

# Intangible patterns in real space: using social science methods to enhance urban research in Egypt

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## ABSTRACT:

While discussing form, function and energy has its value, it must be remembered that architecture is for humans. All significance, meaning and worth are for and determined by humans. As such, using methodologies from the social sciences can enhance architectural research by grounding it in approaches designed to study humans. To illustrate this, an example will be used from the author's investigation on the changes in retail space in 20th century Alexandria, Egypt. Because of the methods employed, the author discovered several patterns of usage which were contrary to expectations. Two of these findings will be highlighted to show the benefits of a combined methodological approach. First, the character of this central city cannot simply be defined as declining because the social data shows an increase in usage and density. Second, the women's market addresses the need for female privacy not only through the architectural design but also through the patterns spatial usage.

**CONFERENCE THEME:** On Measurement, Social environment: what lessons can architectural research learn from the social sciences?

**KEYWORDS:** Anthropology, Ethnography, Retail, Gender, Egypt

## INTRODUCTION

While discussing form, function and energy has its value, it must be remembered that architecture is for humans. All significance, meaning and worth are for and determined by humans. As such, using methodologies from the social sciences can enhance architectural research by grounding it in approaches designed to study humans and producing more rigorous research. Social Sciences are empirical studies of all aspects of human society and include anthropology, economics, education, ethnic studies, geography, history, political science, psychology sociology and women's studies (NSSA 2010). Using standard anthropological research methods in the investigation of the transformation of retail space in Alexandria, Egypt, the author discovered several patterns of usage which were contrary to expectations. Two patterns will be highlighted in this paper to show how using standard methods taken from social science research can not only enhance architectural research but also make the research more rigorous and ethical. As part of the sponsoring university's requirements, the procedures for this research were subjected to review by the Internal Review Board (IRB) to protect the participants by ensuring their privacy and evaluating any possible harm. These procedures include provisions about storage of data, obtaining consent, participant selection, interview procedures and the option to opt-out. Besides being ethically important, these procedures force the researcher to plan his/her methods as well as evaluating the participant selection process in order to reach the most appropriate study group.

The author expected to find that, like many other cities in the world, the exponential suburban growth caused the deterioration of the downtown shopping area. While the physical deterioration of the structures is apparent, the downtown area has not become a lifeless place. Instead, spaces which housed upscale shops, which have relocated to suburban malls or gone out of business, have been replaced by non-elite shops and vendors, and the overall density of shops has increased. Many of the older generation are nostalgic for the downtown of the past, yet they still frequent the shops in these areas. Young people, especially lower and middle class youth, also come to the city center to shop.

The author also expected to find that the women's market provided a gender segregated space which conformed to the Islamic "ideal" of separation of men and women. But through investigation, the author found that in the traditional markets, particularly in the women's market, men and women occupied the same spaces but did so following prescribed patterns.

This paper will show how following established research principles used in anthropology and sociology, employed in tandem with architectural research methods, can elevate the quality of research and dramatically increase the understanding of how the built environment is used and what it means.

## **I. PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND METHODS**

### **I.1 PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

The research used in this paper is part of the author's dissertation on the transformation of retail space in Alexandria, Egypt: 1920-2010. An interdisciplinary approach was particularly important in order to reach beyond conclusions about the changes to the architectonics of retail space and to understand how these changes have affected people and how people have influenced the nature of retail space. This time period was chosen because it covers several historical periods, each considered new, modern and liberating, including nominal liberation from British rule, World War II, establishment of the republic (actual liberation), socialist period, economic liberalization and globalization.

To investigate the spatial composition of retail space, plans, maps, field measurement, photographs, books and articles were used. But to examine aspects of the research question which are not evident in the existing built environment and written sources, social science methods were employed. A large component of this research involved interviews with ordinary citizens who live in or have lived in Alexandria as well as shop keepers, mall managers, architects and planners. Population and usage statistics were gained through observation and quantifying photographs. But the most important method was thinking anthropologically. This involved asking questions about the people rather than about the structure.

### **I.2 INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARDS**

Because this project involves Human Subjects, it required review by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the protection of the research subjects. The project was given exempt status because the potential for harm was minimal but the process of submitting the documentation to the IRB was valuable because it forces the research to think about, articulate and evaluate his/her research questions, methods and potential for harm.

The first principle which is respect for persons means recognizing that research subjects are individuals capable of making their own decisions and having respect for those decisions. This reframes the relationship between architecture and individuals. People are not merely "actors" within the architectural space or acted upon by the architecture but they are individuals who make choices. In practical research terms, this requires informing potential participants about the nature of the research, obtaining consent and respecting a decision not to participate.

The second principle, beneficence means evaluating the risks and benefits for the participants. This seems obvious for medical and pharmaceutical research, but it is also important for architectural research. While the risk of harm is smaller, researchers need to recognize that even harmless questions can result in embarrassment or awkward situations. Additionally, how the information is stored, the security of the data and the privacy of personal information constitute potential risks for the participants. One of the unique risks of doing research in Egypt is the credible fear of secret police. Because of this, the study was designed around casual discussions and interviews rather than formal questionnaires which might have been viewed with suspicion.

The third principle, justice requires the assurance that participant selection is fair and balanced. This forces researchers to evaluate the participant selection process in order to ensure that the best population cross section is used to answer the research question. For this study, significant effort was expended in seeking participants who were outside of the author's comfort zone. This included people from the lower classes, those who spoke no English and illiterate or barely literate people.

Addressing these requirements and thinking about the research from a social science perspective altered the way the research was conducted. This paper will show how using human subjects enriched the architectural research by presenting two case studies wherein the results of the architectural methods produced a different conclusion from the anthropological approach.

### 1.3 CITY OF ALEXANDRIA

Originally founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BC, the city of Alexandria has been continuously inhabited but it has seen significant transformations over the millennia. Alexander established the city at the western edge of the Delta with a canal connecting the sea to the Nile. The city's port was protected by a long rocky island that contained the Lighthouse of Alexandria (Empereur 2002). Under Ptolemy II (r. 283 – 246 BC), a causeway called the Heptastadion was built connecting the island to the mainland. After the 12th century, the city was neglected and silt piled up along the Heptastadion eventually forming new land and transforming the lighthouse's island into a peninsula (Abdel-Salam, 1995). After the conquest in 1517, the Ottomans built the "new city" on the empty land of the peninsula and gradually, the rest of the population shifted into this area (Empereur 2002).

The modern city began when Mohammed Ali (r. 1805-1848), the ruler of Egypt, built his palace in Alexandria in 1817. Serious building began in the 1820s when Mohammed Ali initiated several ambitious building campaigns to create a modern European-style city. He built new docks, restored the silted up canal and encouraged foreign immigration. The center of the new modern city was the Place des Consuls which was designed by Francesco Mancini in 1934. This plaza, now called Mansheiya Plaza, is a long narrow square which was surrounded by large European styled block buildings and linked to the sea by a perpendicular plaza called Urabi Square. By the 1860's the city had spread far enough to the East to necessitate a railroad (Empereur 2002). The city has continued to grow West, South and East as allowed by the geography, but East was the direction of preference. Villas for the middle and upper class were built in the eastern suburbs but now they have been replaced by apartment towers as the wealthy new construction has moved further East (Abdel-Salam 1995). The current city has over four million people (CAPMAS 2009) and extends approximately 25 km along the Mediterranean shore but the total urban agglomeration is nearly 60km (Empereur 2002). The width of the city averages 3km and the widest point measures about 5km from the sea to the City Center Mall along the Alexandria-Cairo Desert Highway. Almost nothing of the ancient city remains and most of the existing urban fabric is from the 19th and 20th centuries. The city is very European in appearance with many of the significant buildings being designed by European architects (Awad 2008). Downtown Alexandria is centered on Mansheiya Plaza, the tram station called Mahatat Ramleh and the shopping street connecting them. Buildings in this area consist of ground floor space filled with shops and a few cafes and restaurants. Most buildings are 3-4 stories tall and the upper floors contain apartments and offices.

## 2. CASE ONE: DOWNTOWN DECLINE

### 2.1 DOWNTOWN DECLINE: ARCHITECTURAL APPROACH

Based on a study of the urban fabric in the city center in the 1990s, Hassan Abdel-Salam noted that "an average 80% [of buildings] are historic with valuable architectural styles and richly detailed facades." (Abdel-Salam 1995) This was the shopping district and home to the finest shops and department stores (Ilbert 1997). Unfortunately, this area has suffered greatly in the past two decades and is in a state of decline. The elegant department stores are nearly abandoned, with their high end merchandise being replaced mainly by cheap import goods and their inventory greatly reduced. The stores themselves are in varying states of deterioration due to government sequestration and nationalization. As public entities, they have not received proper maintenance and several have been subject to destructive renovations and repairs (Awad 2010). Similarly, the other shops in the central business district have suffered from decline. The major factor depleting the downtown has been the suburban growth of shopping centers and malls. The first mall appeared in 1997 and was instantly popular (Ihab el-Khodairy 2010). After that a series of subsequent malls were built. These drew people out of downtown and began the suburbanization of shopping. About 10 years ago, the city

embraced the Western urban models and began to build new urban cores throughout the city and on the periphery. These were mostly commercial developments which appealed to local populations because Westernization has become synonymous with modernization. Alexandrians demanded this type of shopping because they were attracted by the large shops, international stores, large grocery stores and parking. The downtown suffered as a consequence and some parts of downtown were deserted. Store owners who recognized this trend and moved to the trendy areas or opened branches there have survived. But stores who failed to recognize this are struggling. This has caused a change in clients in the downtown area, from elites to lower class clients who are buying cheap products (Aref 2010).

An architectural survey of the city reveals a disturbing trend of wide scale deterioration. The problems can be categorized in to three broad categories: surfaces maintenance, distasteful infrastructure upgrades, and incompatible renovations. Most of the facades in the city center are covered by a thick patina of grime. More destructive than this are the infrastructure upgrades which at best ignore the architectural integrity and at worst destroy architectural details. For example: air-conditioning units and satellite dishes disregard any sense of order and are located at the convenience of the installers. Similarly wires and cables are strung chaotically on the facades. In some cases, waste pipes cut through lintels and cornices. But the most destructive changes are caused by “modernization.” Over the past 50 years individual shops have built their own “modern” facades at different points in time. These new facades are unrelated to the adjacent shops in scale, design and materials. They have no relationship with the building they are a part of and often disregard the original bay spacing. Bays have been subdivided, passageways have been occupied and shops have co-opted additional square footage. Thus the overall image of the heart of the city is one of decline. In reconciling the literary Alexandria with its reality Khaled Fahmy notes that “...the descriptions of modern Alexandria...is, in fact true: much of modern Alexandria is typical of a sprawling, third-world metropolitan mammoth whose streets are overcrowded, whose garbage is left uncollected, and whose neighborhoods are indeed noisy, dirty and smelly.” (Fahmy 2004)



**Figure 1:** Main entrance to Okelle Mensesce from Mansheiya Plaza showing adjacent shops encroaching on entrance and non-harmonious shop facades (2010).

## 2.2 DOWNTOWN (NOT IN) DECLINE: ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

While no amount of anthropological research will prove that Alexandria is a glittering gem of urban beauty, it will challenge the conclusion of decline. By looking at density, a strong case can be made the city center is not in decline but has shifted in character and is de-gentrifying. One example is the Okelle Monferrato, which is a mixed use building designed around a central courtyard which is located on the corner adjoining the two main plazas of downtown. Photographs from 1887 and 1920 show approximately 4 shops along the two public facades of the building (Haag 2008). Currently, there are thirteen shops in the same space and the large corner unit measuring 3 bays by 3 bays which is vacant. The Abu Ribia' restaurant has expanded into the neighboring space which is actually one of the main entrances to the courtyard and apartments above. Currently, the residual passageway is less than one meter wide. Similarly, in Okelle Menesce, another mixed used building which is located on the opposite side of the main plaza, there is an increasing density of shops and many have intruded on public space. On the principal facades, only two bays are unoccupied and all of the shops adjacent to the monumental entrances have encroached into that space. On the main plaza façade Kenz, a clothing shop extended its façade one meter into the entrance passage (See figure 1). On the other side of the entrance, Boom Boom, a jacket and bag was created from the end of the Bata Center shop to nearly the middle of the entrance. Other entrances are filled with lighting shops, sundry stands and clothing sellers. The density of commerce is further increased by the semi-informal venders located in the courtyard. There is even a permanent sign designating this space as Al-Suq Naha (Naha Market). In addition to cramming this space with racks and racks of clothing during the day, semi-permanent storage sheds constructed from scrap material house merchandise at night. Although photographs from 2004 show none of the current structures other than the sign (Saad 2004), two vendors report having "shops" there for 12 and 15 years and paying rent for their space. In terms of density of shops, this area shows that stores are getting smaller, increasing in number and owners are staking out new territory to create selling space because this location is viable.



**Figure 2:** Suq Naga located in the interior courtyard of Okelle Menesce. Structures in the center and right of photo are used to store merchandise at night and are rented from the building owner. Later in the day, all of these shops will open and merchandise will be displayed on the racks. The arch in the upper left hand corner is the back side of the entrance arch in Figure 1 (2011).



**Figure 3:** People crowded around mobile vendors in the city center with vehicular traffic passing behind them on Saad Zaghloul Street. Stores are illuminated and usually open until midnight (2010).

In terms of people, the central business district is also dense. Unlike dying American cities where downtowns are nearly vacant except during business hours, downtown Alexandria is alive with people from late morning until midnight and especially on weekend nights. People arrive by tram, bus, microbus and private car to cram the streets and sidewalks. On Thursday nights (the first weekend night), in the most popular areas, it is difficult to move through the sidewalk crowds, especially because mobile vendors display their goods on tarps on the sidewalks and in the streets. And while many informants discussed how they used to do all of their shopping downtown but now go to the malls, all informants still visit downtown for shopping. Some of the poorer individuals prefer to shop in this area because of the variety and price of goods. So the central business district has become neither vacant nor devoid of people and is still valued by the population even though it has changed from high end shopping to primarily popular goods.

By studying the central business district of Alexandria from a social point of view, one sees that in contrast to the poor state of infrastructure, it is still a lively space. Although not the high class district it once was, it is still extremely popular and provides goods, services and jobs to many people.

### 3. CASE TWO: WOMEN'S SUQ

#### 3.1 WOMEN'S SUQ: ARCHITECTURAL APPROACH

Traditional notions of space in the Islamic world require the separation of men and women. The purpose of this is to protect women from sexual misconduct and impropriety. The ideal upper class woman lived all of her life in seclusion from the public world but this option was impractical for the majority of the non-elite women. Appearing in public tainted women's moral and social standing because both morality and class were intimately tied together (Hourani 1991). Even today, Anouk de Koning, an anthropologist working in Cairo notes that "the gaze" or being watched by unknown (and implied lower class) men is considered a "polluting and defiling agent that physically impacts the female body. [The gaze is] moreover, able to impute a bad reputation and suggest a lack of respectability (de Koning 2009)." Thus certain concessions are required to produce spaces where women without means can maintain respectability. One of these methods was the creation of the Women's Suq or market.

*Zinqat al-Sittat*, literally The Women's Squeeze because the space is so narrow and sells goods exclusively for women. It is located in the heart of the *suq* (market) district surrounded by markets



**Figure 4:** Entrance to the Women's Market, center and left. Showing density of goods for women including jewelry, `accessories, scarves and fabric. Note the proportion of men to women (2010).

for jewelry, house wares and fresh food. Like other Middle Eastern *suqs* (markets), the *Zinqat* consists of small shops along a corridor, but this *suq* was not originally built as a market. Initially, this is where the French stabled their horses. When they left in the beginning of the 19th century, Moroccan merchants moved in and transformed the space into a *suq*. The gates which closed off the *suq* have since been removed so there are no physical barriers between this market and the adjacent markets within the *Suq* District (Al-Ahram 1993).

The name, *Zinqat al-Sittat*, refers to the spatial quality found within this particular *suq*. It is typified by narrow passageways, some of which measure less than a meter and are further restricted by merchandise overflowing from the individual shops. The feeling of tightness is exacerbated by the relatively high "ceilings" of up to 4 meters which are created by a hodgepodge of awnings and tarps of varying permanence. Additionally, the profusion of colorful goods such as costume jewelry, scarves, lingerie, buttons, thread and ribbons intensifies the visual experience.

All of these physical characteristics combine to create a lively shopping experience within a "safe" place for women. Because it is located in the heart of the *suq* district and consists of such restricted passageways, there are no views in or out of the *suq* so it is visually private. Also, the social spaces where men hangout (coffee shops) are located outside of women's *suq* and are not visible from the *suq*. From this approach, one can easily conclude that the *suq* is a space for females because of the physical design and layout.

### 3.2 WO (&) MEN'S SUQ: ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH

Alternatively, the results of anthropological study reach a different and more interesting conclusion. Of the people who occupy the *suq*, only 51% are women. The men are shop keepers, delivery men, waiters, and the occasional shopper. These men constitute nearly half of the population in the Women's *Suq* but interact with the space in a very different way. The shop keepers, most of whom are

men, are generally stationary, limited to the space of their shops or the space immediately adjacent. The delivery men go directly from the exterior streets and alleys to the individual shops. Similarly, the waiters delivering tea travel between distinct places – from coffee shop to patrons who are usually shop keepers. So within the Women's Suq, men's space is largely scripted with prescribed spaces and patterns of movement. Women on the other hand occupy the same physical space as men but move through the space at their own leisure and following their own agenda.

By combining the architectural and anthropological research one sees that both the physicality of the suq as well as the social patterns create a place which addresses the need for a private safe place for women to shop. So women's suq becomes a female friendly place not because of the lack of men in the space but the way in which men behave there. Because it is designated as a women's place, men do not go there unless they have a specific purpose – such as tending a shop, delivering goods or shopping for a woman. This means that there are no groups of idle men walking, gawking, or harassing. Women are protected from the polluting gaze of the street. Even though there are no physical boundaries or security guards, social controls make this a safe place.

The architectural research shows how the physical configuration of the spaces (including the types of merchandise sold) generates a female space but the anthropological research shows that the Women's Suq is not actually a female space but instead a place which is deemed appropriate for women because of a combination of the physical and social constructs.

#### 4.CONCLUSION

From these two examples we can see how different conclusions can be drawn depending on the methods employed. In the case of the deteriorating downtown, the architectural approach showed significant damage and deterioration. But from the anthropological approach one discovers that people are not retreated from this space but instead are filling it with an ever increasing density of shops and commerce. In the second case, the architectural approach shows how the physical structure of the women's market creates a safe environment for women to shop. But the anthropological research explains that the special character of the women's market does not exclude men in order to make it safe for women. Instead men and women coexisting in the same space but men's movement is scripted. Although the two conclusions in each of these cases are nearly opposite, they do not nullify each other. Instead, they enrich the understanding of the downtown and the women's market.

Architectural research is richer when scholars approach structures, spaces and cities anthropologically. Too often we architects use the methods we've seen used in the past or we too eagerly adopt new technologies for their coolness factor. Instead of being tool driven, research should be question driven. Sometimes from the most pedestrian methods such as counting heads one can draw profound conclusions. Other times high tech methods can elucidate age-old questions. Thus following established research principles used in anthropology, when employed in tandem with architectural research methods, can elevate the quality of research and dramatically increase the understanding of how the built environment is used and what it means.

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