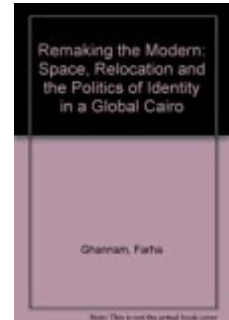


Farha Ghannam. *Remaking the Modern: Space, Relocation and the Politics of Identity in a Global Cairo.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002. xii + 214 pp. \$55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-520-23045-3.



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Building the Urban Landscape with the Gendered Spatial Practices of Everyday Life

This rich ethnography examines the forces shaping Cairo's landscape from the perspective of its poor. Al-Zawiya al-Hamra is a housing development built for a population relocated from Bulaq during Sadat's efforts to redesign Cairo according to his idea of a modern city. Farha Ghannam's work on the daily practices of its residents contributes to the literature on Cairo's urban development with a new perspective. Her work also treats some of the most important elements conditioning life throughout the region: the articulation of state discourse in urban development, the emergence of Islam as a unifying factor for a poor population of mixed origins, and the role of globalization in spreading desires and creating new economic realities. The study focuses on the ways in which people have altered the visible forms and uses of the spaces allotted to them by the government when they were relocated to al-Zawiya. The book describes the "tactics" and "strategies" employed by people in efforts to realize their visions as individuals and as families. These actions

are explored as negotiations with which people selectively appropriate or reinterpret the various powerful forces that condition the context in which they take place. State, global, or religious discourses are not top-down influences to be dichotomously rejected or accepted by the poor. This study challenges the idea of modernity, particularly as it is discussed in relation to Muslim societies. For Ghannam, modernity is not a Western-defined ideal to be more or less successfully emulated by "other" societies, particularly in regard to the emphasis on secularization. Rather, residents of al-Zawiya are modern in that they are both attracted to a religious identity and to the desires and expectations stimulated by globalization, and deal with both in articulating identity and producing neighborhood space. Farha Ghannam's steeped experience in the field and her careful methodology give her subtle analysis an unshakeable credibility. Her theoretical framework and her own identity as a woman place the hands and visions of women at the heart of her ethnography, as they are in the landscape of her analysis.

Remaking the Modern is structured in six chapters that begin with an introduction to the fieldwork site by describing the state discourse surrounding the relocation project and its population. The relocation articulated state desires to improve the city by removing "less desirable" (p. 29) parts of central Cairo in line with its vision for a modern city ripe for expanded tourism and foreign investment. Chapter 2 describes the modern and scientific ideals embedded in the spaces of the housing development; its segregated and regular spaces would produce a healthy and productive citizenry for the nation. Here Ghannam reveals the tactics and strategies of people in reinterpreting the spaces allocated to them by the state to meet their own needs, by changing the balconies or using a single space for several purposes, for example. As women are the "main daily users" of the housing unit, their visions, desires, and needs are central to its individual transformation (p. 61). Chapter 3 discusses the identity construction of al-Zawiya residents through their relationships to place. Ghannam explores both the narratives of residents' past and their identifications with Bulaq and their places of origin, as well as the reordering of relationships and the new uncertainties caused by relocation to al-Zawiya. Chapter 4 brings the issue of the control of public space down from the level of state discourse to the gendered relations of the family. Ghannam challenges the public/private dichotomy, the traditional point of departure for academic discussions on the gendering of space in the Middle East, to examine the ways in which the boundaries between them are continuously contested. The construction of the mosque as a "safe" (p. 126) public space is examined in chapter 5, where religion is discussed as a unifying factor for a mixed community. Chapter 6 reveals the global context in which the local neighborhood is created. The space of the apartment is the site of the nexus between the global and the local; global connections build the local landscape and realize the global desires of one couple, even as another couple struggles with

the inequality created by the same system as they search for an apartment to consummate a marriage.

Because the foundation of Ghannam's work is in the practices of everyday life, this book bridges urban studies and gender studies in the Middle East by moving beyond defining the gendering of space as a simple division between public and private spaces.[1] Ghannam argues that women have always been viewed as "privatizing the public" (p. 91), because the public has been defined as the male domain; such a view does not allow for the complexity of actions and spaces that go beyond the dichotomy of the male-dominated public and the female-oriented private. Ghannam opens the discussion by exploring the varying public spaces that are open or closed to women (and young men) at differing times. Her uses of such a spatial analysis builds on studies that focus on veiling, for example, which explore the control of female sexuality through the body. Ghannam argues that the power relationships that reinforce gender inequalities regarding the movement or access to spaces do not aim to control women's sexuality but to control their access to knowledge.

The discussion of the tactics and strategies of women also contribute to theoretical discussions on the nature of the production of space. For Ghannam, "the city is not a ready-made container for the practices of its residents but a flexible entity that is made and remade through these practices" (p. 23). Ghannam illuminates the role of local people in making Cairo's landscape as well as the significance of their attachments to local place for their own identity construction. However, she argues that the local is never fixed, it is instead continuously remade through the practices of residents. Through actions of everyday life, women and men in al-Zawiya al-Hamra articulate their visions in a local neighborhood while they selectively appropriate or reject elements of the state discourse on modernization, global flows of information and the creation of new desires, and reli-

gion that serves as a unifying force for the urban poor. This is the nature of modernity in Cairo. *Re-making the Modern* joins a growing body of literature that contributes to gender studies in the Middle East with a geographical analysis of social practices.[2] Farha Ghannam's model ethnographic study gives students of urban culture in the Middle East a text which evokes the life of the city itself.

Notes

[1]. Ghannam uses "tactics" and "strategies" as defined by Michel deCerteau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. According to Ghannam, a strategy "assumes a proper place," whereas a tactic "is a 'clever trick' that depends on time and waits to manipulate any emerging opportunities in a system of domination" (p. 50). The physical addition or change to an assigned apartment is an example of a strategy. A tactic is based on "shifting meanings" (p. 59); changing the functions of spaces inside apartments according to different daily needs is a tactic. Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[2]. Such geographic studies emphasize the importance of the spatialization of daily practices and suggest the complexity of the role of Islam in shaping the context in which women negotiate these practices. Another recent example of such work is that of geographer Anna Secor, who explores the spatialization of various practices of veiling across Istanbul, Turkey, suggesting links between the gendered production of Islamic knowledge and women's mobility. Anna Secor, "The Veil and Urban Space in Istanbul: Womens Dress, Mobility and Islamic Knowledge," *Gender, Place and Culture* 9:1 (2002): pp 5-22.

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