

CINEMA AS AN URBAN CATALYST FOR CREATIVE CITIES: THE CASE OF POST-REVOLUTION CAIRO

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Resumen

No es posible categorizar la ciudad de EL Cairo como ciudad creativa, sino que se encuentra inmersa en numerosas dificultades urbanas tanto en el plano físico como social. Según el sociólogo Rob Shields, la imagen de una ciudad puede ser tratada como la representación de la sociedad que vive en ella. Tomando El Cairo como caso de estudio, tras la revolución de 2011, la ciudad ha sido objeto de diversos temas relacionados con el urbanismo, los cuales se han visto retratados en forma de arte callejero, especialmente en forma de grafitis en los muros de Downtown en la plaza de Tahrir. El cine ha sido considerado por su entorno como la máxima forma de representación visual de la ciudad y su entorno, logrando una excelente proyección del comportamiento de los individuos hacia su propio entorno dentro de la ciudad. El cine puede desempeñar un papel importante en cuanto a lograr una representación más auténtica de la ciudad en su tejido social, físico y urbano, con el fin de incentivar la conciencia de reclamo del espacio público en la sociedad. Este artículo trata de introducir el concepto de intervenciones cinematográficas en los espacios públicos y calles de El Cairo, no como un hecho existente en sí, sino más bien como una propuesta y un proceso experimental ante el potencial de El Cairo de transformarse en una ciudad creativa. Concluyendo con una relación entre la sociedad, los espacios urbanos y la narración cinematográfica

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El Cairo, Post-revolución, Intervención cinematográfica, Arte callejero

Abstract

This research brings to light the tensions between place Cairo is not the type of city to be categorized as a creative city, rather it is immersed within numerous urban issues on both the physical and social levels. Sociologist Rob Shields claims that an image of the city can actually be treated as a representation of the society living within. Taking Cairo, as a case study, after the revolution in 2011 the city was subject to many topics concerned with urbanism, which have been portrayed in the form of street art graffiti on the walls of Downtown in Tahrir Square. Cinema is considered by many scholars to be the highest form of visual representation of society and their environment, achieving a projected visual triumph of individuals' behaviour towards their own surroundings within the city. Cinema can play an important role in presenting a more authentic picture of the city, one that is embedded within its social, physical and urban fabric attempting to raise people's awareness about the concept of "reclaiming public spaces". This paper attempts to introduce the concept of cinematic intervention within Cairo's public spaces and streets as a proposal, rather than an existing factor, and as an exploration process to a possible potential for Cairo to be transformed to a creative city. Eventually, concluding with a social relationship between society, spaces and cinematic narration.

KEYWORDS

Cairo, Post-Revolution, Cinematic Intervention, Street Art

Introduction

The 21st century has been categorized by several scholars as the century of the cities. According to Landry (2008), over half of the world's population now live in cities seeking higher standards of living, most of whom are rural immigrants. Rapid urbanization alongside a fast-paced globalized universal shift have led to major transformations within the cities' physical and social strata, to a point leading to adoption of neoliberal strategies to ensure economic development and stability at the expense of social justice and equal wealth distribution. Today, metropolitan cities have encompassed a huge proportion of the world's population that they have become associated mostly with acts of crime, violence and pollution, leaving a huge space of empathy and preferability to the village and the suburban lifestyle. Ironically, with big cities being associated with such visual dilemma, they are considered "cauldrons of creativity" (Florida, 2005, p. 1). They have a great potential in mobilizing human creativity and transforming it into technical innovations that could be embedded within their physical fabric as a proposal for better living conditions. This process is best done through a number of creative actors coming together to seek out-of-the-box solutions for urban issues concerning metropolitan regions and their inhabitants, such approach is known as the Creative City.

Being first coined in David Yencken's 1998 article "*The Creative City*", the term creative cities calls out for metropolitan cities to be fair, just and efficient to its citizens by fostering different opinions and innovative solutions to be able to provide satisfying experiences. With the everyday growth of cities and increasing complexities within urban management, creativity has been a constant debate among scholars, a truly important factor that can be the major turning point for the near, as well as the far, future. Creative cities are also able to establish themselves as resistance tools against state capital and control. Because enforced control by laws and regulations only serve the higher sector of society, most of the local population suffer from injustice, thus shifting towards less urban-ethical behaviour as a result of social anger and frustration. What's more crucial is spatial injustice within cities, where public space is no longer seen as a public asset but as a privatized entity that allows access to certain members of the small community or the neighbourhood based on their financial and societal aspects. As a response, creative cities can act as revolutionary individuals who attempt to reclaim public spaces, mostly through artistic interventions, e.g. street art graffiti, as the case in Cairo during and after the 2011 uprising, which will be examined in this paper.

Egypt's revolution gave rise to a number of street graffiti artists who took action to transfer people's voices to the walls of Downtown. Tahrir Square ever since became a symbol of freedom (tahrir in Arabic means giving freedom to) and an open-air expression of Egypt's long heritage of art and culture. Another type of art which once played a major revolutionary role in Egypt is cinema. Several scholars, as well as filmmakers, have claimed that cinema is considered to be the highest form of art and the best tool for subject representation. During the 1970s, the Egyptian film industry have produced several realist films that have portrayed leftist revolutionary characters against strict governmental policies who limit freedom of expression, and still do till the present days. Yet, the question to be asked here is: Can cinema be a catalyst for urban reclaiming of public



spaces and rights? Can cinema be a critical tool for the emergence of creative cities, especially in the case of Cairo that has suffered from long-term urban disparities as a result of neoliberal capital? Like street graffiti, cinema should act as a public intervention for the local citizens instead of just being shown in closed theatres to a certain audience typology. By then, cinema can transform different civil actors' voices into a visual triumph.

Aim of the research

The aim of this paper is to provide potential answers to the question of whether cinematic interventions within public spaces can be a fruitful seed for a creative city via the revolutionary act of reclaiming public spaces. I chose to explore cinema due to its visual enhancement of subjective patterns of society and the urban arena, thus attempting to conclude with its ability to reclaim not just the physical spaces but also the sociological frameworks surrounding them.

Methodology

This paper will mostly focus on the theoretical framework of cinema as a tool for strengthening public spaces which can be a potential for the emergence of creative spaces, hence a potential for a creative city. Cairo is used as the paper's main case study to give concrete dimensions to such proposal, and that is due to Cairo's post-revolution social and political conditions that led to the degradation role of public spaces. The first section will focus on the theoretical framework of creative cities and the reasons that societies need creativity in the present globalized universe, concluding with cinematic interventions within streets as a possible tool. The second session will highlight the reciprocal effect of cinema and public spaces being interwoven within each other, i.e. cinema within public spaces and public spaces within cinema. These two aspects are strengthened by two theoretical frameworks about the transformation of space, which are in turn visualized through two small examples from UK. I argue that cinema within public spaces contribute to the phylogenetic transformation of space, a term created by Karl S. Kropf (2001), and that the representation of public spaces within the film medium has the ability to give space a given meaning, hence transforming it to a place, a term created by Edward Relph (1976). The last session will be on Cairo as the focal point of the paper examining whether this idea can be applied or not.

1. Creativity in the 21st Century

The 21st century has witnessed, and still is, constant transformations in major cities around the world as a result of some familiar phenomena such as globalization and phases of economic and social crisis. There has been an increased recognition to re-think the way cities should re-structure themselves around these continuous changes, and from here emerged the notion of how creativity can encompass an urban catalytic characteristic to provide alternative solutions to several urban issues. This part will focus on the theoretical framework of creative cities, the present status of public spaces and finally concluding with a



proposed approach to such concern.

1.1. Why Creative Cities?

With the emergence of a variety of issues affecting cities' social and economic behaviour, scholars have engaged themselves in continuous debate about the future of cities within a rapidly transforming era. Many cities have been searching for answers for themselves to cope with recent changes for survival, but somehow they were locked up in the past (Landry, 2008). Still, many cities, especially within developing countries, tend to abide by old top-down organizational methods when facing its own problems which proved to be insufficient nowadays. Thus, the idea of creative cities set a call to imagination and creativity in making use of opportunities and transforming them to future potentials.

Another reason for creative cities is the absence of a creative milieu in most regions. When talking about creative cities, it is essential to include the local citizens and civic actors who are the main creators of soft infrastructure. Cities encompass human awareness, motivation, imagination and creativity (Landry, 2008). The civic society has expressed great concern towards the dramatic transformations of their urban lives (Deffner & Vlachopoulou, 2011), ranging from the young, the elderly, the unemployed, the artists, the academics, the organizations to the policy makers and the political actors. Such different actors ought to be brought together in one physical place where face-to-face interactions can result in productive solutions and ideas. This particular physical space is known as the creative milieu. "Urban milieu need to provide networking opportunities in non-work settings or between firms" (Landry, 2008, p. 132), thus providing more chances for several sectors to meet and exchange information to seek alternative methods for urban development.

1.2. What happened to Public Spaces?

In his article *Ending Public Space as we know it*, Bernd Belina questions the fact whether the well-known term of "public" is still resounding as an effective term, and he mentioned a series of leftist movements that emerged in the mid-1990s as a response to the *Police Strategy No. 5* report which outlined the methods used to expel certain members of society from public spaces in New York (Belina, 2011). On a parallel level, Michael Sorkin's edited collection *Variations on a Theme Park* picturized a new form of urbanism that appeared in the late 20th century as a result of globalized capitalism, leading to the appearance of a whole new level of massive consumerist societies. He argues that huge commercialized structures are "rapidly replacing and eradicating traditional public space" (As cited in Leorke, 2014, p. 2). As Varnelis & Friedberg (2008) extend Sorkin's words, "Public space became increasingly privatized and virtualized", hence "individuals [are] becoming less and less citizens and more and more consumers" (p. 18).

Public spaces' roles are gradually being diminished as "social outlets that enhance the general well-being of collective society" (Attia, 2011, p. 10). Specifically in post-revolutionary cities like Cairo, the role of public

spaces have undergone dramatic transformations within two poles: On one hand, the installation of security and surveillance methods to prevent even the simplest acts of peaceful expressions thereby “militarization” of space. On the other hand, the erection of new developments mostly on the suburban regions of the city as a response to the state’s adoption strategies of neoliberalism. Within both contexts, citizens’ relations to space have become increasingly vague and, in some cases, socially corrupt, thus the image of the city, which is a direct social product of such relationship, is now distorted.

This image of the city is considered to be one of the social foundations for a creative city because it is one of the tools for a creative milieu. Citizens living within a city have the ability to maximize their skills and potentials to reclaim their relationship with the city by coming together and enhancing a network of soft infrastructure that can be implemented within public spaces. As today public arenas have become a tension field between private entities and state power (Belina, 2011), they should be able to counter-act via free emergence of “society’s inner contradictions...and, where people could begin to deal with these contradictions” (Berman, 1986, p. 477).

1.3. Cinema in the Streets

When talking about creativity, and how it is a strong tool needed for providing alternatives to present global issues, it is essential to think about the reason for choosing such approach. According to Bianchini & Landry (1995), “What we describe as creative thinking is a way of getting rid of rigid preconceptions and of opening ourselves to complex phenomena which cannot always be dealt with in a strictly logical manner” (p. 17). It is essential to remove bureaucratic obstacles in order to give more space for innovation and flexibility. Cinema can provide such flexibility, as it “can be very easy to grasp. It opens up the mind and the heart to places and notions that one may never have tapped into” (El-Masry, 2015, para. 1). Cinema is a visual tool that mirrors society onto the big screen, achieving a visual triumph in setting up a relation between society, its environments and spaces and the political and social surrounding framework. Since the turn of the 20th century, cinema has become a strong visual intervention tool within politics and culture (Stern, 2000).

Unfortunately, such visual material has been enclosed within theatres and allowed access to certain privileged social classes. Cinema has become a commodity being sold to the audience for a valuable price for the sake of maximized profits. Such enclosed theatres, which happened to be enclosed within huge malls which happened to be enclosed within larger commercial complexes, have replaced public spaces and have diminished the role of the public in expressing their voices out loud. Recent attempts have taken place to reclaim public spaces via street art, e.g. graffiti, “where a sense of belonging and dialogue restore [public space] to a meaningful place” (Gleaton, 2012, p. 39). From here emerges the proposal of the possibility of cinema acting as an art form for the public, giving a revolutionary status to public space, i.e. a counterpoint to the top-down approaches of authorities, either from the private sector or governmental bodies (Ferrell, 1993).

2. The Cinematic Built Environment

During an interview with Tom Sherak, former President of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, about the role of film in society, he stated that “Film is a reflection of society, both past and present...[it] has become a powerful vehicle for culture, education, leisure and propaganda” (Shah, personal communication, 2011). Motion pictures are a strong tool of communication within which society can express social, political and economic narratives. Being associated with the built environment, it has a great impact on social communication from and within public spaces. This section will explore the theoretical framework of the physical transformation of public spaces acting as two roles: one as reservoirs of cinematic intervention and the other as visual representations within cinema, both of which are accompanied by small case studies from Britain during the 1920s and the 1960s respectively.

2.1. Cinema within Public Spaces: Phylogenetic Change

Since the turn of the 20th century, cinema has taken up the role of a social-awareness agent that introduced a variety of events and images to a wide range of audience in each part of the world, reaching a mass population within vast urban centres (Stern, 2000). Cinematic intervention within social lives within public spaces encompasses a major impact in the physical transformation of spaces via public gatherings and exchange of ideas. In his revised manuscript *Conceptions of Change in the Built Environment*, Kropf defines phylogenetic change as a “form and function that is agreed upon by society and represents a common conception of certain spatial element” (Kropf, 2001 as cited in Attia, 2011, p. 11). Hence, society contributes to the social production of space creating a sense of vibrancy and seeking common needs. Hence again, society engages in several debates concerning social realities that films are able to show to the public. Cinematic images can influence spatial images. It can reach a wider audience through Kropf’s idea of spatial phylogenetic change, i.e. “inclusiveness in the design process of shared spaces” (Attia, 2011, p. 11).

2.1.1. A Small Case Study: Bermondsey in 1920s

This small example portrays how the relationship between the street and films once had an effect on the locals. As part of a health campaign entitled *Education of the Public in Hygiene*, the district of Bermondsey encouraged public talks and lectures to local groups and organizations in attempt to raise awareness about a range of health issues that, mainly, targeted the working class citizens back then (Municipal Dreams, 2013). The program’s aim was to reach to a wide number of local people as possible through street lectures. “Cinemotor” vans were used to screen films within open streets (Figure 1), making use of the “decayed urban remains of the nineteenth century [as]...places of entertainment and political engagement” (Lebas, 1995, p. 43). By mid 1930s, the council had produced more than 30 films to the public which actually concluded with a great achievement not just in improving the working class conditions, but also in the restructuring of authorities’ hierarchy and reforming local councils. All were part of a policy that called for autonomous techniques away

from the “mainstream of the medical profession and the more conservative, national voluntary organizations” (Lebas, p. 43).



Figure 1. Cinemotor vans were used to show health films to the public in Bermondsey, as part of the city's health campaign. Source: Municipal Dreams, 2013

2.2. Public Spaces within Cinema: A Sense of Placelessness

It should be noted that any public space is never actually a place, i.e. without certain meaning or identity. A space can always have the potential of being transformed into a place by implementing experiences, ideas and alternatives. According to Relph (1976), “Places are fusions of human and natural order and are the significant centres of our immediate experiences of the world” (p. 141). The representation of space within film is a potential catalyst for its meaningful transformation to a place. Cinema has the ability of capturing the continuous changing of the physical environment, fluctuations of human behaviour, as well as events, conflicts and reactions (Tewdwr-Jones, 2013). While places are represented on screens, stories are generated and realities are unfolded. The public often “possess attitudes towards notions of place, difference and distinctiveness” (Tewdwr-Jones, 2013) via narrative behaviour. They always feel the need to express themselves and share their experiences and emotions in a public manner, usually addressing a political or a social ideology (Smith, 2007 as cited in Visconti, Sherry, Borghini & Anderson, 2010). In other words, by transforming space into place through a cinematic medium, there is a great possibility for the emergence of a strong creative milieu that can exert pressure on decision making policies.

2.2.1. A Small Case Study: Post-war UK

During the 1950s and 1960s, UK has undergone a chain of controversial top-down planning processes that has greatly contributed to the public's frustration and discontentment. Planners at that time were often

criticized for their “overt bureaucracy, for their “toy town” outlook, and for their destruction of Britain’s heritage” (Clifford, 2006, as cited in Tewdwr-Jones, 2013). Their romanticized visions and images have caused a disruption of northern British urban life, which sparked resistance and opposition, not just from the public, but also from film and other media works. Film implemented heavy reinforced criticism within the public to express opposition against urban planners, eventually prompting the government to issue a legal statement calling for more consultation with the public (Skeffington, 1969, as cited in Tewdwr-Jones, 2013).

3. Setting the Scene: Post-Revolution Cairo

Cairo can be marked by the absence of a clearly defined public realm where members of the Cairene community can gather and interact (Attia, 2011). There has been a great decline in the use of public spaces along the historical timeline of Egypt as a result of the nation’s adoption strategies to neoliberalism, either in the form of commercialized structures sprawling from the urban centres to the fringes, or in the form of security forces and top-down authoritarian control of such spaces. Such decline has contradicted the basic theory of a “multifaceted concept at the heart of the innovative milieu” (Landry, 2008, p. 119). Strengthening public spaces and urban centres means strengthening a sense of identity and place, both of which can resist spatial, social and economic segregation.

During the uprising in January 2011, Tahrir Square has become an iconic image of resistance and opposition to the old regime. The public gatherings that took place within the square (Figure 2) were triggers for new political and social ideologies that drove the people towards a new level of self-organization. What happened afterwards, which is what we see today, is the complete degradation of the square and its gradual detachment from its original symbolic meaning, and due to the square’s significant political image, its declining role has been translated to the declining role of other spaces as well within Cairo. Authoritarian bodies and consumerist entities have established a complete take-over, eventually pursuing what the previous regimes started.

This brief background gives a preliminary reason for Cairo not being listed among the creative cities around the world. For the case of Cairo, creativity would emerge from society’s interactive moments, which would only occur if public spaces are to be given a strong sense of meaning via artistic interventions. Since public space “plays an important role in understanding socio-political changes occurring within the rapidly transforming Cairene society” (Kamel & El-Husseiny, 2014, p. 183), and since cinema is probably the best artistic medium that can capture such changes, it is therefore necessary to consider cinema as an artistic intervention that can develop a strong sense of creativity and innovation resulting from the interactive social exchange of thoughts and alternatives.



Figure 2. Left: Tahrir Square was once an open venue for all societal structures to gather and interact. Right: Tahrir Square nowadays is under the control of laws and order. Source: Los Angeles Times, 2016

3.1. Is there a Cinematic (Built) Environment within Cairo?

So, the question is: is there a cinematic built environment within Cairo's public spaces? Before answering this particular question, it is essential to discover whether there is an actual artistic built environment or not, not just during the revolution, but also what followed. The revolution sparked a number of artistic interventions within the street walls ranging from street graffiti to film screens. *Tahrir Cinema*, an independent revolutionary project, aimed to offer a space in Downtown and view archival footage of the ongoing events to the various classes of society (Figure 3) (Baladi, 2016). Towards the final days of the uprising, independent filmmakers have withdrawn themselves from enclosed theatres, "avoiding the state-owned spaces to open new avenues for creativity" (Baladi, 2016).

After the official step down of the old regime, the city went through a roller-coaster like experience of physical transformations and continuous fluctuations that were documented by several young independent artists and organizations. There were constant debates among architects and planners about the notion of arts being a catalyst for the city's urban development, as well as a response to enforcing laws, regulations and privatization upon public spaces (Rabie, 2015). Since then, several cultural venues have added to their weekly schedule a screening time of non-commercial movies that seek to balance the cinematic industry in Egypt, which is mostly profit oriented. One of these venues called *Zawya* – which means angle or corner in Arabic – was actually, according to Egyptian producer Marianne Khoury, "born out of the revolutionary spirit of nearby Tahrir Square" (Rohan, 2014). The idea of *Zawya* was to create a space to show films that are not normally previewed on TV or other theatres, only such space is still enclosed within a state-owned theatre. Another project called *Cinema Shareana* – Our Street Cinema in Arabic – addresses the public's right to reclaim the streets via evening screenings (Figure 4). Though it does not encompass a revolutionary context, it does aim

to strengthen the community by bringing them together, eventually, according to the project's curator, "the community itself must be the curators and managers of this initiative....because it's theirs, the people's project" (Tewfik, personal communication, 2015).

So, answering to the question, yes there is a cinematic built environment confined within Cairene streets. Yet, they are either situated within enclosed cinema venues or do not necessarily address the needs for creativity and innovative solutions.



Figure 3. Tahrir Cinema is an ongoing initiative aimed to document the events of the revolution to the public in the streets. Source: Egyptian Streets, 2015



Figure 4. Cinema Shareana provides evening screenings in the streets, mainly showing non-commercial films to the locals. Source: Egypt Independent, 2015

3.2. What's missing?

What makes Cairo a non-creative city is not the absence of the ingredients, but the actual process of mixing them all together. Creativity once flourished within public spaces in the form of street screenings that brought several societal actors together. Cinematic interventions have the ability to physically transform a certain space into a creative one that can pump out ideas and solutions. Thus, by laying the foundations for the emergence of a creative milieu, and also removing bureaucratic obstacles enforced by governmental and private bodies (Bianchini & Landry, 1995), the city is able once again to restore the public realm. Like street graffiti, cinema should first be detached from closed theatres, and also be able to address critical social, political and urbanistic issues.

Conclusions

“The theory of the creative cities underlines the human potential in their development” (Jopek in Wiktor-Mach & Radwanski eds., 2014, p. 187). The present global conditions define the absence of well-established creative entities that could bring about alternatives to development issues. Any city, applicable to Cairo as well, is an open place for interaction and differences which lay the foundations for innovation. In the case of Cairo, creativity had paved its way through during the uprising as a way of expressing resistance, but failed to come to a concrete meaningful ending due to the enforced laws and profit-oriented approaches upon spaces that actually brought all sorts of social and artistic actors together. The ideas presented in this paper are not intended to be viewed within a huge scale, rather a confined small spatial one. Deffner & Vlachopoulou (2011) argue that among the pros of creative cities is their support of a more effective small scale application, thus “if effective, the initial idea may lead to similar ideas in other areas or at another period of time” (p. 12).

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