. In the vicinities of district (especially in popular ones, with the model of the “*hâra*”) dominates the *interconnaissance* (individuals are always under eyes of acquaintances). The sociabilities of individuals or groups (friends or families) in a situation of anonymity manage this fundamental difference, and the main answer is maybe some forms of self-control. Is the public space under control? Yes, but not so much by the appointed police force — certainly very present, but whose mandates are very fragmented — than by the self-control of the passers by, *i.e.* by the urban civilities. The anonymity of the public spaces in Cairo does not interfere with this self-control of the passers by, this self-control of oneself, this self-control of the crowd. Its most obvious expression is the automatic mediation of the passers by when arise incidents (altercations, brawls, thefts, etc.). The public “is concerned” with what occurs on the public place, men intervene, interpose, regulate, judge, punish, and, at least with the women, comment. But this self-control is active also on the level of smaller sequences: courtesies, to let pass a woman, to thank, give up a seat to someone, to manage the proximities (proxemics) between plastic chairs outside the café (especially for the family man), to be or not to be arm in arm with a friend, to readjust one’s veil...



Is it necessary to point out the traditional dichotomy usually assigned to the Arab world between primarily masculine public places, and primarily female domestic spheres? This is relevant in Cairo too (even if Hanna, 1991, links the domestic sphere life to the private life more than to the female sphere in 18th century). Women especially feel it and interiorize it in their movements. The garden is then an exception where the women (between them and without men accompanying them) can circulate (as in the streets), but can also come to rest without unseemly conduct. However, what is striking is not the presence on women on this outing place (even if they are numerous, but accompanied), but the presence of the family. (The role of the family, and more precisely of the household, has been underlined in Singerman and Hoodfar eds, 1996.) Always in the gardens, round the clock in the busy streets of *Wast el-Balad*... one wonders whether if it is not necessary to come forward as a family group to have a “legitimate” access to these spaces. This legitimacy of the family may empower women a capture of space (usually more timorous when they are without children and family men). At least, the presence of the families is the best (used) justification to require from the public proper behaviors, some decent poses, and moral rules of conduct. A woman alone would not cause the same result: who can presume of the moral of a woman alone? The matter of worry, of course, is the respect of virtue to say it generically; a fear of the women for themselves, and of men for “their” women. “Virtue” has to be understood *largo sensu*. It is not really a matter of rape or other physical violence (public spaces of this mega-pole are quite safe), but of unwarranted words or gestures that can

compromise the fragile respect of the “face”. To undermine it requires saving face at once (actually, to let believe other people that the face was not lost, see Goffman, 1982).



The opportunity may arise. For the young people, public spaces of the city (sidewalks, pedestrian areas, *corniche*, gardens, and especially malls for the teenagers) are possible places for stealthy meetings (and rendezvous especially in the gardens, that have a “*rûmân-tik*” environment). Young men and girls can try to flirt, with the difficulty that the girls are often in a family circle. Couples sometimes meet only outside, as they have no place elsewhere to get more intimacy: they stay hours ago leant on their elbows on the bridges, or seated round a lawn. Since they are married, no more stolen kisses on the *corniche*, no more clasped in an embrace chastely at the back of a tree. Once married, or better still with children, there is no restrictions other than horary of the closing of the public gardens (in the streets, families, and especially the summer, can stay outdoor later than 3:00 am with infants). And if the multitude of administrations managing the Cairo public gardens agrees to close the garden the night, it is obviously for this reason: avoiding deviant conducts in the verdure. With the same logic, some part of the zoological garden (the Giza Zoo), for instance, are closed to the public the weekdays to avoid that illegal couples thread their way through the vegetation. These closed spaces are spaces that do not offer a clear visibility, a clear transparence from the outside. I noticed on former fields of research in southern Tunisian oases that the primacy was granted to the closing of the space by the vegetation in the garden, a profusion that allows creating an intimacy in the old palm grove (men only have access to the palm groves). It is precisely this situation that the authorities in Cairo want to

prevent, especially in the public gardens. Small popular cafés wedged in passageways and cul-de-sacs in Cairo can be said sort of places essentially masculine and protected against the prying eyes. Cafés visited by couples and families (rarely women between themselves) are located on more open spaces (especially pedestrians streets of Tawfîqiya). The general privileged shape of gardens in Cairo reveals at the contrary a clear reading. The users perceive this “panopticon” also as a security. One does not protect oneself while sheltering oneself from the eyes, but on the contrary while not hiding any. There must be a connection with the “open door” policy. Not the Sadat’s trade liberalization, but this “desire of a totally ‘readable’ society [which] become apparent in the opening of the domestic places, and notably of the front door at home inside the neighborhood. [...] To leave its open door shows its acceptance of other people’s intrusion. If there is nothing to hide, why then be locked up and conceal oneself with the sagacity of the vicinity?” (Puig, 2003) This is relevant in popular area, at the level of the *hâra*, interior space of the neighboring, nearly domesticated. The public space of the downtown Cairo and the public gardens, located apart from the old area of the city, does not propose an environment of familiar connections but a possibility of anonymity. This desire of a “readable society” that smoothes the urban behaviors in general nevertheless remains.

***Dispositifs* of the space and *dispositions* of its public: a concordance?**



It seems we have to come back to the very materiality of the public spaces. For Bernard Debarbieux (2001), “public space is often the space in which the making of artifices

reaches the extreme sophistication even if, sometimes, it is made from the vegetable material and in the name of a certain idea of the nature as in the urban parks. Public space is thus eminently material, made of a material worked with a view of a collective use, which it is supposed to condition. But the relation between space form and social form is not confined to this relation between structure and contents [...].” In actual fact, the so-called “diversion” of a space or street furniture by the users should remind it us. For instance, a path created by the pedestrians because they prefer the straight way to the zigzag of the official track, or else the picnics of the Cairo families on a grassy roundabouts (in town), or a central reservation (for instance on the airport expressway), or else the successive layers of additions in the original Haussmannian architecture, etc.

Is there a concordance between the present physical forms of the public space and the present practices of this space? According to popular users’ comments, the “ambiance” is going well only if the density of people is high, *i.e.* if people are as packed as in their district of origin even though the scenes of these practices, the Haussmannian architecture as well as the design of the public garden, were originally conceived in a spirit of public health. This seems a real paradox. The urban development authorities had conceived new pedestrian streets in Tawfiqqiya area, hopping a beginning of gentrification: an enlargement of the popular playground occurred; the urban development authorities had conceived green interstices (as rather than concrete): the bodies of picnickers, card players, candy sellers now hold them. In a different way, people appreciate these interstices of recreation, a pastoral recreation in town. Finally, the strict control by the authorities (their representatives are abundant, with omnipresent police officers and guardians) is easily diverted for the benefit of the creation of leisure urban ambiances. What should be paradoxical that this recreation occurs within, and without eluding or isolating from an environment saturated of humanities, noises (the “sound matrix” of Cairo), smells, and urban pollutions. Popular users are looking for a peculiar form of sociability there: not a country one, but a sociability of boulevard, which is not really concerned or bothered about others in the anonymity. This sociability slightly escapes the control that predominates in the neighborhood. People come there to enjoy the city and its ambiance, to take part in the show the city engenders by looking at itself.



May we talk about enchantment of the city? Do not people call “garden” (*ganîna*) all greenery and not the official ones only? A tinge of poetry together with imagination is at times necessary to see a *ganîna* in three-square meters of scarce grass. On *mîdan Tawfiqiya* (the vernacular name, officially Orabi square), on the present-square crossed by the street, two structured half-circles contain a lawn and some bushes precisely laid out according to a perfectly geometrical order. And it is there that the passers-by succeed in sitting down. The edges of this raised lawn are used in the way of benches (people bring sometimes especially a small carpet to avoid soiling their clothes). Families, colleagues, in love ones, or friends settle there to chat, to eat the sandwiches that they bought close or they took with them for an urban picnic, to drink a tea the waters of cafés bring... without encroaching really on the plant domain. However, some families or some women between them settle there on the grass (often on an improvised tablecloth), but it is especially the playground of the children, in spite of the usual mud of the flood irrigation created by the attendants in watering.

To estimate the concordance between the public space and the practices, it is necessary to capture at the same time the townsman and the space in which he evolves. To finely express the two sides of (often) the same coin, structure and actual behaviors, Isaac Joseph (1998) used its terminology: “*dispositif*” (that organizes or institutes norms of uses) and “*disposition*” (social and technical competences). So, in other words, it is necessary "to think out together the “*dispositif*” (operators or "programs"), which elaborates or establishes norms of use, and “*disposition*” (of the social and technical skills), which adjusts or redefines

these norms of use in a singular situation". In the green spaces of Cairo city, the strict organized vegetal architecture is striking at first. This lets guess a strong "functionalization" of the nature by a very strong "training" of the plant element. Houston (2001) reminds us that there has been a long association between the civility of the self and the formality of the garden. Civilizing society was akin to ordering the wilderness. It is possible to speak about a monumentalized vegetation of the Cairo city. In these "green spaces", it would be difficult to read there the garden of the Arab poets or the reproduction of the Koranic gardens. We do not have any more a profusion of the vegetable element, of the senses and the pleasures, but the mark of the reformist paradigm: to rationalize the city (Arnaud, 1998). The prospect remains probably always the "ideal city", but the expectations changed: from the religious to a modernistic secularization. Greens spaces are kinds "of hyper-programmed closed ecosystems" (Lambert, 1999), but easily diverted by the users. Thus, while preeminence were granted to the sight (symmetry in the design of the plantations, standardization and proliferation of topiary art, dissuasive hedges of fence), what was dedicated to the eyes only sees the picnic tablecloths to invade lawns, siestas and flirts to occupy the open space which had to highlight the greatness of the vegetal building. Contrary to the Tunisian case of the oasis garden, there is not completely a concordance between esthetics and uses, a functional aesthetic as Leroi-Gourhan (1956) defines it, which is an "aesthetic feeling based in the satisfactory relation between the subject and the surrounding world" (1971). Why does not it apply to the public gardens of Cairo?



Contrary to the situation of the oasian gardens, the designer, the prime contractor and the user in Cairo are not the same agents. *A priori*, the Cairo users and the designers of the Cairo green spaces do not conceive the green spaces in the same way. However, the practices in Cairo are not hindered by the little of apparent adequacy between the shape and contents of the gardens on the one hand, and uses and ends practiced on the other hand... Unless the monumental forms of gardens refer directly after all to the monumental of the city and, in that, take part to the urban ambiance the saunterers of Cairo look for. Besides, we can envisage that the users participate in the construction of the space in order to make a recreative place. Paths take shape on grass, a "tent" settles down, a *shîsha* (narghilé) gives out its smoke, an atmosphere is created while the serenity should have been prevalent at the foot of the statue, the near by shopkeepers increase the plantations by installing in the available ground their own plants (in front of their store)... In view of the extent of the phenomenon, it is not any more just a diversion, but also almost a creative breach (see changes of Downtown area aspect, for instance). The architectural obsession, which seems obvious in the compositions in Cairo, not only of the building but of the vegetal also, suggests an obsession of the visual identity (that of the straight line, a symmetry and the order, an aesthetics of the efficiency).



This obsession seems to result more of the need for impressing the passer-by than for making him participate. Nevertheless, it is said that "the city is its own spectacle", granting to each one its place for the action and the reception. Public spaces are constructions, resulting from "coproductions", between individuals, Authorities, and — as Latour (1997)

would add — objects. The authorities try to deny the work of the users, try to even to prohibit it. For instance, we can mention the illicit street vendors hunting by the police (they nevertheless always come back), the campaign against the proliferation of the shops and other offices signs on the wall (given up), or the locking of some spaces, and this is especially the case of the most "beautiful" gardens, because authorities fear that Egyptians damage it. It is interesting to note that it is implicitly settled in Cairo that the best manner to protect open spaces is to close them. It is a local response to this "lack of behavior", "lack of good manners" (dixit an official of Cairo) etc. conferred upon the popular classes by those who have the authority to close certain spaces to the public (and by upper classes too). In short, they are a response to this little of adequacy between form and "contents supposed to be". That mobilizes obviously representations of the nature and of the city, which will not be discussed here.

To conclude



To conclude, we can argue positively that a change in the use of public space, in downtown Cairo and in public gardens, occurred these last three or four decades. At least, it is the impression, the feeling, the idea of all the inhabitants of Cairo, poor or rich, and all the interviews express it. The Cairo popular classes took the place of the former richer classes. The old upper classes and the *nouveaux riches* moved farther, and established the fact of a proletarianization of their former district and their former green ostentation areas. They, actually, do not express it in this way. They talk about a ruralization: I recorded often

the complaint of the invasion of the capital by country people. We can underline that this “ruralization” of Cairo (for a long time feared by the urban planners because of the flow of the rural depopulation) is not anymore the agenda as today eighty per cent of the growth of the Capital is urban, and nevertheless the growth of the capital (1986-1996) is slower than Egypt taken as a whole. However, Amin (2000: 27) pointed out this “recent and amazing spread of the rural habit of men embracing each other in greeting, even if they have just parted”, and other habits, which betray more humble origins. To explain it, Amin makes use of the book originally published in 1927 by Sorokin (1959). “In situations where the social structure is relatively stable, the lower classes tend to imitate those patterns of behavior which are associated with the higher classes, but the opposite seems to occur in periods of rapid social mobility, when the declining classes are inclined to adopt many of the values and behaviors patterns associated with the lower, but rising, social groups.” The main assertion of Amin’s work is precisely that a rapid social mobility occurred these last fifty years in Egypt. Anyway, I regard as more certain, considering the use of the public spaces, to state at least that the wealthier abandoned the place to the poorer. The new norms of behaviors seem to oppose the administrative authorities only. So, do popular classes turn to squatters? Many of the *bourgeoisie* say that, but then the most notable is finally together the weak efficiency of the official police and the strong self-control of anonymous people between them. We should not talk about an importation of urban norms directly from the popular districts to the former bourgeoisie’s places. They were first models that have been imported. These selected models (readability, control, peculiar ambiance, festive crowd, etc.) had to take the “reality test”, to face the true social and physical environments (space, acceptance of the majority, existing laws — by definition conservative —, state authorities, etc.). Then, these models can become “norms”, always more or less accepted as they are always redefined (see Ireton, 1998). Can we draw this minimal conclusion that Cairo was the scene of a “victory of the poor?” Not even: all this is an issue of scale. And these scales, in the globalization age, have changed. And here, I have to grant the last word to a Cairo inhabitant (middle-middle class): “Ah! It was chic, but because before it was the rich who go to these places! Nowadays, it’s the poor. The poor didn’t get rid of the rich; actually, the rich let the place for them. [...] Well, not exactly, actually, it was more a sort of natural selection, this occurs by itself. It’s because the rich have found other places; they have found other gardens. You know, they go farther. Nowadays, for example, they go to the Red Sea, and the Red Sea is like a big garden for them. The poor, they go nowhere, it’s too expensive, they stay in Cairo, they never leave Cairo.”

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