

# **The Role of Civil Actors, Private Sector, and Public Organizations in the Urban Life of Open Spaces (The Cairo Case)**

## **ABSTRACT**

The trialogue process, reflected by the integration and interaction between civil actors, private sector and public organizations in the design of public open spaces is, and will always be, a hot issue in the urban life of many cities, thus raising some challenging questions concerning the role of public spaces and the nature of public life of cities and their inhabitants.

An essential quality of urban public spaces is that they meet the needs of users. Consequently the involvement of citizens in the design of open spaces plays a critical role in the sustainability of such spaces. On the other hand, both the private sector and public organizations are essential for the existence and construction of public open spaces.

The paper will investigate the trialogue addressed between the three sectors, civil actors, the public sectors and the private organizations in the design and management of open spaces with reference to Cairenes' society. The following questions will be raised, where the study will attempt to seek the answers; to what extent is the involvement of the three in the design and management of local public spaces? Does the use and quality of such open spaces differ according to the degree of involvement of each of the three sectors?

## **INTRODUCTION**

Public open spaces are considered a cornerstone in the lives of societies and they need to be recognized as such for their beneficial effect on human lives. For many years the public spaces of cities have been the subject of wonder, from the different ways in which public space can be designed and developed (Carr et al, 1992; Tibbalds, 1992), to concerns about privatization of space (Loukaitou-Sideris, 1993; Punter, 1990) and the challenging nature of public space (Zukin, 1995).

## **PROBLEM**

The impact of the exploding population in the urban footprint throughout the world, especially in developing mega cities, created a number of problems that largely affect the existence and quality of open spaces. Some of these problems are air and water pollution, housing problems, the legalisation of occupied areas, overcrowded settlements, traffic, congestion and noise. Subsequently, uncontrolled city growth is mounting the strain on public open spaces and putting open spaces in urban cities at risk. As a result recreational spaces are reduced, which consequently lead to the worsening of the social, psychological and physical problems. On the other hand, the management and construction of open spaces faces a number of problems some of which are limited governmental financial support, convincing private sectors' involvement and investment, vandalism, misuse, accessibility ...etc.

In summary, problems facing open spaces stem from two major points. First, the limited availability of outdoor space and pollution as a by-product of modern life, while the second is guaranteeing the continuity of such spaces and the quality they give. To overcome the above problems more attention should be paid to open spaces, whether in terms of quantity, quality

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or availability. The paper argues that such problems could be avoided through the involvement of all parties of interest.

## **AIM**

The paper aims to tackle the problems facing public open spaces in terms of existence, accessibility and quality through investigating the role of involvers. Three parties are involved in the appearance and design of open spaces addressed as, public organizations (governmental parties as providers of land), private sector (constructors, investigators and other main finance supporters), and civil actors (users and co-producers of social knowledge). The degree and method of involvement of the three parties and the resulting conflict noticed from such involvement in the design and quality of public open spaces should be addressed. The vital question which poses itself is “what is the exact role of each party in this triologue to attain “a well managed and successful public open space” which is freely accessed by the public and where users’ needs are fulfilled”.

In sum, the research aims to highlight the impact of the three parties on the design, management, use and quality of public open spaces.

## **FOCUS OF RESEARCH**

The term public open space has many meanings. Throughout the research it is used as a short hand term for any open space which is not covered with buildings and which facilitates free public physical access and is specially intended for recreational use. Such open space includes parks, play areas and incident green spaces, thus excluding grey spaces of roads, pavements, car parks and other hard surfaced areas related to different types of built development and that are not used for a recreational purpose. Madanipour, A. (2003), suggests an accurate definition of public open space based on the observation that public open spaces in cities, almost anywhere and at any time, have been places outside the boundaries of individual or small group control, mediating between private spaces and used for a variety of often overlapping function and symbolic purposes. According to him urban, open public spaces therefore have been multipurpose spaces distinguishable from and mediating between the distinguished territories of households.

The paper is dealing with two sections, the first focuses on the role and importance of urban open spaces in cities, to what extent are they essential and the influence of the three early addressed parties in the life of open spaces, while the second is oriented towards the triologue taking place between the three parties of interest and its impact on open spaces in Cairo.

## **THE SAKE OF OPEN SPACES**

The tradition of providing for public open spaces within an urban environment can be traced back to the industrial revolution, when public parks were recognised as an essential component in the development of the city of London. For much of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the concept of public open space within urban areas was viewed as vital to the health of the residents where crowded conditions, pollution and lack of hygiene were common within the city region. In this era, public open spaces provided leisure, recreation and public health opportunities for residents.

Now-a-days public open space can serve more purposes than before; it is viewed as an important space for social interaction and is contributing to the general well being of a community. Moreover, open space plays an essential role in the environmental quality; it minimizes energy consumption and carbon dioxide production, provides microclimate modification, improves air quality and reduces noise. On the other hand the creation of

aesthetically satisfying landscape environments increases community enjoyment of everyday life and adds greater sense of a meaningful bond between residents and their community.

## **THE ROLE OF PUBLIC OPEN SPACE IN THE LIFE OF SOCIETIES**

Public open space in the modern urban life of societies is symbolized through parks, plazas, playgrounds, streets and other settings designed for the benefit of the public where public activities take place. They provide a context for the enhancement and reinforcement of natural settings and process and give form to urban communities. They make a significant contribution to the regional economy and economic competitiveness through enhancing the overall quality of life and visual identity of the region. Properly designed and managed public open spaces significantly increase the value of the private capital base. They also promote human to physical and psychological well-being (Grahn and Stigsdotter 2003).

## **THE ROLE OF SOCIETIES IN THE LIFE OF PUBLIC OPEN SPACE**

Understanding the role and benefit of civil actors, private sector and public organizations is a means to obtaining an understandable dialogue. Society and individuals derive benefits from open space in a number of direct and indirect ways. Despite the undeniable benefit provided from open spaces to governments, public organizations and civil actors, the share of responsibilities of each is still debatable. Management has, among well known climatic and social aspects, a positive impact on the quality and continuity of open spaces and plays a major role in the way such spaces are used, organised and maintained. A lack of management leads to the deprivation of open spaces. To whom lies the responsibility of not only the design but also the management of open space? Is it the responsibility of civil actors, government or private investors? Are the three parties involved if so, to what extent? And above all what is the task of each party? To find answers to these questions, the role of each one of the three parties should be identified.

The Project for Public Spaces suggests that a successful space has four key qualities: "The space is accessible; people are engaged in activities there; the space is comfortable and has a good image; it is a sociable place, one where people meet each other and take people when they come to visit." According to Carr et al. (1992), public spaces should be responsive, that is, designed and managed to serve the needs of their users, thus meeting the needs of users is considered an essential quality of urban public spaces. In addition, a mutual effect exists between civil actors and urban open spaces where the former provides vision and actions and the latter is designed for the sake of former. Furthermore, the involvement of civil actors in the design and management of urban open spaces provides them with a feeling of belongingness, responsibility and sense of place (Jorgensen and Stedman 2006). The interaction between individuals in open spaces creates social cohesion because they provide the basis for bonds (Marshall and Srolle 2004). In brief, the involvement of civil actors guarantees the management and security of such open spaces and plays a major role in reaching a suitable design which satisfies and fulfills participants' various needs. But do civil actors represent a vital participant in financing open space?

Government has always depended on the private sector to support its aspirations; particularly depending on it as a source of revenue and investments (Burdett, R. p. 304). Most governments, especially in developing countries, face many competing public purposes (education, traffic, etc.) that have larger constituencies beside other financial problems whether in managing, maintaining or in enhancing open spaces. Many already existing public spaces in such countries suffer from overuse and insufficient public funding. Such a situation poses an inquiry which is, who will finance the maintenance and management of open spaces to guarantee their long term usefulness and continuity?

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According to Garvin, A (1998) trends in open space development and management can be classified to three basic models; first is a “purely public sector approach” where public organizations provide or renovate the open space due to civil actors’ pressure. The second model is a “public/private co-venture approach“, where public organizations maintain ownership and responsibility of the open space but co-ventures with the private sector for development. Once completed, the open space is under public sector purview, although the private sector may continue to be involved in case of financial aids. Finally the third approach is “a market oriented civic model” as it relies on a long term partnership between the parties. Using mechanisms such as a nonprofit development corporation, the third approach brings together private sector responsiveness to market needs, private donations and revenue-producing functions to provide for the improvement and management of public open space. Hence, the venture between the two is for the sake of civil actors as participants.

## THE CAIRO CASE

Cairo’s population exceeds 6 million. The city suffers from high levels of pollution and traffic, where inhabitants’ share of public open spaces ( $0.94 \text{ m}^2$ ) is negligible compared to the minimum standard ( $32 \text{ m}^2$ ). Funding public open spaces in a country like Egypt represents a major problem where priority of governmental funding is oriented to public intention that has larger demands as education, traffic, housing,...etc.

Public open spaces in Cairo are owned, constructed and managed by the government, most of which serve the middle and lower classes. As a result many of Cairo’s open spaces are in dire need of repair and rejuvenation where not only money represents a major problem but also managing it. The study argues that to overcome such problems, not only should funds be raised for the sake of open space, but also a dialogue between public/private/civil actors should be encouraged.

In Cairo, one of the rare successful examples of a dialogue taking place between the three parties is Al Azhar Park. According to the Project of Public Spaces (PPS), Al Azhar Park is listed among the 60 of the great places. The park’s aim is to upgrade the site and shift it from a neglected and mistreated condition to a considered resource for the adjacent neighborhoods and the whole metropolis. The park is designed for the sake of the civil actors targeting their needs, where the main purpose of the park is to “launch a combined physical and social rehabilitation process in the neighboring area, the Darb al-Ahmar district”. The construction of the park resulted from joint-efforts between governmental parties (as supplier of the land and facilitators for the agreements) and private sector (the Agha-Khan Trust in corporation with dedicated partners as the Ford Foundation and Swiss-Egyptian Development Fund) to support the ongoing rehabilitation process. The foremost task of public organization in the management of the space adheres to the standards. On the other hand, private sector plays a major role in guaranteeing the continuity of the park through their finance support and mutual benefiting from the space grounding it with a long-term assurance to public use. It was involved through the enclosure of income-generating services within the park, such as the hilltop restaurant and the lake-side café. Their existence facilitated the maintenance and enhancement of the Park to depend on an additional source of income (other than the entry tickets) and to become self-sustainable. The park is an award in the social, aesthetic and environmental scheme of Cairo. Proper maintenance, excellent management policies and assured financial support have made the Azhar park a model to be followed. The case of Al Azhar Park raises a question of how are other public open spaces managed and designed in Cairo?

## 1.1 Scope

The paper is directed to investigate the effect of the interacting process taking place between the three parties on Cairo's public open spaces. Three types of public open spaces in the district of Nasr City are selected for such a purpose. Located to the east of Cairo, Nasr City was launched in the 60s as an extension to neighboring suburb of Heliopolis. Occupying nearly 250 km<sup>2</sup> of Cairo, Nasr city was established to modernize and expand Cairo. It is known for its well designed modern road system, grid street system and well distributed public open spaces. An area of 1.57 km<sup>2</sup> was selected in the 7th zone of the city as it embodies various samples of the three scenarios addressed in the study (fig. (1))

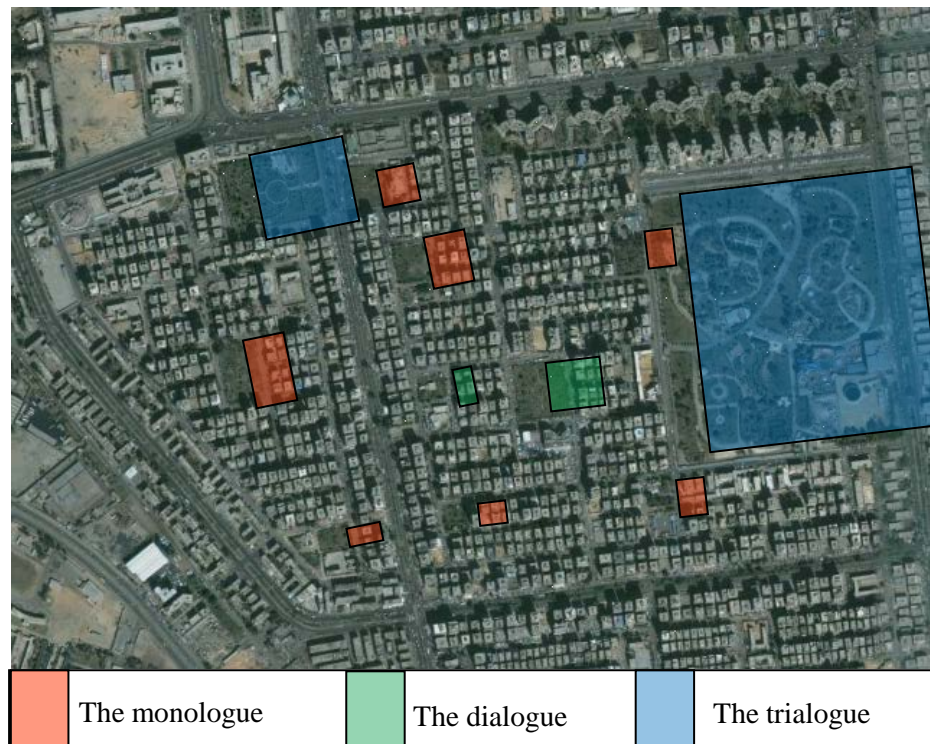


Fig. 1: the case study area

## 1.2 Materials and methods

The research work involved carrying out a quick interview, a closed ended questionnaire and an observation. The interview addresses the parties responsible of management and funding. Residents and users were given a questionnaire and were asked about their reasons for using or not using the open space. They were also asked to evaluate the quality of the open space through its components. Responses formats were closed in ranking scale from 0 to 5 where 0 stands for does not exist to excellent condition. The observation was carried out to support the collected data.

In sum the analysis of the study will be limited to the following issues:

Quality of space: What is the condition of the landscape elements? What are the types and variety of landscape elements? Is the space freely accessible?

Motives for use: Why do people visit the area? Why don't residents use the area?

Management and sustainability of space: Who manage the open space? Who pays for the up keeping of the open space and its renovation?

The paper has a descriptive character and no confirmatory nor predictor aims were set. Basic descriptive statistics have been applied to explore the end product of the interacting process



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taking place between the three parties and the type and quality of open space resulted from such interaction.

### 1.3 Results

In total, 250 questionnaires were distributed, where (61.6%) returned. The monologue approach results from the domination of the public organization on the design, management and control of public open spaces. They represent the one and only player in this scenario, causing a financial stress. The main target beyond such spaces is to create a green area within the urban fabric used for the public but constructed and managed by local districts. This situation is very common and such open spaces are distributed throughout Nasr City. The observation and the analysis of the 46 collected responses of the questionnaire format revealed that public open spaces which have total governmental control not only need repair but are also characterized by their poor appearance. The basic greenery is the only characteristics of such spaces. No recreational facilities are embodied. Although no fees are levied for the entry of most spaces, hardly any participants were observed using the spaces, and few residents were jogging on the outskirts of the space.

The dialogue approach takes place between the public organisations and civil actors. The absence of the private sectors lead to a number of incidents that need to be clarified, one of which is prohibiting the access and use of the public through fencing such spaces where they are only enjoyed to be looked at. Civil actors are responsible of the construction and maintenance with the provision and approval of public organization. The main reason of their involvement is to prevent vandalism. It was notified through the 44 responses in addition to the observation that the quality of landscape elements are good and better maintained than the previous scenario. Most of these spaces are fenced for the fear of misuse and few residents were jogging by the out borders of the open space. At the most basic level urban public spaces must be public; where everyone can enter and should be welcomed, which is missing as a result of this dialogue.

On the other hand, the trialogue existng between the three parties transforms the public open space to a profitable space, where every single service is not for free. Public organization supervises and manages the space while the involvement of the private sector is for the sake of the investment and self sustainability of the area. The Beautification of Cairo Organization is responsible of the management of such open sapces. Entrance tickets in addition to fees provided from commercial facilities within the open space cover the management and maintenance charges required for the sustainability of the place. It was found out from 70 collected responses and the observation that these open sapces are very good evaluated in terms of quality and variety. They are fenced and charged. Various activities took place within the space and participants were observed jogging and walking by their boarders. The only noticed complain is that every single service or facility is charged.

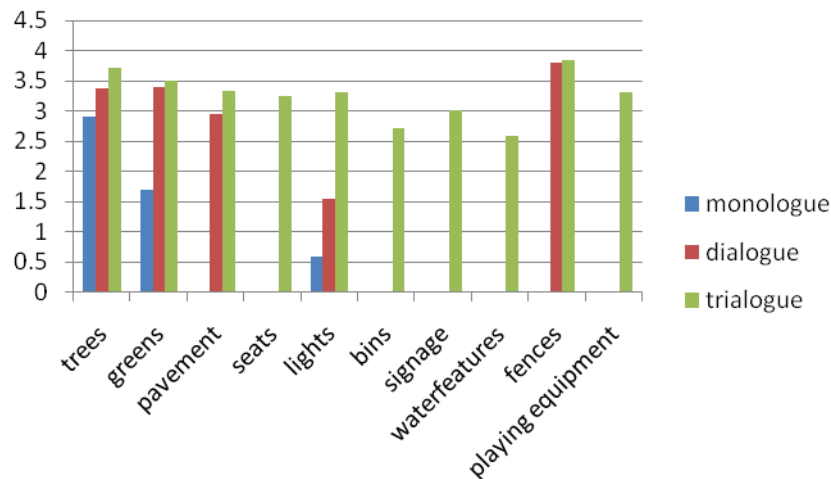


Fig. 2: the evaluation of the three open spaces

In sum, the dialogue between any two parties is better than the monologue but the trialogue is the best. Open spaces resulted from a dialogue process are not a full success in spite of their great role in knitting together the frayed urban fabric. The absence of one of the parties largely affects the success, existence and management of public open spaces, (figure (2)).

Moreover the same technique was applied to the azhar park, where 100 questionnaire formats were distributed resulting the return of 68 responses. The outcome result of the analysis when compared to the above results showed a relatively small gap between the park and the open spaces reflecting the trialogue taking place in Nasr city. On the other hand, a huge gap was noticed between the trialogue and both the monologue and dialogue specially in terms of furniture and hardscape, figure (3).

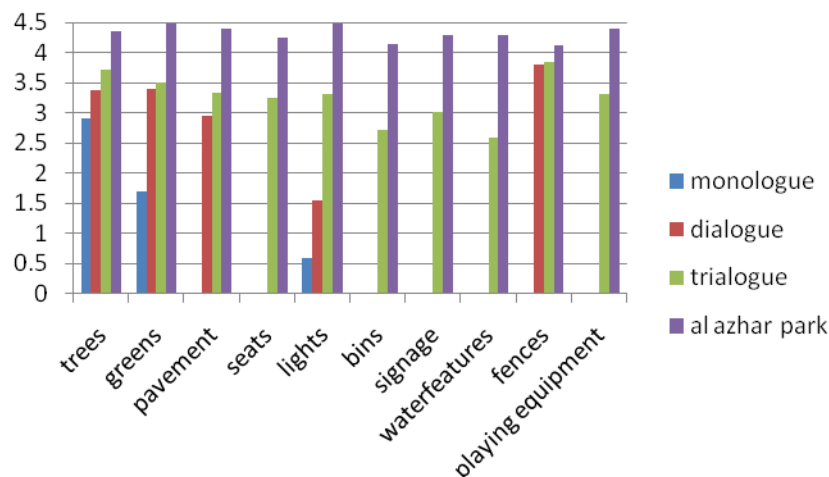


Fig. 3: the evaluation of the three open spaces in comparison to Al Azhar Park

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## CONCLUSION

Communication and encouragement from public organization to both private sectors and civil actors represent important pillars of urban planning. The keystone of the success of al Azhar Park stems from the trialogue between the three parties. The trialogue approach, despite its importance, is not a common approach in Cairo, though so far it has proven to be a success. Thus the paper calls for the construction of more public open spaces based on such approach to overcome the above stated problems resulted from the other two approaches.

As the paper demonstrates, private, civil and public sector partners provide better financing, marketing and management to public open space when worked together. The total control of only one party on public space changes the definition and experience of public open spaces. On the other hand, the absence of one of them leads to a failure in the contribution of public open spaces to communities. The period when land, offered by the government, would lead to the creation of a city-envisioned and successful public open space is gone. Public open space creation and redevelopment involve putting together the efforts of civil actors, private sector and public organizations within a planning program approved by the latter.

Each party has a critical role to play to help in the success of the trialogue. Governments should encourage civil actors' commitment through using community meetings and individual interviews to lead civil actors through the visioning process. This will not only overcome the problem of 'fenced public open spaces' but also will encourage good use of such spaces and support bonds between citizens and their communities. Moreover, governments should also encourage private sectors to be a fund source in public open space through offering various facilitators e.g. reducing taxes. Private sectors should in turn be more flexible and seek to invest in public open spaces. Civil actors must cooperate with their public organization and have more trust in them.

Due to the small size of the sample analysed and the preliminary statistics carried out, no general conclusions can be deduced about the evaluation of public open spaces in general. However some conclusive remarks can be made. Thus, the paper cannot tell what specific techniques should be used to create a successful public space, however, it shows that the success of such space depends on a combination of aspects; broad community cooperation, motivated financing and inspired management. Their involvement provides a sense of ownership which contributes to people's feelings of social, psychological and spiritual well-being. Moreover, their free use of most services maintains their belongingness to the place. In other words a comprehensive trialogue exists whenever contributors are targeting one goal; to obtain a successful, sustainable public open space. Shared goals between the three parties in this comprehensive trialogue largely guarantee the continuity of successful public open space and can supply a reference determinant for planners to visualize more sustainable city approach.

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