Redesigning public space: an evaluation of current urban regeneration practices in the city of Alexandria

Aisha M.H El-Kholy and Amr Youssef El Sherif

Department of Architecture. Faculty of Engineering University of Alexandria.

In an attempt to evaluate current practices of redesigning public spaces in the city of Alexandria, this paper discusses, primarily, the importance of public open spaces as elements of city design, their forms, functions and , finally, their added value as places for human activities. The paper describes and evaluates some current projects for redesigning public spaces in Alexandria, which leads to evaluating these attempts both in terms of public reaction and professional observation.

فى محاوله لتقييم بعض مشاريع إعادة تصميم وتطوير الفراغات العامه المفتوحه بمدينة الأسكندريه - والتى سميت فى وسـائل الأعلام بعمليه تجميل الأسكندريه .. يناقش البحث أهمية الفراغات المفتوحه من ناحية كونها أحد العنـــاصر الأساسـيه فـى تصميم المدن ودورها الهام كمركز للنشاط السكانى.ويتعرض البحث لبعض مشاريع تطويـــر المبـانى والفراغـات العامه بالأسكندريه التى تم الأنتهاء منها وتقييم تلك المشاريع على مستوى رد فعل الرأى العام وسكان المدينه- ثـم علـى مسـتوى التقييم المهنى الفنى - وينتهى البحث بتوصيات يمكن الأستعانه بها فى المشاريع المماثله فى المستقبل .

Keyword: Public spaces, Identity, Regenerate, Public activities, City image.

1. Introduction

Open spaces, streets and buildings make up the public image of towns and cities. The meaning and role that these elements play in urban design, the way they are arranged, designed and detailed is the method by which man creates a built environment that fulfils his aspirations and represents his values [1].

Any discussion concerning open public spaces must include the work of Baron Georges Eugene Haussmann [2], Prefect of the Siene during the reign of Napoleon III (1852-1869). Haussmann and his associates put together the main elements of the city of Paris in a definitive way that had been greatly influential and still affects urban design today. He has left a new image of the city that has been repeatedly used in Europe and the United States. Haussmann's image is represented in the unbroken sweep of boulevards, the symmetry of public squares and the way these focus attention on important public buildings. Similarly, Le Corbusier's "Voisin Plan" of Paris in 1922 represents another vision of open public spaces; that of the tower in a park "tall office buildings". For sometime, the fashion of towers in parks swept the world much as

Haussmann's concept had done. However, now, with the experience of cities of towers it became evident that the continuity of street frontage is an important design element of the city [3].

Open spaces, as in squares, plazas, rondpoints etc...are important elements of city design. A square or a plaza is both an area framed by buildings and an area designed to exhibit buildings to the greatest advantage. In fact, it is the chief method by which a city or town is made distinct, a place where people meet and socialize. Public spaces, when designed according to fairly basic principles giving a sense of place, take on an added symbolic meaning which is the most important function of an element in the city.

Lynch has a perception of urban structure in which he finds the node to be one of the elements by which a city is recognized and understood. The node gives the city imagineability, that is to say, a strong image. Lynch also remarks that: Nodes are strategic spots in a city [4].

Open spaces can be categorized by function and by form. The types of spaces needed in the city associated with function are: the setting for a civic building as in *Midan El Mansheya*; the principal meeting place as in

El Ramleh Station;   places for ceremonial occasions as in *Midan Abou El Abbas*;spaces for entertainment around buildings such as theatres, cinemas, shopping spaces, arcades and markets; spaces around which offices are grouped; semi-public spaces in residential areas and, finally, spaces associated with urban traffic junctions like *Mothalath Al Sharikat*.

Forms of open spaces can be classified as follows: the closed square where the space is self contained, the dominated square where the space is directed towards the main building, the nuclear square where space is formed around a center, grouped squares where spatial units are combined to form larger compositions and finally the amorphous square where space is unlimited [5].

Successful city squares, though they may be associated with a specific function and form, are often those that sustain activity through the diversity of uses in the surrounding buildings.

The process of economic and social change in Egypt has left large areas of our cities with severe environmental problems. Urban deterioration caused by the lack of funds, local authorities' malpractice, and overall economic decline in the city of Alexandria during the last two decades have also contributed to diminishing confidence and urban malaise.

This research discuss the recent attempts to re-organize public spaces in the city of Alexandria. Popularly named, in the media, the "Beautification of Alexandria" projects, these efforts took the form of a series of small-scale public space re-design and upgrading projects.

While there was no master plan informing such projects, as they were not linked to a clear long-term development plan, it is possible to examine them as components of a hands-on urban regeneration-rehabilitation experiment, especially that most of these projects were also sponsored totally or partly by the private sector in the form of urban design and financing.

The purpose of this paper is also to investigate recent attempts undertaken by the Mayor of the city of Alexandria to combat and reverse these trends and draw new life and investment into the urban areas. A key concern in this effort that the paper attempts to highlight is the concentration of these investments in the redesigning and rehabilitation of public space as a tool to regenerate the urban centers of the city and improve its image.

The goal is to draw lessons and experiences for the future urban design policy and practice in the city of Alexandria with regard to open public spaces.

2. Beautification projects in Alexandria.

Redesigning urban space was a major concern in the beautification projects undertaken recently under the auspices of the Alexandria govrnorate. These projects involved redesigning open urban public spaces and squares in downtown Alexandria such as *Midan El Gomhoreya, Midan El Mansheya, Midan Cinema Amir* and, *Midan El Dekheila* on the peripheries of Alexandria. The other main project was the widening of the *Corniche Avenue* and the upgrading of water front buildings of architectural value overlooking the *Corniche*.

This paper examines the components and output of three of the above mentioned projects as case studies for redesigning urban spaces.

2.1 Midan Misr Station

In 1920, McLean, the Municipality of Alexandria's chief architect, designed the urban setting of what is known today as *Midan Misr Station*, where he suggested the construction of several service buildings surrounding the spacious square as a means of visual identification for the public space. Only two of those buildings were constructed, the railroad main station and the communications office building, *"El Central"*.

McLean's plan, somehow, was never completed and the Midan saw much deterioration due to the chaotic mixture of means of transport, which caused slow flow of traffic and continuous traffic jams, and, the intermixture of building uses and activities surrounding the square like hospitals,

schools, housing and offices. In addition, the sprawl of local souks parallel to the tramway, overtook the square space, Fig. 1.

It was clear that the failure to complete the original design plan for the square left many spaces for chaotic growth resulting in lack of visual boundaries identifying the space with an area disproportionate to the human scale [8].

The improvement project implemented to *Midan Misr Station* aimed, primarily, at solving two main issues: resolving the traffic congestion issue in the area, and, identifying the urban space of the Midan. The traffic congestion problem was resolved by:

- Relocating inter-regional transportation systems (buses & taxis) to the Kabary district.
- Allocating specific parking spaces to local buses and taxis.
- Re-routing traffic directions in main streets connected to the Midan for better traffic flow.
- Identifying pedestrian crossing to disentangle human flow from cars.
- Erecting a metal rail parallel to the tramway for the same reason mentioned above.

The public space identity was resolved by:

- Creating two main axes from the memorial, one to the railroad station, the other to a public sitting area.
- Providing the space with landscaping fixtures, seating, textured paving and spotted greenery.
- Surrounding the space of the Midan with a low metal fence.

The improvement project implemented to *Midan Misr Station* has resolved many of the traffic flow problems, but did not succeed in giving identity to the public space, neither visually nor on the human scale, Fig. 2.

3. Midan Al-Dekheila (Mosalath Al Sharikat)

Al-Dekheila was a remote district on the western outskirts of Alexandria up until the early 1950s when it became a busy industrial zone. Various industrial plants were developed in the area, the most important of which are chemical, petroleum and steel industries. Due to its location on main transport routes, the district has seen rapid growth connected mainly to industry.

Midan Al-Dekheila is a small rond point where all varieties of transport come at crossroads. Ranging from railroad cargo lines to cars, buses and trucks, the area has become the major junction for a multitude of routes from and to highways and the Alexandria seaports.

The Midan was never planned as a traffic node or a public space, but, by time, and due to its location, this rond point has grown into a major traffic node. Hence, the governorate of Alexandria, sponsored by private finance, implemented a project for redesigning the space aiming at resolving the problems caused by heavy traffic flow and hazardous traffic intersections. The project for improving the *Midan* aimed primarily at minimizing traffic cross intersections and identifying the urban space by redesigning its element, Fig. 3. The traffic problems were resolved by:

- Widening the perimeters of the *Midan*, thus, eliminating unnecessary crossings and intersections and limiting the speed of vehicles round the circle to change directions.
- Constructing a metal rail parallel to the railway to protect pedestrians.
- Reconstructing side pavings and routes to serve the purpose of directing vehicles around the *Midan*.

Fig.1. Chaotic state of Midan Misr Station.
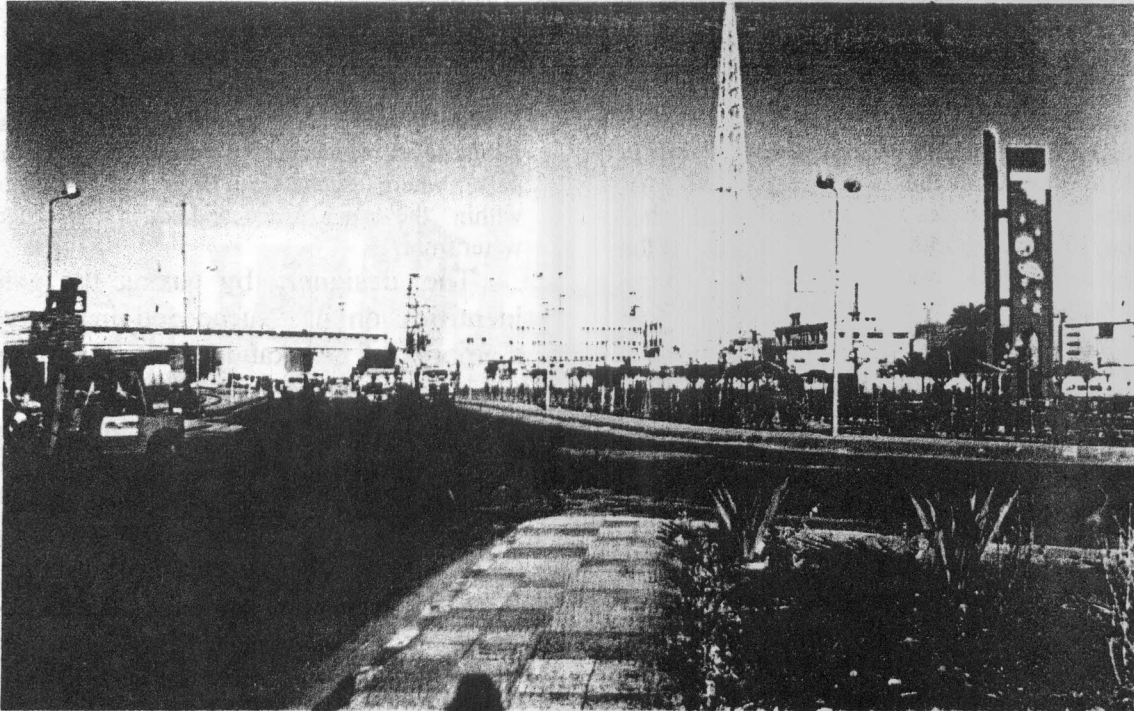

Fig. 2. Midan Misr Station (during upgrading).

Fig. 3. Midan El Dekhela.

Beautification, by providing the urban space with identity was dealt with in the following manner:

Providing the space with landscaping elements such as greenery, shaded seating fixtures and lighting accessories.

Surrounding the railway with a metal fence for protection.

Constructing what may be a landmark, in the form of a monumental non-axial structure on one side of the space, Fig.4.

The improvement project implemented in Midan El-Dekheila has succeeded in solving some of the traffic congestion problems and has eliminated hazardous intersections but, unfortunately, it has failed in creating an urban public space. This is due to the following factors:

The function and location of the Midan is unsuitable for public human activities.

The local environment is unhealthy (air and noise pollution).

Pedestrian crossings are unsafe because of heavy traffic and the absence of traffic lights.

The existence of the railroad bisecting the space is dangerous for the public, even after the fencing.

The monumental structure erected in the Midan as an addition to the space, lacks proportion, scale and identity.

3.The Corniche

The role of water fronts as a physical and social center has been so firmly set in the layout of old cities. Furthermore, the traditions associated with that layout are so strong that they still exist until today [8].

The Corniche, Alexandria's water front edge, runs from Ras Elteen Palace to Montaza Palace and garden covering a distance of about 16 km. This avenue was developed by Osman Moharram, the Minister of Public Works, during the reign of King Farouk I, in the year 1936. Since then, it has undergone little, if any, improvement.

In 1995, the Alexandria governorate demolished all the beach cabins that occupied the waterfront, providing a larger area of sandy beaches along the shore for public use. Later, in 1997, the governorate has undertaken improvement measures by redesigning and upgrading the physical elements of Alexandria's extended linear park, to enhance its social role in the public life of the city and to accommodate the growing

traffic flow especially in the summer. The first phase of this project was completed in 1998, covering the distance from Montaza to Sidi Bishr.

The traffic problems were resolved as follows:

The addition of two more traffic lanes, one in each direction.

Routing street directions to central traffic flow in and out of the Corniche.

Providing parking spaces across from the Corniche.

Limiting allocated parking on either sides of the avenue for emergency use only.

Public transport was re-allocated to Khaled Ibn Al Walid street parallel to the Corniche.

To enhance the social role of the Corniche, the project implemented the following:

The provision of a three-meter wide promenade for public use and activities, Fig. 5.

Well-spaced shaded seating areas, some of which are raised on platforms.

Use of landscape accessories, light fixtures and palms trees.

The construction of a designed pre-cast perforated edge separating the promenade from the beach, which serves as, seats in either direction.

The location of previous beaches were again re-identified by means of open gates in the form of shaded arches, each labeled and named after the beach location.

Sand beaches along the shore for public activities.

On the whole, the improvement project, phase one, for the Corniche has achieved its main goals. On the public level, Alexandria has gained back its water front park, where public activities can be demonstrated within the urban space and setting provided by its water front.

The designer, by using the gate/entry identification has succeeded in reviving the memory of Alexandrians of an important aspect of their cultural heritage and background. Traffic flow has improved due to the measures implemented, although public services such as toilets, underpasses, ramps and designated pedestrian crossings, were not sufficiently provided for, Fig. 6.

The improvement project implemented has succeeded, so far, in maintaining the image of the Corniche as a social and physical center. The Corniche will always remain a source of pride for Alexandria.
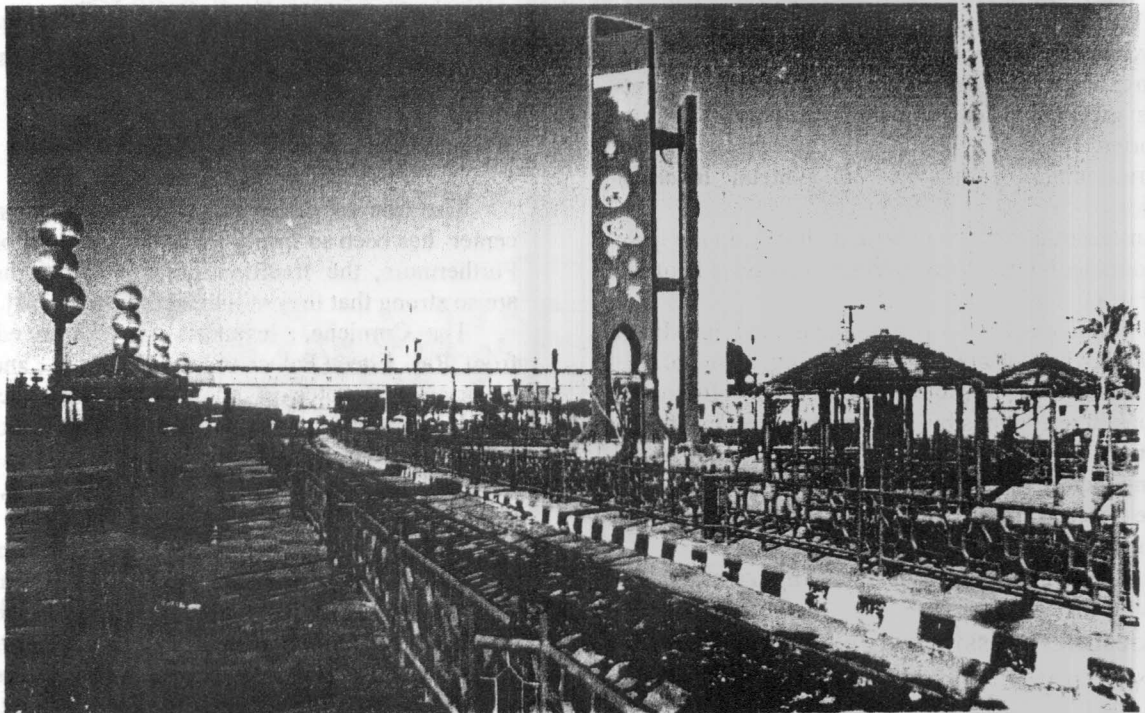

Fig 4. Midan El dekhela (monumental landmark).
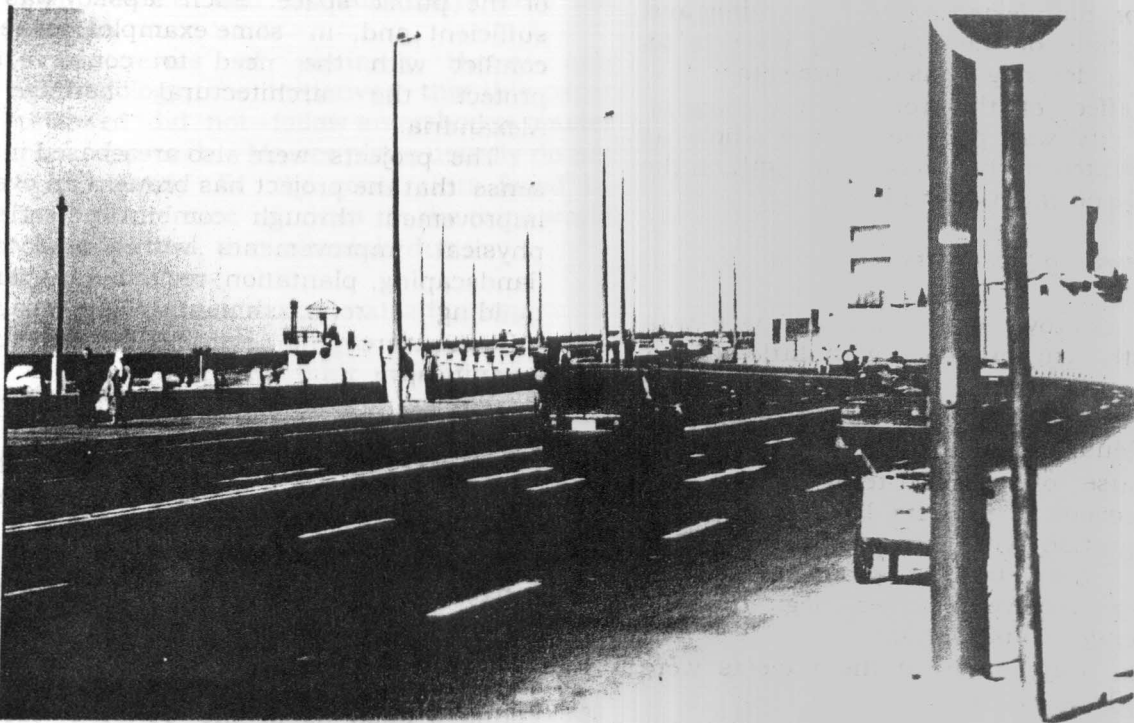
Fig. 5. El Corniche Promenade

Fig 6. El Corniche: Traffic Oriented Redevelopment Plan.

4. Evaluation

After having examined the three case studies for redesigning public spaces in Alexandria by description, analysis of goals, implementation measures and output, it is necessary to provide an evaluation both in terms of user reactions (public reactions) and professional observations.

A) User reactions

- The projects had a positive effect in reversing peoples' perception of the decline of the city.
- Investment in down town public space (established center) attracted the public back to the original historic center and water front.
- The project created spaces and opportunities for the public to enjoy outdoor activities.
- It also created a sense of partnership between the governorate and the private sector manifested in the providing and financing of the upgrading projects as well as devising ideas and projects.
- The effect of the project on the image of the city was positive on the whole as illustrated in the mass media both on the local and the national levels.

B) Professional observations

- The improvement of public space was mostly car oriented, with little, or no, concern for pedestrians, which contradicts the role of public space as a nucleus of social activity.
- Because of its short-term policies, the improvement projects lacked depth and integration with the existing fabric and did not tackle problems in a comprehensive manner. (eg: traffic – parking – conservation)
- In a way, many of the projects were mainly face-lifts.
- Due to the haste in execution, design criteria and components of the project were insufficiently developed towards providing better quality public spaces,

with the exception of the *Corniche* project.
- There was no participation from the direct local community; decisions and execution were implemented directly by the local government.

5. Conclusion

Two issues were highlighted by the examination of the case study projects: the role of the public space and, the need for a change in the current planning and urban design system to be able to incorporate and inform such action-based initiatives.

Public space upgrading is, therefore, the key approach undertaken to reintroduce confidence and combat the decline in the city's established centers and waterfront. Even projects that involved refurbishment of historic buildings, were undertaken merely at the level of the façade of the buildings suggesting that the main aim is to enhance the exterior image of the building as a definer of the public space. Such a policy was not sufficient and, in some examples, rather in conflict with the need to conserve and protect the architectural heritage of Alexandria.

The projects were also area-based in the sense that the project has brought an overall improvement through combining a series of physical improvements within a locality (landscaping, plantation, reclamation, partial building refurbishment, modernizing infrastructure and introducing pedestrian amenities).

While achieving a fundamental improvement in pedestrian amenities and services is an important outcome of these projects, much attention was also devoted to cars and vehicular traffic. This is understandable in the light of traffic congestion that paralyzes movement in many of the city streets and the urgent need for solutions to that particular problem. However, this led to a series of urban design conflicts such as in the *Corniche* widening projects. Much of the added public space was devoted to cars; transforming the *Corniche* from a city promenade to a rather

fast highway with various disadvantages for the safety and well being of pedestrian and urban environment.

There are many facets of good practice in these initiatives that are not typical traditional government-planned projects:

- The objectives were realizable in the light of resource availability.
- Investment of public space has benefited, equally, those living and working in the vicinity of the areas.
- The projects were responsive to local priorities and opportunities.
- They provided good examples of the potential of community involvement in designing and financing the built environment and for drawing resources together.

On the other hand, being independent of an overall framework, there has been a lack of identifying a clear aim for the improvement with much of the major problems such as economic decline, environmental deterioration and loss of urban heritage were not resolved. In addition, future questions related to maintenance and sustainability were not tackled.

In terms of planning theory and methodology, the initiatives that this paper reviewed did not follow an orthodox master plan approach. Master plans usually do not appropriately fit the constraints faced by local authorities of cities in the third world countries and, that is mainly due to:

- Lack of funds and unstable funding.
- Fast population growth and rapid changes in the built environment with regard to the master plan implementation.
- Lenient authorities and political interventions.

- Bureaucratic and inefficient legal systems.

As this paper suggested, there is a need to introduce a less restrictive and rapid planning mechanism able to produce and deal effectively with the changing needs that are constantly evolving while providing strategic frameworks for the development of Alexandria as a whole.

Such an approach will integrate two levels. The first is an overall strategic view of development of the future of Alexandria within general direction for issues of importance for urban design such as transportation, traffic, conservation, new development growth, landscape enhancement and environment protection concerns. The second, is the action planning level, where specific problems of particular sites are immediately solved partly or totally according to the availability of fund and sponsorship but in the light of the strategic view provided by the first level.

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