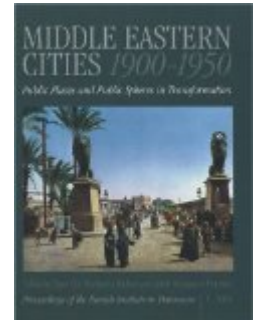


Hans Chr. Korsholm Nielsen, Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, eds.. *Middle Eastern Cities 1900-1950, Public Places and Public Spheres in Transformation*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2001. 175 pp. No price listed, cloth, ISBN 978-87-7288-906-1.



Reviewed by H       Vacher

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The book *Middle Eastern Cities 1900-1950* is the outcome of the international symposium on Middle Eastern Cities 1900-1950, which was held in Damascus in May 1998, organized jointly by the University of Copenhagen, the University of Aarhus and the Danish Institute in Damascus. This Institute, located in a sixteenth-century mansion in the old town of Damascus, was founded in 1995 for a test period of five years, with Peder Mortensen as its first director. This collection of essays is the first and promising volume, which inaugurated the Institute's series of proceedings.

The volume explores from different perspectives, ranging from anthropology and literary studies to architectural and urban history, the forms and functions of public places in the Middle East's cities, as they were shaped in relation to the emergence of new dimensions of public spheres in the first part of the twentieth century. The last two decades have witnessed a flourishing of studies on Middle Eastern cities through different historical sequences. However, few have chosen to focus on public places and public spheres as areas of encounter at a time that, to varying degrees,

witnessed both the fusion and the fragmentation of urban forms and their representations in the West as well as in the East. Unencumbered by any "post-colonial" or "post-modern" studies jargons, the book is well-written as well as abundantly and mostly aptly illustrated. The nine papers fulfill the announced program, looking at the city as it was "conceived, perceived and experienced."

Jakob Skovgaard-Petersen, assistant professor of Arabic at the Carsten Niebuhr Institute of Near Eastern Studies, University of Copenhagen, sets the perspective for the volume, which aims to depart from the dualistic view whereby Western cities are understood as universal agents of transformation while the "Islamic city" is seen as a backwater of traditionalism. Within the context of the drastic changes that occurred in the urban forms and patterns of urbanization throughout many of the cities in the Middle East during the early-twentieth century, the development of the civic sphere together with new types of public areas are a case in point. It has been widely held that the spreading of Western influence, a quasi-viral phenomenon, had, on the wings of coloniza-

tion, subverted the most entrenched values of local societies. Skovgaard-Petersen invites pursuing new avenues away from such a cliché-ridden framework. While the impact of modern urban planning and the specificities of colonial dominance are not contested, most of the contributions vividly illustrate the porosity of material and intellectual barriers. This is particularly so in relation to the "effendis" as actors of transformation. Sitting at the terrace of a Café, observing, commenting and acting on the "local" and the "global," the "traditional" and the "modern," the "educated men" increasingly became an alternative model to that of the "learned men."

Skovgaard-Petersen suggests a variety of approaches to explore the Middle Eastern cities as "perceived and experienced." Benedict Anderson's conceptualization of "imagined communities" can be drawn upon to consider new feelings of belonging to a place, and the relations between modern Arabic literature, the media, and the urban experience. Marshall Berman's cross-analyses of literature, social history, and urban modernity might also be a source of ideas to investigate modernity as it was experienced in locations where industrialization remained marginal. The emergence of new modes of thinking and experiencing time and space as described by Stephen Kern's work could also be relevant to examine the shaping of urban public spheres in other cultures.

Walter Armbrust's article discusses the methodological underpinnings of an anthropological history operating in a non-Western context through the example of early Egyptian cinema and musical performances. He distances himself from Timothy Mitchell's view of modernization and rather draws upon Michel de Certeau's work to focus on how the actualization of the "city text" might carry gradual change of normative social "order" as represented in urban space.^[1] Thus the author emphasizes the particular "as imagined differently in different places" over the primacy of a universal form of modernity. He de-

scribes a number of strategies pursued by cinema stars or by musicians to link up the past to the artistic sphere of the present, and details how "modern" European elements are reassembled into a "system of meaningful social contrasts." The examples of performers such as Umm Kulthum and Muhammad 'Abd al-Wahhab during their early careers are particularly illuminating in this context. The final point aims at showing that the dichotomized order depicted by Europeans opposing tradition and modernity was not necessarily embraced by Egyptians, who mostly proved to be more imaginative, both spontaneously and out of necessity.

Mercedes Volait's article centers on the introduction of urban planning in the Middle East as brought into practice by Egyptian engineers or architects. Together with an in-depth analysis of the first master plan for Cairo, drafted in 1926-29, she explores the building up of a local expertise in Egypt. This early-nineteenth-century tradition, which can be traced back to Muhammad Ali, was to have a strong impact after the end of British rule in 1922. The plan was a pragmatic adaptation of both the garden-city concept and the comprehensive planning principles then current in Britain, including city improvements and civic amenities, extension schemes, zoning provisions, etc. The plan's author, the engineer Mahmud Sabri Mahbub, trained in England and a member of the Royal Town Planning Institute, wished to reverse the former British policy of *laissez-faire*. He insisted on the need to design a new legal framework to check speculation and stressed the social dimension of urban reforms. While his master plan was never implemented as a whole, some of its provisions were executed.

Among others projects analyzed by Volait are more formal exercises centered on the design of public places. Such was a plan by the architect Mahmud Riyad, also educated in England and "director of works" at the Waqfs Ministry during the 1930s. In the Liverpool Civic-Design style prevail-

ing in this period, he put forth a type of monumental composition in the "grand manner" form aiming at creating an impressive city district. Such projects might have had appeal to the rising educated middle class. But, on the whole, the influence of the planning milieu seems to have been fairly restricted, even among technical elites. Rural development was then perceived as the cornerstone of nation-building. The resistance to Western approaches in the design of public places seems to have been more the result of atavistic reactions on the part of the landed gentry than the product of suspicious traditionalism.

Karin van Nieuwkerk looks at the different attitudes towards two types of female entertainment in public places, as embodied by the famous Muhammad Ali Street and the neighbouring Ezbekkiya Square in Cairo. This quarter is revealed to us as a distinctly dichotomized space, reflecting two quite different types of entertainment: on the one hand activities linked to nightclubs, on the other the provision of musical and dancing performances at wedding parties. The author investigates the ethos and tight code of conduct that rules the milieu of wedding performers, who are expected to abide by the values applying to "daughter of the country" even when working in a "non-traditional" and open sphere. By contrast, "nightclub girls" used to be regarded as persons of low social standing, despite their frequently high level of artistic performance. While established in close spatial vicinity and held in equal contempt by outsiders, both milieus considered themselves as belonging to a highly differentiated hierarchy. One might finally wonder if the contempt attached to nightclub performers designed to attract foreigners did not in the end help to build a more legitimate appearance for women working in public, something deemed utterly dishonourable at the time. Nieuwkerk's account of the formation of an autonomous sphere in Muhammad Ali Street is stimulating, but might have gained from a parallel analysis of places.

Christel Braae takes us through the making of early museums in Egypt, Iraq, and Syria. The early-nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of huge areas for tourists, which was reflected in voluminous guidebooks. The author reminds us of the ensuing network of international-class "Grand hotels," cafés, parks, and sumptuous leisure areas intended for a clientele of rentiers, officers, or flâneurs. Within this territory, archaeological sites and monuments formed the main magnets, with the museum becoming a key institution in introducing visiting tourists to the "oriental wonders." A museum was also a significant landmark in the monumental system of colonial cities. The classical roots of Western civilization were at first privileged, but soon testimonies of Muslim civilization were also included, putting the colonial state in the garb of a "protector."

Braae shows that the notion of the museum was widely accepted, while at the same time becoming a contested ground between different parties that aimed at controlling the "policy of the past." The initial struggle to stop the extensive siphoning off of historical artefacts and the evolving archaeological policy of the protectorates introduce us into the meandering network of what can be seen as both a "colonial" and a "national" project. By creating a public through the process of shaping a historical and cultural identity, the author concludes that these places of ritual citizenship proved to be, at the end of the colonial era, a powerful device that contributed to the making of modern city life.

Elisabeth Thompson presents an in-depth analysis of gendered politics in public places in Damascus by focusing on the question of the attendance of women at cinemas. Marjeh Square, already transformed by the Ottomans in the 1890s into an administrative center, was developed as a business and transport node and had by the beginning of the twentieth century become a cultural magnet. The evolving character of the square, with its flourishing cinemas, is taken by the au-

thor as a thread to analyze the rising influence of gender politics in the city. She demonstrates very convincingly how the transformations of a particular place have their own dynamics in relation to the place's position relative to changes in city scale and social grouping. Marjeh Square came to play a "vital integrative function" as a geographic crossroads between the "old city," the colonial district, and the popular suburbs. As one of the main public attractions, cinemas had by the end of the 1920s become one of the sensitive spots of urban politics, a subject of contention between the colonial authorities, the nationalists, and the rising Islamist populist parties. The debate over the type of movies shown became an all-out conflict when matinees started to be organized for women.

Elisabeth Thompson tells us in some detail how the positions over women entering public places were linked to the rapidly changing political scene of the Protectorate. Later, the conflict over women attending cinemas was also fuelled by the relative decline of Marjeh Square as an integrating device for the city. When the center of cultural life for wealthy and middle-class city dwellers started shifting toward the French colonial district, this led to a downgrading of Marjeh Square's cultural functions, and its role as a "border" increasingly became as strong as its role as a center. Cinemas thus formed volatile epicenters, places reflecting the rapid sharpening of class and gender cleavages in a colonial set-up.

Henning Goldbæk takes us to Istanbul, seen through the eyes of the Garip poets, three poets who published their poems together under this title in 1941, "garip" here meaning "strange" or "awkward." Departing from the classical, divan tradition in Turkish poetry, these poets were looking for the "shock of the new." Therefore Garip has to be considered in parallel to the Tanzimat discourse, which stressed "order," "organization," and the like. The city as seen by the poets was also a "city of order," though the workings of this early modernity only managed to deliver fragments of

its message. The author reminds us of General Von Moltke's plan, Bouvard's embellishment schemes, engineer Arnodin's scheme of a ring-road linking Asia to Europe, and, at a later period, of Henri Prost's long-term involvement in the planning of Istanbul. But modernity had not followed as expected. Through invocation and intimation, the three poets seem to have captured fluid experiences of modernity that was perceived as a ubiquitous as well as elusive process.

Hans Christian Korsholm Nielsen's article is about the doing and undoing of public places. As products of specific urban practices that do not accrue in an irreversible and unidirectional way, public areas are undergoing processes of change. The author illustrates this point by presenting transformations of public places in Sana'a between the second occupation by the Turks in 1872 and the fall of the Caliphate in 1924. He brings out the difference between the spatial structure prior the Turkish occupation, where streets were mostly resulting from parcelling sedimentation, and the planned schemes providing for recreational space. As Ronald Lewcock had observed during his preliminary studies on the heritage of the city: "One of the first acts of the Turks was to restore the mosque of al-Baririyyah and the tree-lined road between the citadel, the mosque ... and Bab Shaub becoming once again the centre of the fashionable quarter of the town; it was here that the foreign rulers had their shops and cafés, as well as the new military academy, two civilian schools and an industrial school." [2] Using as sources plans and accounts of visiting foreigners, Korsholm follows the process of the appearance and disappearance of the Turkish installations. This "paper archaeology" is quite fascinating, and one might have liked a greater number of plans.

Focusing on the "suq" as a manifestation of Yemenite social organization, Korsholm sheds light on the distinctive forms of trading places in relation to different purposes and practices among the indigenous and foreign population.

While the Yemenite place of the *suq* is associated with "good faith" economy among people who are socially related and do not "waste" time in their commercial activities, the trading places with their cafés as developed by the Turks were perceived as places for entertainment. Such a dichotomy that has been described by a number of travellers as an opposition between a traditional spatial order and a modern one was to be transformed once the Turkish occupation ended. This distinction between the private and public spheres crossing the local and the foreign ones could have been further explored in other places. For instance, enlarging the inquiry to the social practices as actualized in the "mafraj"—the main room of a Yemenite house, especially arranged for entertainment during the afternoon, could have brought other perspectives with regards to the long Yemenite disdain for street cafés.[3] In his conclusion, Korsholm puts strong emphasis on enduring cultural patterns that define uses of physical structure, which are eventually "re-conquered" as it happened in Sana'a with the end of the Ottoman rule.

In the last essay, Anton Escher adopts the opposite standpoint to most articles in this volume by addressing the question of the public sphere, not as introduced by colonialism or by foreign modernity, but as it was to be found in a traditional "medina." The specificity of "Islamic urbanism" has repeatedly been the subject of heated controversy, and cannot be discussed here.[4] Escher focuses on five photographs by the artist Ré Soupault (1901-1996) as documents of the life in the Tunis medina between 1938 and 1942. The author describes the medina as a place of almost full social control where "the inhabitants ... live and work in a sphere of omnipresent polarization" (p. 164); the pictures do indeed feature a striking gender separation. He concludes: "the public sphere in the medina is made possible only by the absence of woman" (p. 171).

The analysis of the pictures is done with care and precision, while taking at face value the gaze of a grand dame of photojournalism. Some interpretations are therefore not always convincing such as the one presented by the author in the light of the fourth "document." The author's final purpose is to suggest an ideal model, which could allow mapping "the phenomenon of social construction of the public sphere with respect to gender" (p. 172). While this model tends to present the medina as a stable, tight-knit and self-contained unit, where every action in the public sphere must conform to an internalised set of rules, the author counterbalances the implicit rigidity of such a model by allowing that this is a view of social constructions as a whole, while individuals did actually enjoy a degree of free play, and that infinite variations are possible depending on the regional, historical, and political context.

The book introduces the reader to a wide range of themes, which are viewed through an anthropological approach of the urban phenomenon in the former Ottoman sphere. With a focus on practice as a means to explore the relationship of public areas with "modernization" within the context of colonization, this collection of essays can be seen as an attempt to push scholarly inquiry away from formalist approach towards urban changes in non-Western cultures. Urban history was until recently inclined to present "colonial cities" as split into two spheres, the indigenous and the foreign one, reflecting the dominance of the colonizing powers. This dichotomy, which can be found in many encyclopaedias' articles, has often been nuanced by taking into account local history and geography, and has remained largely valid from a historiographic point of view. Nevertheless, such an approach has brought about confusion between the intended colonial project and the urban forms as they actually developed, while entailing categories such as "Islamic" or "colonial" quarters. Significantly, the title chosen by Korsholm Nielsen and Skovgaard-

Pedersen for this volume does not lay stress on the colonial character of Middle Eastern cities between 1900 and 1950. It belongs to a growing body of research that, while keeping the colonial projects in view, concentrates on the study of local configurations, interactions and adaptations, conflicts, contextualized strategies or tactics, or hybridisation of forms.[5]

The book also addresses important issues linked to the dynamics of private and public spheres, such as modernity and the process of cultural innovation as they have been shaped by and embedded in the social and historical realities of Middle-Eastern cities. Whereas the wide scope of these questions could not be easily encompassed, it might have been useful to sketch practical strategies for drawing lines between private and public, or situating the opaque interface between private and public with respect to various cultural horizons. The notion of public "space" has been put under scrutiny on different grounds, and has been alternatively described as a positive factor of interaction, strengthening modern citizenship and grounding cultural innovation, or disparaged as a delusive and restricted device for sociability. [6] Be that as it may, what is "public" gets its very consistency as a result of the combined influences of manifold social practices, social institutions and technologies, not forgetting the cumulative effect of market forces, and is accordingly variegated.

One particular dimension of "public places" that permeates a number of the essays is closely related to early town planning, which seems to include "civic art" as well as "technological rationality," and both can be seen as socially constructed and consequently may be changed, even after a physical design is implemented. Town planning is obviously about public space, places, and spheres.

In a somewhat parallel and converging way, another recent collective work entitled "Public Space in the Middle East and the Arab World: Between Urbanism and Urban Customs" questions

essentialist assumptions attached to modernization.[7] Jean-Charles Depaule recalls two classical attitudes concerning public space in a so-called traditional Middle-Eastern city: to negate its very existence or to give weight to its presence through possibly weak evidences. He argues that these two positions, though contradictory, are underpinned by a common implicit assumption of public space as a harbinger of progress and rationalization. Such a background entails throwing together "traditional" practices of spatial appropriation with forms of common good (that may converge with the Western idea of public utility), and neglecting places that may have existed as "public" without having been perceived as such by Western cultures (for instance, ephemeral locations of festivals or sports competitions beyond city walls). This cultural horizon might also hinder approaching other cultural horizons, in which the "modern" Middle-Eastern city has been evolving in the way it is experienced by its inhabitants. The book edited by Korsholm Nielsen and Skovgaard-Petersen shares a similar concern and should be a source of inspiration not only for scholars and researchers but also for all those with a keen interest in the relationship between space and consciousness in the context of urban modernity, with Middle Eastern cities themselves not being in any way foreign to this very modernity.

[1]. Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[2]. Ronald Lewcock, *The Old Walled City of Sana'a* (Paris: Unesco Press, 1986), p. 48.

[3]. For example, it has been suggested for "public space" in Middle East cities to be considered as a network of discontinuous and heterogeneous places. See Dominique Chellavier, *L'espace social de la ville arabe* (Paris: Éditions Maisonneuve et Larose, 1979).

[4]. For a discussion of the concept of Islamic City, see Janet L. Abu-Lughod, "The Islamic City: Historic Myth, Islamic Essence and Contemporary

Relevance," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 18 (1987): pp. 167-171.

[5]. The process of hybridization as applied to colonial cities has been particularly discussed in Nezar AlSayyad, ed., *Hybrid Urbanism: On the Identity Discourse and the Built Environment* (Westport: Praeger, 2001). See also Joe Nasr and Mercedes Volait, eds. *Urbanism, Imported or Exported? Native Aspirations and Foreign Plans* (Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2003).

[6]. See Sennett, R., "The Spaces of Democracy," in *The Urban Moment*, eds. Robert A. Beauregard and Sophie Body-Gendrot (London: Sage, 1999).

[7]. "Public Space in the Middle East and the Arab World: Between Urbanism and Urban Customs," *Géocarrefour* 77, no. 3 (2002). See especially the conclusion by J.-C. Depaule in this thematic issue.

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