Politics and Discourse: the Making of Low-income Housing in Egypt

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This paper constitutes a part of my PhD research which I conducted during the last three years at the Department of City and Regional Planning, Cardiff University in Wales. In relation to Urbanisation and Global Environmental Change, this paper takes note of the two-way relationship between urban areas and the environment and how each impacts upon the other in the case of Egypt. Yet, it specifically addresses the complex societal process which shapes urban areas and, hence, decides the nature and the outcome of the bilateral relationship between urban areas and the environment. An improvement in this bilateral relationship is tied up with an understanding of this complex societal process. The paper is in three parts. The first highlights the research problem and determines the research focus. The second raises the research questions and shows the methodology followed. The third presents some of the main findings.

Part One

Egypt is one of the most arid states in the entire globe (Figure 1). In the vast unoccupied deserts, 17 settlements are now in different stages of implementation. By the year 2017, the number of new desert settlements is expected to be 61 settlements (Figure 2). It is widely agreed that the spatial strategies adopted by the Egyptian government in new desert settlements are not environmentally sustainable. The new settlements have detached dispersed four/five storey walk-ups that heat up under the intensive solar radiation or consume excessive quantities of energy for cooling (Figure 3). They have wide grid street networks that work as good channels for hot dusty winds. They require high use of cars, not affordable for the majority, that potentially emit an excessive amount of pollutants and heat (Figure 4). They impact on a lot of land and disturb the fragile ecosystems (Figure 5). Interestingly, the layout of these settlements ignores traditional design principles for desert environments which have been established in the area over many centuries (Figure 6). Further research is indeed needed to detail, and perhaps verify, this argument on the current nature of this two-way relationship between urban areas and the environment. Yet, to improve this relationship, we have to understand the complex societal process which shapes urban areas. Indeed, ‘cities are processes not products’ (Abu-Lughod, 1987) (Figure 7).

Because of the complexity of this process, this research addresses only one aspect of it viz: the way in which discourse on urban issues is developed in Egypt. Arguably, it is this discourse that directly stands behind the current urban practices and hence the mutual relationship between urban areas and the environment. Specifically, the research focuses on discourse on housing for people on low-income, who are most vulnerable to global environmental change. It examines the development of this discourse within higher education from which planners and architects – the main shapers of the (formal) built environment – graduate.

Part Two

Secondary data collected on the nature of the housing discourse in higher education showed that academia fostered ill-fitted Modern-related housing ideas during the 1950s and 60s. But, the data also showed that during the last ten years or so academics have been exposed and some have already contributed to a growing discourse on sustainability and traditional-related practices.
Figure 1: Map of Egypt

Figure 2: Current new cities in Egypt
Detached dispersed houses that heat up under the intensive solar radiation or consume excessive quantities of energy for cooling.

Figure 3: Urban form of new settlements in Egyptian deserts

Wide grid street networks that work as good channels for hot dusty winds, and high use of cars, not affordable for the majority, that emit an excessive amounts of pollutants and heat.

Figure 4: Urban form of new settlements in Egyptian deserts
They take up a lot of land and disturb the fragile ecosystems.

Figure 5: Urban form of new settlements in Egyptian deserts

Figure 6: Urban form of traditional settlements
"Cities are processes, not products" Janet Abu-Lughod (1987, p. 172)

Figure 7: The complex societal process
Thus, the research questions are:

1. What is the current prevailing housing discourse in academia? And, more importantly,
2. What are the shaping forces of this discourse?

Three influential academic institutions were searched in an attempt to answer these questions. Multiple research methods were utilized for data triangulation, including structured questionnaires with students, semi-structured interviews with staff, and primary and secondary documentary data sources.

**Part Three**

In response to the first question:

The examination of data collected on housing courses suggests that the prevailing academic discourse on housing primarily promotes Modern-like row and cluster housing forms, similar to those of the government-provided housing. Figures (8, 9 and 10) show a sample of students’ projects in each faculty. They are mainly composed of rows and clusters of prototypical four/five storey walk-ups. In addition, the analysis of students’ questionnaires shows that most students envisioned four/five storey walk-ups as being the best urban form solution for low-income housing projects and the majority supported a top-down process led by the government.

Unsurprisingly, these unsustainable housing ideas were literally transferred from abroad rather than developed internally. Academics studying abroad during the 1950s and 60s brought these housing ideas on their return to academia. One piece of evidence on that is the reply of a course director to a question about the sources used to develop his housing course which is currently taught in several academic institutions in Egypt. He stated:

> I spent 10 years studying housing in England and I worked for the Scottish Housing Association which was developing planning for residential areas and prototypes. Also, I was accompanying my teachers Robert Mathew and Johnson Marshal and I worked in their private offices. I visited all the new cities there, and mixed with designers. I was specifically influenced by Cumbernauld, the only new city in Scotland, and Parkhill in Sheffield. (Figure 11)

**Why then have these 1950s and 60s’ ideas persisted till now?**

**Scientific Opinion of Staff?**

An investigation of staff's opinion on what could be an appropriate approach for solving housing problems shows that staff's opinion does not explain the current discourse's position. Most housing staff members do not view the top-down completed prototypical housing approach as the best solution for the housing problem. The course's director in one of the case studies, for example, stated:

> Of course, today, the percentage of Peoples' housing (not slums) in Egypt is very high. This is the product, which we, in Egypt, are able to bring about. Therefore, it is a must that any solution should stem from this situation. We have to utilise the merits and powers of people which they use to produce this housing. .. This is the formula, which I suggest. It will not be government-provided housing, I mean.

Another investigation of possible forces that might directly contribute to the formation of the housing discourse, such as educational visions of academic institutions, or agendas of different societal organisations shows a negative result.
Part 3: Current discourse

Figure 8: Students’ projects of the Faculty of Engineering, Cairo University

Figure 9: Students’ projects of the Faculty of Engineering, Ain-Shams University
Figure 10: Students’ projects of the Faculty of Urban and Regional Planning, Cairo Univ.

Figure 11: The urban pattern in some new cities in Britain
Educational Visions?

The Head of the Administration Unit in one of the case studies stated:

I do not know of any agreed-upon qualifications that should be in the Department's graduates and which influence courses' formation.

A Department Chair in another case study added:

On each level, there are visions rather than a vision. Everyone has a vision and there is no unifying vision on every administrative level.

Societal Organisations?

On the absence of influential societal organisations’ agendas, a housing staff member stated:

The idea that the market shapes what is taught in universities does not exist in Egypt. The development of the academic thought is not the result of the market and its requirements as in other countries.

Professional Organisations

Professional organisations presents a good example. Staff indicated that there is no accreditation system in Egypt, a fact that is clearly mentioned in existing literature. A staff member explained:

The Engineering Syndicate and similar professional boards do not realise their central role in supervising and developing the educational process. Also, the general political atmosphere does not allow these professional bodies to play a significant role in society in general.

Governmental Organisations

Governmental organisations is another example. Being governmental, the academic institutions are only required, and its administrative structure is carefully set up, to keep a stable political atmosphere within these institutions. In support, it was argued that:

The factors of weakness [in the universities’ system] started with the way through which the university's leaders are chosen which required two conditions. The first is the ability to eradicate students’ movements which oppose the authority. And, the second is to suppress the staff members who have visions different from those of the government.

In reply to whether the government influences what is taught in courses, a staff member conclusively stated that 'the governmental influence is negative because the government lacks an educational vision'.

In other words, the government does not directly influence staff in what to teach. The data analysis shows that staff members solely decide on courses. A staff member clearly stated:

The task of determining the course content is left to the staff member. He/she decides on that in the light of his/her expertise, connection with reality, school of thought; commitment; and vision of the relation between his/her course and other courses.

Yet, the data analysis shows that housing staff's decisions on courses' content are indirectly but significantly influenced by the academic context and the formal market where staff work. Both, the academic context and the formal market statuses could be attributed largely to the current government's interest and attitudes.
The political context in which those two entities have evolved is most characterised by an authoritarian highly centralised governmental system in a top-down relationship with overlooked masses. A key staff member, for example, stated:

The top-down way is a way of thinking that has been established over time, and participation is completely absent. Decision-makers despise participation, and the reason for that is a heritage of pharaohism, education, absence of dialogue and suppression.

**Government and Housing Market**

As a result of this top-down relationship, the formal market is, therefore, mainly confined to governmental low-income housing projects. Data analysis also shows that the government would neither allow non-governmental organizations to take part in solving the housing problem nor consider the overwhelming informal sector a potential rather than a problem.

**Government and Education Context**

And, in this market, professionals are mainly required to implement orders from above. A housing staff member stated in support:

The authority in Egypt is a militant authority; it issues orders to only implement. Innovative ideas are hampered from reaching reality.

Another confirmed that the government refuses specialists' guidance while pushing the market in a direction that conforms to its agenda. This tendency to cast off professionals' ideas and guidance is indicative of the government's stand in relation to scientific research and education. Developing brains that could come up with new ideas, through enhancing education and scientific research, is not, therefore, among its priorities. The President of Egypt's Association for Culture and Dialogue, stated:

It seems that the current education's aim is to graduate prototypes of students similar to those of building bricks with definitive dimensions. The current educational system kills creativity and innovation and mainly delivers what they call “left-sided students”.

Reflecting on the current status of scientific research, ELNajjar (1999) indicates that there is no attention paid to scientific research in Egypt and Elkazaz (2001) even argued that a national budget for scientific research does not exist in the first place.

How, then, do the education context and the labour market influence staff in forming housing courses?

**Education Context and Housing Discourse**

One of the important features of the education context is the low pay in academic institutions. The low pay has significantly reduced staff's devotion to academia in terms of both teaching and research. Courses are stagnant, therefore, as staff have no time and sometimes not enough capabilities to develop courses. In response to why courses are not developed, a staff member, for example, stated:

The staff member in an Egyptian university can not live with the university's salary. Consequently, he/she is pushed, in order to sustain the minimum level of a decent life, to practice as a consultant besides work in the university. Always,
this private work overrides the academic position and the staff member can not afford enough time to academia.

As to staff capabilities to develop courses, a Department Chair in one of the case studies stated:

In developed countries, and not in Egypt, staff are involved in a continuous self-development from the day they enter the academic life. What happens here is rather a deterioration that starts once a staff member obtains his PhD. Papers that a staff member submits are a routine in-fill for the requirement of academic promotion.

This is how the education context contributes to persistence of established ideas, in general.

**Labour Market and Housing Discourse**

Yet, the persistence of specifically *Modern* ideas can not be explained with sole reference to the education context. For staff to teach something they have to develop expertise in it. The research has found that it is in the formal housing market that staff develop the expertise needed for teaching. It is these staff members who contribute significantly to the design of the current Modern low-income housing projects, as their CVs suggest.

**Conclusions**

To conclude, the formal market and the education context support and complement each other in sustaining unsustainable Modern housing ideas within the academic discourse. Both, however, are the outcome of the current governmental agenda. The housing discourse is therefore the outcome of the same agenda. To change the discourse is to change the agenda.

**Contribution to knowledge**

This research has shown that the housing discourse in the most influential academic institutions in Egypt promotes unsustainable Modern housing ideas that were transferred from abroad rather than internally developed. The research has also shown that the transfer/persistence of these ideas within the housing discourse is an indirect outcome of the government agenda.

**Significance to study**

The understanding of the way in which this discourse is shaped is essential if an improvement is sought in urban areas and hence in the relationship between urban areas and the environment.