

Towards Health Amelioration: Analyzing Cairo-Egypt Urbanization Patterns

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Abstract

Issues such as overpopulation, social fragmentation and environmental degradation which are symptomatic of developing countries impact cities negatively, compromising quality of life. the urgent necessity to address basic needs for a growing population is consistently prioritized over the planning of cohesive, organized and healthful communities. such unregulated urbanization poses challenges to the creation of viable, sustainable communities, in addition to generating circumstances of significantly compromised public health. this paper offers an empirical evaluation of contemporary developmental patterns in Cairo (the world's largest cities by 2020) it analyzes demonstrated developmental trends, identifying inherent drawbacks as well as positive parameters evident in recent growth. the study posits that the urban environment can be ameliorated by comprehensive planning to moderate the impact of social, cultural and economic disadvantages, arguing that planning is essential for future communities representing the desired ideals of aesthetic form, social cohesion, equitable social engagement and improved health.

1 Egypt urbanization

Global urbanization manifests itself at an accelerated rate in the developing world. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in Egypt, where high rates of population growth and the urban/rural developmental imbalance have precipitated a sustained, large-scale migration to larger cities by populations seeking economic opportunity. This unprecedented and unregulated over-urbanization exceeds the absorption capacity of cities and compromises their identity, character and functionality. It degrades the quality of life and deprives the population of advantages which the city should ideally provide. Although the quality of life in Egypt's cities is perceived as superior to that in towns and villages, this superiority is essentially materialistic – better employment opportunities, greater income potential and improved amenities exist, but social cohesion, aesthetic environments, meaningful community participation and nature-derived benefits are relatively lacking.



Figure1 Streetscape in historic Cairo



Figure2 Public plaza edged with distinctive architecture

This situation is exemplified in Cairo, Egypt's fastest growing city. Its sophisticated historic core with elegant architecture, street hierarchy, public spaces, monuments and vibrant landscape creates an urban map that is the most expressive and experientially-rich part of the city (Figs. 1, 2). Recent growth beyond this core, however, has not attained a commensurate level of coherence. The urgent need to provide shelter, transportation and employment to a steady influx of migrants compels development to be largely housing and road construction rather than the building of coordinated, environmentally-responsible communities inclusive of other requisite components – public spaces, gardens, marketplaces and civic monuments.

Consequently, most new neighbourhoods are essentially housing districts devoid of social identity or unity.

This reactive approach has other consequences as well – it precludes the conservation of environmental, social, cultural and historical resources in the process of constructing infrastructure, and marginalizes nature, creating ecologically-unsustainable environments which compromise resident health.

2 Urbanization and consequences for public health

While cities offer access to better medical facilities, public health can be negatively impacted by certain urban conditions such as overcrowding, improper sanitation, inadequate drinking water, pollution, etc. which increase incidence of disease. Urbanization also compels a reinterpretation of traditional patterns of living, deemphasizing or eliminating conventional healthy practices, with the import of these modifications often unrecognized by the general population. The situation is exacerbated by a widespread lack of awareness and prevalent misinformation about health. Three major derivatives of contemporary urbanization which adversely impact health and which pertain to physical planning are enhanced city size, individual level adaptation, and societal trends, as described below:

- Magnified Constructed Scale

The physical scale of Cairo involves distances which are too large to negotiate on foot for accomplishing daily tasks, a fact that encourages private automobile ownership and eliminates opportunities for physical exercise. Personal transportation is also preferred, both as a status symbol and as a consequence of the overburdened public transit system.

- Redefined Recreation

An altered perception of 'recreation' has led to a preference for passive, sedentary activities (watching television) over outdoor activities (walking in the park or to the market). The increasing prevalence of individual-centric lifestyles, limited time for leisure, curtailed social networking and higher levels of isolation and stress as a consequence of "urban disruption" (Fullilove 2006, 187) further reinforce this inclination.

- Cultural Value Shift

Western modes of behavior (conflated with progress) are being adopted due to the prestige assigned to westernization in the public perception. The growing preference of the urban middle-class for malls, fast food, processed or pre-packaged meals and synthetic beverages is rationalized by convenience and efficiency and affects health negatively⁵. At the same time, consumption of healthy foods – fruits, vegetables and pulses – is well below accepted standards nationwide.

In recent years, social scientists and medical professionals have mapped a steady increase in health issues afflicting urban residents. As linkages between urbanization and health concerns are increasingly documented and verified effectiveness of city planning as an instrument to improve health is actively promoted (Jackson 2003; Sengupta undated; Rice and Rasmussen 1992), creating opportunities for city planners and urban designers to resolve this problem through comprehensive planning.

3 Planning as prescription

Can physical planning offer an appropriate paradigm for future development in Cairo and similar communities? While the value of planning for the creation and sustenance of communities has been long recognized in the western world and in developed countries, practical and logistical conditions have precluded a comparable view of planning in Egypt. It can be argued, however, that the detrimental circumstances in which Egyptians cities must exist and thrive necessitates a stronger emphasis on the inclusion of planning in the development process. Indeed, there have been historical attempts at planned communities with mixed results, including in Cairo. The ultimate objective – the creation of human scaled communities which are aesthetically, functionally and socially rich, environmentally-responsible and rooted in their milieu – is universally relevant and as applicable to the Egyptian condition as to any other place.

These considerations are reflected in historical Egyptian settlement patterns which incorporated walkable streets, contextualized architecture, and valued social spaces. These characteristics, although generally rejected by current development in Egypt, must be acknowledged (and retained) as vital components of the city. By reinforcing their intrinsic value, planning can create real places that eschew the placeless, soulless and generic appearance which characterizes so many cities in the developing world.

The following locates the core values of planning in the context of Cairo's existing built environment and physical construction, classified as Positive Attributive Factors (substantive assets which actively contribute to the vitality of the city) or Inadequate Desirable Factors (vital, non-negotiable components of the city which are currently absent).

3.1 Positive Attributive Factors

- Pedestrian Focus

Emphasis on environments which are primarily navigated on foot finds resonance in Cairo, which is built on a scale amenable to pedestrian movement. This derives both from traditional spatial arrangement of private, public and civic functions as well as the limited integration of the automobile, as a large majority is unable to afford private transportation. This vital component of viability, although omnipresent in Egypt, unfortunately lacks comfortable, safe and pleasant streetscapes to accommodate it. (Fig. 3) Further, the traffic model of a hierarchical network segregating diverse users has not been implemented. Instead, street width is determined by space availability and not by function, design or planting character. All users – from pedestrians to trucks – are compelled to negotiate the streets simultaneously, leading to constant conflict. (Fig. 4)



Figure3 Compromised pedestrian convenience,



Figure4 Pedestrian safety jeopardized by traffic

- Built Diversity

Complexity and variety exist on multiple levels in Cairo. A compact, high-density building pattern (Fig. 5) results from escalating real estate prices, large population and rapid growth. The perpetuation of traditional social organization has created neighborhoods peopled by intermingling ethnic, linguistic, religious and economic groups. This diversity extends also to gender, age and education, etc. Although populations in larger cities often tend to coalesce based on levels of affluence, this trend still remains a strong determinant of heterogeneity. Housing similarly manifests a spectrum of residential options within each neighborhood, ranging from small, affordable units to larger, expensive accommodations, reflecting diverse economic levels, family sizes and preferences.



Figure5 Typical high-density, high-rise housing

3.2 Inadequate Desirable Factors

- Contextual Architecture and Landscape Architecture

Much of Cairo's architecture reads as an incoherent, repetitive agglomeration of negligible aesthetic value. (Fig. 6, 7) This is true for individual buildings as well as their collective composition. Creative visual expression is largely proscribed by cost, as is continued maintenance, thus accentuating the widespread architectural non-distinction and disrepair. The generic, monotonous uniformity and absence of referential natural features or iconic landmarks fail to create an "identifiable neighborhood" (Alexander et al. 1977, 80).



Figure 6 Unremarkable, visually unappealing architecture



Figure 7 Poorly maintained buildings

The landscape, when not absent altogether, is an ineffective design component, included more as a concession to building codes than for any real contribution to the environment or to the lives of the residents. (Figs. 8, 9) This superficial 'landscape' produces nothing other than a minor enhancement of the aesthetics of the built environment.

- Civic Institutions and Public Spaces

Cairo's districts exhibit no cohesive organizational pattern, epicenter or focus for their spatial arrangement. Historical centers of organization – palaces or public squares – have not been replaced by corresponding democratic emblems for structuring district form and identity. Civic architecture, shared communal spaces and monuments are not employed in the formation of the community. That role has been tragically assumed by malls which, by virtue of their locations, sizes and distinctive architecture, have become the new location markers. (Fig. 10)



Figures 8, 9 Installed landscapes are perfunctory and irrelevant

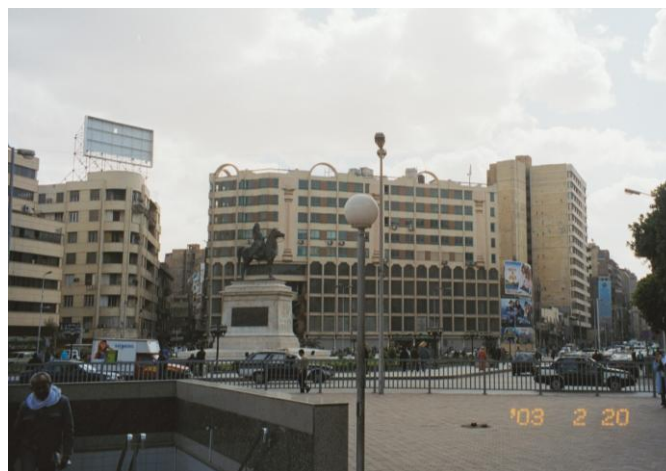


Figure 10 Mall is the new civic landmark

4 Conclusions

While the value of planning, urban design and the influence of a positive built environment on communal behavior are well documented in the western world (Lynch 1960; Alexander et. al. 1977; Whyte 1980),

Egypt's developmental history does not reflect a similarly extensive theoretical or implementation foundation for its cities. Although historical instances of planned communities exist, contemporary development is forced to marginalize the time, resources and effort necessary for planning in order to deal with other exigent issues of human necessity, such as housing and employment. Consequently, the form, function and ideological identity of its cities fail to provide citizens with the idealized environments they deserve. The consequences of such environments reflect broader aesthetic, social and functional inadequacies, as well as secondary concerns such as impaired public health.

Many health issues and their deleterious effects which characterize Egyptian urbanization today can be remedied in communities that integrate aspects of physical wellness in their design. Aesthetically pleasing, socially enriched and environmentally responsible neighborhoods can foster greater participation of the individual with the larger society in ways that nurture physical and psychological health. The current approach which produces mere housing clusters must be replaced with a holistic philosophy that prioritizes both tangible opportunities for recreation (gardens, streets, plazas) and intangible attributes (beauty, comfort, convenience). The provision of destinations for communal interaction and social reinforcement can elevate the standard of fitness within the community with minimal effort on the part of the residents.

As the above narrative demonstrates, the relevance of universal objectives of planning is strengthened by its dual emphasis on pedestrian-oriented design and the neighborhood as the operational unit of urbanization.

Walkability is a fundamental characteristic of the Egyptian city, and its formalization as the essential determinant of city form will incorporate a healthy dimension in the routine experience of daily living. Furthermore, well-designed neighborhoods will allow inhabitants to construct intimate relationships with their surrounding environment, social spaces and neighbors. Individuals are more likely to interact with the exterior, public realm (thus engaging in healthful behavior) if they believe themselves to be stakeholders in their surrounding environment. Indeed, planning at this local scale may be the only pragmatic approach for megacities such as Cairo, which physically and psychologically transcend conventional conceptions of cities.

The achievement of the goals of planning in Egypt will be facilitated by the human component vital for sustaining a city and manifested in density, diversity, mixed-uses and social complexity. Built for, and peopled by, large pedestrian populations, cities in Egypt are replete with the primary component that makes urbanism successful. The emergence of optimal communities has been prevented by the absence of a comprehensive organizational structure for this human resource, but the implementation of an appropriate framework and planning philosophy can result in cities which accomplish the goals of being functional, socially and aesthetically pleasing, contextually relevant and environmentally sustainable.

Ultimately, planning's most significant contribution (and one which also directly influences health) would be to heighten awareness of the ecological crisis, worsening continuously, which recent history has precipitated.

The necessity to protect, conserve and treasure natural resources must inform any planning philosophy that seeks to create durable cities, and be incorporated in administrative policy. This awareness is critical in view of the global future – as natural resources diminish and populations grow, sustainability and ecological responsibility become the only options available. At this stage, we do not have the luxury of pretending we are not in trouble.

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