UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

This is a repository copy of *Re-imaging the Periphery: The Reproduction of Space in Cairo*.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/124999/

Version: Accepted Version

Proceedings Paper:

White Rose
university consortium
Universities of Leeds, Sheffield & York

eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/

Re-imaging the Periphery: The Reproduction of Space in Cairo

Gehan M. Selim
University of Sheffield, School of Architecture
g.selim@shef.ac.uk

Bulaq and its periphery

Bulaq Abu El-Ela is one of the truly authentic districts of Cairo, whose history is paralleled in significance with the history of the city. It is known as a baladi[1] district whose value lies not only in its well documented history which has attracted the attention of a number of researchers[2]; rather, it stands out in Cairo as the land of contradictions, a fusion of the extraordinary. This district witnessed some of Cairo's most important historical events and shared in developing a series of traditions which still exist within the Cairene society till today. By time, many of its vibrant industries were squeezed out and large numbers of people lost their jobs and shops when many of the extended families that had lived in Bulaq for generations were evacuated during the 1970s. Until the beginning of the 1990s Bulaq was not an attractive destination for tourists or upper class visitors; rather, it was an unappealing deteriorated district. Pilot investigations of several remaking attempts in Bulaq acknowledged the high priority this project was accorded by the planning authority on one side and private investors on the other side[3]. Through a careful review of Egyptian media, it became evident that its remaking had become a central issue in the planning discourse in Egypt[4].

Ambitions to improve Bulaq could be recorded after the 1973 October war when President Sadat announced that Egypt would establish a modern capital city[5] to attract tourists and foreign investment[6], and to eradicate less desirable parts of the city, which were at odds with the representation of Cairo in a modern image. During 1978, a plan to develop Bulaq was completed to replace the chaotic decaying district with a new (CBD). Its key policy was aimed at dividing the district into several zones of land uses to improve street accessibility, open spaces, parking areas and provide luxury projects which included the riverfront zone, occupied by run-down industrial buildings, Figure(1) . At the physical level, the plan allowed a default for areas that already demonstrated a string of private multiple-uses within the activity zones. This approach proposed some form of control over the types of activities officially approved within these zones based on the activities permitted in each one. But at this stage, the question is, did the plan offer any significant solutions to problems of deterioration and population influx in the district? To answer

this question it is worth looking at the planners conceptions in improving the spatial qualities of the district's river front zone in particular or its periphery.

Ramlet Bulaq
Proposed for clearance and redevelopment

The river frontage zone
Proposed for clearance and redevelopment

Suq al Asr area
Proposed for clearance

Ishash al-Tourguman
Proposed for evacuation, clearance and redevelopment

Maspero
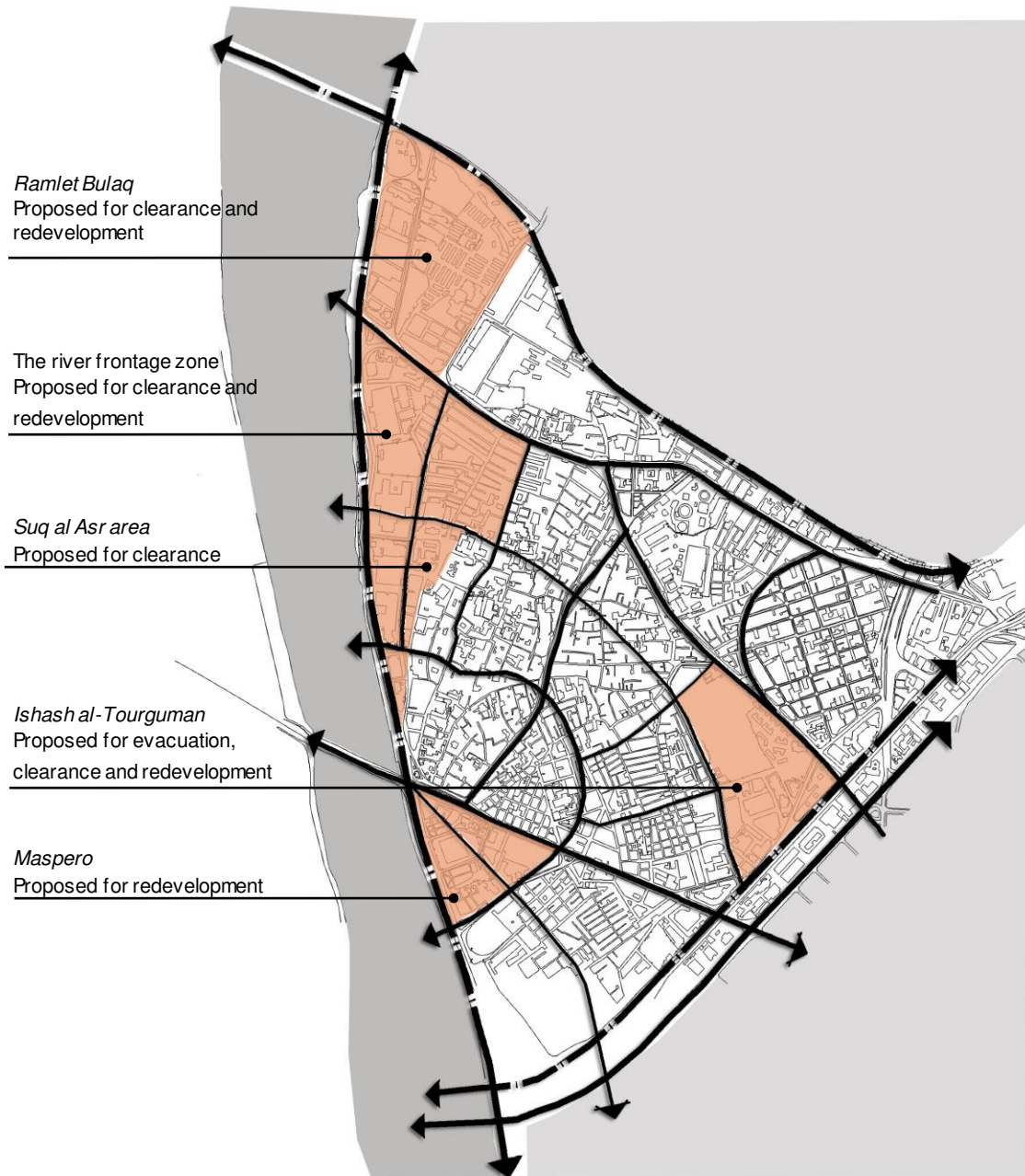Proposed for redevelopment

Figure (1) Bulaq re-planning scheme drafted in 1978.
Indicated on the plan the priority zones for improvement on its periphery.
Source: Al Ahram Newspaper archives (1979). Cairo, Egypt.

Reconsidering Bulaq's periphery:

The planners' conception

> 'The abstract space is a space of quantification and growing homogeneity, a merchandised space where all the elements are exchangeable and thus interchangeable; a police space in which the state tolerates no resistance and no obstacles.... thus coverage towards an elimination of all differences'[7]

Drawing on Marx's distinction between abstract labour which creates exchange values, and concert labour, which create use values, Lefebvre's account is that the '*space of architect*s' had created in return what he described as '*abstract spaces*', a social bureaucratized space which has been render by capitalism. Its basic quality is to separate the *abstract* from the *concert*[8]; the mental space from the lived space; a space from which its preceding histories has been eliminated[9]. For Lefebvre, the abstract space is not designed in its simple format of geometry, but it had been already produced to reflect meticulous visions, strategies, and tactics; it is a space that reflects the domination of power and capitalism[10]. The confinement of an abstract space is tangled by the elimination of the space's previous histories which became a central practice driven by the power of state to reshape physical spaces of the city[11]. In this sense, it could be argued that similar ideals to Lefebvre's philosophy have been relevant to the planning authority strategies in re-planning Bulaq's periphery. Defiantly, this does not imply that planners and the planning institution as a whole are following Lefebvre's ideas, but it notably emphasizes that the capital and the state have collaboratively secured uncompromised power of decision making expressed in creating abstract spaces that visualize capitalism though the media of modern building images and spaces. The consciousness of the space, as a result, occurs not through lived experience, but via its desired representation of power, always reduced to the image of capitalism [12].

Bulaq's riverfront have been continuously criticized for the lack of aesthetic quality; in other words, the quality of its image in contrast with its inner sections, Figure (2). This is in line with the local perception of planning practice in Cairo which is constituted as a form of a visual configuration of socio-cultural space[13]. Improving the spatial qualities of Bulaq's riverfront focused on the visual quality, rather than a comprehensive strategy towards upgrading the urban environment. The motivation behind re-imaging Bulaq's periphery was in large part due to the global trend that does not only intend to eliminate poverty and inequality in urban landscape, but to impose fashionable designs to develop accessible routes to such congested districts. In this regard, the riverfront was a priority as it works as an effective showcase for the state's policy on planning and its ability to upgrade the urban context. The drive to improve the image was overwhelming to the extent that other issues were overlooked, such as sacrificing the people's safety and security, the struggles to relocate or compensate people for their properties and living patterns; realizing how the local economy was to develop; how local social patterns and interaction models were expected to change.

This focus on the frontage was somehow disappointing and frustrating to the local population. They realized that the whole issue of remaking Bulaq has been confined to one particular zone or to the image of a row of luxury buildings, without paying attention to the inner parts and their problems, which also affected their daily safety and security. This priority was explicit in several interviews I conducted with the planners and local authorities in Bulaq. It was apparent that no planners were aware of or were reluctant to speak about the devastating consequences the new periphery could have on the residents of the inner parts of the district[14]. These accounts intended to reveal the overwhelming focus on the image of the river front; the uncompromising display of the state's modernity and power.

Figure (2) new projects constructed on Bulaq's riverfront zone which replaced the chaotic decaying urban fabric with a new (CBD).
Right images: Bulaq's inner sections remained unimproved.
Source: Photos captured by researcher.

The discourse of modernity in Bulaq's periphery

One of the major actions of the modern movement and new urbanism was to regenerate ideas related to social and cultural behaviours by rebuilding cities according to new design principles[15]. This axiom, for planners and the institution, means that improved designs will lead to improved behaviour. It was thought that an enhanced sense of community could be incorporated in two aspects; by integrating the private residential spaces with the surrounding public space, and by re-planning the public space itself.

The reproduction of modern spaces in a city like Cairo is theorized and practised under the pretext of creating liveable and socially interactive spaces in the new urban context of modern Egypt. It is in fact a practice of redefining an entire structure of the comprehensive social domain, including social interaction,

communication and behaviour within a certain urban context. This meant reviewing existing models, their problems and setting new targets and priorities. Modern theorists associated the discourse to the mobility and advancement of transportation and information technology for creating a *Fluid Modernity*[16]. The search for modernity, when linked to the discourse of remaking (the periphery of Bulaq in our case), seems to become problematic for its apparent ideological and spatial conflict; the need for better accessibility versus the traditional sense of enclosure, modern lifestyle versus old practices, the sense of a modern domain versus the historical sense.

Such conflicts, nevertheless, do not exclude the inhabitants from carving out a practice of modern life, but according to social studies research, it is practised through their own methods of adaptability in a form whereby modernity does not conflict with their indigenous values[17]. Farha Ghannam researched a range of ways for identifying modernity in Cairo and its traditional old districts[18]. Her study showed that images of modernity are displayed more in everyday life practices of the traditional areas than in the self-proclaimed modernity of the state[19]. She claims that Bulaq can present a modern image which could be represented in the city's physical remodelling and spaces of flow. Although this logically means that new parts of the city could better participate in making this image, however, old districts like Bulaq were viewed as possible channels for structuring such a global system[20]. A flow of daily movement in and out the traditional context is predicted and it is expected thereby to become enhanced and improved.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the politics of remaking Bulaq's riverfront zone, its periphery, by considering the accounts of each of the involved parties and players. The state and its institutions, whose authority was unchecked, used to manipulate the residents of Bulaq and other areas subject to development in order to implement an unclear agenda. The residents, on the other hand, were helpless and devised their own forms of manipulation of state rules and laws to get their needs attended to. There is huge lack of transparency on both sides, which is due, as I believe, to the lack of a clear and unambiguous legal framework and the power to monitor and implement the relevant laws. Egyptian authorities, in fact, paid little attention to the people's voices and complaints, while they claimed to formally adopt participatory approaches in planning policies. The state is vociferous in its proclamations that a successful agenda for remaking spatial qualities of old districts necessitates the involvement of local residents[21]. The first step in achieving spatial quality, accordingly, is to allow the people further control of their living spaces. However, in practice, this agenda limits any involvement of local residents in the decision making process.

Problems of remaking Bulaq as a locality are widely seen as a sign of the state's struggle with modernity as a concept and practice throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Bulaq is a frontage of old urban fabric overloaded with traditions and historically-informed social patterns and organization. Hence, it is central to the modern discourse that reflects on and contributes to the construction of modernity in Egypt. Cultures and individuals are conceptualized as separate entities of localities in imposing an artificial order on a disordered local context which is separate and distinct from

the global world[22]. On the contrary, in Giddens' view, the individuals 'contribute to and promote social influences that are global in their consequences and implications', no matter how local or traditional are their particular contexts of everyday life actions[23]. Thus, the positions of individuals as active players in the modernity discourse lead to a changing standpoint for understanding their behaviour: from being subjected to external influences of modernity they become creators and initiators of this modernity.

The modern periphery accounts reveals that Bulaq's spatial qualities are grounded in its historical authenticity, its physical attributes, and the vibrant mix of activities practised in its urban spaces. Despite the planners' attempts to develop a modernistic image in Bulaq, they failed to attend to the people's needs. Field investigation showed how local residents' lives became linked to the quarter's inner sections socially and economically, as they turned their backs on the periphery. While their living standards are defined in terms of safety, economy, and the efficient use of space, Bulaq's periphery was accused of embodying destruction of these standards. The reproduction of Bulaq's periphery , therefore, provides an interesting example of segregation of a homogeneous context, and the creation of a periphery that contrasts with its context. Planning approaches in Cairo, as a result, appeared to lack understanding of the complexity of the city's inner zones, thus highlighting the importance of participation, shared commitment, and flexible planning approaches as necessary tools for the creation of a successful built environment.

Notes

[1] *Baladi* is a self descriptive term that can be more or less be equivalent to the term traditional but which also retains a rich infusion of the local. For further readings about the term see Early, E. (1993) *Baladi Women of Cairo*. London: Lynne Rienner. ; El-Kholy, H. (2002) *Defiance and compliance: negotiating gender in low-income Cairo.* Berghahn Books. p.51.

[2] See Rugh, A. (1984) *Family in contemporary Egypt*. Cairo: American University in Cairo. ; Louca, I-M. (1984) *The culture of Bulaq as it is viewed by its children*. The American University of Cairo Press. ; Early, *Baladi Women of Cairo.*

[3] A number of interviews were conducted with residents in Bulaq during 2008 and 2009.

[4] It seemed that Bulaq had become the site of several planning debates which had been instigated by the daily struggle of the residents to survive their living spaces or even to secure any other alternatives.

[5] Ghannam, F. (2002) *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation, and the Politics of Identity in a Global Cairo*. Berkeley, Calif.; London, University of California Press. p. 38.

[6] Hirst, D. and Beeson, I. (1981) *Sadat*. London. Faber. p. 205.

[7] Lefebvre, H. (1979) Space: Social Product and Use Value. In J.W. Freiburg (Ed.) *Critical Sociology; European Perspectives*. New York: Irvington. p. 293.

[8] Gregory, D. (1994) *Geographical Imaginations*. Cambridge. MA:Blackwell.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 336.

[10] *Ibid.,*p. 398.

[11] *Ibid.,*p. 366.

[12] Forty, A. (2000) *Words and buildings: a vocabulary of modern architecture*. Thames & Hudson. p. 274.

[13] Lefevbre, H. (1999) *The production of space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Massachusetts: Blackwell publishing.

[14] I want to note that the official planner from the GOPP is one of the former official planners of Isash al-Tourguman scheme drafted in 1978.

[15] Katz, P. (1994) *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*. New York: McGraw Hill.

[16] Bauman, Z. (2000) *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

[17] Ghannam, *Remaking the Modern.*

[18] *ibid.*, p 19-20.

[19] Cole, D. (2002) *People, the state, and the Global in Cairo*. Anthropological Quarterly. 75:4. 793 - 800. p. 794.

[20] Ghannam, *Remaking the modern,* p. 18.

[21] Williams, C. (2006) Reconstructing Islamic Cairo: Forces at work. In: Singerman, D. and Amar, P. (eds.) *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture and Urban Space in the new globalized Middle East*. Cairo: the American University in Cairo Press.

[22] Hastrup, K. & Olwig, K. (1997) *Siting culture: the shifting anthropological object.* Routledge. p. 2.

[23] Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age.* Stanford University Press. p. 33 - 35.