The Open Conflict Space
Survival Strategies for the Contemporary Mediterranean Town

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Abstract: The so-called *Arab Spring* has conquered the main Mediterranean towns squares turning on unpredictable and intricate decolonization processes necessarily involving and upsetting local and global economies. Nomadic and informal ways of living overcome the colonial patterns by shaping brand new networks inside huge or tiny situations. Planning, by itself, can't give no more answers: the open conflict space, as a survival condition, becomes the sole available strategy able to set up again the Mediterranean context.

A new sight is needed for the link between two scales defines the open conflict space in which strategy becomes project. The geographic scale allows a study on the geopolitical southern Mediterranean cities upheavals and the borderline condition, although territory marking gives it back its significance; the architectural scale, instead, arranges the open space borders by setting up town's ownership and management that are useful to the project.

The protests involving a large part of northern Africa, albeit through different circumstances and features, have given back squares an iconic value, since then too much stifled by regimes repression: from Tunisia to Syria, from Libya to Bahrein, from Egypt to Turkey.

The survey shows up the urban changes through these spaces complexities and deep meanings.

Keywords: conflict, revolt, informal, misunderstanding, town into town

Intro

Why do we take over those urban spaces? Is that choice led just by those *urban voids* dimension? How can *monumentality* affect a restoration project designation? Do we need some deeper reason to find in native, colonial, post-colonial and global urban development? Which is responsible for affecting changes in protest/consensus scenarios? Public imagery places or those bound to everyday life, where time is unbroken and rarified? Do changes, by turning on dynamic and diverse pulses, depend on different stories?

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In Egypt, *Tahrir Square* has become such a token for the *Revolution* it has been quoted by other popular movements like *15 Mayo* or *Occupy Wall Street* along with catchwords such as "We are all Tahrir". The occupation of the square transforms the open space, giving birth to the "the town inside the town": codes and rules are broken; there's a shift from the open conflict space to the shared one. By thinking of the square as a gateway, protesters are given back forbidden spaces, all through the 23 streets leading to *Tahrir Square* and the social networks.

Causes are to be searched mostly in a strongly privatized urban planning and in a lack of suitable open spaces that fosters social classes inequalities.

Open space becomes strategy, then, for it is a shifting space inside the city parts. An open space network project could get a survival strategy turning a conflict space into change for the contemporary Mediterranean town.

Revolting Mediterranean

«[…] A new Middle East is shaping, a new political architecture is molding. […]. We are used to the stereotypes by which we've always looked the world at, and now we'll be forced to build up again a new view. Let's hope consequences will be a chance for improving rather than for segregations and tensions»[2]. This is how the latest work by professor Franco Rizzi about the North Africa and Middle East situation the *day after* decolonization ends up. As it's not possible to compare the uprisings occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrein and Turkey, we are forced to think about ongoing changes complexities and about the role the protest space is given towards the transformations involving the cities. «Conquest, the common spaces usage and urban open goods are thus a constant clash output»[3]. The Mediterranean is uprising and occupying squares just to give the open space back that sharing and political confrontation role regimes have smothered so far. The *Right to the city* is claimed, as defined by Lefe-

2. Rizzi 2011.
3. Harvey 2013.

Cairo, satellite image of Tahrir Square and Egyptian Museum area (source Google maps).
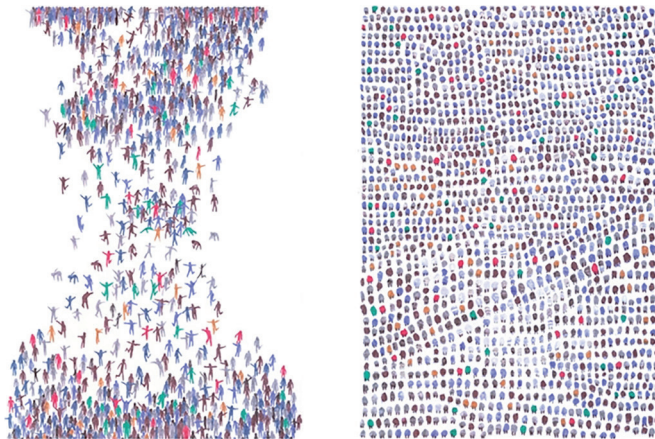
"Cairo", artwork of R. Carcangiu, 2011.

"No Walls Street", graffiti on the concrete blocks placed by soldiers on the streets of Cairo's downtown, 2012 (ph. N. NASSER /AP).

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bvre[4]. As David Harvey states in *Rebel Cities*: «Is a city (or a city system) just a passive place, the scenario (or the existing network) in which deeper political struggles end up meeting and showing up? Well, at a first glance it seems it does. But it's clear, as well, that some urban environment typical feature is keener on protesters' action than others»[5].

What are those features about? Which strategy is able to amend them?

The vague as a survival strategy

Matching a border suitable to some complex geometry can turn an undefined border into a flexible fence, which is able to get together different areas. Limiting a vague space is quite hard: it's all about transition, integration, vitality and *misunderstanding*.

Franco La Cecla writes about the undefined space *misunderstanding*: «The misunderstanding is the border shaping itself. It becomes a terrain vague, where identity, mutual identity, can be acknowledged. […]»[6]. The meeting between different ethnic, social and political groups in these spaces does increase its following iconic and utopist value. The «dream and free wandering spaces»[7] of the Arab Spring Squares develop into open space strategy rebirth through the vague, temporary and mobilization practice. Absorbing the uprising space engenders some view and place diversity that reacts against the space limitations (created by safety systems). «What the word *raum*, space, is about is told by its old meaning. *Raum* means a place set free for settlers or a campsite. A *raum* is something cleared, freed within certain limits, called *péras* in Greek. The limit is not an ending point but, as acknowledged by the Greek, a starting point for its essence. That's why the main concept is called *horismos*, limit. Space is something basically cleared and bound within its limits. What is cleared gets gradually arranged and laid, still collected from a place, something like a bridge. As a result, spaces get their essence not from "space" itself,

4. Lefebvre 1972.
5. Harvey 2013.
6. La Cecla 2011.
7. Gracq 2001.

but rather from places»[8].

Designing the open space conflict: self-governance and symbolism in Tahrir Square

«Social movements belong to people and not to communication tools and technologies. Facebook, like cell phones, the Internet, and twitter, do not have agency, a moral universe, and are not predisposed to any particular ideological or political orientation. They are what people make of them»[9].

The 25th January 2011 uprising led several scholars and politicians to re-evaluate the social network's and the general Internet importance to the protests success. From 1990 Internet is an ever growing political forum, far away from the straight government prohibition (although it still leads continuous control and censorship policies)[10]. The Internet insight shifts from 0,7% in 2000 to 32,6% in 2011[11], by contributing to the *smart mobs*[12] creation as Howard Rheingold calls it. Delphine Pagés-El Karoui and Leila Vignal quoted on EchoGéo: «La pénétration de ces nouvelles technologies est récente et rapide en Égypte. En ce qui concerne Internet, une décennie a suffi pour faire passer les chiffres d'usagers de 450 000 en 2000 à 23,5 millions en janvier 2011, soit un taux de pénétration de 30 % de la population totale. Facebook comptait 6,8 millions d'utilisateurs en avril 2011 – dont 70 % de jeunes –, chiffre en très forte hausse depuis le début de l'année (ils n'étaient que 4,5 millions fin décembre). La chaîne satellitaire *Al-Jazira*, très regardée en Égypte, a été la première à diffuser des films réalisés sur des portables qui circulaient déjà sur le web, sa couverture de la révolution égyptienne étant clairement pro-manifestants. Plus massif encore, du fait de l'investissement financier et du niveau de formation moindres qu'elle nécessite, est le succès de la téléphonie mobile qui est venu compenser la mauvaise couverture de téléphonie fixe : en janvier 2011, on comptait 71 millions d'abonnements (taux

8. Heidegger 1976.

9. Linda Herrera, *Egypt's Revolution 2.0: The Facebook Factor*, in Haddad, Bsheer, Abu-Rish 2012.

10. Nur 2013.

11. Salama 2013.

12. Rheingold 2003.

de pénétration de plus de 90 % de la population, contre 12 % pour les lignes fixes)»[13].

There's no doubt Internet made its role on riots involving the *Arab Spring* squares, but with no physical place there can't be any revolution.

Tahrir Square is situated in the middle of the *Great Cairo* and west to the colonial city, it is accessible from 23 streets (amongst the main ones *Tahrir Via* and *Kasr Al Aini*) and two bridges. It has got an uneven shape defined from south by the *Mogamaa al Tahrir* neighbourhood and from north by the *Abd El Moneim Riad* zone. A meaningful void sneaking through the close historical centre and the agglomeration, between the narrow alleys of the Medieval Cairo and the informal neighbourhoods. Coerced by Mubarak government to get a mobility and transit function, the square is seen by the *Cairenes* as the centre of the town.

After the 1981 state of emergency law, the open space management has been limited and controlled in the whole town for decades and it's more and more referred to the *Melk el hokooma* term which means 'government property'[14]. The gathering of more than five people would mean a public security threat and a penal sanction for transgressors. This lead Egyptians to change their habits and the open space living ways: they haunt bridges, streets, sidewalks in a social way. On night time the mobility space leaves the place to collective activities which are to be removed the next day. Thus, the government interferes in the open space usage, by stirring up informality and allowing sharing places, such as mosques, baths and gardens to strip down. They are absorbed in the close urban building fabric and they lose their importance. The revolution has given back its shared places by setting back a strategic system for the open space.

The *Omar Makram* Mosque has retrieved its political and ideological mediation fundamental role as well as other buildings and minor places.

But, what does this strategy consist of? Which are its crucial features?

13. Pagès-El Karoui, Vignal 2011.
14. Salama 2013.

Tali Hatuka, an architect and professor from the *Tel Aviv University's Laboratory of Contemporary Urban Design*, stated in an interview «As the recent events in Cairo suggest, a protest space doesn't have to be nice or well-designed. A large-scale protest like this has shown that people will just hijack the streets and the roads. Public spaces are the only place in which people feel truly, physically unified. With so many protests going online, the physical element is critical for enhancing society's sense of togetherness and solidarity»[15]. She focuses on people using non necessarily designed spaces. In her survey, Hatuka questions herself on the main factors that fix on a protest planning. In an article of her issued on *Metropolitiques* she writes: «The fundamental decision underlying the design of any protest concerns the spatial interaction among participants and its symbolic meaning. This decision is crucial in intensifying the solidarity among participants»[16]. The spatial interaction the author is talking about doesn't necessarily need a tidy arrangement. Sketchiness creates a seeming chaos but, at the same time, engenders an eclectic, hierarchic and flexible frame able to hold together different groups, each by its own leadership. Dimension doesn't affect the protest space plan because the right *measure* is to be sought in the *distance* the event is perceived in. Globalisation and the power of media are now concerned. Purposely, it's useful to remind a picture taken by Yolande Knell from *BBC* during the riot days in Cairo[17]. The protesters' gathering is linked to an interactive system spotting on the miscellaneous thematic groups in the square. It deals with *auto-governance*, as shown by Costanza La Mantia in an interview released on *Domus*, a complex cooperative framework, an often pictured "town into town"[18].

If the uprising success depends on the temporary occupied space arrangement, causes are to be searched in the square shape itself and its symbolic value.
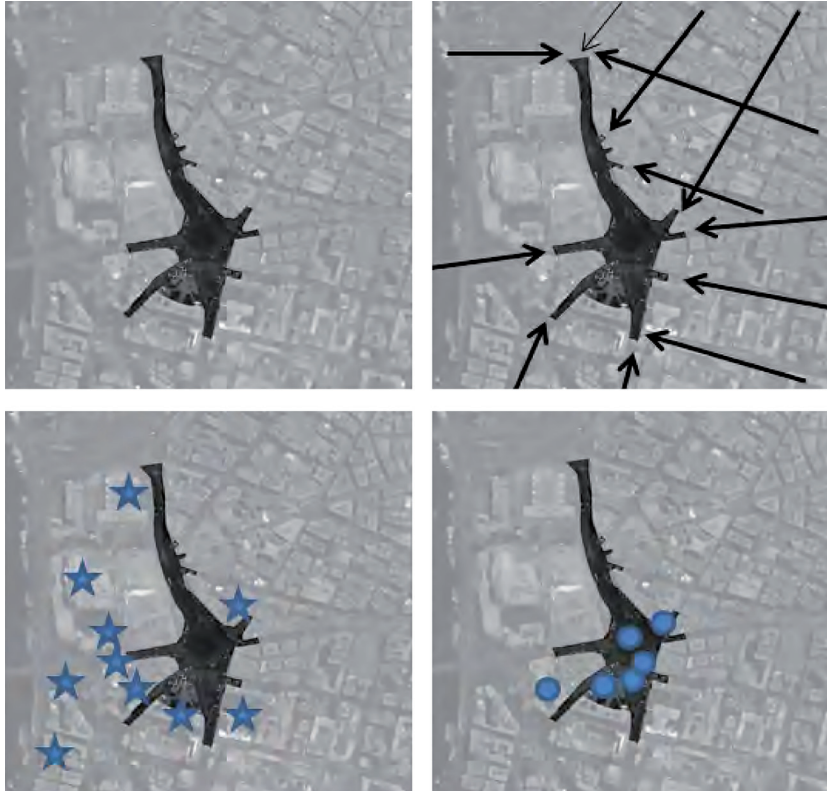
«The recent revolution in Cairo has made Tahrir Square a household name. No one, not even a historian who has written a book

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15. Hatuka, Baycan 2011.

16. Hatuka, Baycan 2011.

17. See: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-12434787

18. Palumbo 2012.

Figure, accesses, references and nodes of Tahrir Square during the protest. Analysis by Hussam Hussein Salama.

Tahrir Square in the "interactive' image by Yolande Knell (BBC) during the protest, 2011.

on the city, could have imagined that this aptly named public space would nurture a spark that would set the entire Middle East ablaze»[19].

Tahrir Square, *Liberation* in Arabic, got this name only after the Egypt breakout from the British army in 1952. The square was a swamp in the desert and under the Napoleonic occupation was used as a camp for the French army after that a Nile containing system made it dry. Ismail had the square being involved in a Haussmann Paris inspired urban project, albeit carried out quite differently. The designed suburb had its name after *Ismail*, as well as the inner square. Only after the Egyptian Museum construction on the north-western side, the space got to get its shape. In 1946 yet became a riot scene and in 1952, after severe building destruction because of a huge fire, Nasser expelled the British from Cairo: *Ismail* became *Tahrir*[20]. According to Egyptian historian Nezar AlSayyad, the square gained its name only after the 25th January 2011 uprising. «Tahrir Square got its name by a presidential decree in 1955. It was supposed to be a sign of Egypt's liberation from the British-who actually left in the 20s-and also from the monarchy of King Farouk. Actually in Tahrir Square there is a large pedestal that was put in place in the time of King Farouk that was supposed to have a statue of him on top. But it never got built and power changed hands so President Nasser decided to keep the pedestal with nothing on it as a reminder of the failure of the Egyptian monarchy. But honestly it's not really clear to me what liberation the presidential decree was recognizing. In my opinion Tahrir Square didn't earn its name until January 25th, 2011»[21]. The lack of symbolic spots in town allowed the Egyptian to ransom, through protest, that lost meaningful role the square had and that was lost under the Nasser and the latter Mubarak rule. The square, made of an ensemble of spaces and close to the most iconic poignant elements, it never ceased being a clash and quarrel scenario. The spatial patterns and views that set and cross the square give it an additional value of freedom. «L'une des leçons largement oubliée de la révolution égyptienne serait peut-être celle-ci: alors que l'on célèbre les cyber-révolutions arabes et la victoire de l'espace
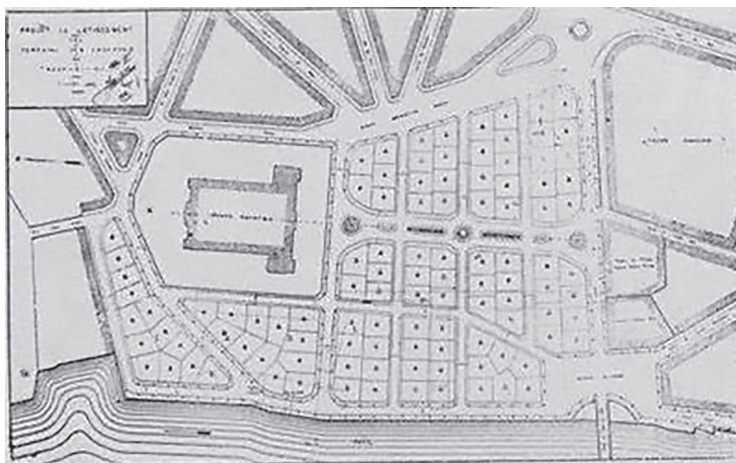
19. ALSAYYAD 2013.
20. ALSAYYAD 2013.
21. ALSAYYAD 2013.
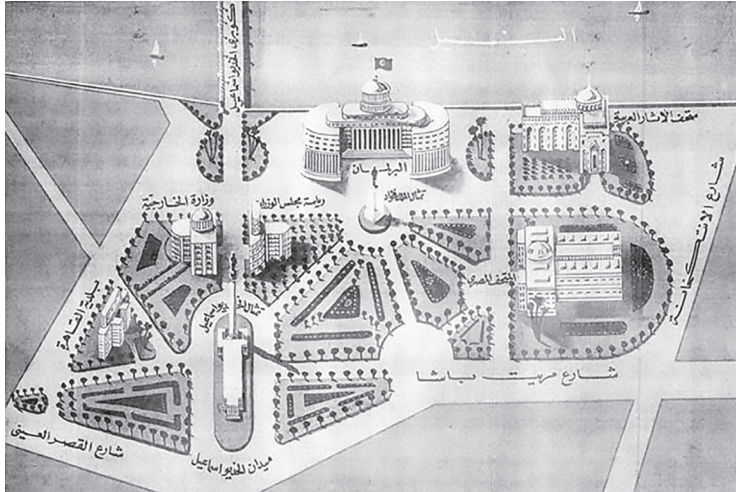
Cairo, the Square and Gardens in the plan by Arch. Muhammad Dhul-Faqqar Bek, 1947.

Cairo, perspective of Tahrir Square towards Egyptian Museum in the 1904 project.

Cairo, plan of Tahrir Square in the 1904 project.

virtuel sur la tyrannie, l'appropriation de l'espace physique et concret des lieux centraux et symboliques de l'histoire des peuples est toujours aussi nécessaire pour combattre l'oppression et fonder une société nouvelle. Dans l'ère inaugurée par le printemps arabe, la géographie a de beaux jours devant elle […]»[22].

Project Vs Informal: projects and contests

«There is this air of uncertainty that is surrounding us all […]. There is a fear of losing control of the square in general, that a competition would be structured the way it was during the old regime. We think we have some solutions to that»[23]. Following the 2011 riots, proposals for a protests' casualties monument were made. Amr Abdel Kawi, one of the *Al Tahrir Competition* and the design magazine *Magaz Magazine* co-founder, expresses his doubtful and concern feelings. The contest was advocated by several organizations such as the Cairo Governor or the *Sawiris Foundation for Social Development*. It took seven months before the Egyptian government decided to let the public opinion participate. Nasser Rabbat, Islamic Architecture professor at the *Aga Khan University*, wonders about the need of a public contest for a place whose iconic value resides in its non-defined, non-designed, undone status: «If Egyptians value their ability to express their freedom, then maybe the creative chaos of the square might be its best asset»[24].

In article appeared on *Al Jazeera* on the 1st February 2011, it is stated: «The essence of Tahrir Square is very well put by an Egyptian writer, Samir Raafat. He wrote in the Cairo Times: "Maidan al-Tahrir cannot sit still. Whether reflecting the city's moods or the leadership's political agenda, the nation's most important plaza has gone from faux Champs de Mars to Stalinesque esplanade. Whenever a new regime feels the nation's capital needs a new look, the Maidan has been the place to start"»[25]. The iconic strength of the square leads regimes to rethink about it and shape it in their image. Nevertheless, a study by

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22. Pagès-El Karoui, Vignal 2011.
23. Interview to Amr Abdel Kawi in Hope 2011.
24. Interview to Nasser Rabbatin Hope 2011.
25. See in Sitography, Repertory 01.

a *Middle East Studies Department of New York University* student, Mohamed Elshahed , shows that no politician or designer succeeded to give the square an unique devise or iconic value: «Yet no one politician or architect has been able to lay claim over the design and symbolism of Tahrir Square, which remains as a collection of fragments from many failed or unfinished plans and urban fantasies»[26]. To corroborate his statements, Elshahed lists a number of undone projects for the square. Considerations came from an urban project made by Moussa Qattawi Pasha, an architect from the early XX century. He suggested the English barrack to be demolished, the Egyptian museum to be adapted and the *Ismail* neighbourhood to be completed. The designer seems to be not interested in restoring an open spaces network inside the colonial fabric. Funds were unavailable and the dispute about keeping or not the British building went on till 1947, when Muhammad Dhul – Faqqar Bek published a plan to redesign the *Qasr el- Nil* zone on the *al- Musawwar* newspaper. Only the Mogamma government building was made according to the designer aim. After the 1953 revolution, Sayed Karim suggested to tear down the Egyptian Museum only to build up a hotel replacing the former barrack. This plan was not accomplished either. *Tahrir Square*, once again, seems not to benefit from necessary circumstances for a formal planning. Informality redesigns living spaces and sets up again new and complex social management systems. «Egypt's first true popular revolution in 7,000 years is an opportunity for an architectural revolution that not only captures the moment and but also takes Tahrir into the future without repeating mistakes of the past»[27].

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