Reading place: the Cultural Park for Children

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Abstract  Built on former agricultural and desert land, contemporary Cairo, the Egyptian capital, constitutes a densely laid urban fabric with few spaces in between. These spaces play a vital role in the public life of Cairenes. This paper approaches this paradox of Cairo public space through an intra-disciplinary approach that draws on architectural theory, social study and philosophy of place. The main aim is to develop a framework that enables architects and urban designers to approach the multiplicities and dynamics of place, which will help enhance the quality of urban space and public space in particular. It explores models of place developed by Canter (empirically based, 1977) and Relph (phenomenological, 1976); Markus and Tschumi (architectural, 1980s). The proposed model abstracts place into people, place, and people-place relation(s) that oscillates between meaning and event; and emphasizes the role of the event in approaching the dynamics of place. Simultaneously, the relations between the elements of the model are represented through an oscillation between conjunction and disjunction. This abstract model is then used to reflect on ‘The Cultural Park for Children, Al-Sayyida Zeinab’ a case study of public space in Cairo. The park reflects a likely agreement between national and international conceptions of Cairo’s image; however, it reflects a disagreement between the architect and the manager about the concept of a park and its role towards society.

Keywords  Public Space, Post-structuralism, Cairo, Deconstruction, Relations
Introduction

Cairo has grown into a high density, overcrowded city with a population over 15.5 million. The last two decades witnessed a growing concern, on both the national and international level, to relieve the city from pollution, environmental and social stressors (El-Messiri, 2004). This set off a number of projects, which involved the development of urban parks; the upgrading a number of existing gardens and parks; the cleaning and the beautification of other public spaces, like squares and pavements. However, Cairenes (the people of Cairo) continue to seek more space and air. They appropriate particular public spaces as well as other informal settings for their use (Battesti, 2006; Rodenbeck, 2005; Salama, 2004; Singerman & Amar, 2006). Whereas, many formal public spaces remain relatively abandoned and receive few Cairene visitors.

This dilemma of Cairo space has pre-occupied many scholars. The various dimensions of public space, identified as spatial, historic, socio-cultural, political and economic, and institutional are explored. These studies reveal a growing tension between the different dimensions, as well as the dominance of the historic dimension. This dominance is manifested in the ‘monolithic’ representation of the Islamic city image, which was founded in 969 AD, and overrides the precedent historic epochs as well as the modern city (Abu-Lughod, 1971; Elsheshtawy, 2004). This dominance helped to link the city to reflections and pre-conceptions detached from the surrounding reality; and accordingly, influenced the emerging relations and patterns of power in Cairene public space.

Interestingly, Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher, reflected on the multiplicity of the Egyptian identity through his lecture ‘Egyptian References: Origin, Orientalism and theory of Deconstruction’, on his visit to Cairo in February 2000. Derrida considered the meaning of place, and the complexities of the Cairene people in relation to Cairo’s setting (Al-Ahram-Weekly, 2000). The contribution of Derrida is particularly inspiring, in that his deconstruction project could help to approach these multiplicities and complexities. In addition, Derrida’s work both influenced and was influenced by architecture theory and practice through his collaboration with Tschumi and Eisenman in Parc La Villette, France. The deconstruction project is used to reflect on and question the inconsistencies within the

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theoretical and empirical study of place. It identifies the potentials of breaking pre-established and conventional relations and stresses the need to explore new relations.

Towards a model of place

Earlier studies of place have considered a three-fold model, which have mainly referenced, either directly or indirectly, models of place developed by David Canter and Edward Relph (Groat, 1995a). Both models were introduced in the late 70s and further developed by the mid 80s through environmental psychology and human geography respectively (Sime, 1995). The similarities between the two models, despite the fact that they were developed through different disciplines and epistemological backgrounds, is noticeable and has attracted the attention of many researchers (Groat, 1995b; Groat & Despres, 1991; Sime, 1995). [Canter’s model] of Place is the result of relationships between actions, conceptions and physical attributes’ (Canter, 1977 p.158-9). Relph’s model of place constitutes three intertwined elements (Sime, 1995); the ‘physical features or appearance, observable activities and functions, and meanings or symbols’ (Relph, 1976 p.61).

The two models introduce three interrelated, intersecting elements of place that are irreducible to one another. Accordingly, place is abstracted into place (physical attributes and features), people (actions, activities and functions); and people-place relation (meaning and conceptions given by people to place), Fig. 1. This model is used as a reference to further explore and reflect on place literature and models.

Interestingly, Tschumi introduced another three-fold place description through a deconstructive architectural approach. For Tschumi, place constituted space, program, and disjunction (Tschumi, 2001). A quick reading of Tschumi could reflect on the apparent similarities in reference to the proposed abstract model. Place is a space envelope that expands and contracts to accommodate a continuously changing program. People are presented through the architectural program. And the people-place relation is the disjunction. However, there exists a key inconsistency in this reading.
The people-place relation presents meaning and conception given by people to place as described by Relph's and Canter's model. However, Tschumi refuses any relation between the expected place and expected use. ‘[…] Architecture [place] is defined as the […] confrontation of spaces and activities’ (Tschumi, 2001 p.4). The in between people-place is the ‘disjunction’ that rejects ‘the traditional cause-and-effect’ relation. People and place are hence mutually exclusive entities that sometimes become interdependent through ‘juxtaposition and superposition’ (Tschumi, 2001). Accordingly, space, program, and disjunction present three independent elements of place that neither interrelate nor intersect. Hence, the anticipated relations between the elements in the proposed abstract model of place are weakened and destabilized.

Simultaneously, this paper explores the architectural discourse of place through the works of Markus (1986) and Tschumi (1983) who also presented place as a three-fold account. Markus considered architecture as ‘primarily social’, carrying meaning to society in general and users in particular (Markus, 1986). Architectural [place] involves function (user activity program), form (style and geometry) and space (place morphology and organization). These three entities are, 'in principle, independent of each
other’. However, there is a, ‘typical conjunction of function, form and space’ that forms a clear relationship between them. This relation is a social product rather than an architectural one. Tschumi, on the other hand, considered architecture as ‘part of a complex process of transformational relations’ (Tschumi, 2001 p.181), rather than a composition of form and function. Architectural place is ‘the combinations of spaces, events, and movements without any hierarchy or precedence among these concepts’ (Tschumi, 2001p.255). ‘Disjunction’ presents the relation(s) or non-relation(s) between these mutually exclusive entities. However this ‘disjunction’ should not be taken in opposition to the ‘conjunction’ relation in Markus’s model. Markus’ conjunction entails the independency of the elements of place; as well as their simultaneous occurrences, where, ‘the one causes the other’ (Blackburn, 1996). Disjunction also entails the independency of place elements however it rejects the cause-effect relation between them. Through disjunction, place entities do not intersect, they affect each other when, and only when they interact. ‘… an architectural element only functions by colliding with a programmatic element, with the movement of bodies, or whatever’ (Tschumi, 2001 p.213). The disjunction relations and non-relations vary between indifference, total independence of place entities, reciprocity, total interdependent between them, and conflict, where one element contradicts the other (Tschumi, 2001 p.159).

Markus’ and Tschumi’s models are projected onto the proposed abstract model of place. Both models reflected a two-fold place description not three. On the one hand, Markus emphasised the physical elements of place detailing form and space; and people were inscribed in the place function as the ‘activities which are in progress … inferred from labeling … or equipment of spaces’ (Markus, 1986 p.468). Tschumi, on the other hand, emphasized the program (people) detailing body movement in space, and events within the social and political realm, and considered the philosophy of (place) rather the physical attributes. The people-place relations in both models, conjunction and disjunction, are presented as an underlying relation(s)/ non-relation(s) between the elements of place rather than an element. This detailing re-questions the abstract model. While form and space are attributes of place, and body movement presents people, the event exists outside the abstract model of place. It lies within the wider context of place, the socio-cultural, political, etc. Also, people-place relation(s) in
between conjunction and disjunction re-questions meaning in place. For Canter and Relph, people give meaning to place. For Markus, place carries meaning to people. However, this meaning is socially produced and hence could not be represented as well identified element. For Tschumi, there is ‘no sense/ no meaning… meaning… is a function of interpretation’ (Tschumi, 2001 p.200-3); i.e. people give meaning to place through interpretation.

Based on the analysis of these models, we propose an analytic model of place that constitutes people and place, and questions meaning and event. It is anticipated that meaning and event show two levels of place. Meaning lies within the abstract place, in between people and place. And the event emerges from the dynamic relation(s) of space that relates to the social, political, economic, etc. The relation(s) in between this model do(es) not present a single linear relation at a specific place and time, but multiple relations, conjunctions and disjunctions through space and time. This understanding of place, is not limited to the physical space nor the social, it is dynamic, changing and constitutes multiple relations, and processes (Nilsson F, 2004). This analytic model of place is hence used to reflect on a case study of public space in Cairo.

![Fig. 2 Proposed Analytic Model of Place](http://research.ncl.ac.uk/forum)

**A tale of Cairene public space**

The Cultural Park for Children was built in the old historic district of Al-Sayyida Zeinab near Ibn Tulun mosque in Cairo (fig. 3). The project
involved the design and development of an old degenerated Park and Abu Al-Dahab Street, the northern boundary of the park. The Cultural Park for Children was designed by the Egyptian Architect Abdelhalim Ibrahim Abdelhalim. Significantly, the project won both a national award from the Egyptian Ministry of Culture in 1983 and an international award for architecture by the Aga Khan in 1992. This reflects a probable agreement between the national and international conception of Cairo space, image and architecture.

Fig. 3 The Culture Park for Children

However, a significant change in the park is evident today. The realities of the park’s everyday life, and Abu Al-Dahab Street in particular, shows indifference to the original design scheme, creating conflicting community activity and isolating the park from Al-Sayyida Zeinab context. This change is also manifested through a conflict between the architect and the manager of the park (Hassan, 1996), where the manager intervened in the design and made several changes to the park. In order to understand the story that the park is telling us through these changes and conflicts, this paper will attempt to reconstruct the conversation between the actors involved in the park, (Fig. 4). The main actors are defined as the architect and the manager. Drawing on Foucault’s perspective on ‘institutions with knowledge and authority’ (Horrocks & Jevtic, 1997 p.87) we argue that the architect claims professional knowledge of place; while the manager claims administrative knowledge of place. A secondary role is played by the award committees who claim authoritative professional knowledge to evaluate and award the place, and the press who claims the authority of national representation of place. Also, the researcher plays a role in this conversation, through the
The proposed analytic model of place, defined as people, place, meaning and event is hence used to reflect on and explore the reading and representation of place. However, the research is neither attempting to defend or criticize the designer or manager nor to explore the success and/or failure of place. It is rather, concerned with the relations between the idea and reality – the architectural concept and the product; rather than the production process. It should also be taken into consideration that the user is not directly involved in this discourse. The actors’ reading and representation of the user is considered more important in this context. I.e. we are approaching the conceptual and end-product rather than the production process of the park.

It is interesting to reflect on the variant names of the park, used by these actors, as they reveal different readings of the park. The official name of the project is the ‘Cultural Park for Children’; the park designer mostly refers to ‘the community park’; while the manager simply describes it as ‘the child’s park’. In between ‘community’ and ‘child’ lies the conflict between the architect and the manager about the role of the park and its functional
appropriateness. The ‘community park’ reflects the architect’s interest in the
development of this community through the projection of his theoretical
background; the park, ‘[…] gave me the opportunity to test out my theories’
(Abdelhalim, 1988), which is braced by the architect’s belief in the park as
‘an educational instrument’ (Saleh, 1989). It is worth noting that the project
was granted the Aga Khan Award based on the community involvement in
the design process rather than an end product. The manager on the other
hand showed more interest in the child’s everyday activities in the park. In
other words, the architect read people through the wider social context of
place, community, while, the manager read people as child’s activities within
place.

As the architect walks through place, he sees the minaret of Ibn Tulun
mosque, 879 AD standing in between the old, dense, and poorly maintained
district of Al-Sayyida Zeinab. He perceives the city as poor and decaying,
and the monuments standing frozen in time. In other words the past is
creative whereas the present is a remnant of that past (Abdelhalim, 1988,
1989). He identifies the objects, which the place contains, landmarks,
minarets, land patterns, existing palm trees from the Old Park, etc. and
identifies, ‘the task of the designer is to disentangle these containers of order
and discover their underlying geometry’ (Abdelhalim, 1988 p.143). In other
words, the architect identified place as a container of physical attributes of
the past.

On the other hand, the manager walks through her old neighbourhood; her
house lies behind the park. She remembers the old park, ‘a large beautiful
garden that contained a collection of rare plants’. She recites the
deterioration of the park through the years since the war in 1967 when air-
raid shelters were built in the park, which continued in the following years.
The manager also considers the physical setting of place as part of her
identity and childhood experience as former resident. She recognizes the
successful function of the project that turned a slum area to a park and
removed many illegal activities. However, she accuses the architect of not
understanding the nature (meaning) of the place, and that he wanted to build
another frozen monument rather than develop the area. For her, the
(administrative) meaning of place is functional. Her interventions in the park
involved adopting the place for children needs, providing shaded areas and
indoor activity spaces which were not included in the architectural program; removing sharp and hard finishing materials provided by the architect and considered unsuitable for a children’s play area. The architect considers the symbolic meaning of the park as a relation between the spiral minaret of Ibn Tulun and the child as a symbol of growth. The spiral is hence considered the main theme of the park.

The architect introduces the event through a ‘Building Ceremonial’, which involved building up a full scale model in wooden poles and canvas of the fountain and exhibits, whereas platforms and terraces were marked on the ground. Dancers, musicians and artists were invited to participate as well as the community of Al-Houd Al-Marsoud. The intent was to show the community how the project would be; this is not part of Egyptian building culture. Buildings under construction are covered until opening day. The building ceremony thus, presented an architectural event that considered the building process rather than the realities of place in the everyday life. While the manager’s event considered the functional everyday life of the park. The controversy of the event lies in its definition as an attribute of the dynamic relations of place within its wider context, which implies the existent of multiple events and/or the multiple existent of the event. This is evident in the reflection on both the architect’s and manager’s perception of place as event. Both acknowledged the past of the place and intrinsic value of its heritage. The architect embedded the event into this past, place is a container of monument and heritage elements, community rituals, and traditional building ceremonies. This heritage was defined in relation to the Islamic foundations of the City. However, the relations between place, people and event(s) through everyday life are minimised; that place can exist alone like a frozen monument in place and time. On the other hand, the manager embedded the event in the place identity that considered the potential of future development of the place. Place was not decaying but attached to the past image of a better quality urban space that could be achieved.

Reflections

The proposed model of place addressed people-place relations on two levels, the abstract and the contextual. The abstract place considered the
inside relations between people and place. The contextual place considered
the insertion of people-place relations within the outside socio-cultural,
economic context. The study of the conflict between the designer and
manager of the ‘Cultural Park for Children’ reflected on these inside/
outside relations. The manager considered the inside relations between
the child-park, while the designer considered the outside relation(s) between the
park and social community. However, the realities of the park relation(s)
were revealed in-between the two perspectives of place. The relation(s) and
non-relation(s) oscillated between people and place, meaning and event,
inside and outside place. There are no defined elements nor relations but
oscillations between place entities and relation(s). This reading asserted the
interpretative conflict through people, place, people-place relation(s) in
between meaning and event. Both meaning and event showed as
independent however, they also demonstrated close relation between them
that requires further exploration and study. This post-reading of place could
help to confront the monolithic perspective of Cairo-space through blurring
the boundaries of a well-defined place. Each perception is continuously
engaged and interacting with other readings through the oscillation of place
definitions and relations.

Note

An earlier version was presented in IAPS conference 2008, Urban
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