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Being in Al-Azhar Park: Public Spaces in Cairo

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Being in Al-Azhar Park: Public Spaces in Cairo

"Cairo" as a space or "object" of study is dominated by several contending discourses. Diane Singerman and Paul Ammar argue that it has its own body of literature and its own meta-narratives. Interestingly enough the two groupings of legends or meta-narratives they pose are the image of the bomb and the image of the tomb. [1]

The myth of the bomb is the widespread image among circles of political scientists and journalists. The Middle Eastern metropolis, is politically, socially, environmentally and demographically a bomb about to explode. Mushrooming slums are an urban 'tumor' in its urban fabric that breads terrorism, crime, poverty and insecurity, and the bomb image itself promotes a "particular landscape of perverse economic liberalization (producing gates, walls, mass arrests and surveillance systems)".[2] The second myth poses Cairo as a city of the dead, as a passive dead place but nonetheless an open museum, a historical landscape of monuments, and a mixture of oriental architecture and timeless urbanity.[3]

I refer to these particular images as interesting, since the focus of this paper is one "Public Space" that is juxtaposed exactly amidst these images, those of the bomb and of the tomb.

Al-Azhar Park is located on a very close proximity to a very popular residential area, surrounded by a skyline of monuments to be seen in the "view", poor residential areas, slums and cemetery zones (The city of the Dead) just over your shoulder, and a westward skyline of modern, 'internationalist', all-glass business buildings and hotels. The place has a very close proximity to Al-Azhar and Khan Al-Khalili area, a religious and touristic hub in Cairo that has witnessed bombing incidents recently. From a bird's eye

[1] Diane Singerman and Paul Ammar (eds.), *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space, in the New Globalized Middle East*, (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2006), 21-22.

[2] Ibid p. 21.

[3] Ibid p. 22.

view the Park offers, the images of the tomb and the bomb infiltrate the landscape and frame the viewer, and it is its complex multilayered visual superimposition that offers something different for everyone depending on what they are there to see. Figure 1 shows the Westside of the park, where multiple layers are superimposed: greenery, the historical Ayyubid wall, Al-Darb Al-Ahmar Area, some restored buildings that infiltrate domes and minarets, and a skyline of faraway business towers and hotels. Figure 2 shows the view from the east side of the park. Again: greenery, two busy highways reflecting city lights and surrounding a cemetery area (the city of the dead), and at the horizon a popular slum area and Al-Mokattam.

Figure 1

Figure 2

I want to use Al-Azhar Park as a reference to discuss the nature of emerging new public spaces in Cairo. Especially, how can these places re-enforce politics of inclusion and exclusion despite their public nature, and the nature of power relations that underlie the landscape and the social practice within them. More importantly, how do social practices and interaction re-appropriate the urban space within practices of constant negotiation and, may be, trespassing.

In this paper I depend on theoretical literature that deal with concepts of Public Space and the political relations inherent in it, this body of literature is not specific to the "Middle East", or the middle eastern city. And it is a theoretical concern to see how can these concepts help in understanding a Middle Eastern setting.

Later I move on to make use of some of the contributions offered to the specific study of Cairo's public spaces before I move on to the specific case by hand. Reflections of Al-Azhar Park were derived from participant observation, and Interviews. I took all photographs in the paper in field unless indicated otherwise, and these helped in refining my own narrative.

While initial literature review would lead the researcher to expect the traditional antagonism between the expert planner or the designator of uses of space on one hand, and the freedoms and trespassing of daily practices. I would argue that the relationship might be more complex, I draw this idea of appropriation of space from Lefebvre, he differentiates among *representations of space* that is conceptualized space, space that its use designated by experts, planners...etc, and *representational spaces* that are directly lived, these are spaces of the users and inhabitants, the spaces which they seek to appropriate, and lastly *Spatial Practice* that produces the society's space in a dialectical interaction of mastering and appropriation.[4]

AlSheshtawy argues that…

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4 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space,* trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 38-39.

> [F]or cities in developing countries, in [that] case the Middle East, the danger is not from external forces (also known as orientalists, colonialists, imperialists, etc.) but from the inside, since local decision-makers view the general public as a threat that has to be dealt with and contained. In doing that a large segment of the population is precluded from certain rights (such as enjoyment of outdoor activities and socializing in urban historic areas)…[5]

The case of Al-Azhar Park, does not succumb to the same dynamics that played in the case of the Sultan Hasan Square-the case from which ElSheshtawy derives his argument. Local decision-makers play a role, nevertheless dynamics of external financing, local and global expertise, the multi-use of the project, economics of sustainability of the park as well as the developmental ambition that links it to the neighboring Al-Darb Al-Ahmar, all these dynamics could take out the confident tone to claims of sources of a "threat". While I do not seek to run counter the argument provided, I merely argue that dynamics of "disenfranchising" and re-appropriating similar public spaces in Cairo could be more subtle and informal, and are constantly, and dialectically, negotiated through mundane practices.

Inclusion and exclusion in Public Space:

A concept of Public Space entails a theoretical paradox. In terms of political and Social Theory it would refer to the Public Space/ Sphere, While in Urban studies it will more appropriately refer to specific material public spaces/places. Don Mitchell refers to this dual understanding in his classic article[6], and while the dualism between normative and discursive public space and material public space is not the main focus of this paper; it is – nevertheless- relevant in so far as it bears on dynamics of inclusion and exclusion.

Two key theorists pondered upon the concept of public space/sphere as it stands in current usage now, those are Hannah Arendt and Jürgen

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[5] Yasser Elsheshtawy, "Urban Transformations: social Control at al-Rifa'i Mosque and Sultan Hasan Square" in Singerman and Ammar (eds.) op. cit., 297.

[6] Don Mitchell, "The End of Public Space? People's Park, Definitions of the Public, and Democracy", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 85, No. 1, pp. 108-133. http://www.jstor.org/stable/2564281 accessed: 23/12/2010.

Habermas.[7] Arendt refers to the Greek Polis for the normative ideal of 'public space'.

For Hannah Arendt a public space is the space of appearance that is created when people come together joined by speech and action, it is hence a space of civic virtue and the practice of politics. She laments the loss of the public space in which one speaks and acts freely and equally to the rise of a social realm that accompanied the modern transformations and the rise of mass societies.[8] The Arendtian Conception of Public Space hence is a normative ideal, for her public space is unlike material spaces because

> …it does not survive the actuality of the movement which brought it into being, but disappears not only with the dispersal of men…but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves. Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever.[9]

For Arendt it is a space of freedom, plurality and equality. It is that which preludes the existence of politics and that within which politics is practices. Nevertheless, it is to be noted that it is a space that was made only possible by a homogenous and exclusive community. There are common critiques to the model of the Polis from which Arendt draws her conception. The Public space of appearance that Arendt describes was exclusionary, and it was only made possible but excluding slaves, women and foreigners out of it.[10] Actually Arendt does not ignore this, but for her this exclusion is precisely their because of the unique understanding of the public/private divide held that the time.[11]

The Habermesian concept of public sphere draws on this Arendtian conception. Habermas though would concern himself with the rise and

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[7] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago press, 1998) and *The structural Transformation of the Public sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, (Thomas Burger trans.), (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1993).
8 Ibid., and Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992 [2007])., p. 90.
9 Arendt, op. cit., 199.
10 See for example, Benhabib, op. cit., Engin F. Isin, *Being Political: Genealogies of Citizenship*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2002) and Mitchell op. cit.
11 Arendt, op. cit.

transformation of the bourgeoisie public sphere during the 17th and 18th century. For Habermas, the public sphere is where private selves come together to discuss public affairs. It is public as long as it is accessible to anyone and inclusive in principle.[12] Again the problem with this model of public Sphere is that it was never accessible to all.[13] Habermas concerns himself with the rise of the bourgeoisie public sphere that differentiates itself from a plebian public sphere, even though it adopts a discourse of moral responsibility of those not included.[14]

For both Arendt and Habermas, public space/ sphere holds the normative ideals, of freedom, plurality, equality and inclusiveness. But in fact the public spaces they describe were socially exclusive in practice, and their cohesion is lost and disrupted with the loss of this social exclusivity. This loss is usually blamed on the rise of conflict of interest instead of rational debate within the public sphere, and the rise of publicity instead of publicness.

I argue –along with Mitchell- that this paradox of inclusion and exclusion in Public Space is due to theoretical tension between public space/ sphere as a discursive political sphere that acts as a normative ideal of inclusion, and real public spaces that are differential and are always subject to contestation and claims of order.[15] Nevertheless as Mitchell argues, the normative ideal of inclusion that embeds the concept of public sphere can become "a rallying point for successive waves of political activity."[16]

As an inspiring normative Ideal, the political public sphere would regard public spaces as spaces of freedom. Like cities they pose the normative ideal

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[12] Habermas, op. cit.,105-106.
[13] See Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy", *Social Text*, No. 25/26 (1990), pp. 56-80 for a common criticism of a unitary public sphere

[14] Habermas, op. cit, 37, 72.
[15] See also, Susan Brickford, "Constructing Inequality : City Spaces and the Architecture of Citizenship", *Political Theory,* vol.28. no.3, June 2000, pp.355-376.
[16] Don Mitchell, op. cit., p. 117.

for politics and public life; traditionally cities have represented the spaces of freedom (Stadt Luft macht frei) and the practice of citizenship.[17]

Iris Marion Young argues that Publicity is one of the virtues for a normative ideal of city life, while several political theorists would argue for a public as a realm for consensus or unity, she believes that our experience with public space teach us differently. A public space is a place accessible to everyone, everyone can participate and enter, and while doing so everyone takes the chance of encountering difference. The city offers these public spaces like parks, streets and plazas. These are places were people get to encounter each other, and it is in them that group diversity is witnessed, and city life gains its excitement and vitality. These public embodied spaces and the ideal of inclusion they express are important for a democratic life, in as much as they bring to strangers and different people within fields of visibility and encounter.[18]

Nevertheless, real public spaces do not always fit this normative Ideal, especially with the increasing rise in the tendency to create walled and gated communities, places of leisure, and of residence. They could include public or semi-public spaces like parks but the nature of openness becomes contested, as Young notes, "Some walled enclaves encourage community among their residents; thus they are not entirely private spaces. But their purpose is to insulate residents from the surrounding city, its people, and its problems." With the quest on cleanliness, safety, order, the very well to do as well as segments of the middle class can segregate themselves from disorder and annoyance of a complex urban fabric. They can avoid fear of crime, and encounters with the less well off and their lifestyle while residing in privileged enclaves. This limits encounters and eventually de-synthesizes the well off

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[17] One of the reasons Max Weber would argue that citizenship developed in Europe rather elsewhere falls back to the nature of western European cities. See:
Anthony Gidden's Introduction to Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism,* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004) and more extensively: Weber, Max, (Trans. Don Martindale and Gertrud Neuwirth), *The City,* (New York and London: The Free Press, 1958).
[18] Iris Marion Young, "City Life as a normative Ideal" in Sharon M. Meagher (ed.), *Philosophy and the city, Classic to contemporary writings* (Albany: State University of New York Press). 2008. And *Inclusion* and Democracy, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 213-214.

towards the problems of the less well-off who could be residing just on the other side of the wall/fence/gate[19].

Along these line Bickford argues that tamed public space though does not mean the same for everyone, and the experience of being in public differs according to how we experience "Others", which is in turn mediated by media stereotypes.[20] The architectural design could exhibit

> antipolitical impulses toward exclusion, control, security, sameness, and predictability-yet often under the guise of public space. One is tempted to say that what these phenomena share is that they are material and architectural constructions that obscure the presence of differences and inequality in the polity and create a tamed and prettified version of public space.[21]

Tamed public space comes to exist through surveillance mechanisms, policing guards, different forms of gating and fencing, or even making the places uncomfortable to be in. This process of Gating or boundary making doesn't mean the same for everyone, a security guard can be a reason for assurance to some, while threatening to others, and hence these symbols of fencing acquire different social meanings to different people. Their danger, she argues, is when we become so used to these walls that we forget they exist and get accustomed to the idea that the world consists of those we see inside these spaces.[22] Mike Davies reflects on the old view of Olmsted (the Father of Central Park): "[H]e conceived public landscapes and parks as social safety-valves, *mixing* classes and ethnicities in common…recreations and enjoyments".[23] Nevertheless, urban developments in Los Angeles took a different turn with the "militarization of city life",[24] he reflects for example that "to ensure that the park was not used for sleeping …the city installed an elaborate overhead sprinkler system to drench unsuspecting sleepers at random times during the night".[25] Sprinkler systems, benches that make it

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[19] Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, op. cit., 212-213, and Brickford, op. cit., 358.
[20] Bickford, op. cit., 362-363.
[21] Ibid P. 362
[22] Ibid p. 358-363.
[23] Mike Davis, "From City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles", in Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (eds.), *The Blackwell City Reader,* (Blackwell Publishing Lmtd, 2008), p. 325.
[24] Ibid., p. 323.
[25] Ibid, 329.

impossible to lie down and the like, create uncomfortable places that could serve to subtly filter the kind of acceptable and preferable actions in public spaces, and to incite different meanings with regards to who has the right to belong. Moreover Public Spaces can also create their own relationships of power with the way they are landscaped to become an object of "visual consumption",[26] a view to see rather than a place to be in, and where "every interaction is carefully planned", and where images of contact replace actual contact, ad where the undesirables are excluded[27].

In addition to this tension between an inclusionary normative Ideal of a public sphere, and an exclusionary differential material places; contestations also occur on the values that a public space should embody. While the normative Ideal would emphasize inclusion, freedom, absence of coercion and plurality, a key question is who is the "public" that gets to enjoy these values.

The existence of surveillance measures along with other codes that permit or prohibit certain actions, make public spaces as contested spaces, as spaces with tendencies or order and discipline versus spaces of open inclusion for all.[28] Don Mitchell contrasts these two visions. Under the pre-text of freedom, a public space could be a space of free, unmediated interaction and absence of coercion, and hence it will be highly politicized, and tolerant to disorder, or –alternatively- it could be a place free and open place for recreation and entertainment to be used by an appropriate public that needs safety and order. Mitchell argues that the "Public" nature of any public space stems from this contestation between these two visions.[29] As will be shown later, with these terms, the case at hand Al-Azhar Park, represent a clear example of the recreational, ordered and controlled public space, and in these terms it is hardly politicized. Mitchell explains in addition that public spaces should also act as spaces of representation for political organizations and address a larger public[30]. In this later sense, Al-Azhar couldn't fit as a space

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[26] Sharon Zukin, "From Landscapes of Power" in Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (eds.), *The Blackwell City Reader,* (Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 205.
[27] Mitchell, op. cit., 119, 120.
[28] Andrzej Zieleniec, *Space and Social Theory*, (London: sage publications, 2007), p.137,145.
[29] Mitchell, op. cit., 115.
[30] Ibid.

for political representation, had it not been for a couple of some very recent political events that it witnessed. At this point it seems fit to address the case at hand and examine how it would fit within these several tensions, but before paying attention to the specific case of Al-Azhar Park, due attention should be directed to the nature of public spaces in Cairo in general.

Cairo's Public Spaces:

It is usually argued that the notion of public spaces in Cairo witnessed its major transformation in the 19th century to accommodate the new rising urban identity.[31] Reflecting on pre-19th century city Mitchell following Raymond notes that the distinction between the public and the private was not a fixed boundary, rather there were degrees of accessibility or sliding that shifted through out the day according to the practices, the time and the persons involved.[32]

Cairo's modern urbanization schemes usually date back to the vision of Khedive Ismail. In 1867 Ismail visited the Universal exhibition in Paris to open the Egyptian exhibit. He was personally received by Haussman, who showed him around a very altered Paris. Janet Abu-Lughod wonders if it had been on the day after his arrival, when Ismail met Braillet-Deschamps the landscape gardener who had executed the plans for the Bois De Boulogne, and if it had been then when he first envisioned creating a modern formal garden in Brikit Al-Azbakeiyah (Azbakeiyah Pond). But a fact is that, two years later, Barillet-Deschamps was engaged in Ismail's plan to modernize and beautify Cairo. Upon his return to Cairo Ismail had set his heart on planning the opening of the Suez Canal with a massive celebration parallel to the Exhibition, but was disappointed by the then dim Capital of his, "the solution to this problem was obvious" comments Abu-Lughod, "Cairo must be cleaned, polished, and given at least a façade of respectability."[33] At the center of this "polishing" project was the Azbakeiyah Park, it had a preliminary unimaginative design, and

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[31] Heba Farouk Ahmed, *Pre-Colonial Modernity: The state and the Making of the Nineteenth-century Cairo's Urban Form,* PhD dissertation (Berkeley: University of California, 2001), p. 249.
[32] Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 56.
[33] Janet Abu-Lughod, *Cairo: 1001 Years of the City Victorious*, (Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 105.

hence Barillet-Deschamps was commissioned to redesign it as a 19th century French garden with all its clichés, a plan that was complete by the time the guests arrived to the grand opening of the Suez canal.[34] Barillet-Deschamps remained in service even after the urbanizing projects relaxed after the opening. His schemes included covering the whole Island of (the Jazirah) with a formal park surrounding Ismail's palace, and a five and a half miles long and three miles wide park to cover the western bank of the Nile which he died before completing. This park later became the current zoo, and the campus of Cairo University.[35]

Ahmed reflects that by the 19th century the triangle between Shepard's hotel, Azbakeiyah Park and the Opera house (the focus of Ismail's plans of Cairo's modern urbanization) became the hub of public and social life. While Azbakeiyah seemed to include different groups of people, the case was not so, she argues. Locals were confined to the old quarters and came to the vicinity of Azbakeiyah to entertain and perform, i.e. as role players in a theatric scene. She further concludes that the construction of public spaces was dominated by elite and foreigners in accordance to their preferences and the space was regulated and controlled hence producing contrasting narratives. [36] Similarly, reflecting on the Giza Zoo, Battesti reminds that the Zoological garden evolved out of the Khedive Ismail's harem and was intended as the rest of the gardens in downtown areas as an open area for bourgeoisie promenades.[37] There is usually a lament on the loss of the intended purposes of public spaces to represent notions of modernism, hygiene and morale. The Azbakeiyah Park was the first modern Park in Cairo, and was created with notions of sterilization in mind, it was out of hygiene that Birkit Al-Azbakeyiah was to be cleansed, also to create a respectable leisure place as an alternative to the nearby pleasure gardens of cafés and prostitution. Battesti reflects that this coincided with the modern global meta-

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[34] Ibid. P. 107.
[35] Ibid, p. 108, 112.
[36] Heba farouk Ahmed, op. cit., pp. 259- 263.
[37] Vincent Battesti, "the Giza Zoo: Reappropriating Public Space, Reimagining Urban Beauty", in Singerman and Amar, op. cit., p. 491.

narrative of morale, modernity and hygiene that guided creating parks in urban settings.[38]

Of course, in the case of these 'modern' parks the colonial design of the public space was later appropriated by popular classes as wealthier classes opted for more exclusive "public" places.[39] Though with the history behind designing the Parks one could seriously question whether they were public at all in the first place. They definitely were not public spaces in the political sense, rather sterilized, clean areas of leisure and promenade, designed to cater for an Urban bourgeoisie and a European 'public'.

Writing in 1971 Abu-Lughod recounts the story of decline of Al-Azbakeiyah Park, from an *"exclusive domain,* fenced and with an admission charge, in which white uniformed nannies paraded pampered babies, to which Europeans and those with European pretentions flocked to listen to military band concerts.." to a sad deterioration where the fences have been removed, the admission charge long gone, and where the garden is not maintained, and where families picnic as they please littering the grounds with their leftovers.[40] Right now the park is stuck in Cairo traffic and open only a few hours a day.[41]

Not all the parks of the 19th century got along that same road of decline, for example a part of the gardens around Ismail's palace became an elite sporting club, which is now al Jazirah club with a closed membership, while another part became open to public as an aquarium and park.[42]

Consequently one could note, that modern parks in Cairo, were not conceived to be open 'public' spaces of inclusion of all. Underlying the plan of the expert were notions of sterilized clean places, fit for recreation and promenade. And these places were kept visually dramatic and functioning as long as they retained their element of social exclusivity. Opening these places

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[38] Ibid p.503, 504.
[39] Battesti, op. cit., p. 491.
[40] Abu-Lughod, op. cit., 209 (emphasis added).
[41] Ursula Lindsey and Issandr El Amrani, "A short history of green Cairo's parks through the ages," *Cairo Magazine,* March 27, 2005, http://anthropoasis.free.fr/IMG/pdf/Cairo_Magazine_-_A_short_history_of_green.pdf
[42] Ibid, p. 141.

to the public was generally accompanied by their decline, and decay and lack of maintenance. Which drives the well to-do upper and middle classes to seek other more exclusive 'public' spaces, these will include social and sporting clubs with closed membership, or the contemporary trending cosmopolitan experiences of shopping malls[43], and western styled cafés[44] that cater for the aspiration if a younger generation of an affluent, and cosmopolitan oriented middle class, or lastly the privatization of public places for the sake of social control.[45] All of which are examples that show that the tendency "gating and closing of Cairo's public Spaces will continue"[46] especially as neo-liberalism keeps on creating spaces that highlight social stratification and difference.

Being in Al-Azhar Park:

The high modernist appeal to moral and hygiene cleanliness associated with (public) parks, have not receded, the same concern was underlying the design of Sayyida Zeinab Model Park meant to become a national center for children's culture, a key objective was to transform the park from its former status of being "the nighttime meeting place for drug users, gangsters and alcoholics".[47]

Interestingly the conception of Al-Azhar Park coincides with the same notions, reporting the creation of the Park went in these terms:

> Not since the days of the Khedives back before Garden City lost its gardens, Opera Square lost its opera and Orman gardens became a zoo divided has a public park of this size appeared in the city proper. Like its predecessors, Al-Azhar Park was made possible by the generosity of an extremely wealthy philanthropist. Unlike the others, it will be a park for the people part of a larger effort to revitalize the once impoverished community of Darb Al-Ahmar. Perhaps

[43] Mona Abaza, "Shopping Malls, Consumer Culture and the Reshaping of Public Space in Egypt", *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 18, No. 5, 97-122 (2001)

[44] Anouk de Koning, "Café Latte and Caesar Salad: Cosmopolitan Belonging in Cairo's Coffee Shops" in Singerman and Amar, op. cit. pp221-235.

[45] Yasser Elsheshtawy, op. cit.

[46] Ibid, p. 311.

[47] Khaled Adham, "Making or shaking the state: Urban Boundaries of state control and popular appropriation in Sayyida Zaynab Model Park", in Diane Singerman. *Cairo cosmopolitan: Governance, Urban Space and Global Modernity*, (Cairo: the American university in Cairo Press, 2009.), p. 42.

even more importantly, it will earn its keep. The park is expected to attract 2000 visitors a day and be self-sustaining within two or three years.[48]

In the case of Al Azhar Park, "this area used to be outside Cairo, historically it was a dumpsite".[49] The project took upon itself the construction of three water tanks for the population of Cairo and replacing the dumpsite with a green space. Situated between the popular area of Al-Darb Al-Ahmar on one side, and the City of the Dead on the other. The Park prizes itself as the green lung of Cairo, and perhaps altering the landscape might be a very drastic change that is usually attributed to the project. (Figures 3 and 4)

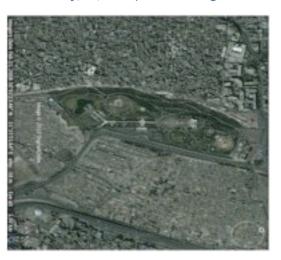Figure 3: Aerial View, The Site on July, 10, 2000 (Source: Google earth: 16/5/2010)

Figure 4: Aerial View: the site in 2008 (Source: Google earth: 16/5/2010)

Inclusion/Exclusion and the Public nature of the park:

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[48] Josef Krauss, "Green Acres: In a concrete Heavy City, Landscapers Hope Al-Azhar Park will help unearth a greener Cairo, *Business today,* August 2004.
http://www.businesstodayegypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=1440
[49] Dina Bakhoum, Interview, 11-5-2010, Al-Azhar Park.

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The park is not a totally "open space" as one would imagine given the nature of public parks in cities. As most public spaces in Cairo it is fenced, and entrance is with a ticket. It is one of the very few places that charge Egyptians and non-Egyptians equally, unlike other 'touristic ' places. Nevertheless the initial plan or vision of the Park is that should represent all social classes.[50]

Inside the park there are a lot of non-Egyptians, wonderer tourists, photographing the scene, others more intrigued by the view from above and the seeming access to the very different perhaps more 'authentic' area of popular housings that contrast sharply with the parks organized and spacious landscape. When wondering around the park one notices shifts in different people one encounters. The entrance will be overcroweded with families, or couples who are just enjoying 'being' in a park or playing with or bathing in fountains. (figure 5)

Figure 5

Visitors of the Park from middle class and upper strata will usually be frequenting one of the posh restaurants in the park, and young boys and girls with an intellectual (and often cosmopolitan) outlook will be flocking towards the Geneina Theatre, where it could be normal to find almost wanderers as non-Egyptians depending on the show scheduled. Walking by the theatre – in

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one of my visits- it was clearly visible that most of the people descending from the Hill top avnenue, or approaching the theatre with their cars were non-Egyptian. As three –seemingly foreign girls- descended one of the security guards carefully watched over and prevented a group of young men from following them. **Subtly but firmly park guards informally shape the kind of people to access specific areas in the park, and help maintain it clear and safe.** Though the park places are open to all, the variation of activities and the audience they target could shape the different groups of people and where they exist in the park.

In an interview conducted in the lake side café –one of the three main restaurants located in the park- a young lady would say: "I like that the park suits different styles, like you have trianon, or if your life –style is less affordable you can just sit on the benches" as I probe her into looking around the place we were in and point to the faraway benches barely seen from afar I say 'like those way over there?" she replies, "okay you are right, they are not exactly combined".[51] This sort differences within the park is striking if you wander through it, and it is obviously understood that there are different kinds of visitors, and that the space offers different functions for different groups of people.

For instance the Geneina Theatre, is a cultural venue within the Park, run by Culture Resource (Al Mawred Al Thaqafy) which is a regional non-profit organization that seeks to support independent artists in the Arab region, among its many other objectives. In an interview with Ashraf Kenawy, Egypt Programs and El Geneina Theatre Manager in the organization he mentioned: "I do not chose my audience, nevertheless, my audience is of a special nature, some are the Park's visitors, usually about 20%, you can notice them, sometimes they leave in the middle of the concert, others are the audience and fans of the program of El Geneina itself, and the rest are usually the fans of the specific band playing…the expansion and diversification of audience can happen depending on the show itself, a unique example was in October 2010 when we held the international Circus festival, the audience was very

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[51] Sarra Moneir, Interview, 22-5-2011, Al-Azhar Park.

diverse, social wise and age wise, it was great, and it attracted mostly the Park's visitor's".[52]

The Geneina Theatre lies at the area next to the historical Ayyubid Wall that is under restoration, and the seperates/connects the park to the Area of Al-Darb Al-Ahmar. Of interest here might be the perception of those who would be interested to pass towards the *Al-Darb Al-Ahmar* gate, or walk by the historic wall:

> *-Most Visitors, since they come from condensed space, they need the green space, obviously, **other people**, visitors, whether from schools, foreigners, tourists…*
>
> *- They look for culture?*
>
> *-Exactly, but we do not want to promote culture only for them, we want a flow to Al-Darb Al-Ahmar, ever for those who do not know…*
>
> *…the gate (the Al-Darb Al-Ahmar gate) was opened last year, but it is not very much promoted, because we need to train guides, we need it to be organized, we do not want to shock the community with the flow of people and tourists…we do not want it to turn to Disney land, we do not want mass tourism…**right now it needs people who have a bit of curiosity, and who will ask, and the guards will tell them.*** [53]

Thus, the nature of gates, ticketing and social difference is not always that straightforward to trace or criticize, in the Park's setting as theoretical bodies of literature seem to convey. While some codes could work to socially structure difference and encounters, some other openings might be left untapped because of lack of willingness and curiosity to venture in. A lot of

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[52] Ashraf Kenawy, Interview, 25-5-2011, Culture Resource regional office in Cairo.
[53] Dina Bakhoum, op. cit., (my emphasis).

people I spoke wouldn't know before hand that the Park has an acess to Al-Darb Al-Ahmar area, for example.

The Park is fenced away from the very busy and traffic ridden Salah Salem highway, which has the main entrance, then again after the parking lot, with the ticket office, and a metal detector securitized gate. Within the park signs of control are not totally absent as well. (Figure 6)

Figure 6: Staircase to the Historic Wall.

Figure 6, shows the beginning of the stairway down to the promenade by the Historic Salahuldin wall that is being restored and an access to the more popular area juxtaposed by the Park. The picture was taken on one of my earlier visits. By the second visit the threatening do not pass cones were removed, instead there was a guard. The guard allowed us –two young Egyptian girls- after some negotiation and pretended naivety on our part to descent the stairway that leads to the Historic promenade and take a stroll…"just till the gate, and come up before dark". We had to negotiate our way for a while after several *mamnou'* (prohibited) on his part, and insistently asking to see *El-bawaba* (The Gate) and promising it won't take more than five minutes. Only half-way through the staircase we heard another *mamnou'* from a guard below, and again after negotiations we were allowed to take a stroll after promising not to take pictures.

Coming up the stair case a family of four saw us, and felt curiosity to see the wall, there the guard was firm, it was again *mamnou',* which provoked a sarcastic question from them in return: Is the stairway only for ascending? After seeing us ascending the staircase, and seeing below a group of three seemingly foreign young people sitting below and having lunch after a stroll, sarcasm was the initial reaction to claims of prohibition. The same guard directed our pathways to take the road uphill, this time we compiled eyeing with curiosity the group of 5 or 6 non-Egyptians strolling down what was –for us- a prohibited lane, only to come and negotiate our way through it again by explaining that we needed to go to El-Geneina theatre.

Obviously security personnel help shape the pathway promenaders would take, the park might be open for everyone, but informal rules of where different people should naturally be, are based on constant negotiation with security personnel, stealth wondering and curiosity, some role-playing and perhaps a declarations of what you are after.

Fencing and access granting is again constitutive to the nature of "Publicness" of the Park, as I have tried to show. As Susan Bickford would argue, gates could take a variety of forms, impenetrable walls, barbed wires, redlines on a map[54] or even do not approach, or caution tapes. And these are not necessarily sinister, but they can have different social meanings to different people, or even to the same person. These kinds of walls and fences do not necessarily include or exclude, but they help to construct difference and random encounters.

The sense of imposed order is meant to give both feelings of security or perhaps safety, but also adding an element of unnaturalness. That sense of ordered and constructed nature is common in parks, as green public spaces striving to strike balance between civil sense of being in public and free openness. As a modern urban form of greenery one must expect the 'order' is an underlying element in cities' public spaces.

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[54] Bickford, op. cit.

The Park nevertheless works with a notion of permeability, evident in its perceived role and relationship to Al-Darb Al-Ahmar community. The Park prizes itself on being close to Al-Darb Al-Ahmar which is "very rich in Cultural Heritage yet poor socially and economically", it sees itself as a "catalyst for development in the neighbourhood", hence it's initial vision is to "create a public space for people, while working on their heritage, and social and economic conditions". [55]

In addition to codes of inclusion and exclusion within the Park, the nature of openness and inclusion also relates access. Deciding on whether the Park is truly a public place or not is rather complex then, Dina Bakhoum would agree that it is an interesting debate,

In Egypt, it could be a public park because it is not Heliopolis Club, or Jazira Club, for which you need an exclusive membership. On the other hand, yes you need to pay for a ticket, but it has to do with the culture, ….so it is a public park in that sense, but it is not 100% public for issues that have to do with Egypt in general, we do not have this Idea of Central Park in Egypt, so it is a balance.

Pricing also is not a fixed boundary, prices shift from weekdays, weekends and public holidays, special prices are granted for families, and reduced tickets are there for children, and infants are freely admitted. Another "category" on the pricing list is people from *Al-Darb Al-Ahmar* and *Al-Gamleyya,* who can enter on a reduced ticket.

Pricing acts as a safe guard for the park to stay "clean" or "Nedeefa" , and to control the numbers to avoid crowdedness "Zahma" . For many of those I have talked with, if it is left open to all it will get spoiled, it will be crowded, it might lose control since the tickets responds to a cultural value that if you pay for something you have to take care of it and not spoil it. None of those interviewed would resort to class-related terms. Issues of concern will always be security, cleanliness (though the term in vernacular use could

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[55] Dina Bakhoum, op. cit.

relate to a higher class or posh place), serenity, space, greenery and control. Things that would annoy conservative young visitors are the unrespectable practices that young couples would engage in secluded places. Nevertheless the park is still some place respectable for them since it is spacious, so one can avoid unpleasant encounters and because of the role of security. For one of the girls I interviewed it is one of the places that her parents will feel comfortable in allowing her to go.

These concerns reflect what Battesti noticed while conducting interviews for his studies on the zoo, he notes:

> Criticism of the public gardens is often severe among representatives of the wealthier strata of society who express regret about the 'invasion' of public spaces by the masses who 'do not know how to act, who are not respectable' (Mu'addab).[56]

The park might be the new "it" romantic place for young couples. Both AlSheshtawy and Batettesti take note of the space public spaces open for young unmarried couples or harmless teenage flirtations. Alsheshtawy in particular reflects on the changing gender relationships as one of the elements of urban subcultures that public places respond to. While it is traditionally unacceptable for a young unmarried couple to appear in public; Public spaces allow the room for them to become a not unusual site in Cairo, since they are not exclusive domain of men like the traditional 'ahwa but it integrates both men and women in its environs.[57]

Security guards, though, do keep an eye on what would be unacceptable behaviour, "The Park has to maintain its reputation"[58] and sometimes it is their role to check any inappropriate behaviour even if not in a direct or confrontational way.

After sunset a guard passed next to us and with a loud voice said that sitting on the grass was forbidden as the sprinkles were about to work. This note was obviously directed to the couple that has been sitting next to us, on

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[56] Battesti, op. cit., p. 503.
[57] Alsheshtawy, op. cit. p. 307.
[58] Bakhoum.

a not-so-close a distance. As we and the couple stood up and left the lawns, and as no sprinklers started to work, the young man was sure to throw the same comment to another guard sitting on the grass along the way… "it's not allowed to sit on the grass, the sprinklers are going to start".

Though guards have authority, they would resort to informal perhaps hidden ways of controlling 'the places to be' in the park: "the sprinklers, that it is forbidden to pass, gates are closed, we will get punished…" are the reasons one hear walking through. Visitors comply but not with out their own form of hidden dissent, even if it with a mean joke, saying *Al-salamo 'aleikom* as one passes by a grumpy guard in a not so heavily trespassed area, or even pretending not to hear cautions. [*]

For some of those I spoke to, the presence of security for social discipline and order is important to maintain the park a friendly public space, for others namely Ashraf Kenawy the manager of the theatre, he finds this pointless: "Why have security inside a Park? What could be dangerous inside the Park?"

The Park as a Politicized Public Space:

People I have spoke to only represented what one term middle class young people looking for a place for an "Outing": the posh term that came to replace the term "Fosha" that usually denoted going out for leisure. In this sense the Park corresponds to a recreational place, and a dramatic visual landscape that has multiple layers in a dense historical urban fabric.

Nevertheless, I would argue that with more encounters among different groups that frequent the park, contestation could begin to rise to about the

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[*] Very recently though a small incident of direct confrontation between security personnel in the Park and a young couple, got filmed and uploaded on you tube, raising a very small debate about infringing of personal freedoms and what could constitute as moral or appropriate behaviour/discipline in a public place. Having seen the youtube video as it got uploaded on May 18th 2011, it did not seem to raise a huge controversy, it still hasn't, but it was mentioned to me again by Ashraf Kenway during my interview with him. It remains yet to be seen whether this video will snowball into a debate or will be overlooked. Ashraf Kenawy, op. cit. and see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z_QBD5pAqLY&feature=player_embedded#at=14 (last accessed May 31, 2011)

values the park should reflect. So far the Park is still a "tamed public space", but very recently (post January 25-Feb 11 2011) it attracted two events that could be considered as political representation. Two newly formed political grouping chose to launch the inaugural ceremonies in it, which has not been a very common practice before. It was chosen first to launch a newly formed political party, Al'Adl. In a phone call, Mustafa Al-Naggar one of the founding members explained the reason why they chose the place:

> We wanted to deliver the message that we combine authenticity and modernity, as youth we do not want to be divorced from our identity, we chose Al Azhar Park to stress this idea, we also chose the place inside the park that has the background of mosques and the citadel, we wanted this to be the background…secondly, people are used to inauguration ceremonies that are in Hotels, or syndicates, we wanted to reach out to people in a place where they would normally frequent.

Two concerns appear here, the symbolic landscape that the Park convey, it sets a scene that is usually envisaged as a great mix between renovation and elements of historic Cairo, and secondly the Park's more public, open outreach to people, who otherwise might not be able or interested to join in.

Contestation also strongly features in clashes between security and the cultural theatre in the Park. Although the Park's administration is fairly neutral, the Theatre has been subject to conflict with Authorities, in 2006, a concert that was supposed to feature a famous dissident poet was banned and the theatre had to stop performances.[59] Reasons given were related to security and safety measures of the theatre, while Ashraf Kenawy brings it back to the security mentality that infiltrates cultural production, and that have generally been hostile to independent cultural production. "The Security mentality sees the theatre and its audience as dissident an ant-regime, the ironic thing is that I still get this after the whole political regime has already been brought down", he comments. The theatre was back in business after six months thanks to media pressure, but Kenawy still has a problem worth the security mentality that seems to still lurk and censor. He depends on the support of the audience

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[59] Rania Khalaf, "No Music in the Park", Al Ahram Weekly, March 16th, 2006
http://www.mawred.org/images/stories/press/AlAhram-Weekly_16March.jpg

that has grown and come to respect it, and sometimes seems to enjoy the contestation with security forces representatives.[60]

Conclusion:

According to these practices one witnesses in the Park, and according to the intital Plan of the Park, it could hardly fit as a public space in the political ideal sense, not in Mitchell's sense of a public space as a subject of contesting values. It seems to be a relatively tamed public space, if it weren't for the daily and mundane practices of "being" in the Park, and finding the place in it where one belongs. As notes have shown, there are constant negotiation of the spaces to "be in". The designated plan of space, or what Lefebvre would call representations of space do not operate alone, but are rather appropriated by practices that transform them into social and lived spaces.

Nevertheless, I wouldn't argue that it is a dead public space,[61] especially when the nature of similar public spaces in Cairo is taken into consideration. As has been commented, Parks and spaces for recreation have never been really open to an undifferentiated public. They were usually catering to a very socially homogenous group looking for social exclusion as a value, and the trend seems to unfortunately continue with increasing neo-liberal consumption places. As one interviewee would say: "Many people from upper middle class or upper class believe being in a garden is boring, and would prefer going to cosmopolitan places like shopping malls, and Hotels, places that are indoors and air-conditioned, where people go to show off."[62]

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[60] Kenawy, op. cit.

[61] Richard Sennet, *The Fall of the Public Man,* (London: Penguin books, 2002).

[62] Sarra Moneir, op. cit., see also, Mona Abaza op. cit, and de Koning, op. cit., El-Essawi, op. cit.

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