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Legitimizing Everyday Tradition: The Spatial Narrative of Modernity in Cairene Old Quarters

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This article examines the path being taken toward legitimizing a modern spatial quality in Bulaq, one of Cairo's oldest quarters. It documents how its historic fabric, elements of which date to the fourteenth century, is being progressively refashioned according to policies and visions that have engendered debate about the management and control of heritage. Specifically, the article questions the extent to which official attempts to create a new spatial quality in the quarter conflict with more popular appreciation of and concern for the quarter's long history, traditional qualities, and structure. By investigating government correspondence and meeting reports, and through interviews with area residents, the article seeks to uncover the divergent meanings of legitimation with regard to officially "undesirable" areas of authentic urban fabric in the city.

> Tradition may come up in the public discourse of lost heritage or in efforts to revive
> and invent custom; tradition is wrapped up in talk of technological and social change
> and the search for solutions to various political problems facing groups and nations
> cognizant of the force of tradition in the connectedness of citizens or members.
>
> — Simon Bronner[1]

In 2007, the late architect Zaha Hadid published a proposal for a radical and iconic tower to be built on the Nile riverbank in Cairo. The sinuous, 70-story Nile Tower, containing residences and a hotel, was to occupy a site on the periphery of a declining old quarter, Bulaq Abul Ela.[2] Hadid's emphasis on "dizzying" aspects of mass, appearance, and visual form, however, displayed an almost total lack of engagement with Bulaq's existing urban configuration and social characteristics.

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The design was subsequently criticized as an abuse of Bulaq's historic urban quality, which had already been compromised by a series of ill-conceived government planning initiatives. Such undermining of the quarter's collective integrity had apparently liberated Hadid's inspiration to gift Bulaq a "genuine" design based on a dubious reading of the authentic complexity and spatial quality of Cairo's old quarters. Whatever the rationale, the massive discontinuity between the proposed tower and its context remained unjustified.

Although it was never built, Hadid's proposal and projects like it evoke trends in modern design discourse such as described in Kim Dovey's study of the Melbourne waterfront in *Fluid City*, whereby remote powers of globalization shape the future of living spaces.[3] In Cairo, such proposals also raise questions related to authenticity and the continued relevance of everyday traditional life and built environments.

Emerging from concern for both social relations and individual experience, new modes of thought about urbanism began to bring new formal qualities to cities toward the end of the twentieth century. One manifestation was a distinct brand of postmodern metafiction that exploited the rich beliefs and rituals of tradition. In *Explaining Traditions*, the folklorist Simon Bronner, however, contended that in many such cases the idea of tradition as "lived experience" was being inappropriately extended to cultural practices without fixed rules, in which variableness and multiformality were regarded as the main sources of complexity.[4] Such an attitude was further encouraged by people's nostalgic attitude toward tradition at moments of crisis, when they intuitively seek to flee into the past to reconnect with renowned practices and places.

Such criticisms, however, highlight the relational aspect of tradition: how it bridges the past and the present. Tradition is not a relic set in stone, but rather, as the historian Daniel Boorstin has noted, pliable — a resource for future renewability.[5] According to Bonner, this very flexibility creates space for extended "social interactions influenced by and generative of varied cultural practices."[6] And since this derivative quality seemingly has no "end," Nezar AlSayyad has argued there is a "need to re-evaluate [tradition's] utility as a repository of authentic and new ideas to be handed down or preserved."[7] In particular, he advocated interrogating tradition as a reaction to modernity and as its antithetical other.[8]

As a constitutive counterpart to modernity, tradition may thus be seen as socially constructed according to an assembled vision of "newness" — its power legitimized chiefly by inaugurating a historical chronology that cross-references the new against the old. While modernity tends to navigate the future to determine its exceptional and extraordinary conditions and opportunities, tradition, according to Bonner, thus implies "an examination of what went on before that is ordinary and social, in contrast to the modern image of accelerated change and chronic aloneness."[9]

According to AlSayyad, however, even though tradition is typically studied within authentic environments that rep-resent real everyday practices, its consumption has generated the global phenomenon of hyper-environments, whose association with physical places results in profoundly intangible experiences.[10] Retrospectively, he claimed, one might also observe how nations seeking to represent themselves as modern have dismissed past traditions as a stenography of unlettered practices, while privileged communities may similarly regard tradition as a risk to their social position and control.[11] Thus, as in the case documented here, governments may employ a rhetoric of modernity to expunge layered representations of old and traditional cultural dynamics and social settings that appear to contradict their aspirations.

In a regional context, meanwhile, the discourse of tradition and everyday life in Africa and the Middle East, with regard to spatial transformations, political economies and state policies, has typically been framed in relation to efforts to rebrand the old in the service of various contemporary ideologies.[12] Sociologists, political scientists, and urbanists have thus researched how colonial and postcolonial powers safeguarded past traditions in cities of the region.[13] They have also uncovered how these places survived as a result of the efforts of vibrant communities to construct symbolic representations of collective identity.[14] Moroccan cities during French colonialism, for example, were thus used as experimental sites for realizing French/Western ideals of urbanism (e.g., modernist formal organization and zoning). Yet, at the same time, attempts were made to conserve their distinctive "Oriental" identities.[15] Likewise, one could point to how aspects of Cairo's traditional spatial quality were developed in the early nineteenth century as a superficial imitation of Western urbanism set against tradition and traditional structures. Muhammad 'Ali's early attempts at urban design thus showcased the transformation of building facades, while leaving the organization of lived space and the integrity of local communities relatively untouched.

There has already been considerable scholarship on these issues in relation to the city of Cairo.[16] This and similar work has typically studied how space forms and ultimately produces identitarian groups within different communites. Most such research interweaves with Michel de Certeau's notion of "everyday life."[17] However, these studies sometimes evade full engagement with the spatial experiences and practices of these places. One work that has added much in this area is Evelyn Early's *Baladi Women of Cairo*, a detailed monograph providing an empirical investigation of the multifaceted nature of traditional daily life in Cairo — particularly, of the traditional, or *baladi*, culture of its low-income communities.[18]

Interestingly, Early argued that there was a fairly ambivalent quality to the binary relation between tradition and modernity in most official sociocultural structures. Meanwhile, actual traditions, norms and values were exhibited through practices like running a household, raising children, socializing, and worshipping, and through cultural perceptions related to gender and sometimes even black-gown dress codes.[19]

Other scholars, like Farha Ghannam, have described how ordinary residents may adjust modern urban spaces as part of their daily survival tactics when affected by top-down social planning, such as when forcibly relocated to new neighborhoods.[20] Asef Bayat's work on squatter communities in Cairo and Tehran has described related practices as "movements in their own right," which represent a form of "collective" resistance.[21] Hence, the related question might be posed: Can tradition inform the production of local policies, plans, and intervention strategies that might sustain the historic fabric of cities as living places?

This article will address this issue by explaining how traditions related to lived experience and the production of the built environment may be legitimated as an apparatus of political and social contestation. It further investigates how this process intersects with the right to produce and/or reproduce identities celebrating everyday practices and qualities of life. In particular, the case examined illustrates how the spatial quality of an authentic Cairene built environment was constructed and thereafter altered, transformed and rejected. As a case of raw instrumentality, it further documents how governments and other powerful institutions may seek to pursue programs of urban renewal despite voices of resistance. A quality of legitimacy, however, only attends such efforts when these agencies are seen to communicate with members of the community they serve. The argument presented here, therefore, is that planning institutions, when interested only in efficiency and effectiveness, may actually be seen as obstructing the interests of the very people by whom they have been entrusted with the management of valuable historic quarters of Cairo.

CONTEXTUALIZING MEMORY AND TRADITION IN BULAQ

The city of Cairo had spread between the old Fatimid wall and the Nile, and the river had conveniently receded and allowed the new port of Bulaq and a whole colony of houses to be formed on what had been the Nile bed till the wreck of the good ship Elephant *helped to make a sand bank, called Elephant's Island (gezierat el-Fil) which altered the river's course and provided an excellent building site.*

— Sidney Lane-Poole[22]

Literature on the sensory quality of traditional environments has focused on the meanings and memories of places as entrenched in individual experience, rather than through connections to particular symbolic structures.[23] Indeed, the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre claimed that monuments reinforce an individual's affiliation and attachment to society, a force that may powerfully contradict personal experience.[24]

The value of tradition in the built environment thus relies on the ability of individuals to generate strong bonds with places through personal experience and social communications.[25] Such bonding is mostly emotional; and to the extent that it comes to define the individual, it occurs over time.[26] Eventually, however, a person's psychological and spiritual perceptions translate into an enduring stream of cultural behaviors and attitudes rooted in the environment. Thus, people consciously direct their interaction with physical settings to maintain their needs, accessibility, and social networks. According to Kevin Lynch, this "not only allows people to function effectively but is also a source of emotional security, pleasure and understanding."[27]

The tight and tangled alleys of old Cairo may be seen as conducive to this type of experience. For centuries they provided an integrated sense of safety and social intimacy for their residents that secured for them an immense level of fortification against the outside world. This condition was particularly evident in the old area known as Bulaq. Here the spirit of old buildings and the essence of streets filled with vendors and public life have all been emblematic of tradition in place, as this quality has been reproduced across time through physical structures with lifespans longer than that of any particular individual.

The history of Bulaq goes back to the period of Mamluk rule in the fourteenth century when the area, created by a shift in the course of the Nile, was developed as Cairo's new port. By the fifteenth century, it had become a wealthy quarter, filled with elegant warehouses, religious structures, and merchant lodgings, through which, among other things, passed shipments of spices and coffee destined for Europe (FIGS.1,2).

In the early nineteenth century, this historic area was transformed by the addition of small-scale workshops and industries such as printing and metal-working shops that supported the rebuilding of Cairo (FIG.3). At the time it became home to a mixed population of rural migrants, who came to Cairo from all parts of Egypt to work on Muhammad 'Ali's modernization projects.

A further era of change arrived during the first decades of the twentieth century, as evidenced by constant debate within the city's main planning agency, the Ministry of Public Works, as to the extent to which Western culture should be allowed to impinge on local traditions. The focus of Egyptian society at the time was on acquiring the same level of affluence and culture as other developed nations. For the first time, buildings in Bulaq adhered to Classical principles of clarity, symmetry and regularity, with different degrees of modernity were reflected in the simplification of ornamental motifs, following Neoclassical trends from Europe (FIG.4).[28]

President Gamal Abdel Nasser's (1956–1970) industrialization policies brought further change to the quarter in the 1960s. Initially, this took the form of a new influx of workers from rural areas, who were employed at a series of large new
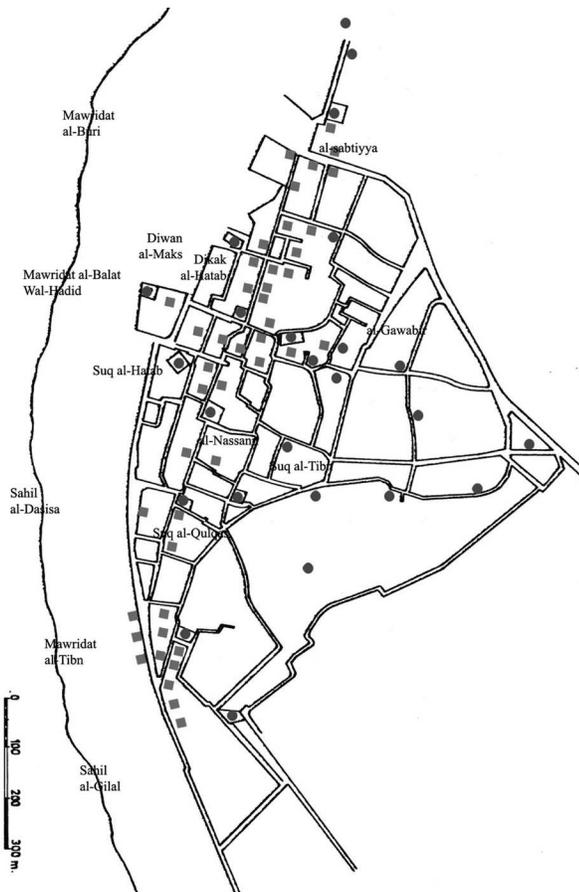
FIGURE 1. *Mosques and* wikalah*(s) in Bulaq near the port of Bulaq. Drawing by author after image in N. Hanna,* An Urban History of Bulaq in the Mamluk and Ottoman Periods *(Cairo: The America University in Cairo, 1983).*

industrial complexes nearby. But the quarter's residential character was even further altered following construction of social housing blocks in Ramlet Bulaq.[29] Built according to Soviet models, these were initially regarded as providing an image of prosperity and order, housing relocated families from the city's Arab al Mohamaddy slums in identical, rectilinear blocks. Following the tenets of modernism, such housing was being reproduced around the globe at the time. A notable example was the Pruitt-Igoe public housing complex in St. Louis, which was completed in 1956. However, this originally middle-class complex was later condemned as a "racially segregated" scheme that echoed "a failure of architecture, a failure of policy and a failure of society."[30] The repetitive, out-of-context structures of Ramlet Bulaq soon faced similar criticism with respect to their form, style, and pattern of use (**FIG.5**).

Bulaq's long history of social and demographic transformation has aroused the fascination of social researchers, who have studied its Christian population[31]; the position of women there[32]; and its remarkable urban morphology during the Mamluk era.[33] However, since the early 1980s, its western edge, along the Nile, has become the site of a series of multistory commercial towers with separate and secure means of access, such as the Cairo Plaza towers. These today stand in stark contrast to the older organic fabric of Bulaq's interior sections. The current urban scene is thus hybrid, consisting of a growing quarter of modern residential and commercial structures along the Nile, which abut areas of dense, lowrise, originally fourteenth-century fabric deprived of the context and symbolism that once provided the identity of the place (**FIG.6**).

Despite its currently degraded state, however, the formerly glamorous quality of the traditional Bulaq built environment may still be appreciated, owing to buildings, streets

FIGURE 2. *Mosque of Sinan Pasha, Cairo, Egypt. Image © Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford (EA.CA.4129 K.A.C. Creswell).*

FIGURE 3. *Small-scale workshops occupying the lower level of houses during the nineteenth century. Maison Bonfils, photographer. Une rue à Boulac / Bonfils [image taken between 1867 and 1899]. Retrieved Feb.19, 2017, from the Library of Congress, https:// www.loc.gov/item/2004668085/.*

and monuments that still permit a dynamic reciprocal relationship between physical structures and people. The formal characteristics that distinguish the neighborhood thus still allow it to transmit cultural values across generations.[34] Such evidence of the past reinforces national identity and traditional value systems, signifying why architecture may become so significant during periods of ideological change or conflict.[35] However, historic structures themselves cannot inexplicably interconnect experiences in a way that empowers memory.[36] Architecture and place can only operate as animated cultural products, produced by the practices of individuals in response to their shared social needs. As Lefebvre has pointed out, this creates the possibility that they will be subject to interpretation, distortion, disjunction or substitution.[37]

The significance of Bulaq's spatial qualities, in this sense, may only be understood by accurately documenting how each historical layer has been conceived, composed, and lived. This in turn allows it to be appreciated as a living continuum of coherent urban form. Typological qualities of the urban grain thus reveal how each layer is distinguished by a certain capacity for change. This has allowed the quarter to absorb, transform, and adapt to manipulations of its physical elements without disturbing its underlying structure. Coherence was thus maintained through history by means of incorporating, adapting, and altering previous typologies according to the changing needs of an expanding population.

Bulaq, however, could not survive unscathed through the waves of iconoclasm that accompanied the discourse of urban modernization. These presented the traditional built environment as dated, hazardous, and insecure, and demanded that municipal powers be used to refashion it in a modern image. In Cairo, this discourse was driven by an official apparatus established in 1960 to manage such practices. And from 1966 to 2005, three renewal schemes were developed and approved, which ignored Bulaq's distinctive and invaluable traditional structures and heritage. These initiatives were formulated in a vacuum of opposing cultural arguments to save the quarter and its monuments. However, for political and

FIGURE 4. *Neoclassical architecture in Bulaq.   Photo by author.*

financial reasons, none of them was ever completely executed, leaving large areas of the quarter in a state of neglect and deterioration. These schemes were eventually merged with an attempt to integrate Cairo into a new global political economy, albeit one that dismissed the discourse of heritage.

The most inclusive of the three efforts came in 1979, during the administration of Anwar Sadat, and involved the relocation of five thousand residents of the quarter from run-down residences to new social housing on the city's outskirts.[38] Moving the residents was a bid to redraw the map of Cairo's waterfront with prestigious commercial projects, wide streets, and highrise towers, and so display an engineered image of a new, youthful city. Despite its advanced planning ideas, however, political and economic difficulties blocked full realization of the scheme. It was eventually replaced in 2005 by a new plan that gave more specialized attention to a limited area along the Nile riverfront. Throughout these interventions, however, Bulaq's residents maintained a noticeable degree of solidarity — even as the area was divided into two distinct realms, with the minority super-rich occupying the edge and the majority super-poor occupying the center.

Throughout this effort, planning initiatives consistently overlooked the inherited culture, traditions, and ingrained physical image of Bulaq as a popular authentic quarter. Today they can be evaluated as embodying two intertwined institutional failures. The first reflects how urban remaking

FIGURE 5. *The Ramlet Bulaq social housing scheme built in 1966.   Photo by author.*

FIGURE 6. *The old (Sinan Pasha mosque), and the new (Cairo Plaza towers). Photo by author.*

globally, and in the case of Cairo specifically, has suffered a conflict of vision related to the dual discourse of tradition and modernization. The second involves the lack of full understanding of the role of planning institutions. This may ultimately be attributed to vacillations in government power and authority, which have had an erosive effect on its efficacy.

REGULATORY CONTROL OVER OLD QUARTERS

For their part, Egyptian planning institutions have struggled to articulate either a distinct rationale for protecting old, traditional quarters or overarching strategies for the long-term improvement of their physical quality. Part of the problem is that laws addressing the development of particular old quarters have lacked supporting consultation, feedback, or understanding of local needs. Planning frameworks likewise lack reference to academic studies that might provide a consistent method for scrutinizing, defining and assessing these needs. In stark contrast to comparable European practices, local planning in Egypt does not entail social studies or public consultation. And despite its long history and association with European models, Egyptian planning practice has made only slow progress toward an effective and up-to-date structure

of legislation. Indeed, it was not until 2009 that planning frameworks started to incorporate concern for such policy drivers as social control, economic growth, and spatial quality. The need to achieve the latter has somehow specifically been underestimated in the practice of redevelopment in Cairo.

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, there were no formal efforts to efficiently manage the growth of Cairo. Indeed, the modernization project of Khedive Ismail was the first formal initiative that sought to recognize and regulate mixed activities and land uses within the same quarter.[39] But this scheme did not seek to address the city's existing urban problems. Rather, it aimed to regulate new quarters in imitation of those in nineteenth-century European cities. This first instance of planning control in Egypt was thus a reproduction of models from elsewhere, instead of a self-developed local strategy. In addition, since this effort was applied both to architectural and planning concerns, it led to criticism from Europeans living in or visiting the city that local authorities were merely replicating European models to the detriment of the distinctive character and traditional quality of Old Cairo.

The built fabric of the old city, as seen in a French map of Bulaq at the turn of the nineteenth century, showed a nonlinear, maze-like street network with no regular shape or pattern **(FIG.7)**. The development of Cairo was thus seen as naturally moving toward a juxtaposition of this medieval fabric with new forms of rational design, which would have added complexity to its visual quality, as seen in nineteenth-century European urbanism **(FIG.8)**. And to control undesired growth that might contradict this pattern of development, a new legislative system was implemented to complement traditional master-builder control over the building process. The authorities under Ismail justified this new level of oversight by claiming that Cairo lacked the control of construction activities required to cope with an expanding population. Planning authority, in their opinion, needed a proper administrative structure, continuous involvement in everyday construction activities, and appropriate legislation to support these improvements.[40]

In March 1881, the first legislative edict, intended to secure a healthy environment and beautiful living spaces, was issued by the newly formed Ministry of Public Works.[41] Designed to regulate the then irregularly growing street lines in Egyptian cities, it included clauses empowering local engineers to systematically censor and control building and construction activity. But the edict was limited to specific regulatory issues in certain areas. Its primary focus was apparently to allow greater authority in terms of demolition and clearance in old quarters, in particular to improve the quality of streets by increasing their width and ensuring minimum dimensions. It also authorized the demolition of all constructions that blocked public traffic and any protrusions into streets. This included such structures as *mastabas* (outdoor stone seats), steps, and outdoor stairs — all of which had been part of traditional urban patterns in Cairo for a long time.[42]

During the period of British colonization, which began in 1882 and lasted until 1952, attempts were subsequently made to provide more clarity to planning efforts to improve the quality of the traditional built environment. This included efforts to define and regulate norms for street and building form, including aspects of size, height, style and character which are critical to determining the visual image of a city. Law 51/1940, for example, was the first piece of legislation for decades to regulate building construction within residential blocks and areas. In some measure, it represented a progressive response to the importance of quality, because it not only addressed the enhancement of spaces for living, communication and interaction, but also the form and design of individual buildings.

A desire to craft progressive policies was indeed an implicit force behind these early legislative actions and attempts to implement them. However, centralized control over all building activities by the Ministry of Public Works presented a dilemma. In particular, strict adherence to its policies resulted in a mono-style urban image that imitated classical
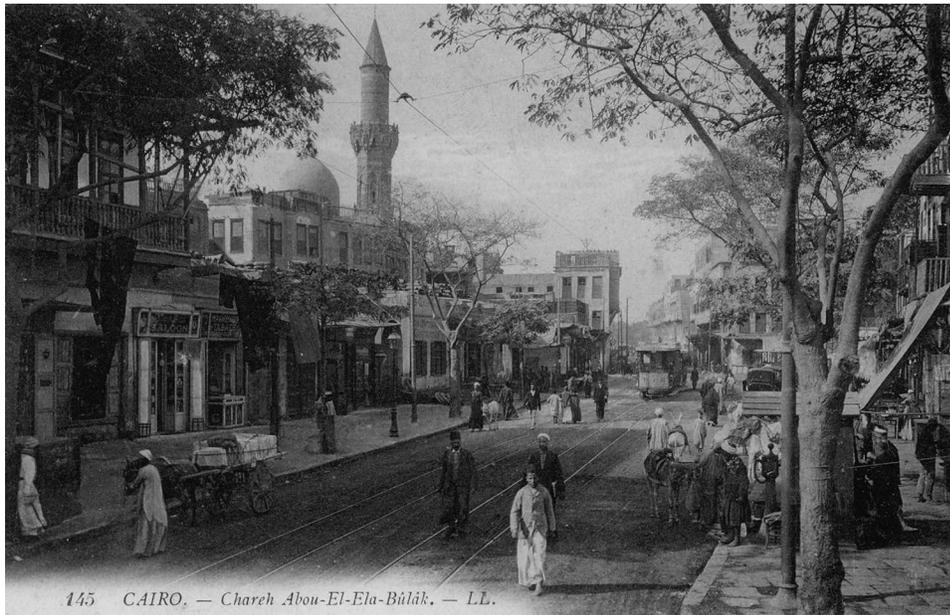
FIGURE 8. *Linear and wide street scene in Bulaq during the 1900s. Historic postcard, retrieved Feb.19, 2017, from https://railasia. wordpress.com/2012/08/28/pictures-of-a-postcard-12/.*

145   CAIRO. — *Chareh Abou-El-Ela-Bûlâk.* — LL.

European designs. To be sure, this reflected the ideology of the Western-oriented Cairene elite who were in charge of planning institutions at the time. But it also embodied an attempt to re-create a Western urban model, in denial of the city's distinct Oriental character.[43]

Change in public attitudes toward the city's old quarters only came after the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 and an intervening period of centralized state social and economic control. In particular, new concern for the city's Arab Middle Eastern heritage materialized when local authorities adopted a series of resolutions based on recognized planning principles, comprehensive feasibility studies, and phased implementation. This culminated in 1983 in the issuance by the Cairo Governorate of a new Physical Planning Law (3/1983), which set guidelines for the renewal of old quarters. The law specified that "every quarter suffering from severe signs of deterioration in its buildings or living areas is subject to renovation."[44] However, the provision also clearly signaled an intent to extend the governorate's control over clearance procedures and give it the authority to order the complete evacuation and reconstruction of areas of the city.[45]

By this time, the Egyptian government was also voicing concern over the growing problem of poverty and the lack of basic services in old, run-down areas. This brought the Egyptian planning system to some extent into line with prevailing concerns internationally for the socioeconomic problems of deprived areas. In 1986, the Cairo Governorate thus inaugurated a string of low-cost housing projects to swiftly displace residents from areas like Helwan, where health issues and social difficulties required special attention. Yet the minister of local administration at the time also announced that the number of declining areas in Cairo had increased to 79.

Twelve of these required urgent clearance, while the remaining 67 could all be recommended for renewal.[46]

In 1999, the Egyptian government shifted its attention to drafting a number of schemes to regulate land use and street widths in old quarters of the city. And in 2005, Bulaq was once again listed as one of those quarters designated for replanning as part of a wider strategy to refurbish the western section of the city. However, in contrast to the 1979 mass-relocation scheme, the new plan called for preserving ongoing activities and minor land uses in areas representing about 60 percent of the quarter. The Cairo Governorate's intention to limit clearance as part of new efforts to replan the quarter was clearly a response to the unforeseen outcome of the earlier effort.[47] Yet, government goodwill appeared to receive only limited appreciation from the public.

As this review of planning policies indicates, changing perceptions and values may fundamentally influence the quality of traditional urban environments from one era to another, and from one socio-cultural context to another. However, appreciating the shared values embodied in (and sometimes the ambiguous meanings of) urban contexts is essential to assessing the appropriateness of revisions to their spatial qualities. The scope of such efforts, arguably, needs to be determined through a thorough and critical understanding of the meaning and value that different people attribute to their experience of urban spaces and the built environment. It has always been inevitable that the growth and renewal of Cairo's urban spaces would need to be regulated through appropriate legislation. But such legislation cannot re-create the full and divergent range of values embodied in such environments. It can nevertheless be crucial to managing and controlling the transformation of areas of the city from one state to another, e.g., from lowrise to highrise.

TRADITION AND SPATIAL QUALITY IN THE CAIRENE CONTEXT

Maintaining the spatial quality of traditional quarters has been a central concern of planning practices in Cairo and of the way local residents perceive them. A particularly important concept in this regard is *turath*, a highly evocative Arabic expression typically used to describe local "heritage." In general scholarship, *turath* is intertwined with other terms, such as *maouruth*, *taqalid*, *addat* and *eurif*, to refer to tradition. But in Egypt, the significance of *turath* has specifically been tied to renowned and admired figures — among whom are Gamal al-Gaytani, known as "the Egyptian heritage keeper" for his pseudo-Mamluk narratives, and the Nobel Prize-winning author Nagib Mahfouz, who romanticized Cairo's old alleyways and ancient buildings in many of his novels.[48] The word thus typically connotes a particular complex of emotions that arises from human attachment to place and its essential spatial qualities. Of course, such an understanding may fluctuate from time to time and from one place to another. Conflicts may certainly also arise between preserving heritage and concerns for spatial quality.

In Egypt, spatial quality may sometimes be regarded as a luxury afforded only to social elites. But *turath* represents the quality of a common past and, hence, may be considered only as a reflection of it, not of present or future development. Local people in Bulaq have also materialized aspects of their *eadat* and *taqalid*, in both individual and collective ways, as a matter of fulfilling daily needs. They may thus be unconcerned with having wider streets in the quarter, for example, because their understanding of its authentic spatial quality is based on deeper social engagement with their environment. In some cases, they may also contribute to the preservation of spatial qualities simply because they are associated with the dignity of the past.

In pursuit of such qualities, residents of traditional areas of Cairo often desire to live in vibrant and active residential alleys that are abundant in life and activity. They perceive such areas as providing a high degree of safety — in contrast to more open spaces, which are thought to be unsafe. Bulaqi streets thus constitute a complex spatial organization that defines the lived space of the community based on a set of rules for everyday social life. These spaces are characterized by complex patterns of sociability and everyday interaction, long governed by the proximity of houses and the limited street widths, which bring adjacent families into close contact (FIG.9). These streets in turn accommodate many social activities, such as weddings, neighborly get-togethers, and the sale of goods, which collectively create a sense of community. In addition, most houses contain commercial and industrial activities on their ground floors, adding to the sense of security (FIG.10).

Since the implementation of high-end real estate developments along the riverfront, the loss of such qualities underlies the continuing opposition of area residents to the widening of Bulaq's streets. In particular, their concern is that their social living spaces will become uncontrolled, causing them to "fear to walk in the street at night."[49] Anxieties of this nature are particularly associated with changes to street alignments because wider streets are thought to generate additional through-traffic and to bring strangers into the quarter.[50]

Such concerns reflect how the social domain of Bulaq is embodied in the interaction of its residents and their willing-
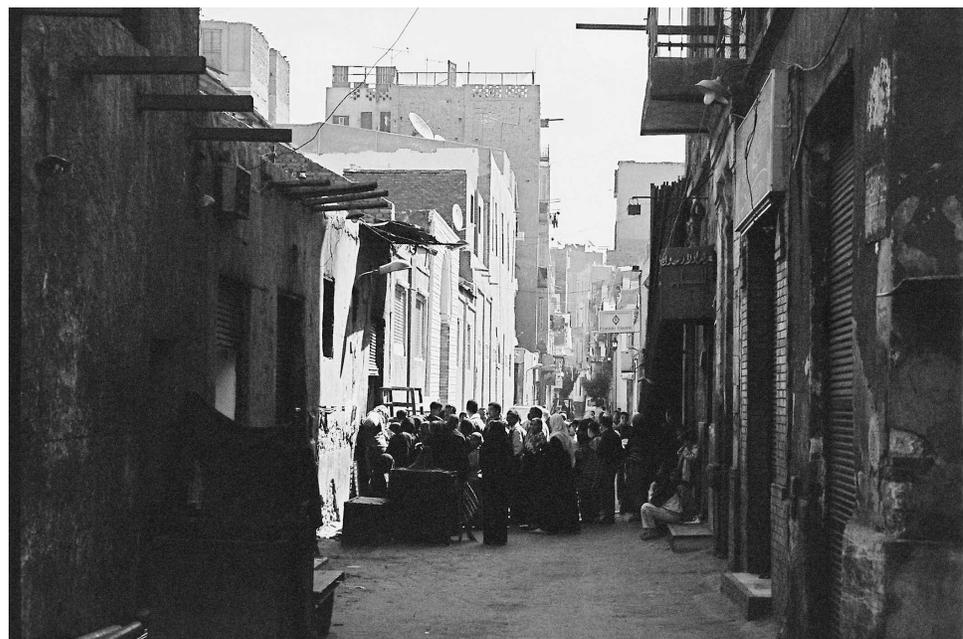

FIGURE 9. *The proximity of houses and limited street widths in Bulaq (2011). Photo by author.*

FIGURE 10. *Retail stores with commercial and industrial activities add to the sense of security. Photo by author.*

FIGURE 11. *Part of the extended display of cloth markets that forms part of Wikalat al Balah. Photo by author.*

ness to maintain and adapt their living spaces to meet their needs. Changes imposed from outside may thus pose a significant threat to everyday activities that create the basis for the quarter's socio-cultural traditions. Such fears are not unfounded. Local residents and businesses have lived through a number of government attempts to abolish their reality entirely based on the premise that it reflects an image of the old that must be replaced with the new. Government aspirations are thus typically seen as mandating the destruction of intangible qualities of the old fabric and its monuments as well as patterns of human activity established over generations. One recent example involves government-ordered changes to renowned local markets, long defined both by location and patterns of behavior. Such efforts have been decried by Bulaqi residents as exhibiting "ignorance, neglect, and impropriety" — words that express both frustration and grief over governmental mismanagement of the physical environment (FIG.11).

From the residents' point of view, therefore, government renewal efforts typically seem less concerned with reinforcing existing neighborhood qualities than configuring space in ways that decrease the visibility of socio-cultural conflict. This not only reflects a desire to eliminate poverty and in-

equality from the urban landscape but also to impose new access routes through previously congested areas to improve their supposed lack of aesthetic quality. Indeed, since the mid-1950s, the inner area of Bulaq has been continuously criticized for its supposed lack of such quality. But this concern has only become more acute now that the quarter's new, modern periphery contrasts so sharply with its traditional character. The ambition to change appearances has become so overwhelming nowadays, residents believe, that it has caused other, more important issues to be overlooked, such as their safety and security, the struggle to relocate or compensate residents whose dwellings have been demolished to make way for new development, and the way people's social communication and interaction models are expected to change.

On the other hand, planners involved in implementing the new schemes have also been unwilling to discuss or respond to queries about the implications of these schemes in terms of residents' daily patterns of life and work. Thus, in one case, in an uncompromising display of modernity and power, all buildings located immediately behind the modern towers along the riverfront were unexpectedly painted evenly white (FIG.12). According to one resident this indicated that planners were more concerned with superficial aesthetics than with their welfare; indeed, it primarily indicated that buildings "had to look neat and ordered because this area was particularly visible to tourists."[51]

Beyond the effect they have on the residents' daily lives, such actions raise important questions. Are the planning authorities not only seeking to marginalize the residents but also depopulate the quarter to prevent them from engaging in activities they consider ugly? And, ultimately, are they seeking to delegitimize the quarter as an authentic traditional environment in order to replace it with one more pleasing to their sense of visual order?

FIGURE 12. *Buildings painted white to standardize their visual aesthetics. Photo by author.*

LEGITIMIZING EVERYDAY TRADITIONS

Davide Morandini and Fabio Lucchini's 26-minute documentary film *Bulaq: Among the Ruins of an Unfinished Revolution* captures many important aspects of life in the quarter, portraying it as one of Cairo's key contested spaces. In particular, the filmmakers tell the story of how residents of the Ishash al-Tourguman area have had to endure a series of raids and threats of eviction since 1979. In that year, 5,000 people were forcefully relocated to the al-Zawya al-Hamra area on the outskirts of Cairo, as part of a colossal urban development scheme to create new tourist facilities and five-star hotels.[52]

Despite the fact that almost forty years have passed, memories of that incident still evoke passion among the area's remaining residents and residents of nearby areas. A subsequent decision to evict the inhabitants of Ramlet Bulaq in 2005 was equally shocking and unwelcome to a majority of residents. It, too, provoked enthusiastic reminiscences about the past.

Even today, the physical setting of the Ishash neighborhood remains a powerful testament to the lives of its previous residents and the quality of their attachment to place (FIG.13). What may be most astonishing in this regard is how elderly neighboring families, who witnessed the eviction, today serve as guardians of this narrative of displacement

and its repercussions. They will freely relate how the government, though police intervention, destroyed hereditary kinships and ties to the traditional structures and buildings of Bulaq. Although this population lived in areas described in the media by Egyptian officials as "uncivilized," its ingrained practices, traditions, and ways of socialization were nonetheless evidence of longstanding patterns of communal living and robust social traditions.[53]

Such conditions today indicate how there are key limitations and weaknesses to forced eviction as an element of planning policy in Egypt. Over the years, evictions have consistently been paired with such stories of grief and distress. Nevertheless, the Egyptian Center for Housing Rights describes how a veil of criminality still attaches to targets of eviction.[54] Timothy Mitchell described a famous incident in 1998, when several court orders were obtained to evict the inhabitants of Old Gurna and move them to new housing on desert lands. However, the local families refused to budge, even after the bulldozers, supported by armed police, moved in. And it was only after four people were killed and twenty injured that the depopulation order was carried out as part of wider plans to transform the area into "an open-air museum and cultural preserve."[55]

In Bulaq, following the 1979 evictions, the vacant land at al-Tourguman was not redeveloped until 2001. Delays convincing private investors to step in proved a major setback to the more comprehensive government plan to remake the area. In the end, therefore, many residents were evicted simply to clear the ground on which they lived, with no underlying strategy or proposal for how to provide them with

an alternative, affordable place to live.[56] In Ghannam's view, relocation is thus not only about moving people from one place to another; it involves the destruction of socio-spatial relationships within an entire community.[57] But, in Egypt, eviction and relocation are part of an economic and political model that presupposes the complete power and control of planning agencies over urban space. This type of power is then translated into creating new physical forms and spatial qualities devoid of input from local people or links to underlying traditions of place.

By contrast, Bulaq's vibrant land uses represent a significant aspect of the traditional charm of Cairo, as it has been constructed through time and across space. The commercial activities within its tight alleyways are a particularly important aspect of that charm. In general they are structured according to two main patterns: commercial/trade-based zones and on-street retail shops. Such patterns were developed as a spontaneous response to a series of long-term social arrangements for the good of the local community.

Evidence of the former pattern is provided by Wikalat al-Balah, whose name is used interchangeably to identify Bulaq. This crowded, active market — where clothes, fabrics, curtains, textiles (and even car parts) are for sale at low prices — adds to the authenticity of the quarter and the history of the place. Developed as an extension of commercial and trade activities associated with the former port, this center of fabric and textile trade in Cairo indicates how Bulaq has yet to lose its distinctive character. Indeed, because of such attractions, Bulaq is still a commercial destination for middle- and low-income Cairenes.

On-street shops, meanwhile, accommodate many important local needs through the sale of countless products like fresh vegetables and fish. Such commercial activities provide a primary source of income for many families in the area. The same may be said for the many home-based industries, such as sewing, cooking traditional food, and roasting corn, which allow local people to make a reasonable income at minimum cost.

In most cases, peddlers and on-street sellers gather in popular and busy areas, such as the spacious Suq al Asr street. Such locations allow them to display their goods to a great number of people by means of small kiosks or mats spread on the sidewalk.[58] Over time, particular street junctions and crossings may thus become crowded, as informal vendors compete, and sometimes fight, for the best locations. However, this has recently provoked conflict, as the government has deemed all such activities illegal. It now insists that vendors must apply for permission to use busy pedestrian paths to sell their goods, which is almost impossible to obtain.[59] Unfortunately, this has led to frequent police raids intended to clear pedestrian routes of vendors and arrest those without permits — which, effectively, means all of them. At such times, displayed goods and products are seized, and vendors are taken into custody. The moment the authorities arrive in an area, most sellers frantically start packing their goods, to escape with whatever they can.[60]

Commercial traditions such as these help explain why residents associate their living space and daily activities with work, trade, and the domestic economy. One old vendor in Bulaq noted that "the stability of the local trade activities leads to the stability of the residents and their financial security."[61] Another elderly man explained that his family, who live with him in the same building, helps run his shop (FIG.14). These comments show how the lived quality of public space in the quarter is constituted by a mixture of social interaction and economic activity.[62] Most resident-run businesses thus are locally oriented and based on neighborhood needs. Nonresident owners may be more financially stable because they can change the location of their businesses according to financial viability. But in those cases, economic and living concerns are considered separately and do not embody a similar commitment to local social conditions.

For their part, government officials regard all such local businesses as an obstacle to development. They claim their presence has slowed down improvements in the quarter, particularly in the area of Wikalat al-Balah. To secure public support for the relocation of the cloth market, therefore, state media has portrayed the activities and behaviors of local residents as ugly and disorderly. And, since 2006, in preparation for new developments anticipated for the area, Bulaq's municipal office has prohibited all mobile and outdoor trade activities, including vendors and peddlers. They have backed this up with daily enforcement of the ban in certain popular areas. The only commercial activities permitted are those taking place indoors, in a shop, or in a proper space.

Of course, informal approval may be granted to certain people who maintain good connections with officials, who subsequently turn a blind eye to violations.[63] However, current restrictions on vendors and their activities have proved effective in eradicating many economic patterns viewed as

FIGURE 14. *The extended family running this pottery shop live in the same building. Photo by author.*

undesirable by the authorities. Meanwhile, the Wikalat al-Balah, the main traditional outlet in the quarter, remains on the waiting list for relocation to a site on the city's outskirts. And if such a relocation does take place, it will radically alter local economic patterns, and possibly precipitate other more far-reaching social and physical changes.

TRADITION AND MODERNITY: AN ENDLESS CYCLE

In the wake of events related to the Egyptian revolution of 2011, the plight of Bulaqi residents may also be seen to illustrate the presence of a global web of power between states, investors, and private security firms. In the first days of the uprising, after police and security guards had fled the area, local residents worked together to defend the commercial outlets in the Nile Plaza towers, located on Bulaq's riverfront, against looters and angry protesters. The owner of the complex subsequently expressed his gratitude, and agreed to employ a number of them, knowing that the faltering economy had left many residents of the quarter, who were already poor and jobless, with few options but to seek work as security guards. Throughout the course of the following year, "around 67 shack residents came to work informally for the towers, making a wage of LE800 per month."[64] However, tensions soon reescalated, as security forces began firing on residents of nearby areas and showing up during nightly raids to evict them from areas of housing that stood in the way of a proposed expansion of the giant real estate development.

Part of the residents' security work was to prevent families from moving back to reclaim lands from which they had previously been evicted by the government. However, when these displaced residents took a stand and attempted to assert their rights through the courts, violence ensued. One elderly resident thus explained that he initiated a court case to assert ownership of the land on which his house had stood.[65] However, a number of attacks followed — on himself, on members of his family, and on their homes. Another incident occurred in June 2012 when the Cairo Governorate issued an order authorizing police to evict the residents once again.

The above conflicts may be conceptualized within the debate over New Urbanism, a design movement that has attempted to regenerate the quality of living spaces by better relating it to social contexts and cultural behaviors. Planners see the movement as a way to facilitate a better quality of life within a modern, developer-driven context. Two design strategies are seen as critical to such an effort: better integrating private residential spaces with surrounding public space, and rebuilding the public space itself.

Stories such as those above, however, also reveal a deeper understanding of the discourse of "space refuge," as this is linked to efforts to improve the quality of life in Cairo.[66] For the state, the term "quality of life" also lies at the core of planning objectives and programs. And it has thus been linked to

the debate of modernity and structuring social policies, as defined by cultural, personal and religious values. Within this discourse, determinations of quality of life are partially associated with the ability of individuals to shape, form and manage their living context. A good-quality urban space, thus, is one that is safe, suitable, and that actively encourages a positive sense of belonging. It reflects the user's satisfaction with features such as traffic, housing affordability, and livability.

Nevertheless, such qualities, as embedded in the physical structure of spaces, do not exclude residents from engaging in practices that ensure their personal living rights, including their safety. According to social-studies research, security is practiced through local and hybrid methods adapted both to indigenous values, as displayed in everyday life practices, and to the self-proclaimed modernity of the state.[67] Although this logically means that new parts of the city should afford better living conditions, quarters like Bulaq may also be thought of as channels for structuring such systems. A flow of daily movement in and out of the traditional context may thereby allow people to enhance and improve their quality of life.

Legitimizing urban traditions in place may also be crucial to improving social conditions. However, it is not yet certain, in areas like Bulaq, how urban renovation projects can be carried out in a way that allows existing residents to benefit from them. Thus, headlines typically proclaim how efforts to improve such "undesirable" traditional areas are always accompanied by social conflict. But this outcome may be expected when so little consideration is given to how improving spatial qualities or relocating people improves their economic circumstances — or even their everyday living practices.

Remaking procedures, whether planned for the short or long term, tend to view the social aspect of such physical upgrading according to one of two scenarios. One involves a comprehensive effort to rehouse existing residents in other areas, claiming that they will be provided a better quality of life there. Meanwhile, residents of a higher social class are sought for the renovated spaces once they are complete. The other approach involves moving on with projects in a piecemeal manner, under the umbrella strategy of providing financial compensation on a case-by-case basis. But this approach neglects the fact that other people must still continue to live in the area and will oppose the gradual destruction of their existing environments. A third option — addressing social concerns in conjunction with physical problems — could, however, improve the chances that renovation projects will be successful. Such a lack of concern for ameliorating poor living circumstances may not be typical of all such projects around the world; but it is certainly the case in Cairo.

In traditional areas like Bulaq, local inhabitants create their own patterns and spatial settings to suit their social needs. They may thus add new spaces, convert existing ones, and arrange their environment to express their social traditions. The need for people's cooperation may thus be essen-

tial to in improving the spatial quality in traditional neighborhoods. This may be seen historically with regard to Bulaq in two regards.

The first problem concerns maintenance. The social housing constructed in Bulaq by the Nasser government in the 1960s was poorly designed in both physical and visual respects. When the residents relocated to it found that their social needs were violated by its underlying pattern of straight rows of houses in close proximity to one another, they thus neglected its maintenance for years.

The second problem concerns the expression of cultural habits unsuited to an urban context. Thus, rural migrants to Bulaq over the years have engaged in haphazard practices such as closing in balconies or extending living areas to ob-

tain more private space. Similar to rural patterns, however, the outcome has been to create a disordered physical mix of street widths, building heights, uncontrolled uses of land, and limited patterns of access.

To address such problems effectively within the context of a historic quarter may ultimately depend on a renewed desire within government agencies to legitimate the traditional practices of residents and work with them to remake the physical structure of their living areas. Ongoing attempts to delegitimize these practices can only result in the destruction of the social fabric of which the quarter's physical form is merely an expression. And this can only be to the detriment of the authentic character of the city as a while.

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