

Session 9-1: “Urban (In)Formality: Tensions, Conflicts And Breakups In The Struggle To Belong”

**Informality, Culture, and Informal Urban Development: a Comparative Study between Cairo and
Istanbul**

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In Cairo and in Istanbul, as in many other cities of the *global south*, informal settlements are the product of a process of rapid uncontrolled urbanization, containing “inequality” in dealing with its citizens, and accompanied by the failing of government’s role in providing appropriate housing. Self-help/built settlements have been the alternative by the rural-urban migrants and urban poor to fulfill their need for housing. In cities such as Istanbul and Cairo, which have a pioneering role for the country in the global competition, informal areas have been largely ignored by neo-liberal state regimes (Sims, 2011). It is not a mere coincidence that in both cities almost 60-70% of their inhabitants live in such informal settlements.

Rapoport has discussed in his different writings that culture and space correlate in urban form (1977, 1990). It is striking, how many similarities can be found in the formation of informal settlement of Istanbul and Cairo while studying the relation between culture and the urban development patterns. Yet, urban mismanagement in these cities affects daily life significantly in a negative way; new definitions of urban poverty arise, new ways of inequalities come to forth, and new traps of discrimination reveal. Lifestyle influences the organization of the city through whatever variables (ethnic, religion, class, and income) so that the city is a collection of different groups, and subcultures. Urban informality turned to be a “new” way of life (Al Sayyad, 2004).

Comparing and exploring the relation between the development of informal settlements and culture is the aim of this research. This demands a critical reflection to the understanding of various disciplines such as cultural anthropology and urban sociology. Theories about informality and imperfection are to be criticized by trying to develop a new way of looking at informal settlements. Arguing that informality is not a choice. We believe that crossing through theories could benefit the understanding of informality and imperfection, not only in Cairo and Istanbul, but also in many other cities. The main research question will be: *how the urban development of informal areas could be considered as the outcome of the interaction between cultural factors and the urban context within the struggle of global competition?* Based on selected case study areas in Cairo and Istanbul, a comparative and qualitative exploratory fieldwork research using grounded theory will be presented: our observations will be introduced via photos, videos in addition to quotes from semi-structured interviews.

This research concludes that “informality” is an outcome of interrelated cultural factors, which share in the urbanization of Cairo and Istanbul through interacting with the urban context of the area, including the “formal” system.

Keywords: culture, urban informality, uncontrolled development, imperfection, neoliberalization, Istanbul/Cairo.

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Introduction

According to facts and statistics, informality represented in the informal settlements is dominating the urban realm of Cairo and Istanbul. The *Formal* system consists mainly of the political regime, government, and official institutions, with the laws and regulations controlling this system in planned urban areas practiced and followed by the citizens (those who do not belong to informal system). It is argued that the informality could be considered as a part of the formal, as it deals with it, interacts to it. The existence of each of the systems is indispensable from the other. People or residents are the main actors in both systems and their culture is the main source of the directing values of their actions. The main research question is: how the urban development of informal areas could be considered as the outcome of the interaction between cultural factors and the urban formal context within the struggle of global competition?

Discussion of theory including culture and informality takes place as an introduction to the paper's argument. Based on selected case study areas as examples from Cairo and Istanbul, a comparative and qualitative research based on exploratory fieldwork, and the secondary resources from available literature will be discussed. Our observations will be introduced via photos, in addition to some quotes from the interviews.

Culture, Informality and Informal settlements: International discourse

Sir Edward B. Taylor wrote in 1871 that the classical definition of culture is as an anthropological term that can serve as a convenient starting point: "*Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.*" (Taylor, 1920 (1870): 1). This definition simply suggests that culture is all that relates to being human. Geertz (1973:14) tried to be more precise, as he regards culture as: "*a set of control mechanisms for the governing of behavior.*" So Geertz added another dimension to culture, describing it as the *control mechanisms* and showing that it is composed of several components. He indicates the reason of its existence, which is for "governing" and for asserting the power to control behavior. Wederspahn (2006) had another definition that is not very different from Geertz: "*Culture is the shared set of assumptions, values, and beliefs of a*

group of people by which they organize their common life (Widerspahn 2006). Rapoport explains his abstract idea of “*dismantling culture*” (the term *unpacking* is also used in some literature), as a solution for making culture usable (Rapoport, 2005, 2008). He describes how understanding culture could share in resolving the complexity of systems: “*Each expression and component of culture can be examined separately and links established to specific aspects of the environment. Such a process can also lead to a better understanding yields of an understanding of how the whole system works*”. Built environment is usefully conceptualized as the organization of space, time, meaning, and communication (Rapoport, 1986).

Assuming that *informality* is practiced by people, then it could be easily explained by understanding the conditions and the context of its existence. *Informality* as a notion is usually affiliated with studying poverty. It started from an economic perspective in the 1970s. The term “*informal*” is often acknowledged as the downside of “*formal*”, which recognizes and strengthens the western idea of the legal, rational, capitalistic (financial), public, and institutional (Kang, 2009). Although the use of “*informal*” may be controversial since it may imply being inferior to what is considered “*formal*” (particularly for those who belong to this informality), this research uses it as the common term that expresses that situation in the broad international discourse. From a western point of view, followed by almost all governments and academics of the global south, in fields of modern urban planning and management, it is considered an inappropriate mode, ignoring that this informality has been common for centuries before capitalism and the modern state came into power.³

Informal settlements are the physical representation of informality in the urban form. Informal housing was defined by United Nations for human settlements: “*Housing is described as informal when it does not conform to the laws and regulatory frameworks set up in the city in which it occurs.*” (2003:104).

In most of the late-industrializing countries a similar informal settlement establishment can be found. ‘*Ashwa’eyat* and *Gecekondulish* settlements can be found all in Mexico as *jacale*, in Panama as *rancho*, in Brazil as *macambo*, in Argentina as *favela*, in Tunisia as *gourbeville*, in Algeria as *casbah*, in Fas as *bidonville*, and in India as *bustee*.

3 See also Kang, J. (2009) Informal urbanism from inside-out, internalizing Taipei experiences of informality, The 4th International Conference of the International Forum on Urbanism (IFoU) Amsterdam/Delft The New Urban Question – Urbanism beyond Neo-Liberalism

'Ashwa'eyat and Gecekondu: History, reasons and general description

Cairo has become an informal city, with some portions of formality. This statement reflects that the majority of Cairo's area is considered informal 60%-70% in different resources. In Turkey, the informal settlement ratio in general is 35%, in Ankara 62,5%, in *Istambul* 60% and Izmir more than %50 (Keleş, 2002: 542). These informal settlement areas constitute between 20-70% of the housing stock of the population (Keleş, 2002: 542).

In Egypt, 'Ashwa'eyat means random, haphazard, which reflects that it is unplanned. In general, due to the media, it is always linked to negative meanings of poverty, crime, illiteracy and immorality. UN-HABITAT data reveals that urban informality in Cairo includes a wide range of characteristics and is not limited to a context of poverty - a resident of an informal area in Cairo can be better off than a non-slum dweller in other cities (UN-Habitat, 2008). "The importance of Cairo, the capital of Egypt, is highlighted by the city's several names—al-Qahirah ('the Victorious'), Umm al-Dunia ('Mother of the World'), or simply Masr (the Arabic name for the nation as a whole)". (Kipper, 2008: 13)

While in Turkey, *gecekondu* means, "placed (built) overnight", as *Gece* means "at night" and *kondu* means "placed" (from the verb "konmak" means "to settle" or "to be placed"). This expressed the emergence process of each of those areas. Houses are built quickly overnight away from the surveillance of the government. In the morning, they exist. These squatters are making use of a legal gap which states that if one starts building after sunset and moves into a completed house before dawn the next day without having been noticed by the authorities, then the next day the authorities are not permitted to tear the building down but instead must begin a legal proceeding in court (and thus it is more likely one can stay). Such buildings may be constructed without going through the necessary procedures required for construction, such as acquiring building permits, and can be very densely populated. Neuwirth states that "*half the residents of Istanbul - perhaps six million people - dwell in gecekondu homes*" (Neuwirth, 2004: 8)

Reflecting this on Cairo's case, *Cairo* as a metropolitan region is called "Masr" by most of the Egyptians that shows how it is important for them. It has been hampered by a lack of statistical land-use data with spatial reference. The city, like many cities in the global south experienced rapid growth in the latter years of the 20th century and first decade of the 21st century. Although intermittent censuses have recorded the increase in population, the resultant change in the extent and spatial configuration of the urban area is poorly

understood⁴. As it expands into agricultural areas to the north and west, consuming 500 hectares of prime agricultural soil every year. According to El-Batran, greater Cairo region-GCR has gradually enclosed nearby villages, and it is a very dense city with problems of transportation, inadequate drainage and sewerage, and lack of usable spaces (El Batran et. Al. 1998). According to Soliman: “*Informality is no longer simply the domain of the poor; in fact, it has become a major condition of land ownership and housing for the urban lower-middle and middle classes*” (Soliman 2004:201)

Under the same circumstances, *gecekondu* has been a response to social security/safety and shelter needs of new comers (Acaroğlu, 1974) and has evolved as the shortest and cheapest way to solve the housing shortage problem (Çelik, 1970). Therefore, the establishment of *gecekondu* at first has not been for profit (Özsoy, 1983). *Gecekondu*s have usually been residential constructions built to meet the need for shelter.

It is argued through focusing on daily life in Cairo’s/Istanbul’s urban *formal* (planned) areas, it can be obviously noticed that *informality* is practiced everywhere on two different levels: first would be the usage of urban spaces, meaning activities of residents in its streets and city open urban spaces, and second would be the development process and its outcome in different areas, whether they are planned formal areas or unplanned (‘*ashwa’eyat/ gecekondu*).

Reasons and formation process are discussed in the following part. *Gecekondu*s and ‘*Ashwa’eyat* are quiet similar, in the reasons behind them, their formation, characteristics, and the development along time- with some differences that are going to be pointed out in this study.

Both economies of Egypt and Turkey used to depend on agriculture. In Turkey, as in Egypt, and many other global south cities, urbanization is not only a result of the change in agricultural policies and industrialization, but also is a reflection of a process of social change. Numbers reveal that behind the phenomenon of “urbanization” lies an influx of migration from rural areas to urban centers (Kongar, 1978). ‘*Ashwa’eyat* and *Gecekondu* are natural products of poverty and unemployment problems in rural areas, which leads to the population influx from rural to urban areas and the social and economic development. Especially, in late-industrializing countries the undersupply of residential housing stock leaves for rural-urban migrant no other choice than building their own shelters. In these countries, there is not

⁴ Dona J. Stewart, Zhi-Yong Yin, Stevan M. Bullard and Jared T. MacLachlan. *Assessing the Spatial Structure of Urban and Population Growth in the Greater Cairo Area, Egypt: A GIS and Imagery Analysis Approach*. Urban Studies, Vol. 41, No. 1, 95–116, January 2004

enough affordable land in the market for the low-income groups to build legal housing on. The public institutions and the local administrative units do not possess enough land for massive residential projects, and the ones once possessed have been sold out because of shortsighted land policies (Keleş, 2002). Looking at Istanbul's case, different existing typologies carry the same name *gecekondü*. In *Cairo*, there are many different typologies of '*ashwa'eyat*, mainly on agricultural land with legal ownership, and no building permission, and on desert state/public owned land (illegal ownership). The later is considered "officially" more informal, due to the illegal ownership. Security of tenure is also less in case of '*ashwa'eyat* built on desert land.

Formation/emergence processes usually start with land acquisition, then building fences/walls. Constructing one floor with bricks with a ceiling made of whatever available materials (e.g., wood, aluminum sheets, plastic...etc.). Then comes the phase of building with concrete and bricks. Later on, due to the accumulation of some cash available through working in the city, extra one or two floors for the second generation.

Dealing with the formal system is explained as a kind of adaptation and a survival strategy. In both cases of *Cairo* and *Istanbul*, the '*Ashwa'eyat/Gecikondü* residents have adapted their conditions according to their city context. One of the main factors affecting that process is their linkage to the city and the surrounding urban factors.

The way governments deal with the informal areas in both cities influences the development of those areas. Infrastructure provision by the government usually plays a role of increasing the perception of the residents' security of tenure, which results in real estate investments and increase in land/apartment prices and rents. This leads to gentrification, and lower income residents thus cannot afford to pay the higher rents.

Transportation as another example related to the urban factors in both cities. Mini-buses have been initiated by some local entrepreneurs to link between areas and their working places in the city. It has started without any official support or permission, then it was accepted and approved from the formal system (government). The government's reaction was to accept this informal solution, and deal with it. The same example could be found in *Cairo* case not only through minibuses, but also *Tuk-tuks*. It started only within '*ashwa'eyat*, then this phenomenon has been prolonged to almost all *Cairo* districts.

Political context

In approaching the socio spatial interplays and trying to understand informal settlements, a very crucial question emerges; how are the meanings in the urban space are redefined and struggled, but for whose interests are urban space and local economies produced and re-produced?

Neoliberalism, privatization and free market policies, were adopted as economical policies by Mubarak's Egyptian state for decades. This has followed the so-called "open door" policy introduced by Sadat in the mid 70s. Meanwhile, the structure of governance over land and housing has benefited only a narrow elite class of high income at the expense of the wider middle/low class population. Urban poor residents and informal areas of the city have been largely ignored by the former neo-liberal state regime (Sims, 2011). Land mismanagement and urban planning issues affect daily life in Cairo, which about 70% of its inhabitants live in informal settlements. Self-help/built settlements have been the only alternative by the people to fulfill the need for housing by the rural-urban migrants, moving to Cairo aiming to improve their income. In Cairo, before the revolution, and under the authoritarian rule of Mubarak for the last 30 years, the NDP (National democratic Party) headed by Mubarak adopted an economical reform policy that is based on privatization, responding to World Bank and IMF recommendations. The government partially got rid of its responsibility towards providing housing for residents, which was the case by the days of Naser (1952-1970).

Neoliberalism in most of its cases is eager to quick profit, and high rate of money turnover. This is rarely reached through housing projects that target the lower income classes. Neoliberal policies adopted by the NDP and its businessmen has dominated the housing policies of ministry of housing and urbanization.

The official vision for Cairo could be summarized in the "Cairo 2050 project", which contains a series of master plans and megaprojects for the capital, changing its urban face in the directions of "Dubai" with skyscrapers. Mubarak's regime has begun its promoting in 2008. Deknatel (2011) described this:

"This authoritarian, outsized development "vision" would involve relocating millions to the furthest edges of the desert — areas banally termed "new housing extensions" — to make way for "10 star" hotels, huge parks, "residential touristic compounds," and landing-strip-sized boulevards lined with a monotony of towers. It's unlikely to happen in an Egypt after Mubarak — if it was ever possible at all, given budgets and popular resistance."

The Egyptian government has started in the early 1990s to look at the phenomenon of 'ashwa'eyat due to its having of some terrorists/ fundamentalists groups. In 2008, the collapse of the rock of *Al-Doweka*, and tens of death cases and injuries took place, again pushed the

government to react, but not actually with obvious results. In the last 2 years, since the January 2011 revolution, many changes have occurred on the national political level. Muslim Brotherhood group (represented by Freedom and justice party) formed a Parliament majority in 2012. And the current president was the previous president of the party. The political speech about the topic of *'ashwa'eyat* in a positive way, although this has not been reflected on the government's actions towards improving life in *Cairo 'ashwa'eyat* (Sims 2012). The only change noticed by the authors is that eviction -as an intervention policy- has been minimalized, to avoid peoples riots. Rehabilitation projects started to take place on site, if possible, avoiding moving the residents to areas far away from their place of work in the city.

Through the last decades the years, infrastructure was included in the parliament's candidate program. It has always played a role in the negotiation process between the parliament candidates (usually affiliated to the NDP) and the residents, aiming at gaining their votes. And it usually worked. This treat is directly based on the relation between the NDP and the executive official ministries and the governorates and district levels.

In Turkey, but specifically in the big cities of Turkey and as the pioneering and out-standing city, Istanbul, we observe how neoliberal urbanism attacked a local culture vivid in Istanbul under the guidance of a conservative political party, namely Justice and Development Party (AKP) which has shown that neoliberal reforms in Istanbul coincided with a conservative tendency that sought for homogeneity within the city center by displacing lower income inhabitants. In accordance, the urban coalition formed around AKP guidance has also been sympathetic to actors who aim at neoliberalizing the urban space. This coincidence and dangerous overlap has been generating multifaceted and multiplex problems centered on the implementation of neoliberal reforms in Istanbul. Although the hegemony of neoliberal urbanization is apparent, the urban gentrification process in and ongoing exclusion of *gecekondu* inhabitants are being contested.

While the recent re-generation projects in Istanbul are basically aiming to gentrify the society - the users of the physical environment to be sanitized. By emphasizing the "generation" in the concept of re-generation, it is intended to express that the process of gentrification/re-generation handled in this study, is not a natural process, but rather a forced and top-down process, which is imposed usually to disadvantaged groups of the urban society (ethnic minorities, socially excluded groups, poor and uneducated people, etc.). For instance, as Ünsal and Kuyucu indicate, "*gecekondu zones and inner city slums become particularly attractive for redevelopment for two reasons: legal ambiguities in their property regimes and*

as their perceived status as centers of crime and decay” (54). Not surprisingly, these areas were under serious pressure by the conservative AKP.

Residents’ Profile and “Culture”

Rapoport has discussed in his different writings that culture and space correlate in urban form (1977, 1990). It is striking, how many similarities can be found in the formation of informal settlement of Istanbul and Cairo while studying the relation between culture and the urban development patterns. Yet, urban mismanagement in these cities affects daily life significantly in a negative way; new definitions of urban poverty arise, new ways of inequalities come to forth, and new traps of discrimination reveal. Lifestyle influences the organization of the city through whatever variables (ethnicity, religion, class, and income) so that the city is a collection of different groups, and subcultures. Urban informality turned to be a “new” way of life (Al Sayyad, 2004).

An explanation is argued by the authors, that an informal urban system emerges to organize the residents/migrants lives. It forms non-written rules from different *cultural factors*. In the Egyptian case, migrants to Cairo with upper Egyptian traditional origins, carrying values and rural lifestyle formed the majority of the first settlers in many informal areas; adaptation to the urban city, including the relation to the government, to the formal Cairo society and their image in the media. Economy and profession within these areas also plays a role, in addition to religion. These factors are in a continuous interaction together, with the initial urban characteristics of the area to shape the area’s path of urban development.

Discussing these concepts in details while reflecting on the case of Cairo and Istanbul, some examples are presented in the following part. When the residents tend to build together in a cooperative action, it reflects the existence of certain amount of social capital (solidarity). In addition, due to the low income of the migrants, cost reduction acquires a high priority. However, this is the way they are used to build in their rural place of origin.

The process of chain migration from the same village to a certain informal area in the city takes place in both cases cities. This reflects strong family/kinship relations. This has been observed in several Cairo *‘ashwa’eyat* on former desert land (e.g., Ezbet El-Haggana and Ezbet El-Nasr). Also building for the sons could be according to the same family issue, as the parents feels responsible to provide their sons with a shelter. It could be also understood as economic factor, as the city could not provide access to housing for the second generation of migrants, except in informal areas. Some of the migrants build extra flats for rent, as an extra, stable source of income. In the case of *Istanbul*, The safety mechanisms of the new comers in

the city are subject to get destroyed. Therefore, the *gecekondu* inhabitants most likely try to maximize their safety and reach their previous level of safety but in their new destination. This means:

- Continuous job opportunities
- House ownership
- Minimizing the distance with relatives in the city to sustain these relationships (e.g. enclaves of relatives/kin groups in specific neighborhoods)
- Continuing the relation and associations with the rural area they are coming from, not be to totally torn apart from origins/roots (Özsoy, 1983:67).

This is not different from the case of *Cairo*. Living close to relatives, keeping social networks with other districts and with place of origin, working together in family business, in addition to sharing the sufferings from bad conditions, makes migrants come closer together against the “other”, which is in many cases any danger that threatens their existence (mainly the government). The new comers who try to reach a safety balance have the tendency to show two different behavioral actions (Kıray, 1972): “*To stay a short while in a flat close to the work place and then to move to a gecekondu or to settle directly upon arrival to a gecekondu by building, renting or buying it.*” In *Cairo* case, low-income male migrants also share their accommodation for the first periods until they can afford renting/building for themselves, and bringing their families.

When comparing residents’ profiles in informal areas of both cities, a difference could be highlighted: in Istanbul, Gypsies, Alevis and Kurds concentrate in certain Gecikondus. This type of physical segregation is based on ethnicity and/or religion. While in *Cairo* ‘*ashwa’eyat*’s case is different. Only certain neighborhoods might be inhabited by Christians within a bigger ‘*ashwa’eyat*’ area. Usually the Christians move together to live beside a church, which provides them with services and financial assistance. This helps them to maintain their identity, which in turn supports their feeling of safety.

Within the informal system, cultural factors provide certain values that play the role of the alternative for the laws and regulations of the formal system. Migrants from the rural areas carry their rural lifestyle with them to the city (e.g., breeding animals and birds), which last at least for a while till they might adapt and move towards more modern lifestyle.

Conclusions

Tracking informal settlements development in both countries proved to be an obvious expression of successive failures by governments to deal with housing demand for the poor. Governmental policies towards housing form a main reason for the emergence of those

informal settlements in big cities. Informal urbanization comes as a consequence of the deficiencies in strategic planning on the national level to develop the under-developed regions, from which migrants move to the bigger richer cities looking for better income opportunities.

Neoliberal national policies adopted by both governments -in Egypt and Turkey- affect the informal urban development in both cities. Residents rely on their cultural factors and values to set up their own rules that governs their life. This includes dealing with the formal system.

This research concludes that “informality” is an outcome of interrelated relations between cultural factors of the residents, including the urban context of the area, with an important role played by the government. This causes the informal urbanization of *Cairo* and *Istanbul*. These interactions occur differently from one area to the other. This paper recommends that before any urban intervention process takes place, understanding those relations is essential.

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