Beyond the Bounds of the State: Reinterpreting Cairo's Infrastructures of Mobility

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Mobility in Cairo is characterized by junctures of residents who redefine connectivity beyond the city's spatial arrangements of tangible networks. This article presents Cairo as a mesh of invisible relations between material infrastructure, lives, and practices.

Egypt's governing systems have, for many years, neglected to tackle inequality, particularly since the political turmoil of the January 2011 revolution. Cairo's urban landscape is now one of fluctuating realities. Spates of laws prohibiting gatherings and committees, demographic neighbourhood shifts, uncontrolled urban growth, and arbitrary traffic and planning regulations have had palpable impacts on mobility patterns.

This article shows that neoliberal spatial boundaries such as satellite compounds and large transport corridors have produced unequal relations of power and inclusivity. As marginalized citizens circumvent such boundaries and construct social solidarities to support their daily livelihoods, they reveal networks of resistance and subversion.

Material infrastructures, deeply embedded in everyday politics and social relations, become key conceptual instruments in understanding how residents negotiate their freedoms in Cairo. Their ability to move from one sphere to another, whether social and cultural, or through a reinterpretation of public and private structures defines their right to the city outside formal governmental institutions.

Introduction

The streets of Cairo play host to the city's pageant of daily life in a uniquely post-Arab Spring, Middle Eastern context. It is in these public realms that people visibly negotiate their everyday lives. This article poses that Cairo's local, or *baladī*[1] streets, often neglected by the state and ill-serviced, offer their residents a spatial reservoir of possibilities, where elements of political subjugation mask a highly mobile and connected social realm. This reading of informality infers that invisible infrastructures of networks and relationships open marginalized spaces to new productive exchanges and lived practices, where expressions of collective identity flourish.

Cairo is a city in flux, characterized by ceaseless intersections of residents who claim their rights to transition and stasis beyond the city's material infrastructure and political will. Flanking the foot of the Nile Delta, Cairo's heaving mass of around 20 million inhabitants overlap and converge within the bounds of the surrounding desert (CAPMAS, Census). This sprawling megacity is arguably the largest on the African continent, housing over a quarter of Egypt's population (The World Bank Group). Yet Cairo's heterogeneous parts are a mosaicked composition: historic districts rub against dense patterns of infor-

mal growth, Haussmann-esque downtown avenues run through post-colonial neighbourhoods and out to grandiose desert enclaves. Connected and segregated by highways, these urban islands are a product of decades of undemocratic governance, urban inequality, social division, exclusionary politics and deep-rooted biases of Egypt's administration, forming isolated nodes rather than a cohesive whole (Dorman 130).

Against such a backdrop, this article seeks to understand how informal communities reinterpret structures of political division as expanded spaces of economic and cultural operation, accessible to residents of limited means. As renowned sociologist Asef Bayat notes, large segments of Cairo's populace are in a constant negotiation between autonomy and integration, carving out self-governance wherever possible, but reliant on the state for security and service provisioning (Bayat, "Globalisation" 79-101) His notion of the "city inside- out" explains that, compelled by physical and socio-economic barriers, residents develop structures which give them the freedom to work, socialize, and live in the public arena (Bayat, "Life as Politics" 12). Similarly, in his writing on urban sociology, AbdouMaliq Simone poses that these junctions where complex

combinations of objects, spaces, persons and practices assemble are a radically open infrastructure (407–429). Such open infrastructures generate extroverted, integrated, public, and permeable urban conditions which encourage a physical two-way exchange of entities and intangible interactions beyond political and structural constraints.

Cairo's Urban Planning Mechanisms
This article intends to disentangle itself from basic assumptions about what is often described as informal development, termed *ashwā'iyyat* in Arabic.[2] These neighbourhoods are estimated to house more than 65% of Greater Cairo's population (Séjourné 17-19) and are characteristic of contemporary Cairo. They have "developed not only independent of government intervention but usually in defiance of established law" (Harris), as an alternative for individuals who find that the cost of abiding by regulations exceeds the benefits. As such, Cairo's built urban fabric and patterns of settlement simultaneously define and are defined by the ability, or inabilities, of its population to participate openly in legal structures. Restrictive building codes and cumbersome bureaucratic procedures to obtain official building permits contribute to the exclusion of most urban middle-lower classes from

formal housing circuits (Piffero, *Struggling for Participation* 5), not just the poor and disenfranchised. These areas counter many economic assumptions, housing a wide spectrum of socio-economic groups rather than a homogenous demographic (Sims 3), often with access to public services and relatively strong land tenure. This is not to say that their services are of the same standard as their formal counterparts (Gerlach 53), generally positioned with inadequate connections to the city at large, on poor-quality desert land and systematically devalued. Despite this, such neighbourhoods are flourishing and almost entirely self-sufficient (Shehayeb, "Advantages of Living in Informal Areas" 37), and Cairo's citizenry have become architects of an incremental, but palpable protest.

Egypt's historic planning mechanisms helped define this trajectory. Nasser's nationalization of the country's assets (Clawson), and the 1961 Agrarian Land Reform (Saab 48; Saad 110) redistributed agricultural land tenure to small landlords (USAID 5). This system, augmented by Egypt's longstanding inheritance customs which apportions land to all heirs, with double shares for sons, (AlSayyad 15), meant that a pattern of unequal subdivisions began to emerge. Turning plots to

residential use became increasingly profitable, and ultimately, former fertile land, whose proximity to the Nile and legacy of sustaining the city was undervalued, was devoured by real estate speculation (Piffero "What Happened to Participation" 53-65). This emergence of a peripheral form of urbanization by private actors ultimately compartmentalized and fractured Cairo's vast urban agglomeration.

President Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, is known for his economic liberalization *infitāḥ* or *Open Door Policy* of 1973, which led to a surge of private Arab and foreign investments in Egyptian infrastructure (Osman 129). Land prices soared as the Egyptian economy moved from production towards maximizing annuity through real estate, fuelled by the remittances of Egyptian workers in the Gulf (El-Batran and Arandel 219). At the same time, the state abandoned its commitment to social housing, which dramatically bolstered land prices (Shehayeb and Zaazaa 12), obfuscating many residents' access to formal markets. City-wide rent control laws were passed (Egypt (GoE), "Law 49/1977"), meaning property owners stopped maintaining existing housing stock in formal areas, accelerating their deterioration and discouraging legal private investment in rental housing (Shehayeb "Self

Governance" 6). Zoning regulations were abolished by a Ministerial Decree in the mid-1980's (Shehayeb and Zaazaa 12), legitimizing the obliteration of existing planned urban fabric.

Inevitably, informal neighbourhoods consolidated throughout the city, cocooned by dense spatial parameters such as congested highways serving large peripheral developments, and neighbouring villages transforming to industrial and service-based economies (Shehayeb, "Self Governance" 6). This fragmented sprawl began to promote an unsustainable over-consumption of the city's seemingly limitless frontier.

Severing Urban Connectivity

A tendency to prioritize functionality, connectivity and profit in Cairo's urban planning means many of the city's local streets are truncated by large transport corridors abutting stagnant spaces. While it is well-known that physical barriers continue to play a major role in dividing cities (CinC 1), less has been noted on the significance of disjointed rhythms of movement. Where modes or speeds of movement are at odds, invisible walls and physical or psychological community severance are generated (Urry). Decades of car-centric urban design in Egypt have reinforced such

mobility patterns, forcing certain people and goods to travel further. Corridors of high speed transit may imply connectivity for some, but also serve to emaciate their adjacent spaces.

Cairo's ring road was a product of the Greater Cairo Planning Agency's grand urban schemes, notably the second Master Plan of 1970 which intended to restrict the physical growth of the city and redirect its future development (Zehner et. al. 18). It has been noted that, "built as a wall, it limits severely the possibly to develop tangential connections to the settlements inside and outside the Ring Road" (Dennis and Séjourné 15), particularly since across Cairo, only 14% of residents own a private car (Tadamun, *Egyptian Constitution*). Indicative of Cairo's current neoliberal arena and in line with Egypt's institutional privileging of the elite, it cuts through working-class districts as a barrier rather than a connector, not built for the residents who exist below. Despite the fact that the freeway passes alongside their balconies, many residents have no direct access to it. A bounding arterial road, it hastens traffic past, offering visibility into the neighbourhoods but limiting accessibility out.

According to urban ethnographer Suzanne Hall, "The double impetus of the […] boundary is that it perceptually attaches to both place and people, not only relegating a negative value to a place, but making it difficult for individuals to leave an area of familiarity to enter into new worlds." (100) Boundaries have greater ramifications than physical segregation as an interplay between systems of power and control over the other. This perpetuates longstanding connotations of the *ashwā'iyyat* in Cairo, and projects it onto neighbourhoods' present realities and future potentials.

Re-interpreting Urban Connectivity

During the vacuum of power in 2011, Egyptians had a new awareness of their ability to hold the state to account through self-organized drives for connectivity and mobility. This was exemplified by the construction of entry and exit ramps on the ring road on Cairo's Western edge by informal community associations. Through a sophisticated means of coordination, publicity, and calls for donations, a significant number of engineers, experts and residents soon grasped the community's vision, offering cash, contributions in kind, labour and expertise. The momentum went well beyond initial plans for a temporary ramp (Nagati and Elgendy 3), and a paid contractor was appointed. The project only took three months, costing around E£1 million, and gained support from the governor and police chief in Giza, who installed a traffic police point at the interchange at the community's request, thus legitimizing what was otherwise a criminal act (Abbas 98).

Such local drives for mobility have continued, even since the ripples of the January 25th Revolution of 2011 have faded. However, the Egyptian grassroots now resort not to politics of collective protest but to the individualistic strategy of "quiet encroachment", tapping into closed systems of municipal provisioning (Bayat, "Social Movements" 24-28). For example, vendors and informal services are increasingly springing up along the edges of the ring road, using improvised solutions for access such as stairs and ramps (Shehayeb, "Cairo's Ring Road" 23). As a result, the community have access to previously inaccessible infrastructures, and therefore greater opportunities for social and economic mobility. This is a natural response of citizens who desire the ability to move beyond certain boundaries and restrictive spatial orders asserted by governmental and societal delineations.

Contained within their bounding conditions, Cairo's typical narrow neighbourhood streets work hard against their limitations despite often lacking lateral connections. Fleets of tuk-tuks connect public interfaces with the inner fabric. These composite machines are an illegal but widespread form of transport that weave malignantly through the Cairo's local streets. Their fine grain networks complement and compensate for inadequate formal state provisioning: a spontaneous and creative response to the state's ineffectiveness in satisfying the basic needs of its populace.

Similarly, the city's ubiquitous microbuses are local, privately owned, and effectively complement the formal bus routes, serving areas where a critical mass of demand guarantees profit. They have expanded their sphere of duty beyond the licensed routes that existed before the revolution. Prices were set according to length and traffic demand by the governorates' traffic and police departments (Metge 27-31). They constituted a major source of revenue for the city, yet lax monitoring has left passengers at the mercy of microbus owner-operators. After fuel prices rose in 2014, microbus drivers increased the prices 50-100%, while the fares for public buses remained the same (Tadamun,

Urban Mobility), showing that existing outside of formal channels can present its own set of challenges.

Due to their lack of timetables or visible destination markers, and the high illiteracy rate in Cairo (CAPMAS, Egypt in Figures 2014), people rely on shouted exchanges with microbus drivers or a system of hand gestures to make sense of this web of transit. Ultimately, these transactions and transit routes are negotiated through social communication, both verbal and visual, creating an accessible and fluid network of signs and associations (Fayed and Issa 11) beyond the limitations of formal structures. This typifies Cairo's strategies of improvisation which alter and open new trajectories and possibilities of connection.

Spatial Disconnection

Spatial segregation is generally viewed as a negative force, imposed on a group of people by economic, religious, racial, infrastructural or political forces (Sennett, Wacquant 165). For example, Cairo's neoliberal powers employ highways, compounds and infrastructural barriers to elevate the elite above other social classes, with divisive implications that epitomize the massive political and social tensions that engulf Egypt. Beginning in the 1990s, Cairo's New Towns began to gain traction

on the city's desert edges, acting as avenues to further the interests and aspirations of the government (Nagati and Elgendy 4). Incorporating perceived symbols of wealth such as integrated shopping malls, businesses began to relocate, including large institutions like the American University in Cairo. Those with the means escaped to these new desert compounds, driven by the pursuit of distinction and the desire to remain within the metropolis but away from pollution, congestion, crowds and the social other. The Cairo 2050 plan of 2008 outlined a vision for the Greater Cairo Region to become a "global city" (Tadamun, *Cairo 2050 Revisited*), with developers promoting lucrative gated communities and a sanitized urban realm, connected by highways (Sims 170–186). This exclusionary citizenship devours diversity and restricts who belongs, where, and under what conditions.

Yet this outlook necessarily disregards the agency of the segregated: sometimes they are perpetrators in their own exclusion, or willingly harness the positioning imposed on them for their advantage. This does not necessarily follow the premise that these aspirations only manifest among the rich: districts such as 6th of October and New Cairo have mid- and

low-income residents. Gated communities cater for those who choose that lifestyle and seek privacy, shunning the benefits of local connectivity in favour of autonomy. These mechanisms of flexible and temporary seclusion or subordination are "a conduit for protection, unification, and cohesion – a sturdy socio-spatial shield, a protective buffer" (Wacquant 164–177).

Local Connectivity

Architecture, the built environment, and lived space in Cairo are the product of social relations, but equally influence the production of social relations themselves. Urban consultant Dina Shehayeb notes that the compact built form of Cairo's historic and informal fabric restricts vehicular access, meaning walking predominates ("Advantages of Living in Informal Areas" 37). This engenders a close work-home proximity and relative self-sufficiency. When comparing popular neighbourhoods Sayyeda Zeinab and Dar Al-Salam with 6th of October, a planned new settlement, neighbourly relations are clearly influenced by spatial form, such as shared responsibility for collective spaces, natural surveillance of streets, and unplanned random encounters (Shehayeb, "Neighbourhood Design" 7-12). On residential streets, this is enhanced through the presence of

ground-floor activity where strangers are easily recognized. As a result, children play unaccompanied by parents and vulnerable segments of society are minded. The qualities of pedestrianized neighbourhoods, uninterrupted by busy vehicular traffic, renders the street network an extension of the home: activities spill out into the public space and streets are traversed by insiders only.

Local streets and their interfaces are where diverse public life is most tangible. These semi-public domains enact different cyclical roles – at once a place of exposure and refuge, a public forum and an extension of the private realm, a place of employment as well as recreation. In informal areas, food carts serve foul and falafel sandwiches in the morning to congregations of labourers waiting to be shuttled out of the area. As the day goes on, small kiosks open, and access nodes steadily fill with shoe-shiners, vendors and tuk-tuks. In the afternoon, employees drift back, and the main routes adopt an atmosphere of leisure: people gather at cafes, and families are drawn into gaudy, ramshackle fun fairs. These rhythms of time and activity that converge and interweave within overlapping spaces can be found where work and leisure intermingle, complementing and sustaining each other.

Most activities in informal settlements are concentrated within the bounds of the neighbourhood, which consequently generates strong familiarities and neighbourhood ties, social regulation and evolving interdependencies through repeated interactions. An empirical study of shopping patterns shows 80% of residents in local neighbourhoods purchased groceries daily, compared to just under 70% in 6th of October where 30% of residents shopped on a weekly basis (Shehayeb, "Neighbourhood Design" 7-12). Additionally, a 2008 GIZ study sample in Boulaq el-Dakrour showed that 100% of residents met all their subsistence needs within the neighbourhood, with 60% of residents walking to work (Shehayeb, "Advantages of Living in Informal Areas" 37). It is worth noting that these studies were pre-revolution, and formally planned neighbourhoods have increasingly seen street vendors and informal markets springing up to meet local demand, as in Haram City (Simcik Arese 1-18).

Local neighbourhoods require a certain informal membership from those who partake in their insular spaces, to grant and gain trust, affirm loyalties, and to respect common social codes. Intimate social formations of a neighbourhood are galvanized by repeated personal contact and

common affinities within local public spaces, which is only possible where walkability and compact urban form prevail. The neighbourhood is a platform through which people are known and know others, made even more pertinent due to the pace and extroversion of the city as a whole, and in light of the external threat from unpredictable security forces or developers. In contrast, high publicness equates to high potential exposure to the outsider: anyone can be an active participant and the spaces are unlikely to be appropriated by a single entity. These streets are generally underused and are fertile ground for negative behaviour (Abdelhalim and Shehayeb, 65). They are viewed as the responsibility of the government (Abdelhalim and Shehayeb, 72), who are reputed to neglect their duty to maintain garbage collection, street lighting, cleaning, and pavement upkeep.

This shows that while connectivity is essential for neighbourhoods to thrive and flourish, to sustain diversity and activity, it doesn't solely rely on physical infrastructure. While, at face value, connectivity is the fluid transfer of bodies from one spatial territory to another, cities also host intricate relations of non-tangible exchange. Amin, in "Lively Infrastructures", theorizes connectivity as more than that

which is delineated by material infrastructure (1-4), defining it instead as thickening of ensembles or fixed territories of belonging. Streets are often understood merely according to their functions of mobility, yet Cairo's informal systems flourish unfettered in ways unseen in exclusionary desert enclaves, reweaving connections throughout the city. Such a reading diminishes the minute details of transitions and tensions between dwelling, work and play, and their accompanying lines of connection, fragile improvisations, and multiple reference points in the city. "This multifunctionality is often overlooked, and streets are usually regarded as mere links in a road network, enabling travel between two or more destinations." (UN Habitat 2). Cairo's local streets instead portray "everyday cosmopolitanism" (Bayat, "Life as Politics" 185–208), where repeated associations and shared sentiments transcend autonomous acts within the community.

As a result, civil society within these tightly knit communities thrives, since much localized action is initiated by self-help networks rather than external NGOs. Cairenes, in their everyday lives, don't always turn to officials, local authorities or the central government for solutions to daily challenges, but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves

and their own communities. Here, the forging of collective identity within these bounds exists as evolved forms of collective representation, such as private actors and civil society organizations (CSOs) who, partly due to neoliberal reforms over the past decades and the emancipating effect of the revolution, have begun to instigate urban change (Abbas 7-25). Local defence leagues, springing up to protect personal territories during the absence of security forces in the wake of the ousting of Mubarak have now evolved into popular committees across the city (Nagati and Elgendy, 2012). Initially smaller entities focussed on street-level security and advocacy, coalitions of proactive citizens realized the power of the collective and are now a viable mode of development outside state-led institutions.

Residents circumvent constraints, assert collective will, utilize resources and claim spaces in different ways than before the revolution to make themselves heard, seen, and felt. This is termed "the art of presence" by Bayat ("Life as Politics" 249), where shared margins turn autonomous citizens into a collective force, whose power lies in their ordinariness. Since notions of identity and belonging are entwined with the spatial, the virtues of familiarity, shared identity, security,

accountability and ownership are all reinforced by communal ties constrained to life in the same bounded space. Boundaries often act as an anchor or reference point for communities to defend the gains carved out for themselves, particularly in a post-revolution context. Making gains through "quiet encroachment" is generally an individual act, irrelevant to the lens of power, but the defense of gains against external threats takes place collectively (Bayat, "Life as Politics" 58). Even so, discontent needs to extend beyond its neighbourhood bounds to exert significant influence (Bayat, "Life as Politics" 168).

Bayat and Dorman explain that in the Arab world, the street is the physical place where dissent is expressed across demographic stratifications. Diversity, or exchange between multiple actors in a non-privileged space, facilitates both convivial, rational debate but also productive encounters of conflict (Miessen 122). It is in such spaces that urban geographer Amin sees the free and conducive mingling of strangers as social and politically engaged subjects ("Animated Space" 241). The revolution showed that people can be compelled and enabled to make themselves heard beyond the limits of their intimate private realms. Through a diverse culmination of demands, Cairenes were united,

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even if only briefly (Al Hussaini). It is this volatile risk that endangers the status quo, prompting repressive control from above, such as the spate of prohibitive laws criminalizing gatherings and protests in public spaces (Bayat, "The Street" 10-17).

Local decision-makers view diverse publics and their cross pollination of ideas and energies as a threat to be contained in a desire for a submissive populace (Elsheshtawy 297). "Public space" as a recognized urban component was overlooked in the 2014 Constitution, Egypt's fundamental law (Egypt (GoE) *Constitution*), and deliberate assemblage in Cairo is now prohibited to help maintain security and order[3]. Whereas before, community associations were the formal route for action, they are now suppressed by tools of closure[4] which prohibit the establishment and registration of community associations and neighbourhood committees. Accordingly, the local street as a primary public domain takes on a whole new understanding in its present context, where residents are often more reluctant to form visible associations that could further their collective wellbeing. However, passive networks, cocooned within the confines of local neighbourhoods, have a latent energy which can quickly transform

into action when faced with a common threat.

Conclusion

While this article has considered the popular interpretation of connectivity as an ideal planning mechanism for successful, global and inclusive cities, a line of thinking often expounded by urban theorists, it has also considered the more contentious view of spatial boundaries as a necessary, and constructive, counterpart. These are interdependent and layered forces, which enhance and define each other. On every scale, there is the desire for autonomy, but also integration – physically, socially, culturally and politically. Marginalized entities tend to function as much as possible outside the boundaries of the state, producing neighbourhoods of incremental adaptations over time, and shaped by the particularities of local needs. Successful streets rely on these networks of socially-shared understandings that are created, communicated, and enforced within their confines.

Neoliberal spatial boundaries have the potential to differentiate, individualize, and dislocate inhabitants, to weaken traditional ties, and to break down extended family relations (Bayat, "Life as Politics" 188). These public space and infrastruc-

tures that are overdetermined, and do not leave room for the affordances of new and improvised social relations, are inherently closed and unsustainable. Yet, this article has demonstrated that when political mechanisms aren't truly open to the citizenry, residents rely on spaces and streets that allow an assertion of Kevin Lynch's five principles of spatial rights: the right of presence, right of use and action, right of appropriation, right of modification and right of disposition (205-207). Referring to Lefebvre's seminal text, *Right to the City*, this call for spatial presence is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources; it is a common right to urban life, dependent on the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization (Harvey). In Cairo, where informality is routine, it is clear that communities invariably find ways to accommodate these rights outside of formal structures.

Notes

[1] *baladī*- Egyptian Arabic: meaning local, with a lower-class connotation

[2] *ashwā'iyyat* – This means 'random' or 'haphazard', and is used interchangeably to mean 'slum'.

[3] Despite the Egyptian constitution stating, 'All individuals have the right to express their opinion' (Egypt (GoE), "Article 65" *Constitution*) and, 'Citizens have the right to organize public meetings, marches, demonstrations and all forms of peaceful protest […] without the need for prior notification. Security forces may not attend, monitor or eavesdrop on such gatherings.' (Egypt (GoE), "Article 73" *Constitution*), this is not the lived reality for many.

[4] The new law of 2013, 'The Right to Public Meetings, Processions and Peaceful Demonstrations' forbids any meeting 'of a public nature' of more than 10 people without the prior consent of authorities, setting heavy prison sentences for anyone so much as attempting to 'influence the course of justice.' (Egypt (GoE), "Law 107" *Constitution*)

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