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Evaluation of the contemporary urban design through the classic urban theories: Cairo and Gwangju downtown as a case study



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Abstract Since Camillo Sitte's time (1843–1903) and until three decades ago, a number of principles for quality design derived from a range of urban design and planning theorists have emerged in urban planning field. Due to the reasons of exploratory theorists' influence on the new urbanism movement, their concepts were applied in varied regions, especially; within the United states. Unfortunately, the urban planners nowadays have ignored the basic principles of good urban spacing, abandoning theories evolved from systematic observations and deductive experiments thus; the urban environment constitute lots of problems which undermine the role of public spacing as a social generator in our life.

This study examines the current situation of two areas selected in Egypt and South Korea against some general principles extracted from a band of classic urban design theories. Therefore; the study aims at measuring up the studied area to the successful principles in order to determine both the positive and negative aspects of urban design, in an attempt to improving the built environment in the forthcoming redevelopments.

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The result showed some encouraging aspects of the studied area, especially in Cairo downtown of Egypt which appears to be consistent with classic urban design theories, but Gwangju downtown of South Korea still has some problems, and as a result, there are overriding concerns that could well undermine such positive elements.

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Introduction

Cities are enormous laboratories of trial and error, failure and success in city building and city design. Instead of learning from cities as well as forming and testing their theories in this laboratory, planning practitioners and teachers in the discipline have ignored the factors which result in successfulness or unsuccessfulness and the factors that lead to each result [1,2].

The strategies followed by the planners and local authorities throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries were based on rebuilding instead of how cities work. Since the industrial revolution, the evolving of transportation means in general and heavy reliance on private automobiles in particular have impacted profoundly on the city structure and built environment [3,4]. Before car invention, the movement through towns or settlements was compatible with the human scale and keep on settlers' health and their spiritual conditions due to increasing walkability and strengthening the social linkages [5]. With the emerging of the car, a number of planners and architects got an inspiration to coin their theories of city planning which allowed the suburbs to expand horizontally outside the city boundaries such as the linear city by Soria Y. Mata in 1882 which was implemented in 1894, the garden city theory which was coined by E. Howard in 1898, the satellite cities which were presented by Raymond Unwin in 1922 and the broadacre city theory dated 1932. Fig. 1 shows the city planning theories based on the horizontal spread. Unfortunately, these theories opened the door to the gated and private communities whether inside the city or outside it. Therefore the city has been segregated into inhomogeneous zones caused by social, cultural, economic and environmental problems [6]. Until a couple or three decades ago, the contest between local public authorities and residents around the openness and accessibility of public spaces were indicators of undermining urban spacing quality [7]. In recent years, local authorities have employed new surveillance techniques to monitor the uses of public spaces and how they are used. Furthermore; there are growing numbers of private developments and gated communities – in which the availability of public spacing was limited to the residents [8]. Thus some initiatives attempted to advocate the settlers' right to public space, one of these initiatives is to reclaim the street (RTS) which was originally formed by Earth first in Brixton, London, in 1991 and was born out of anti-road protest camps at places such as the Claremont Road and Twyford Down. RTS pointed out that vehicle traffic is the source of obstruction in public spaces and not the pedestrians. RTS initiative is an aspect of objection against the status of the modern city [9,10]. On the pretext of protecting the public space, we are increasingly turning to the use of both force and of surveillance devices to control public space. In many cases this happens because citizens, especially wealthier citizens, barricade themselves behind walls and gates [1].

Due to this phenomenon, a question has arisen with regard to the use of the public spaces nowadays and those actually entitled to use the space and define it. Thus, are all members of the public entitled to use it or only some? [8]. Don Mitchell asked this question and presented the case of the People's park in Berkeley, California that has become a contest site between the local authorities and residents and various political advocates seek to use the space for the homeless, whereas the local authorities and the University of California wish to maintain absolute control over the park. As has been mentioned, the city derived from modern planning theories has expanded horizontally such as the garden city, broadacre city and satellite cities that segregated people from each other in what is called "suburbs". whereas it expanded vertically such as the radiant city (Ville Radieuse or Functional city theory) coined by Le Corbusier in 1922/33 which isolated dwellers who live in skyscrapers or high rise buildings far away from the streets as J. Jacobs criticized it in her book "*the death and life of great American cities*" in 1961, and said people cannot keep eyes on their streets, hence public space will be unsafe and encourages the increase in crime rate. These theories opened the door widely towards the deterioration of the public and urban spaces, the streets and plazas were planned first for movement not the place [16]. Therefore another claim revolved around the quality level of public spaces and the ways of urban environmental design and was the motivation that made Sharon Zukin adopt a critical stance toward the transformation of the New York city park into exclusionary and heavily regulated spaces. She notices that "the fastest growing kind of public space in America is prisons" in introduction to the bad way of treatment, building, and rebuilding of the urban environment and parks [17].

In the context of the criticism series stated in the previous point, Gregory Smithson (2008) wondered why some plazas resemble empty concrete boxes with none of the sociability W. Whyte described. He finds that in many instances developers requested designs that would reduce, not facilitate, the social usefulness of their building plazas [18].

The restrictions and control over the use of public space does not only happen in the parks, plazas and sidewalks but also in whole cities around the world. In order to understand how cities work, inductive reasoning and closely observed city life were carried out over time. The conductive observation thus produced the accepted current urban design principles which were summarized by Bantley and others in 1985 in their design manual "Responsive Environment" [19]. They also suggested other qualities such as permeability, legibility, varied or mixed uses, robustness, visual appropriateness and richness which are of foremost importance in urban design. These principles and qualities were derived through time, and are the culmination of the work of many theorists and planning practitioners [20].

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