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Spatial Relations of Informal Practices in Cairo Streetscape

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Abstract |

The re-appropriation of public space by Cairo residents after the Egyptian Revolution in 2011 offers an opportunity to re-think the role of public space and its informal dimension as a space of belonging and contestation. Most of the scholarly works on urban informality focus on the lack of regulations in urban planning, on informal settlements or informal economy; this article discusses informality in the way it affects people daily life through forms of informal practices. By studying the spatial nature of daily informal practices, investigating how they interact with the physical form of the street and examining the complex relations between formal and informal, this paper suggests looking at informality from the perspective of people's everyday life. In attempting so, the work shows the importance of informal practices for the city functioning: they are not only a vital element for Cairo streetscape's vivacity, but a system of sustainable living for many communities. Moreover, in explaining that it argues that formality and informality no longer exist as opposite categories in two separate territories but instead they are involved in the same process of space production, which creates both spaces of dialogue and negotiation and spaces of conflict and contestation.

Keywords: Informal Practices, Public Spaces, Conflict, Urbanism, Cairo

Introduction |

Space is never something that people simply use; they attached meaning to it; and through this meaning, they re-think the physicality of space. This is true for private spaces as well as for public spaces. However, in public spaces “meaning” is culturally and socially constructed by different social groups, therefore the process of “ascribe meaning” is a collective action, full of representation and symbolism. This is particularly true when conflicts, protests and tensions that arise in society take place in a public space. In this case, the space becomes a “space of belonging”, a “space of cultural sharing” and a setting for “reinforce the sense of community”. During the Egyptian Revolution that took place in January and February 2011 in *Tahrir Square*, people did not only attached a new meaning to *Tahrir Square* but they re-thought the significance of public space in general and created a new space of belonging, a new representational space, in reaction to the symbolism of the Regime. Through spatial social and cultural practices, the Egyptian Uprising revolutionized the way people perceived, lived and conceived public spaces [Lefebvre 1961].

The battle to reclaim public space – squares and streets – was not merely a battle for space. It was a quest to put the demands of the people above the demands of a Regime. For the first time in years, during the Revolution, squares across the country became real public spaces, places in which citizens can meet to protest, share ideas, cooperate, make art, sing and discuss. People now see public space differently. The street became not just a place to park cars, but the gateway to homes in a way that was sacred; graffiti and public art became a way of literally reclaiming public spaces for freedom of expression; now when you walk on the streets, “there is life, there is a sense of shared space that protect neighborhoods. Previously there were a lot of streets and empty spaces that were run by the State” [Ravazzoli 2011].

The Revolution has changed the role of public space and the perception of what public space is and should be; what it is allowed and what it is not. Before the Revolution the State always used to dictate where you were allowed to sit and walk, what you were allowed to do or say. Now, there is a “new right” to express yourself in the street because public spaces belong to people and not to the Regime anymore. The *re-appropriation* of streets and major public spaces of the city, the increasingly *inability of the state* to exercise its control over space, and the increasing *empowered of communities* have increased the number of

informal practices in public spaces, favored the appearance of a new model of urban interventions, and spurred the rise of community initiatives [Nagati and Elgandy 2012]. People are not simply using their streets as never done before, but they are re-inventing spaces based on their daily needs, embedded in socio cultural practices.

An example of urban intervention was the construction in the three months after the revolution of an exit ramp [*Al Mi'timdija Exit*] to have direct access to the 45-mile-long Ring Road. Commenting on this fact Kimmelman wrote on the New York Times [2013] *"In the absence of functioning government, they built ramps from dirt, sand and trash. Then they invited the police to open a kiosk at the interchange"* [Kimmelman 2013]. *"This was always a revolution about unjust urban conditions and about public space. People now realize they have the right to determine what happens on their own streets, to their own neighborhoods. So there is a battle of ownership throughout Egypt: over whose space this is, and who determines whose space it is"* says Omar Nagati speaking for the New York Times [Kimmelman 2013]. Other examples of urban intervention from below are the *Ard Al Liwa Park* and *Lino's Café* [Nagati and Elgandy 2012].

In addition to urban interventions of this kind, which are examples of urban planning "from below", other forms of informality have appeared: informal practices. They refers to the informal encroachment of sidewalks, streets and public spaces, through the extension into the street of existing structures such as cafes, tea stand, food stalls; extension of shops outside of their premises; temporary street vendors; and informal use of parking lots. These informal practices, conceived either as an ensemble of socio-cultural practices and micro-economic activities, are not new in Cairo's public spaces. Informality in Cairo is a phenomenon that goes beyond the classic stereotype of poverty-informality, legality-illegality, and regularity-irregularity. It affects every day life through a network of multiple dynamics. Informality is something that belongs to Cairo's culture. It is a practice, a pattern of repetitively spatial interactions and behaviors, embedded in a historical socio-cultural construct that constitute an everyday system of sustainable living for many communities.

However, after the Revolution individual and communities started to claim and battle for a better city and better public spaces, favoring new informal practices to grow in number. The streets and major public spaces become full of "new" micro economic

activities, different kinds of urban actions and initiatives, which have reshaped the physicality of space and how it is used.

With the aim to examine the significance of informal practices as a **creator of material spaces of cultural belonging**, both as a reclaim to *the right to the city* and as a concrete *instrument to satisfy individual needs*, this paper investigates daily informal practices, how they concretely manifest on the city and the extent to which they shape the physical form of Cairo's streetscape. Moreover, we seek to explore ways in which different regimes of informal practices take form on urban space, and investigate **how informal and formal practices relate to one another** in different contexts across the city. By analyzing the spatial relation of informal practices the paper also analyzes how informal practices generate spaces of conflicts and contestations as well as spaces of dialogue within the city. In order to unfold these aspects, this paper provides a categorization of different types of informal practices and a list of the different way in which informal practices intersect Cairo's streetscape. On the basis of this typology, informal practices are investigated in relation to formality in two selected neighborhoods of the city, *Wust El-Balad* [Downtown Cairo] and *Qarafa, el-Arafa* [City of Death], where the juxtaposition between formal and informal is very strong.

The article develops three main strands of thought: it discusses the concept of informal practices in an attempt to show the way they produce space of belong; it investigates the relations between informality and formality in public space suggesting a reflection on the extent to which informal practices foster community empowerment, street vibrancy, as well as conflict and contestation among communities and government; also by studying the spatial manifestation of daily informal practices it is possible to understand more of the concrete needs of the population and reconsider the role of planning. Concluding, the paper qualifies us to contribute to the discussion over the need to find original alternatives solutions able to integrate "informality" into the planning processes. In effect, informal practices are concrete planning actions full of culture and social meanings.

Cairo streetscape |

Due to its very heterogeneous urban fabric and the strong opposition between formal and informal areas, Cairo's streetscape constitutes a unique element of the built

environment in terms of both form and content, constantly changing as a reaction of main metropolitan transformations. While facing global social and cultural challenges, Cairo's metropolitan area is indeed redefining its boundaries, neighborhoods and most of its public spaces. Especially after the Egyptian Revolution in 2011, public space was transformed remarkably both in its physicality and meaning: while reducing itself because of private speculative interests, it has become a key element in community building processes and a representative tool for citizens to gain a new social cohesion.

Regardless, His Highness argues that "*When we looked at public space, Cairo was one of the cities which had the highest density of people, and the lowest square meters of public space*" [AKTC, 2005]. This quotation is emblematic of Cairo's historical urban development, where public space has been built just as a "space in-between buildings", in both formal and informal districts, and it is nowadays predominantly represented by streets and circulation's infrastructures. The lack of public space has been caused mainly by traffic, privatization and lack of funding and it is the main cause of social segregation. Excluding some great green open areas, such as *Al-Azhar Park*, *Giza-Zoo*, the *Botanical Gardens*, and mayor squares, in most cases used as roundabouts, some few areas can be classified as public spaces. In what is considered the old and historic Cairo, only the intricate system of streets and passages can be classified as "true" public space; in this context public space is mainly characterized by sidewalks crowded with people, vendors and a variety of activities, as well as by the absence of both regulations and a spatial and formal continuity.

The only classification that seems possible is based on the empirical distinction between formal and informal, among permanent material and unfinished, mostly created on permeable ground without any kind of pedestrian sidewalks. For example, in the two case studies analyzed in this paper, it must be observed that, even if spaces in-between buildings could be considered a large amount over the total urban fabric, both in *Wust El-Balad* [Downtown] and *Qarafa, el-Arafa* [City of the Dead] districts, only a little part of it is intended to be sidewalks for pedestrians. Actually, only Downtown streetscape has been designed and realized with permanent ground materials, while the City of the Dead's informal streets network reveals a more complex mobility and social structure, because of its "unfinished condition".

However, this strong relationship between public space and streets, and thus traffic and the system of public transport in Cairo, would be a key aspect for a new design attitude towards the urban and linear element represented by streets. In a territorial context characterized by high density of population, highly dense built environment and a weak political strategy concerning the environmental, social and economic role of public spaces, the examination of informal practices within the micro-universe of the sidewalks is not marginal; on the contrary it reveals important information about how people use spaces, their daily needs and possible planning actions, thus suggesting a new tool of investigation.

The spatial socio-cultural dynamics generated by the interaction between inhabitants and the public linear system of streets, are concrete daily tools through which the city organism provides services and wide accessibility over urban space. In achieving so, a human scale is regained out of the megalopolis, transforming a city for cars into a city for human beings [Gehl 2010].

In this framework, informal practices and their economic, social and spatial relations within streetscapes are a relevant aspect of Cairo's metabolism: they affect every day citizens' quality of life, produce evident transformations of streets' open spaces and ground floors landscape both by a formal and functional perspective, and generate spaces of dialogue and contestation.



Figure 1| Aerials view showing two different urban fabrics: to the left, the formal Downtown; to the right, City of the Dead informal settlement [Source: Google Maps, 2013].



Figure 2| Comparison between Downtown [on the left and City] of the Dead [on the right] space in-between buildings, which comprehends streets, squares, parks, roundabouts and public lands in general.



Figure 3| Downtown and City of the Dead's streetscapes. The images show the formal urban patterns of Downtown [on the left] in juxtaposition to the informal and not mapped patterns of City of the Dead [on the right].

Informal practices as a way of living|

Informality has been study as a territorial formation, as a particular sector of the economic activity or as a labor category. This shows the complexity of this concept. This paper examines informality as a group of collective practices that take place in public spaces

and that generate spaces of belonging. So defined it is both a simple and extraordinary complex process. It is simple in its everyday manifestations and in its expression on urban space; people experience informality in our daily life when we buy a cheap watch, an orange juice or a book from a street vendor, when we purchase vegetables from farmers coming to the city or when we hire a person to clean the house. It is complex in its relation to formality. In fact, it is intricate to understand how informal practices interact with existing physical legal spaces, social structures and with government rules, and to grasp how they relate to formal practices, urban spaces and the political order. Nevertheless, it is from the understanding of this complex relation between formal and informal that this work contributes to the discussion on the potential of conceiving informality within planning practices.

In order to reduce the complexity of the argument and better understand this relation as well as the implications for urbanism, this session is threefold: it creates a typology of informal practices, by selecting only the ones that appear along Cairo's streets; it describes their spatiality in relation to the urban fabric and Cairo's streetscape; and it investigates how informal practices relate to formality. In order to examine these aspects we selected two city neighborhoods: *Wust El-Balad* [Downtown Cairo] and the *Qarafa, el-Arafa* [City of Death]. They were chosen for both their similarities, in exhibiting a network of informal practices and for their differences, in the arrangement of the urban fabric, enabling us to discover if the dichotomy between classic categories used to interpret cities, such as "formal and informal", "legal and illegal", "planned and unplanned", "poor and middle class", is still valuable for the understanding of Cairo metabolism.

Types of informal practices |

Informal practices denotes both a non-formal [not covered or insufficiently covered by formal state arrangement] set of informal economic activities, which are associated to the commercial, recreational, entertainment and food supply sectors, and are embedded in socio-cultural practices. Most of the major social and economic activities relate to the production of goods and services for sale [e.g. street traders and street vendors], although they also refer to other living patterns like entertainment, socializing, sleeping and eating. These patterns spatially manifest in the city in mainly three different ways: as an extension

on the sidewalk of former activities; as a temporary but stationary street vendors; and as a temporary and mobile street vendors [see Figure 4]. Besides their practical and functional use, they are part of Cairo historical culture and system of relations. What make them unique and interesting is that they represent a distinct social structure and cultural identity and represent for the community a special place where they recognize themselves as citizens and human beings. Therefore, informal practices do not appear in society with the simple aim to satisfy everyday needs, but they belong to a complex system of socio-cultural constructs and are related to the urban form of the city.

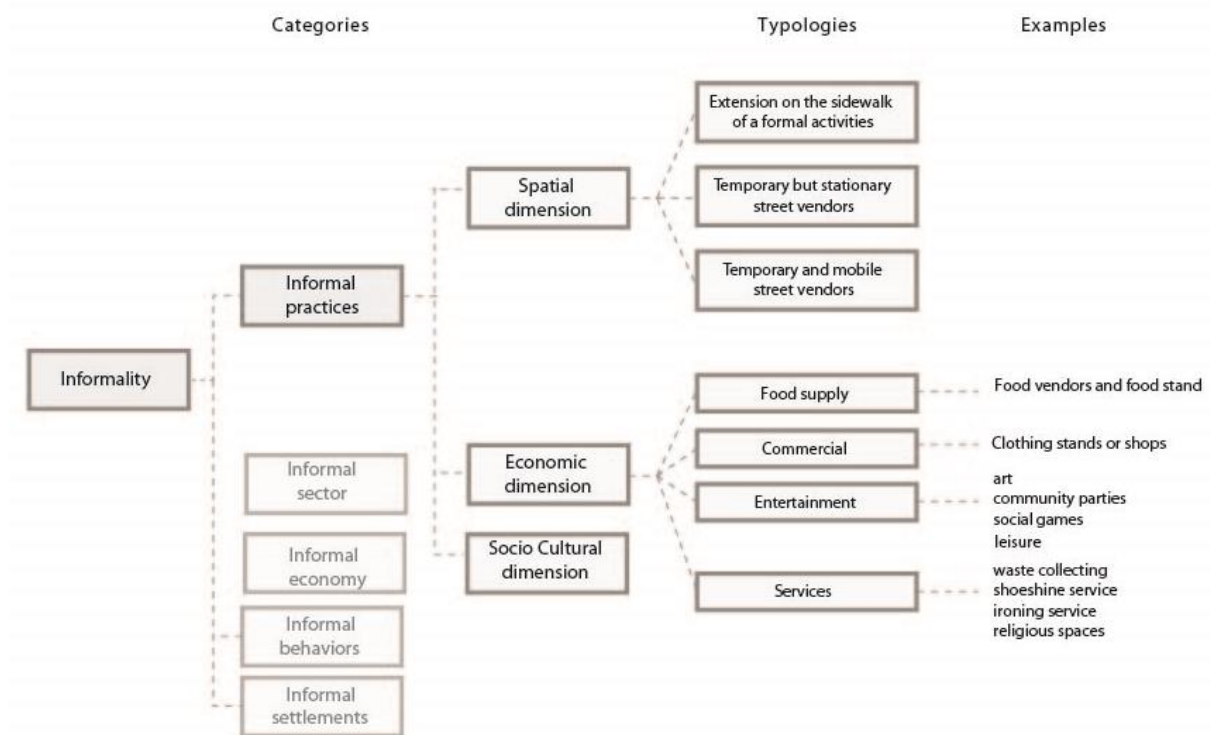


Figure 4| Diagram about Informal Practices and activities in Cairo streetscape

By investigating informal practices as the set of micro-economic activities [economic dimension] and the extent to which space is organized in order to accommodate them, it is possible to capture how streets and public space are used, lived and constructed by communities. The observation of the spatial dimension of eating, socializing, smoking, or drinking coffee, which are typical activities performed on a daily basis, demonstrates that they happen prevalently on public space, along the streets, in the public setting. Most of the people take their meals in the street, in front of their shops, they smoke *sheisha* or drink tea by moving their chairs on the sidewalks or do their jobs at open air. Some of these cultural

and social practices are remarkably related to the distinctive Cairo's urban form and urban development, which imposes a certain use of the spaces that bring people to conceive streets and public spaces as an extension of their private space. As explained in the previous paragraph Cairo is a very crowded city where streets are small and the built-up areas have very high population densities. Consequently, people are forced to close proximity and to satisfy their need of space by merging private space with the street, transcending physical boundaries. For this reason outdoor space is intensively used, and adapted to provide an alternative to the missing indoor space. Informal practices are to be understood in the framework of this multiple dimension [economic, spatial and socio-cultural].

Spatial analysis of Informal activities on Downtown's streetscape |

Today Downtown Cairo, overcrowded and clogged with traffic, but with very few residents, is considered the historical city center, with a lot of touristic facilities and some of the most important political institutions located. The elegant and upper-middle class' district does not exist anymore, due to the economic politics and land laws. As the urban planner Elshahed [2012] said in a recent interview economic politics and laws force the upper classes to leave the neighborhood, causing a general abandonment of buildings and cultural centers and devoting such a rich heritage to poor maintenance conditions.

It's exactly in this framework and especially after the Revolution that informal practices spread all over the district, in the attempt to support the local poor community, thanks to a touristic and commercial vibrancy clearly visible in almost every street of Downtown. Thus, the informal activities that characterize the streets' public space are almost essentially associated to commercial retail, to recreational amenities and entertainment's sector and, only occasionally, to the providing of missing services. It can also be argued that, as the traffic fluxes are much more intense than in some other informal settlements of the Cairo's metropolitan area, the everyday informal activities are in most cases confined in the public space of the sidewalks, interfering with the pedestrian paths and ground floors' activities and shops. The absence of a specific regulation on the occupancy of public ground also determines a chaotic and often conflicting arrangement of street vendors, stands and temporary kiosks, which forces both traders and pedestrians to negotiate for common spaces or simply tiny passages.

Due to Downtown economic and social profile, the most relevant informal activities are mostly based on commercial and trade purposes, varying from clothes, objects and souvenirs street vendors and on services like shoe-shine workers. Sometimes they are also related to cultural events or leisure, like art temporary exhibitions and informal *dehors*.

The informal practices that take place in Downtown also and mainly differ in spatial features from the ones in other districts. Considering that the streets' central space is completely devoted to vehicles' traffic, and that street cross section is the twenty meters wide, informal activities can only take place on sidewalks spaces or on small parking lots, by preventing pedestrians paths. Two forms are more visible: temporary street vendors that show their goods on the ground floor of the sidewalks or legal formal vendors that exhibit their goods on ground floors on the related sidewalk, in front of their shop's or café's door.

Although their spatial patterns obstruct pedestrian paths, forcing people to walk directly on the street, Downtown informal economic actives can be, thus, considered an important part of public life in the streetscape as they represent a sequence of vibrant activities, which contribute to make streets safer and more alive. They can also be a huge contribution to the general abandonment of the area, filling ground floors with life, and building the base for an urban regeneration, centered on inclusivity and accessibility for a large part of the citizens.



Figure 5 | An informal coffee with a temporary extension outside the sidewalks.



Figure 6 | Bakery shop with informal and temporary stands on the sidewalks in Downtown.

Spatial analysis of Informal activities on City of the Dead's streetscape |

The so called City of the Dead, an inhabited cemetery on the eastern part of Central Cairo, has been forgotten for many years by the municipality and Cairo's population as well, although it is still a complex large urban piece of the city. Today it can be considered one of the many informal settlements of Cairo's metropolitan area, with some different urban and spatial features resulting from the original plan of the cemetery. The ancient origin of The City of Dead can be traced back to the first Arabic settlement of *Al Fustat*, and it is divided into two regions, a northern and a southern one. They differ from one another for social and spatial features, but there is a common aspect that links them: the streetscape.

Today the City of the Dead is currently inhabited by nearly half a million people, who came around the 1950s, pushed by the economic crisis or by the harshness of rural areas, searching for a shelter. When most of the people settled there was no electricity and water supply. The living conditions were tremendously limited. In the last thirty years electricity and water has been provided and lots of spontaneous and informal commercial activities and markets arose, in order to supply to public inexistent urban planning. Many of these informal economic activities are located in the ground floor of informal buildings of three or four stories: however most of vendors are selling their goods right in the middle of the street mixing food and vegetables with dust. As almost every informal settlement in Cairo, and probably in the world, streets are not paved and vehicles, animals and people share the same common space. There are no limits between pedestrians' paths and vehicles' ones and, therefore, there are no sidewalks.

In this context, informal activities take place prevalently on the street, in what can be considered the "core" of public life and the "essence" of the neighborhood. The economic typology can vary a lot, from food and primary goods supply to general services and facilities, such as car repairing service or ironing service; from entertainment spaces to playgrounds. Moreover, they are often temporary located and on a mobile mean of transport, in order to move quickly and to serve as many streets and neighborhoods as possible. For this latest aspect they can be seen as horizontal and subsidiary activities, starting spontaneously from the bottom and from the poorest inhabitants' of Cairo, and trying to support a low profile and affordable market in the struggle to survive and supply primary needs of the community overall.

As so conceived informal practices resulted in a sort of “territorial control” over the space people inhabit, and are associated to a strong sense of “cultural belonging”. In the city of the death informal economic activities represent the cultural and social expression of a compact community that share the same living condition, the same space, the same needs and the same time dimension. They represent a “socially constructed system” of human actions, habitual practices, spatial order, and above all rituals so they are informal practices to all extents. In effect, each economic activity is essential for the survival of the community not only in terms of food supply and services but in terms of social interaction and cultural representation.

Today, the boundary between formality and informality is blurred since most urbanites, including the middle classes, experience both formal and informal encounters in their everyday life. Informality does not affect only marginal segment of the society anymore. In addition, formal practices does not only take place within the boundary of informal settlements only but, to different degrees, in the city overall. The examination of the two case studies [*Wust El-Balad* and *Qarafa, el-Arafa*] shows that the relations between formal and informal no longer exist in two separate territories but instead both formality and informality are engage in the same production of space, although to different degree. As a result, the relation between formal and informal affects all spaces and the majority of people living in urban space.

For this reasons the relation between formality and informality produces different level of contamination in urban practices that we should think about integrating informality into the planning processes and look at the meaning of actions. Framing this discussion within classic categories “informality” and “formality” and supporting the idea that informality belongs to the poor and formality to the better off, and that informality and formality necessarily belong to different kinds of urban spaces is not actual, and appropriate anymore for describing the phenomenon. The approaches following a categorization system, coming from consolidated political, economic and socio cultural theories, thus reducing the complex reality into classification of formal/informal, legal/illegal, planned/unplanned need to be re-thought. In order to understand such complex context we suggest thinking about informality as a set of “meaningful processes” rather than a category system.



Figure 7 | An ordinary shot from the City of the Dead's streetscape.



Figure 8 | A temporary and mobile fresh vegetables' street vendor in the middle of the street in City of the Dead.

Informal practices: dialogue, negotiation and conflicts between space and society|

Within cities the relation between formality and informality display different forms, due to the nature of space [Abdelmonem, 2012, p. 39]: there are areas in which the two spheres [of formality and informality] overlap and dialogue, and others in which they generate conflicts and a contested space. Following are two examples of the positive and negative connection between formality and informality in public space.

During the Egypt Revolution 2011 the relation between formality and informality were so particularly strong to generate a space of dialogue. In a contesting setting many [formal and legal] public spaces were filled with informal practices and interventions. The way *Tahrir Square* was re-constructed as livable space through a group of informal activities is a clear example of the dialogue between the two. Figure 9 displays evidently the “logical organization” of informal practices in a formal however contested space.

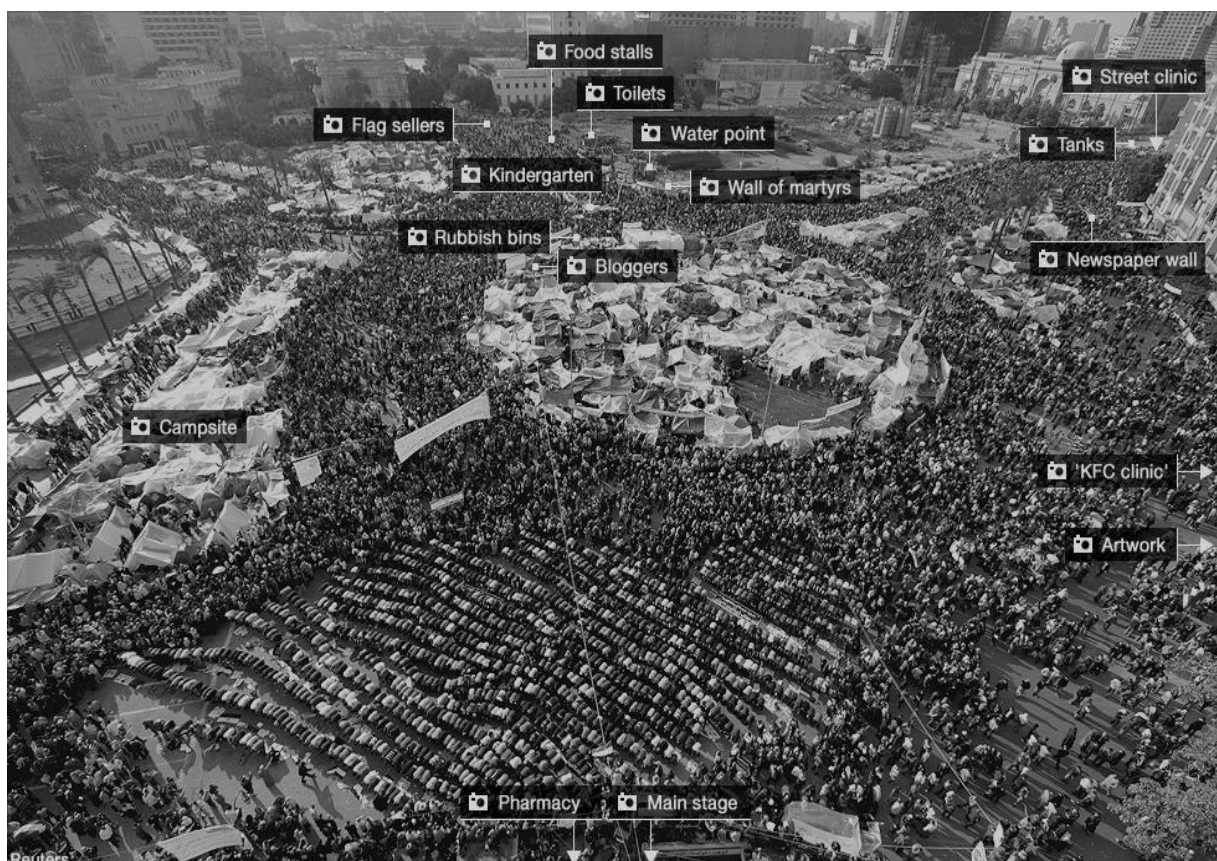


Figure 9|The logical organization of informal practices in *Tahrir Square* during the Egypt Revolution, 2011 [Source: BBC News].

After the Egypt Revolution in 2011, in times of political instability where there are no regulations on public spaces, the struggle for public space is deceptive in the streets, squares and sidewalks and the relation between formality and informality is more contradictory. Tenants, land owner, shop keepers, street vendors, drivers, walking pedestrian as well as informal businesses are trying to make “the most out of a city” in a political limbo. While the Revolution and protests need to be conceived as means used to challenge the Regime and express their voices and dreams over a city, the absent of state control over the public space is today a source of conflict. It generates a contested space. Most of the time streets become an arena of discontent or conflicts because space is used actively and not passively. Street vendors who spread their businesses in the pavements, poor people who extent their lives into the sidewalks, squatters who take over public lands or protestors who march in the streets, are all involved in the production of space [Bayat 2012, p. 120]. The main types of street conflicts are between authorities and individuals or between individuals over the control of public space.

In the relation between formal and informal, between formal space of the city and the legal roles, and the informal practices of the street vendor or illegal food stalls, unfolds the dialogue between formality and informality, legality and illegality; a relation that generate per se a conflict between the state and the civic society, the institutional roles and active citizens. The nature of this relation, which generates conflicts, is not only typical of Cairo but it exists in different degrees in other countries and societies. Indeed, the relationship between the state and civil society is inconsistent by nature.

More interesting is the conflict that rises among individuals or communities, in a contested space of belonging. The street vendor, whose presence has significantly increased with the rise of unemployment over the past several years, and in the two years of lax security that followed the 25 January Revolution, are in this days sauces of conflicts. Although they offer a substantial service to people, and they thrive because there is a demand, they have been blame to increase the city traffic, they obstruct the sidewalks and are criticized by vendors that have a legal activity and pay taxes. In all this occasion the public space of the street becomes an arena of conflicts, conflicts that are rooted in the essence of place, identify and culture.

Conclusion |

During the Revolution, public space has acquired a “new meaning”. After the Revolution informal practices increased remarkably across city neighborhoods as an expression of an everyday system of sustainable living. This article has investigated the informal practices showing their socio cultural meaning and explaining their implication for the city functioning: they are not only a fundamental element of Cairo streetscape’s vivacity and of social interaction, but they also provide a real support for the needs of many section of the population in several ways, offering services that the formal economy is not able to guarantee. By analyzing the spatial dimension of informal practices within different context of the city, this work has examined the complex relations between formality and informality, and how they combine in the space production. In doing so the paper have shown that there exist a strong relation between formality and informality in both informal and formal urban space and that conflicts and struggle to belong are a typical character of Cairo’s streetscape.

However what this work highlights the most is the contrast between how city and public spaces are designed, and how they are used. There is a city designed by planners and a city lived by people that differ considerably. It is only by rethinking informality within the planning process and looking at how people use space that we can improve their quality of life in the city overall. Indeed, informality, in all its declinations and different semantic meanings, cannot longer be considered as a temporary phenomenon or an “accident”; in countries where the incomes are not equitably distributed, such as Egypt, has become a structural element of society and of urbanism. Therefore, new interventions of planning should be based more on an alternative notion of “legality” and “formality” that take into consideration how people live and use space, rather than on the institutional definition of legality. The main challenge for urban planners and professionals is to abandon the general approach that denotes informality negatively, and that have made informality an object of exclusion, and instead think about innovative and supportive policies able to re-consider the interaction between formal and informal in a constructively manner.

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Note|

The information presented in this paper are based on the personal experience of the authors, collected during fieldworks, observations and a photographic documentary conducted in November 2012; from few interviews with residents in both informal settlements and formal areas in the city; and from discussions with members of ONG like LiveinSlums as well as academics. In addition, we use the literature and on online sources, including newspaper and websites to create the theoretical framework.