

Resolving the Paradox: Cultural Encounters in a Cairene Urban Space

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There is the paradox: how to become modern and to return to sources: how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization.

— Paul Ricoeur (1965), *History and Truth*

The paradox identified by Ricoeur is an insightful description of the situation in many developing countries. Two apparently contradictory, and equally strong, forces are at work: tradition, inherited from a rich cultural heritage, and change, expressed through a desire for modernization. This cultural heritage manifests itself not just in artifacts such as buildings but also in a distinct worldview and life style. While many great cultures — including Islamic culture — derived their greatness from an ability to assimilate, adopt, and borrow from other civilizations thus being able to advance and change, there is a growing trend toward viewing the past and tradition as a rigid unchanging model as expressed through various so called “fundamentalist” tendencies throughout the Moslem world (and elsewhere). This becomes apparent in architecture and urban design for example through the recycling of historical forms. Thus, recognizing the inherent danger in trivializing one’s cultural heritage many individuals and organizations have acknowledged the need for change while allowing for tradition to become an integral and vital part of that process.

This paper examines this issue by demonstrating how through one project an architect and his team attempted to resolve this paradox thereby setting a small scale precedent whose lessons could be applied on a larger scale and in different contexts. Specifically, it will be argued that the performance of a pedestrian street in Cairo is directly related to how it responded to change and the extent to which it was able to utilize “imported” urban models. A proposition is made that *Mohamed Ali* street’s design represents a shift away from traditional patterns thus taking into account changes which have occurred in Cairo over the last century. This shift does not constitute a complete break with the past however. Various traditional elements were utilized in such a way so as to support new forms of street encounters.

MOHAMED ALI STREET: HISTORY AND EVOLUTION

The street is an extension of a major boulevard known as *Mohamed Ali* Boulevard. It passes between two religious buildings — one built in the 14th century (the *Sultan Hassan* Madrasa, a religious school) whereas the other one was built in the 19th century (the *Rifa’i* Mosque) (Fig. 1).

The street prior to its closing was a main passage for cars and busses on their way to, or leaving, *Mohamed Ali* Boulevard. Only a narrow walkway was provided for pedestrians. Although a small

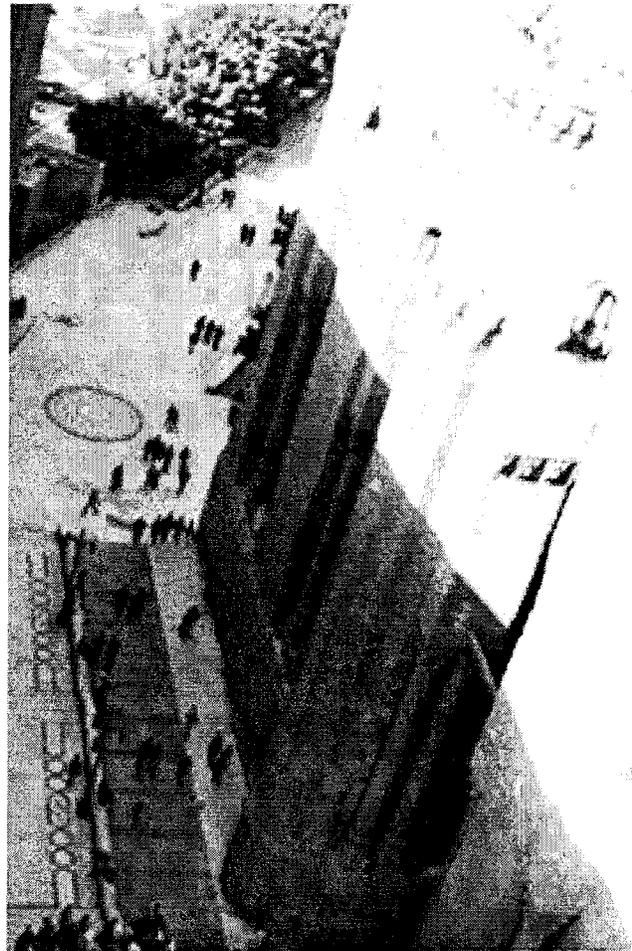


Fig. 1. Aerial view of Mohamed Ali street. The Rifa’i mosque appears in the foreground.

park area located at the rear of the *Rifa’i* mosque was occasionally used, it appears from pre-pedestrianization photographs to have been in severe neglect. Officials from the Egyptian Antiquities Organization (EAO) suggested to the researcher that this area was known for the presence of illegal activities such as drug use.

In 1985 the EAO began a large effort in restoring the monuments located around *Salah al-Din*’s citadel including the *Sultan Hassan* Madrasa. Parallel to these developments plans were made by EAO

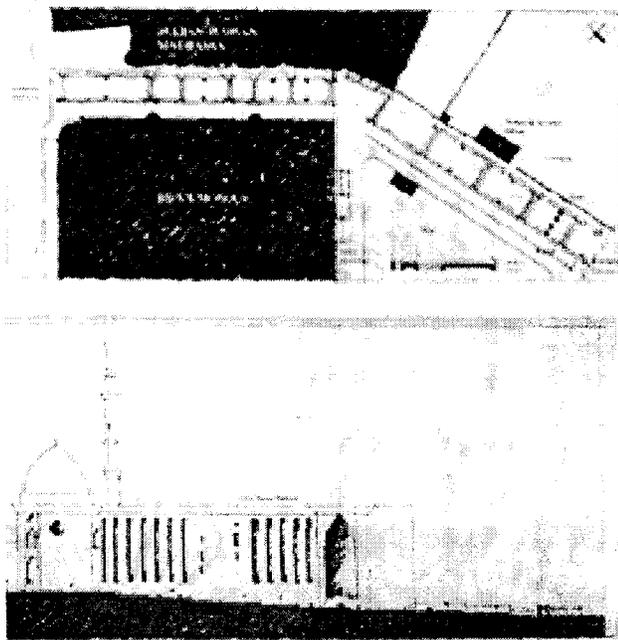


Fig. 2. Mohamed Ali Street: site plan and longitudinal section.

architect Nabil Abd al-Samiea for closing the street to car traffic and converting it to an area for pedestrian use. Inspired by “traditional” streets from Islamic Cairo, as well as a visit to Italian cities, the architect divided the street into various sections to accommodate the natural incline in the street’s topography through the provision of steps. Also, a gate was built near *Mohamed Ali Boulevard* to mark the entry into the street.¹

METHODOLOGY

Given the exploratory nature of the study it adopted participant observation as a method for collecting data. In doing so a number of techniques were employed: (1) direct or simple observation (behavioral mapping; counting of users, i.e. pedestrian volume); this technique suggests that there is minimal interference from the researcher; (2) direct participation (observing the street; casual conversations; eavesdropping); (3) informant interviewing (informal conversations with users; architects; and officials); (4) respondent interviewing (guided — i.e. using a set of questions as an overall guide).

The study attempted to measure the performance of the street with the objective of identifying whether it could be considered a success or a failure. In doing so a number of criteria were used to establish a measure of success. First, in terms of numbers and types of people using the street *M. Ali* is frequented by a large number of users distributed throughout the day in a way that reflects the diurnal rhythm of the city. Use is not restricted to a particular season or occasion but is consistent throughout the summer and winter months, as well as weekdays and weekends. In terms of types of users *M. Ali* street witnesses a diverse range of users — or actors — ranging from children, teenagers to elderly. In addition women use the street on a regular basis as well. An important measure of the street’s success is the presence of regular users who can be seen on any given day such as elderly, retirees, etc. Street vendors are present as well thus adding another component to the vitality of the street (Fig. 3a & 3b). Therefore, from a strictly quantitative as well as qualitative standpoint the street could be considered a success.² The following section discusses some of the main findings of this study within the framework outlined in the introduction.

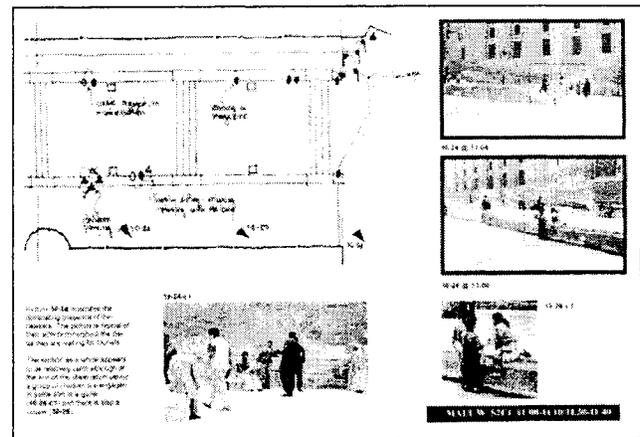
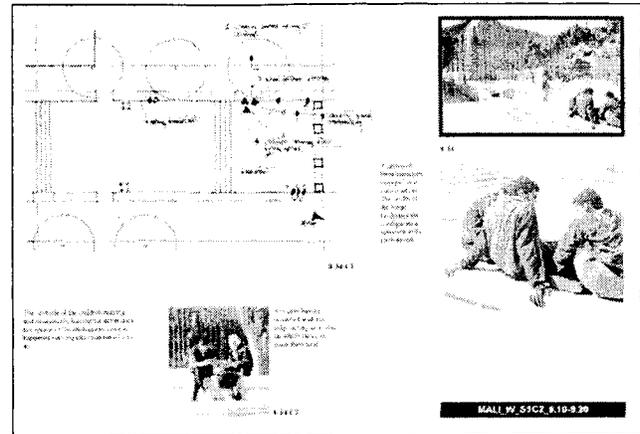


Fig. 3a. Sample of behavioral maps illustrating street use.

RESOLVING THE PARADOX: RECONCILIATING TRADITION AND CHANGE

At the beginning of this paper it was argued that many developing countries face a paradox: the need for modernization while at the same time recognizing one’s cultural traditions and heritage. Furthermore, a proposition was made that the success of *Mohamed Ali* street could be directly attributed to the fact that it was able to accommodate change while at the same time responding to deeply rooted (core) cultural traditions.

Amos Rapoport in numerous writings defines culture as a matter of life-style, a particular “way of doing things.”³ Specifically, he argues that all the definitions of culture can be classified in three classes: (1) culture can be defined as a way of life typical of a group, a particular way of doing things; (2) a system of symbols, meanings, and cognitive schemata; and (3) a set of adaptive strategies for survival related to the ecological setting and its resources. Given the scope and objectives of this study I was adapted as an appropriate starting point in examining the construct of culture.

Using this definition in examining the data several elements of Cairo’s traditional urban sub-culture are seen as being responsible for the use of *Mohamed Ali* street. They are (1) the concept of *Fos’ha*; (2) outdoor celebration. In addition to these, three more components — while not unique to this sub-culture — are considered as well: (3) the *Qahwa* custom; (4) the changing role of women and gender relationships and (5) the dramaturgical aspect of street life. It will be argued that in Cairo the ability of *Mohamed Ali* street to cater to all these components through its unique physical structure has resulted in the heavy use it is subjected to, hence its success. The



Fig. 3b. Images from *Mohamed Ali Street*.

following defines and explores each of these constructs.

(1) The *Fos'ha* concept: Examining the etiology of the word *Fos'ha* an Egyptian derivation from an Arabic verb meaning "to go out for recreation" shows that it is a very unique cultural construct with very specific architectural implications that are all present in Mohamed Ali street, thus contributing significantly to its success.

According to *Mokhtar El'Sahah* — a classic Arabic dicti — the word *Fa'sa'ha* is defined as a wide place; its usage is in such sentences as "people widened the place for him so he could sit." It is also associated with the meaning that someone felt depressed but then became relieved: "his spirit was widened." In Egyptian colloquial Arabic this word was developed into *yet'fa'sah* and *fos'ha*. They are used when someone is going out for leisure activities, to have fun, or simply to hang out.

The use of this term is significant and has strong architectural and urban implications particularly since it has no equivalent in the English language. The significance stems from the association between enjoying oneself and being in a wide, open place. While this is probably a common feature among most cultures, it is notable that there is a special term devoted to this purpose. Moreover, the word suggests indirectly that this wide place is not attached to a place of residence but one must go out and seek it.

Mohamed Ali could be examined from the perspective of *Fos'ha*. It is a perfect urban manifestation of this idea. It fulfills the two criteria which make a space suitable for a *Fos'ha*: (1) presence of open, wide areas and (2) removal from any residential use. Therefore, it is a suitable space for an outing (Fig. 4). Its success could thus be directly attributed to the extent to which it accommodates a highly specific cultural concept of the Egyptian people.

(2) Outdoor Event Celebrations: Two events are typically celebrated outdoors: weddings/engagements and the feast ceremonies. The former is increasingly being performed in indoor spaces whereas the latter is synonymous with going out and engaging in some outdoor activity. Mohamed Ali street accommodates both thus adding another measure to its success.

In the case of *ketb el'kitab* ceremonies they are ordinarily preceded by a processional walk accompanied by music and dancers, as well as relatives who gather around the bride and groom. Commonly, this walk would occur in the street leading to the apartment, house or tent where the formal wedding ceremonies are performed. It is also worthy of note that this is typically associated with poorer areas. Middle and upper-middle class segments of society perform all of these events indoors in hotels. Increasingly, the occurrence of an outdoor processional walk is diminishing in traditional areas due to various societal changes such as the desire in emulating the "rich" and also the unsuitability of the street as a space for such activities (e.g. the crowded and unsanitary conditions in many traditional areas precludes the performance of such important events).



Fig. 4. A group of elderly sitting on the street ledge.



Fig. 5. Wedding celebrations.

In *Mohamed Ali* street celebration of outdoor *ketb kitab* ceremonies was frequently observed by the researcher. Through its location, physical structure, and the presence of a major mosque where such events could be formally performed, it is conducive to this type of activity. The central location of the space accounts for its visibility and perception as an important gathering place, a setting that is known by everyone. Frequently, respondents would tell the researcher that it is used as a meeting place for neighborhood residents, which explains the occurrence of weddings and engagements. The physical structure manifested in the ledges which people use to sit on, the presence of zones allowing for a spatial separation between participants in the ceremonies and the rest of the users, and the gates which convey an image of a protected space shielded from any outside interference, all are supportive of the *ketb kitab* ceremony (Fig. 5).

In summary, an event that is increasingly diminishing in traditional Cairo is transformed to *Mohamed Ali* street. People are taking advantage of its unique physical characteristics and use it as a way to revive a deep-rooted tradition, an important component of their life-style, or their culture. In that way a continuity is established between "tradition" and "history" while at the same time recognizing societal change.

The second important event which caters to a larger segment than the previous one, and which occurs in many other parts of Cairo as well, is the celebration of the feast or *eid*, which is done on two occasions: one following the fasting month of *Ramadan*, also known as the "small feast" (*eid sughayer*) and the other during the pilgrimage in Mecca, the "big feast" (*eid kebir*). *Mohamed Ali* on both occasions was filled with an immense number of people no doubt

encouraged by the rides bordering Salah el'din square located immediately next to the southern entrance, in addition to the park-like atmosphere in the street itself (Fig. 6). Similar to the discussion on the ketb kitab ceremony, the eid celebrations — one of the unique characteristics of the traditional Cairene sub-culture — are performed in Mohamed Ali street, thus showing the extent to which it fits with peoples life style by providing an alternative setting where such activities could be performed.

(3) The Qahwa factor: a changing tradition: In a recent book about global cultures a “cultural metaphor” approach was used in trying to understand the essence of 17 cultures. “Cultural metaphor” refers to “some phenomenon or activity of a nations culture that all or most of its members consider to be very important and with which they identify closely.”⁴

In the case of Turkey, the coffeehouse was used as a setting in which one could find the essence of Turkish culture. In a similar manner one could argue that in Cairo, the coffeehouse or *qahwa* plays a similar role, particularly in low-income neighborhoods. For many it is not simply a place to drink coffee, tea, etc. but a meeting place, to socialize with others, a place where news are communicated and fights are carried out. Such places could be found in all cultures although the setting in which they occur might differ. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg classified these as “third places” the first and second being the home and work “place.”⁵

In Cairo the qahwa used to be the primary meeting and gathering place, next to the mosque, for its male residents. Recently, however, changes took place whereby the mosque for example could not be considered as a community meeting place (aside from its strictly religious functions) and many people are shunning the qahwa for a number of reasons such as economics, the increasingly negative connotations derived from being in a qahwa (among Cairenes the expression “sitting on a qahwa” is synonymous with having nothing to do and wasting one’s time), and the simple desire to be away from others.

Mohamed Ali street has replaced the traditional qahwa for those who do not wish to use it for all the above reasons. This has been expressed to the researcher by many informants and respondents. Many noted that the street is much better than the *qahwa* since it is for free, they are not forced to partake in any interaction, and it is not as noisy. One informant told the researcher that many people who used to sit on the qahwa are not doing so anymore and have in fact substituted it for the street. The most frequently mentioned reason for not using the *qahwa* and sitting in *Mohamed Ali* street is that they are left alone and are not bothered by anyone. In other words they are still able to partake in the social life surrounding them, but from a safe distance, without being forced to participate (Fig. 7). While it would be an exaggeration to argue that the qahwa has disappeared, for some people *Mohamed Ali* street has become a reasonable alternative for a meeting and gathering place that accommodates the changes in their lives — a “third place.”

(4) The Role of Women; changing gender relationships: Traditional Arab-Islamic societies were characterized by gender segregation, i.e. public places were reserved for male use whereas women were restricted to the home. Recognizing that such practices are not based on religious principles but inherited traditions, Islam societies underwent many changes and the liberation of women was one outcome of these. Particularly in Egypt women participate fully in public life. In the same vein gender relationships underwent many changes. Whereas in the past it was unthinkable for an unmarried couple to appear in public this has not become an unusual sight, at least in Cairo.

Mohamed Ali street reflects these changes as it has become a place for both men and women. It is not a domain exclusively reserved for men, as the *qahwa* for example, but both genders are represented among street users. While the numbers suggest a majority of males, the study discovered that for adults both men and women are almost equally represented. In addition the spatial structure of the street allows for certain sections to be occupied



Fig. 6. Feast celebrations



Fig. 7. The Street as a Gathering Place for the Elderly

exclusively by women, families, and couples without feeling that they are being observed or watched. It has also become an acceptable setting where couples could meet since they are in the middle of a public place occupied by many users, thus they are not looked at as trying to hide. In this way persisting cultural and religious sensibilities are respected and honored.

Thus, the full participation of women in public life has found a

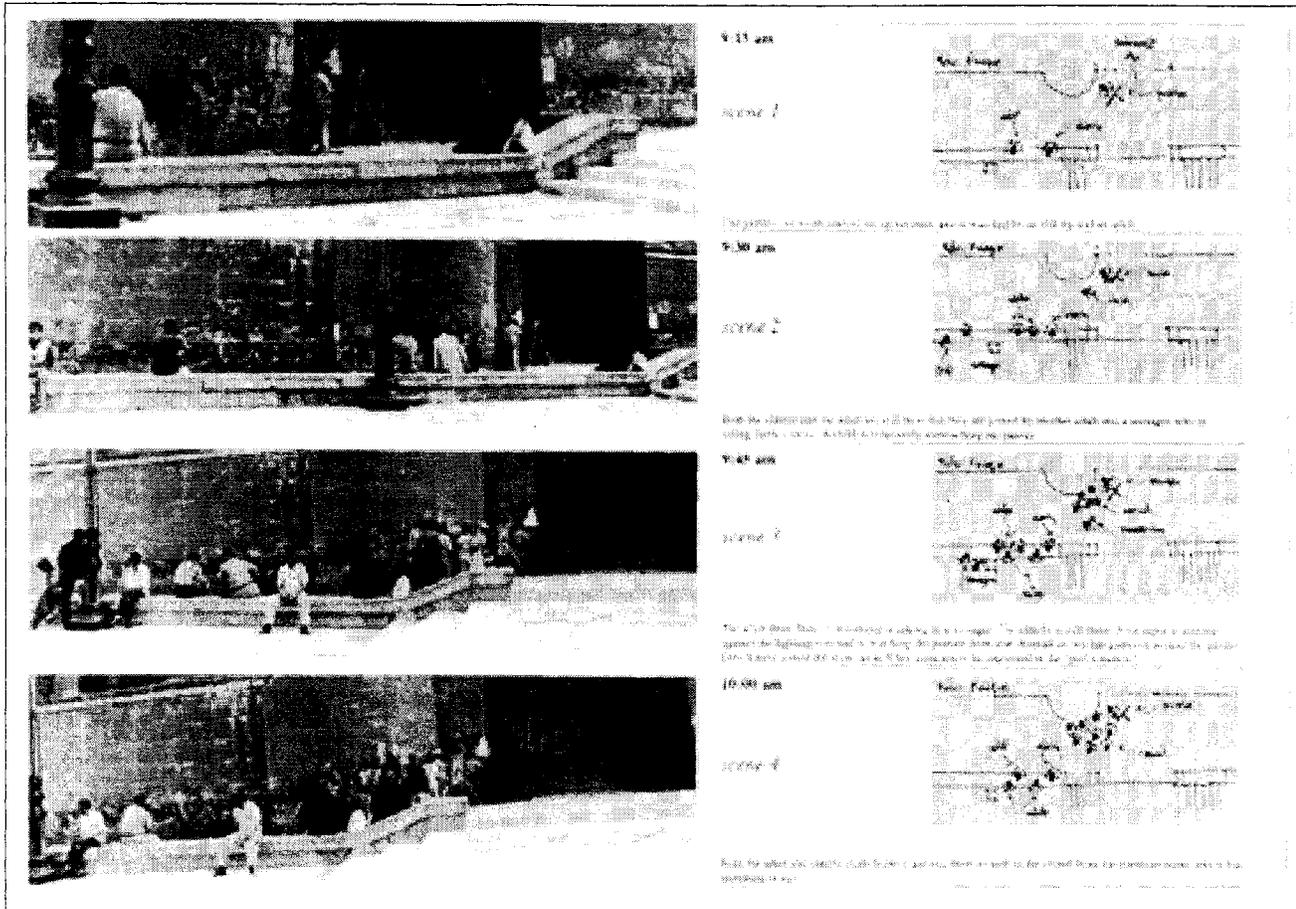


Fig. 8. Watching a painter.

symbolic expression in *Mohamed Ali* street by providing a setting in which both genders could interact while at the same time allowing for cultural sensibilities to be respected.

(5) *Performing and watching: the theatrical component:* Alexander and his colleagues in *The Pattern Language*, a large compendium about recommended “design patterns,” propose the following pattern: “Each subculture needs a center for its public life: a place where you can go to see people, and to be seen. Moreover, “these places have always been like street theaters” since they “invite people to watch others, to stroll and browse, and to loiter.” Both the universal presence of such spaces, particularly among Latin countries, and the theatrical — or performance related — aspect of behavior found there, has been confirmed by a number of authors such as Pitkin who explored the phenomena of the Italian *passaggiata*⁷ — the evening stroll ritual; Robertson’s study of plazas in Mexico⁸ and Richardson’s ethnography of plaza behavior in Cartago, Costa Rica⁹ still showing traces of the *paseo* ritual — the courting of females by males under the supervision of adults sitting in the plaza. However, this is not restricted to Latin countries. Wherever one encounters a public space that is well designed and placed in the “right” location one can find similar behavior. For example the work of Whyte in New York,¹⁰ Gehl in Denmark,¹¹ or Lerup in Stockholm, Sweden,¹² all show that one of the primary activities in any successful public space is simply watching the “performance” of others.

Thus while the concept itself has almost global dimensions, it is how this activity is carried out, where it is done, and how it is done, that imbues it with a unique characteristic making it an integral component of individual subcultures, as will be seen in the case of *Mohamed Ali* street.

The separation of actors and spectators is achieved since the

street is wide enough to allow for people to distance themselves from each other and watch what is going on without appearing to be too intrusive. The ledges act as excellent seating, and the performance tends to occur in the middle of the street. Sometimes, as is the case in modern theater the spectators are immersed in the middle of the play and actually could become part of the play itself. Thus the role of actor and spectator become interchangeable. However, no one is forced to participate. It is interesting to note though that the external events which are being watched do provide an incentive for people to talk as they provide a context, an excuse, for the start of a conversation (Fig. 8).

The success of this pedestrian space is thus dependent upon the extent to which it caters to an important cultural component among Cairo’s residents, namely the desire to watch and to be seen, which is one of the critical ingredients in any public space design.

In all of these instances mentioned above change is an important element, whether it is in the changed physical setting in which an old tradition is performed or a changed tradition which found its expression in *Mohamed Ali* street. The final question to which this study now turns relates to the lessons that could be learned from such observations. Are there larger issues involved, and does the study have any global dimension that could be of use to other Islamic cities and developing countries in general?

CONCLUSION

Are we not once again being asked to inspect the Oriental Muslim as if his world, unlike ours — differently from it — had never ventured beyond the seventh century?

— Edward Said (1978), *Orientalism*

The study started out with a simple observation: the heavy use of an urban space in Cairo. It thus set out to discover the reasons that led to this apparent success. In the process the researcher discovered that the extent to which the street — through its physical structure — responded to changing cultural traditions played a major part in peoples response. Rather than providing stereotypical “Islamic” and “Arabic” design patterns the architect opted for a more subtle and indirect approach, inspired in part by European urban patterns (street use in Italian cities), which caters primarily to peoples needs and desires, thus responding to changing needs as well as deeply rooted cultural traditions

This suggests a larger point: it could be argued that the propagation of architectural/urban stereotypes is a mere continuation of an orientalist mentality which deems residents in developing countries incapable of change. They are thus left with two choices: either stick with the past in all its forms or abandon it altogether (thereby implicitly suggesting that the only way to progress is through the adoption of western forms and lifestyles).

Such views are echoed by a number of authors such as Edward Said who effectively argued in *Orientalism* that the reduction of cultures to a few easily readable symbols has resulted not only in the creation of durable stereotypes but contributed to Western hegemony over Islamic countries through the construction of cultures.¹³ Cultures, are however hybrid and heterogeneous, a point also made by the same author in *Culture and Imperialism* namely that cultures are so interdependent as to beggar any unitary or simply delineated description of their individuality.¹⁴

Implicit is the belief among some of those studying Islamic societies that their inhabitants are incapable of change, condemned to remain with their “rigid” traditions or abandon them altogether and adopt the western life-style. However, a strong argument could be made that urban residents in developing countries share many aspects of their lives with counterparts throughout all great cities in the world.

This study hopes to show that residents in Cairo, an Islamic capital in a developing country, do in fact follow this path. And while there are some aspects of their culture which are unique, others have a more or less universal appeal as well. Researchers and practitioners need to abandon the orientalist mentality and should re-examine the notion of tradition and change, and the relationship between culture and history, in light of the changes which occur in their societies. Only in this way will they be able to resolve the paradox and join the universal civilization.

NOTES

- ¹ From an interviews conducted with architect Nabil Abdel’ Samiea in his office at the EAO (Egyptian Antiquities Organization) in Cairo (May, 1995).
- ² For a detailed account including statistics, interviews, photographs etc. see Y. Elsheshtawy, *Tradition, Change and Street Encounters, the case of two pedestrian streets in Cairo, Egypt* (Milwaukee: University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Unpublished Dissertation, 1996).
- ³ A. Rapoport, On the Attributes of Tradition, in J. Bourdier & N. Alsayyad (eds.), *Dwellings, Settlements and Traditions: Cross-cultural Perspectives* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1989), pp. 77-105.
- ⁴ M. Gannon, *Understanding Global Cultures: Metaphorical Journeys through 17 Countries* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 1994), p. 7.
- ⁵ R. Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).
- ⁶ C. Alexander, S. Ishikawa, M. Silverstein, M. Jacobson, I. Fiksdahi-King, S. Angel, *A Pattern Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
- ⁷ D. Pitkin, Italian Urbanscape: Intersection of Private and Public, in R. Rothenberg & G. McDonough (eds.), *The Cultural Meaning of Urban Space* (Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Carvey, 1993), pp. 95-102.
- ⁸ D. Robertson, *A Behavioral Portrait of the Mexican Plaza Principal* (Syracuse University, Department of Geography, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, 1978).
- ⁹ M. Richardson, “Being-in-the-market versus Being-in-the-plaza: Material Culture and the Construction of Social Reality in Spanish America,” *American Ethnologist* 9 (May, 1982), pp. 421-436.
- ¹⁰ W. H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces* (Washington, DC: The Conservation Foundation, 1980).
- ¹¹ J. Gehl, *Life between Buildings* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1987).
- ¹² L. Lerup, “Environmental and Behavioral Congruence as a Measure of Goodness in Public Space: the case of Stockholm,” *Ekistics* 84:204 (1978), pp. 341-358.
- ¹³ E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
- ¹⁴ E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).