Tahrir Square and Haussmann’s Paris: Physical Manifestations of Political Doctrines

Frederique Paraskevas
HTS 9/12/2011
Seminar Tutor: Ross Exo Adams
Architectural Association
We are at a stage in history where modern revolution has resurfaced in an outbreak at a scale that was hard to predict. Starting in Tunisia, and sweeping across the Middle East like wildfire, the effect of such events has yet to be digested let alone understood. The spaces that allow for such revolutions to be realized is what this essay shall address. Just as the ideas of modern revolution date back to Aristotle, the architecture that was occupied, changed and indeed helped form uprising shall be analysed in relation to Cairo, and Tahrir Square, otherwise known as “Liberation Square”. The parallel shall be drawn between the French revolution on 1848, and Haussmann’s vision for Paris, and the architecture that framed the Egyptian Revolution. This essay shall also analyse the urban planning and organization of Cairo and Paris in relation to governmental structure and techniques of security that are projected into the city.

In the late half of the 19th Century, Pasha Ismail (Khedive of Egypt from 1830-1895), had the vision to change the urban fabric of Cairo based on the model of Paris. Indeed it was his visit to Paris for the ‘Exposition Universelle’, organized by Haussmann in 1867, “that provided Ismail with a comprehensive model for the transformation and beautification of the city”. Following the Exposition, Ismail and Haussmann kept in contact and developed a friendship. Haussmann’s influence on the Pasha was immense, and led him to reconsider the urban planning of Cairo on such a scale that has not been seen in Egypt since its execution. The outcome of this Exposition extends further to the initiation of projects such as the Suez Canal and the Egyptian rail system. The inauguration of the Suez Canal, Egypt’s artery on both political and economic platforms, was to occur two years later in 1869. Hence, his vision for a new Cairo needed to happen fast. Such a complex urban fabric displayed in the streets of old Cairo (otherwise known as ‘Downtown Cairo’) would be a struggle to address at such a large scale as had been seen in Paris. Ismail therefore decided to focus on the Western portion of the city. Ali Mubarak, the “master planner” was put in charge of the works, was given the task to literally transform Cairo into the Paris of the Nile.

In order to better understand the attraction to the Parisian model and the influence Haussmann’s planning had on Ismail Pasha, we must before continuing, make an analysis of his transformation of Paris. With the increase in urban population due to the flow of residents from the outskirts of the capital to the centre in the 19th century, the centre of Paris had become a place of “rapidly built housing of poor
quality, overcrowding, disease \(^4\). The city was in fact unequipped to support and house such numbers. The task given by Napoleon III to solve the “mushrooming city” \(^5\) was given to Baron Haussmann, who was to instigate a re-planning of Paris on many levels. The revolution of 1848 was essentially a revolution of the Parisian proletariat, and this was to be pronounced in Haussmann’s urban planning. The arterial streets, connecting key points of the city were geared towards an “up-to-date mid-nineteenth century man” \(^6\). What is key for the purposes of this essay it to understand that the new vision of Paris was above all “a city useful to the political interests that the Empire represented above all others”. The break from the old winding and bustling alleyways of old Paris was a key strategy to the Empire, and in turn, decreasing the possibility of further revolution. Howard Saalman, author of “Haussmann: Paris Transformed” states that the new plan for Paris had a “usefulness in suppressing popular insurrections” \(^7\). David Harvey supports this point of view where he states that Haussmann had “clear Bonapartist sympathies” \(^8\). The ability to erect barricades and revolt was stifled and counteracted under Haussmann’s Paris. His extensive planning in the field of spatial relations was also key in expanding such doctrines around the world, with the ‘Exposition Universelle’. Harvey recognizes the significance of these events in relation to the “unification of the world…of spatial interconnections facilitated by modern networks of communication and materialized through commodity exchange” \(^9\). The influence on Cairo under Pasha Ismail can be seen as proof of this ‘unification’.

Overlapping of Haussmannesque Boulevard on old Parisian model

The indirect policing of Paris through Haussmann’s urban planning was a decision rooted in political motives. In Cairo however, similar techniques of planning and expansion were applied to the city, but perhaps with more of an aesthetic motive in relation to Downtown Cairo. It is however interesting to observe how this space has been changed during the Mubarak years and how this space in fact backfired against its government who were essentially trying to tightly police it under the premise that people cannot congregate in public spaces and may be arrested for doing so, in accordance with Egypt’s Emergency Law.

\(^{10}\) http://www.arch.wsu.edu/faculty/pgruen/arch324/Haussmann'sParisImages.htm
In Giorgio Agamben’s “State of Exception”\textsuperscript{11}, he discusses the fine line that a state of emergency hovers between politics and the law. He states that the ‘state of exception becomes the immediate response of the State when faced with the gravest kind of internal conflict’\textsuperscript{12}. Consequently to this, all that is the norm under the legal system of the country becomes obsolete in its usual sense. A new use of the legal frame has been put in place that gives exceptional power to the State by somehow extending or putting on hold their usual legal and political boundaries they abided by. Such a establishment of this State of Emergency or ‘Exception’, “permits the elimination of political adversaries, and also whole categories of the population that resist being integrated into the political system”\textsuperscript{13}. Such are the elements that run the risk of being severely abused by governments. It is in this instance that the ‘exception’ ‘becomes the rule’. It is at this point where Agamben’s comments on ‘anomy’ become paramount to our discussion. He suggests that the “state of exception introduces a zone of anomy into the law”\textsuperscript{14}, which, according to Carl Schmitt, “renders possible an effective ordering of reality”\textsuperscript{15}. The term “ordering of reality” perhaps gives us the key into understanding how a State of Exception works, where the legal domain has been suspended, and the political now play with the dynamics of the legal system to reframe their position within that framework; usually in the goal to achieve a greater amount of control or power, for any given situation. Agamben states that the “state of exception defines a regime of the law within which the norm is valid but cannot be applied, and where acts that do not have the value of law acquire the force of law”\textsuperscript{16}. The above sentence is a clear indication to the delicacy of such a state, where the consequences of hovering between two grounds is potentially destructive if this ‘force’ was to be left in the wrong hands. It is absurd to think that such a decision can be made that is so decisive and influential on the people of a state, yet they take no part in the decision. Such has been in the case in many alleged democracies. What is extremely interesting in relation to this essay is Agamben’s observations on “anomic festivals”\textsuperscript{17}, that are situations of suspended law, where the “ambiguous connection between law and anomy is thus brought to light”\textsuperscript{18}.

Furthermore, In Foucault’s analysis of the relation of “Space, Knowledge and Power”\textsuperscript{19}, he suggests that the organization of a city and urbanism are strongly tied to techniques of government. He states that it is in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century that countries such as France begin to demonstrate the rationality of their government through space and urban planning. Policing the city became increasingly important at this point. It is perhaps here where the rationale of Haussmann’s straight line comes into play. Where winding, narrow streets are present, it is more difficult to impose control of society. It is the visibility and span therefore of the extending boulevards of Paris that meant that power could be facilitated.

Tahrir Square, being situated at the forefront of Downtown Cairo (modeled on Haussmann’s Paris), was the space occupied by the 2011 revolution. One must ask the question why this space was put to this use, and which elements did it contain that would allow for the people occupying it to play out their struggle for freedom and

\textsuperscript{11}Agamben, Giorgio, \textit{State of Exception}. USA: University of Chicago Press, 2005
\textsuperscript{12}Agamben, Giorgio, \textit{State of Exception}. USA: University of Chicago Press, 2005, page 1
\textsuperscript{13}Agamben, Giorgio, \textit{State of Exception}. USA: University of Chicago Press, 2005, page 1
\textsuperscript{14}Agamben, Giorgio, \textit{State of Exception}. USA: University of Chicago Press, 2005, page 2
\textsuperscript{15}Agamben, Giorgio, \textit{State of Exception}. USA: University of Chicago Press, 2005, page 3
\textsuperscript{17}Agamben, Giorgio, \textit{State of Exception}. USA: University of Chicago Press, 2005, page 7
fighting a regime of power that was previously controlling the streets with an undeniable force?

There is an intrinsic relationship between public space and visibility. If one were to perceive Tahrir Square as a stage for the revolution, then one could also conclude that visibility was fundamental. The open space that Tahrir provides for such a great visibility that the congregation of the masses within a circular space that it creates an image of intensity and unity from all perspectives. We could therefore come the conclusion that the over-controlling of space, or otherwise the over-governing of a space, led to the failure of its initial purpose and actually boomeranged in its effect. Tahrir Square, which was designed simultaneously as a transitional space between two parts of the city, and hence a heavily policed area, changed function and turned its back on the very authority which used it for political ends. Foucault states, “If one governed too much, one did not govern at all- that one provoked results contrary to those one desired”22. In the case of Cairo, this can be seen through the setting of Tahrir.

In an interview, the author of “Cairo, Histories of a City”, Nezar AlSayyed, discussed Tahrir Square in relation to its design. He mentions that Tahrir Square was previously called Ismailia Square, named after Pasha Ismail. He goes on to say that although the square is based on Parisian urban design, it differs from it immensely. In the first sense, it does not have boulevards streaming out from all around it, but rather just from one side. Secondly its proximity to the Nile adds another significance. He mentions “It's an ill-defined space that is constituted by five or six adjacent spaces”23. When reflecting upon Agamben’s theory on ‘States of Exception’, and the ambiguity that accompanies them, we could relate this to the spatial properties discussed in the above quotation. AlSayyed describes the space as being “ill-defined”, which is a definite contradiction to Haussmann’s clear vision for Paris. Such a complex space has proved to accommodate intensely complex political events that were repeatedly “ill-defined”. When asked why he thought the space was chosen by protestors he replied “Twenty-three streets lead to different parts of it, which is why it was so successful with the demonstrators”24. Such a phenomena is not seen in Paris. He then compares it by saying “There isn't one big boulevard that you can block off, and there are two bridges that lead to it as well”25. We can thus conclude from these two things. The first being that the model for Paris was not fully obeyed by Ismail,

20 http://www.flickr.com/photos/nouran/2757029082/
and perhaps it was more a quasi-replication, which focused more on the decorative aspect than the actual urban fabric. Secondly, we can prove this in that the level of visibility is much more complex in Tahrir when compared to the linear Parisian model of the boulevard. Where 23 streets lead to the square, this not only restricts visibility, but also increases accessibility. When putting two such aspects together, we understand that the controlling of such a space becomes a difficult task, and hence a perfect location for protestors. Looking deeper at the openness of the space of Tahrir, we can also conclude that the visibility has two perspectives: One that looks into Tahrir from 23 converging streets, and which is therefore fragmented, and one that is looking from Tahrir itself outwards. Not only does the latter allow for a greater number of people to unify in this space, but is also gives the protestors a strategic advantage in that they are able to see down the many streets that lead out of Tahrir. This becomes especially important when security forces decide to remove protestors and the clashes that follow.

One important aspect of Tahrir that has not been mentioned yet is its proximity to the numerous governmental buildings. Nested somewhat at the focal point between many such buildings, the occupation of Tahrir provides a direct confrontation between protestors and symbols of the regime they were against. One such an example would be the building that hosted the National Democratic Party, which, before Mubarak, was built for the Arab Socialist Union under Nasser. AlSayyed describes it as bearing a strong similarity to the governmental buildings of the Soviet Union:

Described by AlSayyed as being a symbol for Nasser’s authoritarian rule, and then continuing to host the legacy of authoritarian regime, this building was burnt during the January revolution of 2011 (top right). The symbolism of this could not be stronger. Burning down the headquarters of the regime meant that the people had taken away one of the main places that exercise the regimes program.

The fact that Egypt has been operating under ‘Emergency Law’ since 1981, since Mubarak took rule, has come to show that Egypt is essentially a police state. In an essay by Mohamed El Shahed, a doctoral candidate at New York University's Middle East and Islamic Studies Department states “public policy and urban planning, like most governmental matters, were filtered through the harsh lens of state security”. His discussion of public space under the Mubarak regime brings to light the policy against public assembly. This in turn gives an entire new approach to urban open spaces and public squares. Prior to the revolution, Tahrir was considered more of a heavily traffic-filled ‘medan’. A serious break was made from the previously

26 http://theheartofamerica.wordpress.com
27 http://en.bestpicturesof.com/gezira
29 ‘roundabout’ in Arabic
open gardened space that was planned under Ismail, which can be seen above on the left. The congregation of just a few people under the Emergency Law was enough for an arrest to take place. Apart from the implementation of security through the law, policing was extended to the physical realm in that public spaces were “subdivided or fenced off”\textsuperscript{30}. In breaking up such a large space, it meant that the surveillance of it would be facilitated, and also that it restricted the democratic purpose of public space. El Shahed also states that “the state deployed the physical design of urban space as one of its chief means of discouraging democracy.”\textsuperscript{31} If we understand the organization of public space under Mubarak to reflect directly the “model for governmental rationality”\textsuperscript{32}, then the occupation and democratization of Tahrir Square becomes a foretelling act to the toppling of the regime.

This then brings us to the question of the liberating element of architecture, and whether this is actually possible. Foucault addresses this issue, where he states that architecture “can produce positive effects”\textsuperscript{33}, but essentially, “the guarantee of freedom is freedom”\textsuperscript{34}. Egypt’s revolution is perhaps a case that stands as proof of Foucault’s argument. The practice of freedom has an inevitable spatial relation. The fact that the revolution was a collective effort and concern meant that it was a collective struggle for freedom and liberation from a regime. However, although the unification of the Egyptian people was brought about by a common goal, we could say that liberty itself belongs to the individual. It could therefore be said that if architecture attempts to aid or achieve some sort of liberty, then this is in fact impossible, seeing as liberty is something that is completely individual. However, we can see Tahrir as being an example of a compromise and understanding between people who each have a unique view of liberty and freedom. They seemed to have settled for a space that will accommodate the mutual understandings of protestors. Such a setting can only be a vast open space. Moreover, dependencies can be drawn in the relation of liberty, architecture and security. Foucault comments that “freedom is nothing else but the correlative of the deployment of apparatuses of security.”\textsuperscript{35} This statement is indicative of the dependency of freedom on ‘apparatuses of security’, and the dependency on freedom for the functioning of security itself. It is a delicate relationship where an imbalance can cause much tension, and where Egypt is probably an example of such an event. The controlling of the physical city is a major apparatus for such control, where urban fabric can be monitored and manipulated to suit the needs of those in power. Such is the case in Egypt, where the extent of security spans from within the privacy of peoples homes to the public realm. Indeed this was a strategy and last resort for the recently fallen government before this over-controlling turned on them.

In relation to Amabgen’s analysis, it could be observed that Tahrir square is a physical manifestation of two things that work sequentially. In the first instance, we shall refer back to Agamben’s “zone of anomy in the law”\textsuperscript{36}, and suggest that Tahrir was an example of this. Indeed Egypt’s “State of Emergency”, which still operates today, created a new sphere within the legal system that allowed for an entire new set

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{30} Mohamed Elshahed. “Tahrir Square: Social Media, Public Space”. The Design Observer Group. 27/2/2011
\bibitem{31} Mohamed Elshahed. “Tahrir Square: Social Media, Public Space”. The Design Observer Group. 27/2/2011
\bibitem{32} Foucault, Michel. Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College De France. Edited by Michel Senellart: 1977-78, page 248
\bibitem{35} Foucault, Michel. Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College De France. Edited by Michel Senellart: 1977-78, page 60
\bibitem{36} Agamben, Giorgio. State of Exception. USA: University of Chicago Press, 2005, page 6
\end{thebibliography}
of laws and regulations to develop over the course of the past 30 years. Indeed the aforementioned possibility to abuse a system of exception has been clearly demonstrated in Egyptian politics since Mubarak. A very comfortable nest for government was weaved within the obscurities of Cairo’s ‘state of exception’. In the second instance, the analysis can be made of Tahrir Square in which it became a physical manifestation of the collapse of such a system. Where is was previously a square which was divided, and where all the elements of a public open space were suppressed, we have witnessed the transition to the other extreme of the political spectrum in that it was overturned and regained by the public. In a sense we could even go as far as to say that Tahrir became that place of an “anomic festival”37, where not only was the governmental system rejected, but a new system within the ambiguous previous system was created by the people. In many events we witnessed the government trying to gain that control back, but it seems that these were repeated failed attempts. Could Tahrir square be interpreted as a tool for the analysis of States of Exception? The square became a space devoid of law. We could thus come to the conclusion that it became an anomic space within, and in reaction to, a wider anomic governmental system.

Bibliography


http://www.arch.wsu.edu/faculty/pgruen/arch324/Haussmann'sParisImages.htm


http://www.flickr.com/photos/nouran/2757029082/