

## Diagnoses on Cairo City Reflective Analyses of Ramses Square

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FIGURE 1: Postcard Old Ramses Square (Union Postale Universelle, Egypte (s.a.) Collection R van Kats).

**Abstract:** Cairo, a 20 million megapolis, is characterized by the absence of a logical urban design. For most people, chaos is the most characterizing element of the traffic situation in Cairo like Ramses Square, the busiest intersection of Cairo. We focus on the pedestrian. How can an increasing number of pedestrians and an increasing number of motorized vehicles use the city simultaneously in a comfortable way? How to improve the comfort of all people who use the square? Not only pedestrians and motorized traffic are everyday users of the square, but also small vendors. Diversity of users characterizes public space. To fulfil the conflicting needs of different groups, it is essential to hear what the users need and want of the spaces they interact with. In our research we started by accepting the physical environment and the social stratification of the area. Our open interpretation of the Ramses Square includes a literal intention for more sustainability: an improvement of users comfort, the local environment and an impulse to reach a change of outlook with the people and government. In our opinion sustainability is a state of mind to increase the comfort of life, urban and green space. This will be achieved through an anthropological approach of architecture and town planning. With this study and its focus on Ramses Square, one of the most polluted and traffic wise overcrowded intersections of Africa, we believe that the vital points mentioned have to be considered when working on African cities.

**Keywords:** Cairo Egypt; urban planning; Traffic; bottom up approach; Ramses Square; economy and place; pedestrians; transformation processes.

## INTRODUCTION

The city, in the strongest sense, is 'poeticized' by the subject: the subject has refabricated it for his or her own use by undoing the constraints of the urban apparatus and, as a consumer of space, imposes his or her own law on the external order of the city. The neighborhood is thus, in the strongest sense of the term, an object of consumption that the dweller appropriates by way of the privatization of public space (Giard, de Certeau & Mayol 1998:13).



FIGURE 2: Ramses Square 2008 (Authors).



FIGURE 3: Pedestrian bridge (Authors).

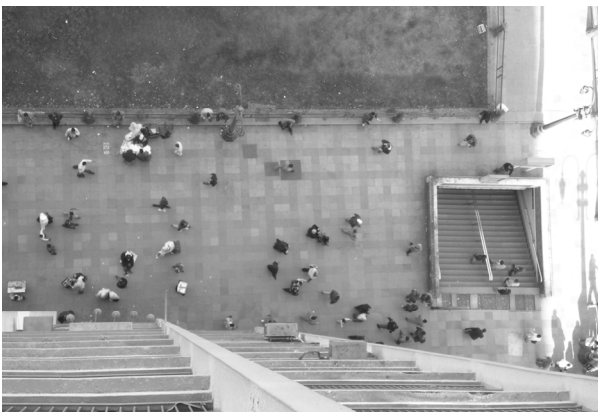


FIGURE 4: Metro entrance (Authors).

Cairo is the largest city in Africa, with a population of 20 million and a population increase of 30 people per hour. This megapolis is characterized by the absence of a logical urban design. Roads are being constructed and buildings demolished in what seems to be urban chaos. The wishes of the population have often been ignored and peoples' living comfort has been compromised.

We focus on Ramses Square, the busiest intersection of Cairo. In Ramses Square, the public domain has been completely taken over by motorized traffic. There is no place for pedestrians. In our proposal, we want to focus attention on the pedestrian. How can an increasing number of pedestrians and an increasing number of motorized vehicles use the city simultaneously and in a comfortable way? How can the area of Ramses Square be transformed to improve the comfort of all people who use it? Not only pedestrians and motorized traffic are everyday users of the square, but also small vendors who set up their stalls in the area. To transform Ramses Square we have chosen not to employ a top down approach, but instead we have focused on the experience of the people who use the area (Figure 2).

## RAMSES SQUARE

In our approach, we started from the premise that the artistic ego of the architect must not interfere with the wishes of the inhabitants. In designing a building or public space, aesthetics do matter, but can never be allowed to be more important than the living comfort of the end users. In contemporary architecture, the aesthetic preferences of the architect too often play the most important role. The importance of a design that follows a logical use of space must not be underestimated, but here again it is the logic of the end users, the local inhabitants, that has to be the starting point.

The following examples show what errors can be made when this premise is not followed through. To cross the square and its traffic, a pedestrian bridge was built, starting at the station but making a too long stretch – people prefer crossing on street level despite the safety of avoiding all cars (Figure 3). Another example: The entrance of a metro station that is simultaneously used to cross the road or as a place to run a small vending stall. The entrance is small, like a dark hole in the ground (Figure 4).

People have to go left; right and left, then walk hundreds of meters, to come out of a similar small hole out of the metro station again, just in order to cross the road. The government acknowledges the problems in the functioning of the city, but does not see the power of the creativity of the users of the urban space, the creativity of the small vendor, the existence of a small area for prayer in the corner of the hall of the station. Every square meter is used, in a flexible and mobile way. The city facilitates this creativity. When people do not see the social function of architecture, but only the aesthetic aspect, a city cannot function on this scale.

When restructuring an area, different users often have competing wishes and needs. Users of urban space are not a homogeneous group; they differ in use, gender, age etc. Car users have different needs than pedestrians, who may not have the same needs as the small vendors. These different groups can have a tense relationship with each other with regards to the use of urban space, but at the same time these groups can function as a self regulating organism (Figure 5).

Diversity of users characterizes public space. To fulfil the conflicting needs of different groups, it is essential to hear what the users need and want of the spaces they interact with. To gain an insight into the complexity of the different users of urban space in order to come to a successful solution to our project, it is necessary to apply a broader field of knowledge and to not restrict ourselves to architecture. In contemporary design, attention is mainly focused on form and the technical realization of the design. We, however, look at the wishes of the users in the society where the design is implemented.

Instead of making our own concept of an aesthetic design, we internalized the wishes of the people making use of the area. This was achieved through an anthropological approach of architecture and town planning. The methods of fieldwork and participant observation, combined with interviews in the area, have shown us what the people in Cairo find most important in their use of Ramses Square and what changes they would like to see.

In the case of our approach to Ramses Square, Cairo, we performed ethnographic research through participating observation. We started by accepting the physical environment and the social stratification of the area. Despite the common traffic chaos, it is surprising how well the commuters find their way. The inhabitants and other users of the Ramses Square area are all very well aware that the situation in Ramses Square is not ideal. Nevertheless, due to a lack of governmental attention to the area, they have reconciled themselves to the current daily traffic reality.

For most of these people, chaos is the most characterizing element of the traffic situation in Cairo. The intersection at Ramses Square looks like a chaotic mix of traffic, people and buildings. In this chaos, however, people find their way and there seems to be a hidden order in the way people use the space. Installing traffic lights to force a more formal order onto the area might not be the correct way to structure this crowded space. The first step in the urban planning process is acceptance of all the existing. In recognising the situation of this area and the wishes of the users, we have decided not to assume a rebuilding of the area but rather a restructuring of the infrastructure for the traffic participants, public transport, passers-by, inhabitants and commuters. For example, the motorists are not chased off the space. This is not realistic in the light of the economic development of the city, population increase, etc. Putting aside the motorist will be only a temporary solution or worsen traffic congestion somewhere else in the city. In our concept of the new Ramses Square the motorist received a new place and mobility options.

By studying the city structure as a whole, we noticed that the infrastructure of the city had developed through ad hoc solutions. Besides the Greater Cairo ring, there is no main structure which gives sufficient orientation and flow of traffic. Further study showed that this main structure is partly present in the current city configuration, but not used as such. Cairo has a central ring road for opening-up and allowing for flow in the centre area. Of concern is especially the revaluing of streets at the level of local, central and regional traffic use. It makes no sense to want to traverse a narrow street with high speed traffic just in order to pass through. Besides space for traffic and pedestrians, a vast public transport system is also important. The choice of travelling through the city by means of several manners is important for every inhabitant of each social class. Increasing the choices is part of comfortable living. By creating new passages for pedestrians and leading the motorized traffic through/via new traffic-arteries, the notion arises that the car is not always the most comfortable option. Yet it is still possible to use the car with enough comfort and without nuisance for the other users in the area, if a person cannot or does not want to move differently. By serving the pedestrians as well as the motorists in their individual interests, Ramses Square preserves its self-regulating capacity and people are simultaneously made aware of other options that are not available at present. In our concept of the new Ramses Square, the users also create their own natural lines of movement in contrast to the forced impossibilities which are available now.



**FIGURE 5:** Street level activity (Authors).



**FIGURE 6:** Vendors near Ramses Square (Authors).



**FIGURE 7:** City with lack of green (Authors).

The built environment offers users a structured rhythm of life, work and dwelling. The structuring power of the environment determines the way people use space. When the urban environment does not inspire people in a creative and constructive way, they tend to become passive users who adapt their lives to the rigid design of their physical habitat, as designed by the architect. The implicit restrictions that are produced by the built environment reduce inhabitants to obedient users of space. The resulting situation serves only the hegemonic order and not the individual who is compromised in his or her creative use of urban space.

In contrast to the average users of the city, who are collectively compromised in their uses of their environment, the creative other within actively seeks to extend his or her boundaries of movement. In respect of public safety, it is vital for the community to have a certain amount of predictability and social control; however, on a micro level it is equally important to allow for freedom of movement in order to achieve an individual psychological and material development. In addition to spatial openness for the everyday users – who take a prominent place in our concept of the new Ramses Square – we also focus on the continuation of the small informal economy.

In a city where a large part of the population lives in conditions of poverty, it is vital that the individual small vendors (that sell products like cigarettes, shaving blades, newspapers etc.) have space to set up their stalls (Figure 6). It is very important to keep these people working in the area instead of driving them out, like the government is used to do. In contrary to the popular governmental point of view these small vendors, in our opinion, are not a 'visual pollution of the area'. They are to be seen as a vital aspect of the daily social economical culture; in a way they are the tangible heart of the urban economic society.

These people are important for the economy of the city as well as important for maintaining social order. The network of individual salesmen could give the government access to a functional system of social control, i.e. the action of observation of unwanted persons and undesirable activities. For the vendors, safe surroundings are also very important. In our concept of Ramses Square, they are not viewed as polluting elements but as a natural and integral part of the place.

### RAMSES PARK

Cairo is the largest city of Africa. It is considered as one of the biggest cities in the world. Taking this fact into consideration, it is striking to realize that the city has only one park as a zone of comfort for the



**FIGURE 8:** Concept for a new Ramses Square, with a second green space for Cairo adjacent to Ramses Square.

inhabitants. An extra park or green environment is not a matter of luxury but a human need. 'Green' is a vital aspect of the transformation of Ramses Square. It would be the second green spot in central Cairo housing approximately 7,500,000 to 8,000,000 people, and for greater, Cairo (a megapolis with 20,000,000 inhabitants) where people can gather with family and friends and to find a spot of comfort and silence (Figure 8).

Our open interpretation of Ramses Square includes an intention to achieve more sustainability; an improvement of users comfort and the local environment, as well as an impulse to reach a change of outlook by the people and government. The addition of a park to Ramses Square will be a direct improvement of the audio and visual environment. Flora will also positively affect the air quality. The effect of extra vegetation on the people is perhaps more important than the way it will affect the environment. The notion of the word 'sustainability' is, in our approach, a principle that does not necessarily have its origin in reducing pollution. In our opinion, sustainability is a state of mind to increase the comfort of life and space; A calming and pleasant living area ensures that people will take care of their environment; Less waste is left on the street, the traffic will decrease and so on. Green space such as parks will directly lead to an increase in comfortable living and a strengthening of the local environment. Above all, it will be an awakening for the own and personal surroundings of the users of the Ramses Square area: People will feel at home in a comfortable area.

Sustainability is a notion that, in its core, directly relates to people and not to the natural environment. The people in an area, in our project Ramses Square, will never experience the area in a singular visual manner or as intended in the top-down vision design traditions. The city will be appropriated by the individual according to his or her wishes and needs. As regards use of the area (Ramses Square), we will leave space for people to fill in according to their wishes and desires. From our point of view, this is a healthy provision to achieve a grassroots approach to sustainability (Figure 8).

## COMMUNICATION AND ART

People make use of public space in a creative way. The individual person likes to see him- or herself as a unique personality. Within his or her most personal experience, each individual will reject what is seen as normal and mainstream, creating his or her own set of rules and dogma's for his or her personal lifestyle. This includes a personalised approach to design, intention and target group, and the further production of architecture, the urban environment, and a physical experience of shape, texture and environment, the celebration of the city.

With everyday litter, like cigarette butts, an individual leaves a trace, a memento in the dream of his or her legacy. This makes the city a 'bulletin board' for everyone whom makes use of it. At different points of time,



**FIGURE 9:** Small city stories (Authors).

people are leaving messages for each other (Figure 9). People might urinate in dark alleys at night; the shopping audience leave cash register slips and plastic bags. Waste and garbage is dumped on the roadside, the waste of a picnic is left on the spot. These short urban narratives show that the interests of different users of a city are not necessarily in harmony with each other. As in a good novel, there are different story lines, changes in the plot and character developments to be found.

These stories relate the conflicting interests of the different users of the city. All the users tell the urban tale of a city where the individual defines the dots, commas, punctuation marks and verbs: The city as a sensorial book.

The citizen can be inspired by recognizing him- or herself in the city and by its heroes. In every major city around the world people can get inspired by its contemporary and classic heroes who have been of a crucial importance for the identity and development of the city – the city honours them. Among other metropoli, Cairo is an outsider due to its lack of honouring its own inhabitants and heroes. Cairo is a cosmopolitan city, famous for its cultural and scientific atmosphere. Many world famous personalities in the field of arts and culture were born and raised in this city. Among contemporary artists, a few to be mentioned are Naguib Mahfouz, Ohm Kouloum and Omar Sharif.

Shockingly, there are almost no places to be found in the city where relatively new cultural expressions are celebrated. The city is focusing primarily on the ancient history of the country, within a fixed framework of galleries and museums. From our point of view, public space is to be considered as a tool for cultural communication. Ramses Square will be a celebration for all the people and its cultural messengers of their time. This can be realized by working in close cooperation with local artists.

## CONCLUSION

The urban experience of the individual is a déjà vu of its own conscience. It adheres itself to the expectations that people have of their city, their lives. The urban environment that is created in the minds and in the imagination of people is of a crucial importance to understand the city. Because this urban environment exists only in the hearts and minds of the people using the city, the importance of understanding this imaginary city is by far greater than trying to fit this imaginary city in a narrow-minded framework or approach.

The way we have conceptualized the new Ramses Square is that it will become the showpiece of Cairo: A domain where people can be themselves, not bound by the chains of uniformity, but a place where openness and unity can be celebrated. With this study and its focus on Ramses Square, one of the most polluted and, traffic wise, overcrowded intersections of Africa, we believe that the vital points we mentioned, have to be considered when working on African inner cities.

**Note:** This paper was accompanied by an oral presentation and a 9.48 minute film presentation.

## LIST OF SOURCES

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