

Cairo 2011: 'Architecture by the People'

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 URBAN DESIGN

It was no coincidence that Essam Sharaf, the new prime minister of Egypt, chose Tahrir Square as the venue for his very first speech to the people. During the demonstrations earlier this year and the revolution that followed, Midan Tahrir (Liberation Square) showed just how important and emotionally charged this square is for freedom of expression. In addition to all the political and social changes that will hopefully take place, the events in and around the square also mark the start of a development towards a more public domain in the city.



Wrecked cars clog up places for gathering and assembly



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Tahrir Square stands for even more. One of the leaders of the revolution on the square, architect Nabeel Elhady, explains that the Friday prayers during the demonstration represented the first instance of a public domain in Cairo during Egypt's period of dictatorship — created on location, from the bottom up, by the people. In the struggle for freedom and democracy, hundreds of thousands of Muslims said their prayers in public and thus shared their most religious moment with Copts and atheists. The people alongside the army, without animosity. As awareness of the power of public space grew, an infinite amount of energy was released, as well as the conviction 'that victory could no longer be prevented', Elhady explains to me.

The public nature of urban space in our Western cities can indeed be put under pressure sometimes, but it is difficult to imagine that a metropolis like Cairo with a population of 18 million people does not have any public space. For years, however,

the military governments have suppressed every form of public life and nipped it in the bud for fear of assemblies and demonstrations. Instead, squares functioned as dumping grounds for wrecked cars. The Mubarak regime not only tolerated this but also supported it and invested little in facilitating alternative car parks and infrastructure. For years, Tahrir Square was 'laid out' like a permanent construction site. The places where people could meet and hang around were small and linear in shape, such as the sidewalk cafés or the rows of small chairs on the bridges over the Nile.

But Tahrir Square has now demonstrated the democratic power of a public space. It is therefore no coincidence that, directly after the revolution and even before the new government has been formed, urban designers and architects from the universities in Cairo were initiating decentralised projects for the public domain. All this of course was occurring outside the official channels with its permits and so on. All too often in the past, funding has vanished in the sand owing to corruption, inefficiency and delays.

Despite what the word 'informal' suggests, the so-called 'informal' districts of Cairo, which today house up to 75% of the population, offered the forces of the dictatorship an outstanding way to control the inhabitants. The informal neighbourhoods were built without the permission of the government. Dr. Khaled Abdelhalm, of the Participatory Development Program in Urban Areas (PDP), arrives at a brilliant conclusion when he asserts that 'by leaving the construction and organisation of their informal developments to the people themselves, the government was able to accuse them at any moment of violating the laws and regulations. That was both an indirect way of maintaining control and a way of lowering people's expectations of high quality services, precisely because they are informal.' Viewed from this perspective, we see that the informal neighbourhoods of Egypt differ from the South American favelas and the Indian slums, which are often dominated by a mild form of anarchy or fatalism, but such government control mechanisms are certainly not the order of the day.

The current neighbourhood projects set up in Cairo immediately after the revolution can be described as 'owner-builder' projects. They are devised and carried out by the local population themselves. New parks are created, vegetation planted, debris and rubbish cleared away, the sewer system tackled, footpaths claimed and painted and tidied up by neighbours, new-build projects stimulated and improvements to the infrastructure considered. Owing to the revolution, the people have taken the initiative. That is resulting in a new interactive system of community, social economy, politics and cultural heritage.

Propelled by the mass of individuals, Cairo is changing, calling to mind an old proverb from Nubia: 'One man cannot build a house, but ten people can easily build twenty houses'. Ahmed Gaber, a social worker with whom I spent two days, has been conducting social demographic research in his neighbourhood since the revolution. He counts elderly people and notes who depends on medicine or requires help and who has health insurance and who not yet. He tries to arrange appointments so that working children can go to school one or two days a week without any loss of earnings. There are thousands of people working like Gaber on a small scale. His answer to the question who is coordinating and paying for their work is both simple and brief: 'Everybody is organising it alone, and there is no remuneration. If this is the price for freedom, then we'll pay it'.

Only the future will reveal just how long a country can rely on such an attitude. Without a growing economy — the tourist industry has collapsed completely — the unrest with increase again. Next time, however, demonstrations will not be held exclusively on the centrally located Tahrir Square. All of a sudden, by 'taking possession' of public space, people and individuals can do this in many more places, even small ones far from the centre. Tahrir Square is an international symbol of the revolution. It should therefore be viewed as a transition from 'Architecture by Dictatorship' to 'Architecture by the People'.

info

Architect Christian Müller was in Cairo, Egypt, for work from late February to early March.

<http://www.archined.nl/>



A city-centre courtyard devoid of public life



Public buildings are abandoned



Tahrir Square designed as a permanent construction site



Informal buildings without infrastructure



The people are creating a public domain



As far away as Aswan, signposts point the way to 'freedom' (Tahrir)