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## Challenges of Social Sustainability in Neo-liberal Cairo: Re-questioning the role of public space

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### Abstract

Public space has been always regarded as a reflection of the social status of the community. Based on this assumption, the challenge for achieving a ‘socially sustainable’ community in neo-liberal Cairo is in need to be re-questioned in relation to the role of public spaces. This is relevant in the shadows of the socio-political transformations of post-revolutionary Cairene society. Accordingly, the paper explores the role of public-space in maintaining the social sustenance in the extreme ends of Cairo’s social structure, first: the gated communities taking ‘Beverly Hills’ as a prototype, and second the informal areas taking ‘Al-Zahraa’ district a prototype.

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### 1. Introduction

Public space has been always regarded as a reflection of the social status of the community. It is the ‘place’ for social encounter and interaction, while at the same time the mirror which reflects the problems and challenges of its users. Based on this assumption, the challenge for achieving a ‘socially sustainable’ community in neoliberal Cairo; whose social capital is highly affected by the neoliberal market imperatives, is strategically in need to be re-questioned in relation to the role of public spaces. This is especially relevant in the shadows of the socio-political transformations taking place in the highly

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complicated and diverse postrevolutionary Cairene society. Thus, the paper explores the role of public-space in maintaining social sustenance in the two extreme ends of Cairo's social structure, first: the gated communities at the desert plateaus surrounding Cairo, and second the informal areas, which represent the individual solutions by a great mass of Egyptian residents as a result of the deteriorated governmental actions during the past decades.

## **2. Methodology**

The methodology adopted will be based primarily on literature review of the related concepts of social sustainability and the relevant meaning of a sustainable community to the Cairene context. Then the development of public spaces in Cairo from a socio-political perspective will be presented and its relation to the community structure up till the 25<sup>th</sup> of January revolution. Finally, a field survey will be implemented on the selected cases; Beverly Hills as a prototype of gated communities and Al-Zahraa, as an example of an informal housing district. This study will help in understanding the nature of social sustainability according to each of the selected localities, as well as shedding light on the challenges associated with the perception of the role of public spaces in both venues which will add another layer of understanding the socio-cultural role of public spaces in postrevolutionary Cairo.

## **3. Defining 'Social Sustainability' and 'Sustainable Communities' with Relevance to the Cairene Case**

In order to be able to analyze the role of public spaces in maintaining social sustainability in Cairo, we first need to unveil what is meant by 'social sustainability', most importantly as applied on the Cairene case. Accordingly, this part will explore the literature review of the definitions of 'social sustainability' and the 'sustainable community', followed by the interpreted measures relevant to the Cairene case to be used in the case studies analysis.

However, it is first important to explain the inter-relation between public space and the social sustenance of a specific community. As Harvey (1996) presents, places are constructed and experienced as material ecological artefacts and intricate networks of social relations. They are the focus of the imaginary, of beliefs, longings and desires. In addition to this, Knox (2011) argues that the sense of place is always socially constructed, and a fundamental element in the social construction of place is the existential imperative for people to define themselves in relation to material world. People generate meanings about objects, buildings and spaces through routinized behaviours and practices. Often this carries over into a collective and self-conscious 'structure of feeling', including the 'affective' dimension of feeling, emotions and moods evoked as a result of the experiences and memories that people associate with a particular place.

Knox (2011) further implies that particular urban spaces are created by specific sets of people, and they draw their distinctive character from the people that inhabit them. As social groups occupy urban spaces, they gradually impose themselves on their environment, modifying and adjusting it, as best they can, to suit their needs and express their values. Yet at the same time people themselves gradually accommodate both of their physical environment and to the people around them. Urban spaces, in the language of social theory, are both structured and structuring. As neighbourhoods and communities are created, maintained and modified, the values, attitudes and behaviour of their inhabitants meanwhile cannot help but be influenced by their surroundings and by the values, attitudes and behaviour of the people around them. (Knox, 2011).

This social construct of space is relevant to the activities, both cultural and economic, that are created by the people in their search for a real sense of place. Activities that might be looked at as 'informal',

'looting' and 'inadequate' can be in fact what maintain the social capital and sustenance of a certain space within a district. Thus, it is extremely important for designers and planners to understand the social construct of the community before judging the tools and means of creating social sustainability.

The definitions of social sustainability have been widely discussed among theorists and planners. This part will provide a review of some of the most important definitions which will draw a clear understanding of the term. According to Chan and Lee (2008), social sustainability refers to maintenance and improvement of well-being of current and future generations (Chiu, 2003). A project is said to be socially sustainable when it creates harmonious living environment, reduces social inequality and cleavages, and improves quality of life in general.

Colantino et al (2009) define social sustainability as how individuals, communities and societies live with each other and set out to achieve the objectives of development models which they have chosen for themselves, also taking into account the physical boundaries of their places. Social sustainability blends traditional social policy areas and principles, such as equity, with emerging issues concerning participation, needs, social capital, the economy, the environment, and more recently, with the notions of happiness, well being and quality of life. As to Sachs (1999: 27) a strong definition of social sustainability must rest on the basic values of equity and democracy, the latter meant as the effective appropriation of all human rights – political, civil, economic, social and cultural – by all people.

Biart (2002:6) proposes that sustainability aims to determine the minimal social requirements for long-term development (sometimes called critical social capital) and to identify the challenges to the very functioning of society in the long run. While Polese and Stren (2000: 15-16) present the term as development (and/or growth) that is compatible with harmonious evolution of civil society, fostering an environment conducive to the compatible cohabitation of culturally and socially diverse groups while at the same time encouraging social integration, with improvements in the quality of life for all segments of the population.

Chiu (2003) identifies three main approaches to the interpretation of social sustainability. The first interpretation equates social sustainability to environmental sustainability. As a result, the social sustainability of an activity depends upon specific social relations, customs, structure and value, representing the social limits and constraints of development. The second interpretation, which she labels 'environment-oriented', refers to the social preconditions required to achieve environmental sustainability. According to this interpretation, social structure, values and norms can be changed in order to carry out human activities within the physical limits of the planet. Lastly, the third 'people-oriented', interpretation refers to improving the well-being of people and the equitable distribution of resources whilst reducing social exclusions and destructive conflict.

More importantly, exploring the dimensions determining social sustainability in a certain community will aid in the field of this paper. Tsenkova (2009) argues that a sustainable community is one of shared interests such as personal affiliations and cultural heritage, and one of locality or place, which is the residential area where people live. First, 'community' is a social term. It means a network of people with common interests and expectations of mutual recognition, support and friendship. Moreover, it is an aggregate of characteristics including among others economic security and growth, environmental quality and integrity, social cohesion and quality of life, empowerment and governance.

As to Dempsey (2008), 'sustainable communities' are, described in relatively abstract terms: providing a 'safe and healthy environment with well-designed public and green space' with a 'sense of place'. In a more comprehensive approach, Ageyman (2005) presents that a 'Sustainable Community' is one which combines the three dimensions of the environment, the social needs and the economy. This is achieved according to Ageyman (2005) as follows;

### 3.1. *Protection and enhancement of the environment:*

- Use energy, water and other natural resources efficiently and with care.
- Minimize waste, then re-use or recover it through recycling, composting, or energy recovery.
- Limit pollution.
- Value the diversity of nature.

### 3.2. *Meeting social needs:*

- Create or enhance places, spaces, and buildings that work well.
- Make settlements 'human' in scale.
- Value and protect diversity and local distinctiveness and strengthen local community and cultural identity.
- Protect human health and amenity.
- Meet local needs locally whenever possible.
- Empower all sections of the community to participate in decision-making and consider the social and community impacts of decisions.

### 3.3. *Promoting economic success:*

- Create a vibrant local economy.
- Value unpaid work.
- Encourage necessary access to facilities in ways which make less use of the car.
- Make opportunities for culture and recreation available to all.

Based on the above review, it can be deduced that there are five main doctrines which are relevant to the Cairene society that guide the evaluation of a local community whether to be socially sustainable or not. These five doctrines are the social capital, the environment, economy, political influences, and finally place-making. The related notions to each of the five doctrines are presented in the table below, see table 1. Certainly, the relevant weight of each doctrine varies from one specific community to the other, thus, it is not possible to transform these measures into a quantitative approach.

Table 1. Main Five Doctrines Guiding Socially Sustainable Communities

Doctrine	Extracted Measures from Literature
Social Capital	Social Participation, Shared interests, Social cohesion, Common experiences and bonds
Environment	Environmental Quality, Safe and healthy environment, Protect human health, Protection of environment
Economy	Economic security and growth, Meeting local needs locally, Creating local vibrant economy
Policy	Empowerment and Governance, Participation in decision making, Democracy, Accountability
Place-making	Sense of place, Well designed public space, Enhance place and space

These five aspects can be used as will be presented in the case studies to provide the points of strength and weakness in each local community, and provide guidelines for the deficiencies if found in a certain broad issue which can be used to enhance social sustenance. For instance, in informal sectors of Cairo, we can find very poor environmental conditions, yet, on the other side, strong social capital and local economy. On the contrary, in elite housing communities, we can find much emphasis on the environmental conditions and on the design of public spaces, yet devoid of liveability and social cohesion. Thus, the next part will provide a brief about the development of public spaces in Cairo as a reflection to the economic and political status up till neoliberal Cairo and the 25<sup>th</sup> of January revolution to understand the current situation of social sustenance which will be further explored in the case studies.

#### **4. The Development of Public-Space in Cairo and its Socio-political Implications on the Social Structure**

The point of transformation for the Cairene public spaces from the traditional Islamic city fabric was the end of the nineteenth century, when Khedive Ismail conceived of a new city center for Cairo. He dreamt of a Haussmanian Paris of boulevards uniting public squares and apartment blocks. Thus, the traditional city based on trade '*saha*'s and religious gathering spaces related to the mosque and madrasa were altered into the westernized model in the new downtown which was associated to colonialism.

After the 1952 revolution, the new spaces produced reflected the nationalist aspirations of the government. The Nile Corniche was one fine example of a space produced by the government as a showcase of national pride. Of course, these spaces became prime properties for development, which marked the new postcolonial city. The rebuilding, in 1957, of the famous Shepheard Hotel along the new Corniche, after it was burnt during the Black Saturday riots that preceded the 1952 Revolution, symbolized the passing of colonialism and Orientalism and the emergence of postcolonial time and spaces (Adham, 2004).

However, Adham (2004) argues that the postcolonial spaces that most notably came to affect the city in the aftermath of the Revolution were those reflecting the government's ideological ambitions at the northern and southern edges of the metropolis. The revolutionary officers came with loose ideas about how to reverse the feudal order of the former monarchy and the imperial order of the Western powers. Their ambitions included, among other things, modernizing the country and abolishing the class differences. At that time, modernizing the country was seen as synonymous to industrializing it so that Egypt could equal the West on its own terms. The establishment of these industries and their corollaries of massive housing projects for the newly-arrived migrants who constituted most of the labour transformed the landscape of Cairo to a great extent (Adham, 2004).

Following that, Sadaat's open-door policies, '*Infitah*', were the initialization point of neo-liberal market imperatives that transformed the typology and forms of public spaces within Cairo. The introduction of capitalism, the inflation and the westernized model adopted afterwards by Mubarak's regime initiated the commodification, privatization and social-segregation within the city's public space as will be exposed.

Cairo became a city which is torn into two halves, the 1st is embodied by the rise of inner-city slums, and all types of informal housing has been further increased by the effect of economic reform plans on the local currency. Since the days of '*infitah*', the Egyptian pound has been constantly devalued, so that the actual wage of paid labours and governmental employees has fallen sharply. This as Adham (2005) explains has brought a significant decline in the average family's purchasing power, which has had an indirect impact on housing markets. The lack of adequate, affordable housing has also forced many young families to seek alternative living space: in graveyards, garages, riverboats, staircase vaults, rooms inside the apartments of relatives, and rooftop shacks (Adham, 2005).

Such dismal living conditions, caused by a combination of natural population growth, rural migration, and the government's inability to provide new lands for low-income housing or programs to build it, has also degraded environmental conditions in the city. Besides the visual cacophony of deteriorating buildings and clashing architectural styles, colours and heights, the city is becoming increasingly polluted. Noise levels have risen, streets are littered with refuse, and blackish smoke hangs over a city that is subject to never-ending traffic jams (Adham, 2005).

The second half as exposed by Denis (2006) was the new developments on the desert plateaus bordering the city and suburbs of Cairo, to the east and to the west. Dozens of luxury gated communities, accompanied by golf courses, amusement parks, clinics, private university schools have burgeoned along the beltways like their siblings, the shopping malls. This new dimension of Cairo is marked by a flight of the urban elites made more visible by the de-densification of the urban centre. This radical reformulation of the metropolitan landscape which its promoters invite us to view as an urban renaissance or '*nahda umraniya*', is completely in tune with the parameters of economic liberalization.

Despite their apparently diverse appearance, from an urban point of view there are important similarities between these emerging spaces of consumption. Whether a mall, a gated community, a theme park, or some other development type, they all provide a carefully controlled environment that is physically, economically and socially isolated from surrounding areas. They also benefit from the deterioration of the surrounding public environment through the establishment of a simulated alternative ideal. Finally, they enforce codes of behaviour to uphold the utopian imagery which gives them their economic and symbolic value, see Fig. 1. For example, to establish such forms of symbolic capital, gated communities deploy various marketing strategies aimed at displaying the luxurious lifestyles that are possible there (Adham, 2005).



Fig. 1. (a) View from an apartment at Dreamland in 6<sup>th</sup> of October; (b) Luxurious gated compounds at the periphery's of Cairo

(Source: Dreamland website, 2012)

During the last decade of Mubarak's ruling era, from the start of the new millennium up till the initiation of the 25<sup>th</sup> of January revolution, the social and economic status in Egypt deteriorated to an unprecedented extent in modern times. The gap between the two ends of the community widened, approximately demolishing or minimizing what is called the 'middle income class'. Corruption was clear in a great sum of state-led mega projects, and wealth was distributed among the ruling party '*Al-Hizb Al-Watany*' and anyone close to Mubarak's family. The deteriorated health, educational, economic and political conditions led to frustration among the remains of the middle income class, which was struggling to maintain its social and economic position, while at the same time was fearing the injustice subjected to the less income classes would turn into a revolution of the hungers or '*thawret al geyaa*'. Accordingly, the revolution started, and the target was first and foremost the reclaim of the public space and the calls for freedom, social justice and the right to a dignified life.

Those stated motives were justified in the 'occupation' of one of the most strategic squares in Cairo, Al-Tahrir Square, for which every party was aiming to declare its right for being. The angry crowds did not mind the violence of the regime, and succeeded to a great extent during the 18 days to transform the re-claimed public space into a real socially sustainable public space of encounter. This was relevant according to the five previously discussed doctrines through the establishment of a strong social capital where shared interests were the base and social cohesion between the poor and the middle income classes strongly appeared. The environmental aspects were apparent in the urge of all people to maintain the well-being and cleanliness of the square even amid the battles. The economy played an important role in presenting the ability of the people to self-sustain their beings through local economy where the neo-liberal and globalizing effects had minimal influences. As to the policy and governance, the different political ideologies were all unified to face the corrupted regime; accordingly, acceptance and empowerment were present among all parties no matter how diverse they are. Finally, as to place-making, the activities, the memorials and the social and artistic events taking place, all developed a strong image of the square or '*al midan*' which became the symbol of the Egyptian revolution worldwide, see Fig. 2.



Fig. 2. Tahrir Square during the early days of the revolution witnessing the gathering of hundreds of thousands of Egyptians

(Source: Al-Ahram Newspaper, 2011)

Unfortunately, the utopian atmosphere of the perfect socially sustainable society never lasted, yet, dissolved amid the rapid political transformations that affected the essence of the square and all the public spaces in Cairo. Those transformations reflected the diversity of thoughts and the urge for power by the different parties, even those who were not part of the revolution. The effect of the successive events cannot be discussed in details in this paper, but at the time of writing, contradictions became a trait of the Egyptian character, and this is highly reflected on the public spaces and the activities occurring within, which in occasions are highly appreciated and in others totally rejected.

## **5. Analysis of The Role of Public-Space in Maintaining Social Sustenance in Neo-liberal Cairo:**

### *5.1. Beverly Hills: The public spaces of gated communities:*

Beverly Hills was one of the first large scale residential compounds to be developed in Sheikh Zayed City, off the Cairo-Alexandria Desert Road. Beverly Hills represents a prototype of new housing communities which developed at the outskirts of Cairo, following the neo-liberal paradigm during Mubarak's era. The compound aims to provide its residents with a utopian, fancy image, just as it shows from its name "Beverly Hills". Thus, it can be reflected upon when analyzing the social sustainability of high income neighborhoods, as affected by the new lifestyle of a wide spectrum of the changing Egyptian community.

The social capital in Beverly Hills is based on two groups of users, the residents of the apartments and villas, who belong to the high middle or upper income classes, and escaped from the city centers due to deterioration in infrastructure and services, on the other side are the workers who occupy the serving jobs, for instance the security guards, who either come from other countries to work and temporarily live or residents of far districts who take the daily trip form and to the compound. The problem associated with this type of social cohesion among the residents who all belong to the same class, while at the same time social segregation of all other classes of the society is that the younger generations will never see the 'other' except as a serving person, not as an ordinary person walking in the street. This kind of problems

will increase not decrease the social injustice which the revolution was standing against, with new generations who never walked in the streets of downtown, see Fig. 3.



Fig. 3. The paradox between the user's of the public space in Beverly Hills, either elite residents or guards (Source: Author, 2012).

As to the environmental aspects, there is a clear difference between the environmental quality between the new district and downtown, regarding the pollution of air and solid wastes. However, there are no actual attempts towards building a green, eco-friendly environment in terms of reducing CO<sub>2</sub> transitions, reducing the use of water and fuel. Besides taking into consideration the fact that the residents work at distant places and the strong dependency on the individual private car leaves the whole environmental issue debatable.

The economic capital at Beverly Hills is partially local and mostly depending on megastores and malls present at the 6<sup>th</sup> of October city. The presence of locally driven shops and markets are used by the residents at a very limited scale. This is due to the increased price of the goods, which in turn are due to the long distances and the deficiency of stores and markets. However, the presence of outing places, such as the clubhouse, the coffee shops and the restaurants, although still limited but started to provide some sort of 'third places' in which the residents began to enjoy nightlife and social interaction within the compound, see Fig. 4.



Fig. 4. (a)The local market; (b) Clubhouse at Beverly Hills with limited users  
(Source: Author, 2012)

As to the politics of public space in the compound, this aspect appeared to be very weak in the course of the study. The public spaces are used for leisure and as aesthetic places, but no calls were arranged even during the time of the revolution due the sole role of the district which is the residence. However, the field survey revealed a strong role for the central mosque during the time of the elections in supporting the Islamic political parties, yet, this was done through sub-activities, such as the web social interaction sites.

Finally, the issue of place-making is very controversial in Beverly Hills like the other gated communities in Cairo. The public spaces are well designed and maintained, due to the efforts of the owning company who initiated a policy of obligatory maintenance fees. However, the spaces host very few activities, which are to some extent individual as presented by the residents. The activities range from jogging, dogs' walk, playing of children, but in the absence of strong economic or cultural forces, these activities are very limited, see Fig. 5. Recently, efforts are exerted by the owning company to host sports events and cultural and religious activities to increase the sense of place and thus the sense of belonging to the compound.



Fig. 5. (a) Uses of open spaces at Beverly Hills;. (b) Well maintained open space yet without place-making  
(Source: Author, 2012)

### 5.2. Al-Zahraa: The public space in the 'informal'

Al-Zahraa district in old Cairo '*Misr Al-Qadima*', is a prototype of an informal district which emerged on the hilltop contours beside the ring-road surrounding Cairo see Fig. 6. The district was built by the self-finance of the people, with no planning or interference from the government. Accordingly, the district suffers from deteriorated conditions and no infra-structure. However, several NGOs started utilizing the strong social bonds there, especially among women to help improve the economic, health and educational conditions there.

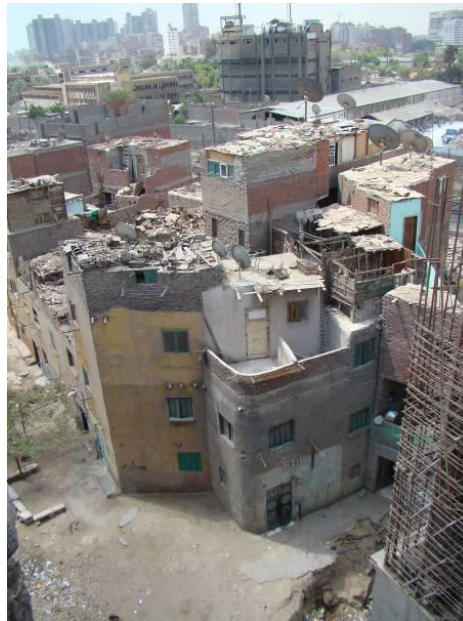


Fig. 6. Al-Zahraa informal housing district  
(Source: Author, 2012)

The social capital is mainly constructed from low-income groups and temporary workers; although there are still groups who ideologically belong to the middle income groups, for instance teachers and engineers, however, suffer from high living expenses. The social bonds are definitely strong among the residents when facing 'outcomers', although there are sub-groups and lobbying among the residents themselves when inner problems occur. Accordingly, social cohesion is apparent due to the shared beliefs and circumstances of the people.

The environmental conditions appear extremely deteriorated with the lack of proper infra-structure. This affected the health of the whole district's residents, see Fig. 7. In addition to this, solid wastes provide a strong source of pollution with the absence of a system of garbage recycling. In addition to this, the presence of marble workshops among the residential blocks adds more to the poor environmental conditions of the district.



Fig. 7. Spread of garbage all over the district  
(Source: Author, 2012)

The economic base of the whole district is weak, depending on temporary works and to a great sum of the families the woman is the household financier. However, the open spaces provide an excellent accommodator to locally based economic activities, for instance the market, the exhibitions of the workshops, the coffee shops, all utilize any left-over space to accommodate any activity no matter how small, see Fig.8.



Fig. 8. (a) Local temporary market held in the public space. (b) The street used as an extension for shops and cafes  
(Source: Author, 2012)

Due to the difficult living conditions, most of the residents are not interested in the political transformations that occurred recently. Although the revolution called for the right of those people for social justice, they mostly blame their poor conditions to the revolution and always urge for stability ‘*isikrar*’, that they believe would improve their living conditions. Accordingly, the public spaces are used

mostly for political reasons only during the times of the elections, by the parties who succeed to convince the people that they will improve their physical conditions, even if through direct bribe.

Finally, the place-making is achieved even if not planned, through the accommodation of all sorts of activities within all levels of public space. This is relevant from the small alley, to the left over space, which can be used for a wedding ceremony, a temporary market or for a meeting place for the female neighbors, see Fig. 9. Although not designed and not aesthetically maintained, yet, still preserves its livability through its user's continuous activities.

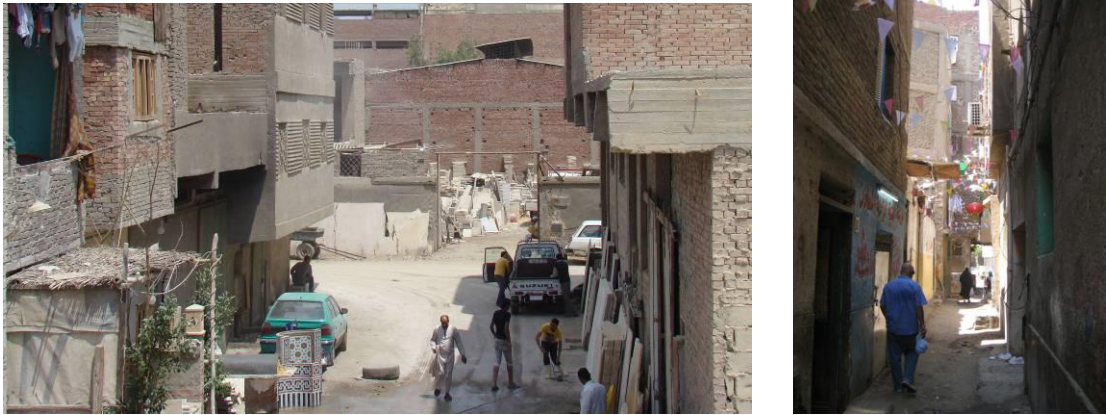


Fig. 9. (a) Public space used as exhibition space. (b) The street used for celebrations  
(Source: Author, 2012)

## 6. Discussion

The analysis revealed the controversial lives of an example of the two extreme ends of Cairo's today social structure. The public space in the first case is used as a marketing tool, for the residents who have the right to move out of the crowded downtown and enjoy better living conditions. However, the issue of livability is hardly achieved, with the lack of real economic and cultural bases that stem out of the diversity of the community. Thus, a community in which the private home accommodates all possible leisure facilities and the outer spaces provide no new experiences turns into an introvert community that is closed although promised by more openness and freedom by the promoters of the new communities.

On the other side, the 'other' end of the society which is currently being blamed for the lack of security, are the ones who actually fear the actions of the elite and educated. They rarely blame Mubarak's regime for their poor state, but always find ways to dwell and facilitate their conditions as much as they can afford. And since 'space' is all they have, they use it to its maximum capacity and through time, they acquire the ability to add new experiences and plan for the best that accommodates their needs to the contrary of what most architects and planners believe.

## 7. Conclusion

The paper explored the role of public spaces in achieving the social sustainability of a certain community through five main doctrines extracted from the literature which are believed to be relevant to the Cairene case; the social capital, environmental conditions, economy, policy, and place making. As presented in the case study analysis, the public spaces of Beverly Hills were used occasionally due to the

lack of diversity in the social capital, the lack of economic and political activities, in spite of the good environmental and physical conditions of the spaces. On the contrary, the deteriorated environmental and physical conditions of the public spaces at Al-Zahraa did not stand against the achievement of livable economic and social places of encounter. Accordingly, the creation of public spaces are mostly the creation of the actual lively experiences, in which people share and even disagree, which is the dilemma of public spaces in neoliberal Cairo.

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