



HAL
open science

Cairo behind the gates

Noha Gamal Said

► **To cite this version:**

Noha Gamal Said. Cairo behind the gates. *Ambiances: Revue internationale sur l'environnement sensible, l'architecture et l'espace urbain*, 2013, In situ - Ecologie sociale, <http://ambiances.revues.org/252>. 10.4000/ambiances.252 . hal-01324053

HAL Id: hal-01324053

<https://hal.univ-grenoble-alpes.fr/hal-01324053v1>

Submitted on 10 Nov 2021

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

Cairo behind the gates: studying the sensory configuration of Al-Rehab City

Le Caire derrière les murs : étudier la configuration sensible de la ville d'Al-Rehab

Noha Gamal Said



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/252>

DOI: 10.4000/ambiances.252

ISSN: 2266-839X

Publisher:

Direction Générale des Patrimoines - DAPA - MCC, UMR 1563 - Ambiances Architectures Urbanités (AAU)

Electronic reference

Noha Gamal Said, « Cairo behind the gates: studying the sensory configuration of Al-Rehab City », *Ambiances* [Online], Varia, Online since 06 February 2013, connection on 10 December 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ambiances/252> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ambiances.252>

This text was automatically generated on 10 December 2020.



Ambiances is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Cairo behind the gates: studying the sensory configuration of Al-Rehab City

Le Caire derrière les murs : étudier la configuration sensible de la ville d'Al-Rehab

Noha Gamal Said

Wallification

- 1 If you go for a drive in the new cities surrounding Cairo, you will discover how the city landscape has radically changed, revealing a new perspective of the city, formed by the linearity and openness of broad avenues and highways, repeated over and over again. You may travel several hundreds of metres and see nothing but walls and gates enclosing various functions. Two main spatial configurations define this contemporary landscape: *walls* and *zoning*. The city has become a closed urban territory, fragmented by function into islands. In this emerging landscape, the city has become a *universe of objects* where modern men and women live, work and entertain (Degoutin, 2006). In fact, new cities in Cairo, much as many other cities, are subject to the sweeping influence of *privatopia* (MacKenzie, 1994), which is increasingly invading the modern city, reaching all sectors and activities including housing, and producing a new form of habitat called *gated communities*¹. This form, first developed in the United States, reached Cairo in the early 1990s when dozens of gated communities encroached on the desert plateaus to the east and west of the megalopolis.
- 2 Gated communities have occupied many researchers concerned about various aspects of the future of cities. The aim of the present article is to analyse Al-Rehab City, a gated community in New Cairo, from a sensory point of view, or, in other terms, figure out its *Ambiance*². *Space Ambiance* has been introduced to the field of architecture and urban design to combat the visual hegemony by which sight has become the sense of senses, and

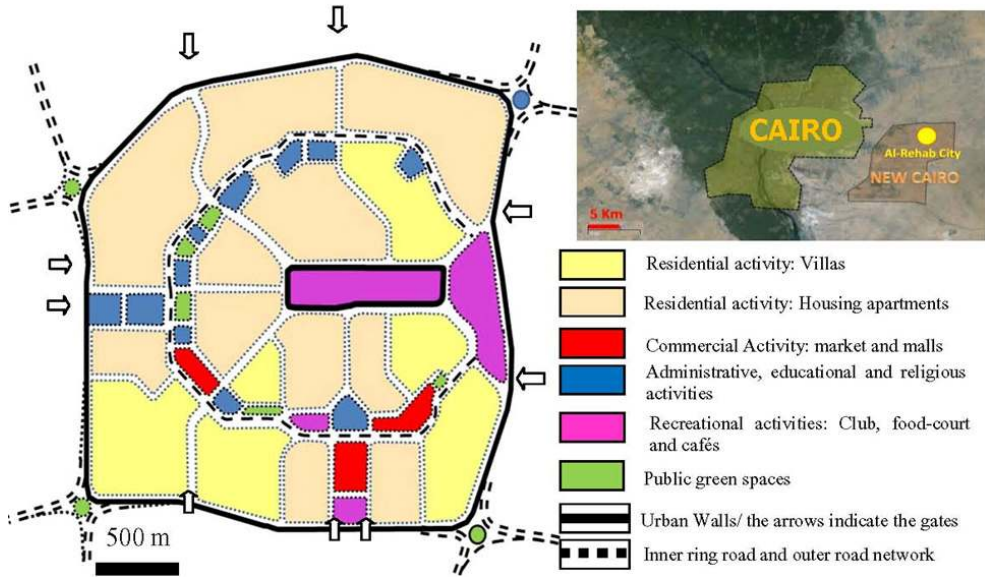
to restore “sensory equity” (Augoyard, 2004). It can be best translated into Arabic by the word “*Al Ja’w*” (Al-Ba’libaki, 2005), which basically refers to climatic characteristics and is used as a common expression in colloquial Egyptian, referring to a place and its atmosphere.

- 3 Cairo behind the gates is about revealing the way in which the body, hearing and sight traverse the various spatial borders which make up this type of habitat. The prime objective is to understand the *sensory structure* of this gated community as an emerging type of habitat. To elaborate on the sensory configurations of Al-Rehab City, our research uses participant observation and “commented-walks”³ as its main methods, supported by sound recordings and measurements (Thibaud, 2001). Six commented-walks were carried out (four residents and two visitors, three men and three women).

Almost a city “Presque ville”: Al-Rehab’s urban morphology

- 4 Described as an “*incomplete dream of a city or almost a city*”, Al-Rehab provides all the services for its residents within its walls, yet they still depend on the mother city for certain reasons, mainly economic. It is situated east of the capital in a new city called New Cairo. It is about 15 km from the big city’s eastern urban boundaries. Al-Rehab is mainly accessible from the Cairo-Al Suez highway or the internal road network of New Cairo. It occupies an area of 10 million m², housing 200,000 people⁴. As New Cairo is still under construction, Al-Rehab City is almost in the middle of the desert. Most of the surrounding land is still vacant with buildings scattered here and there. As a gated community, the city is ringed by walls. Zoning is the main concept governing its spatial organization and internal urban form. It is divided into mono-functional zones, forming multiple islands surrounded by roads. As a dormitory city, residential property covers most of the area, with two basic types of dwelling: houses and blocks of flats. Services are distributed along an inner ring road, serving all residential areas. Services are, in turn, separated by function: the market, food court and malls, in addition to other administrative, educational, religious and recreational activities (Illustration 1). The street – once the main unit of urban fabric and the principal public space – has completely disappeared, replaced by inner green networks for pedestrian movement and outer transportation corridors for vehicles (Illustration 2). We shall focus mainly on the western part of Al-Rehab city where the commented walks were carried out (Illustration 3).

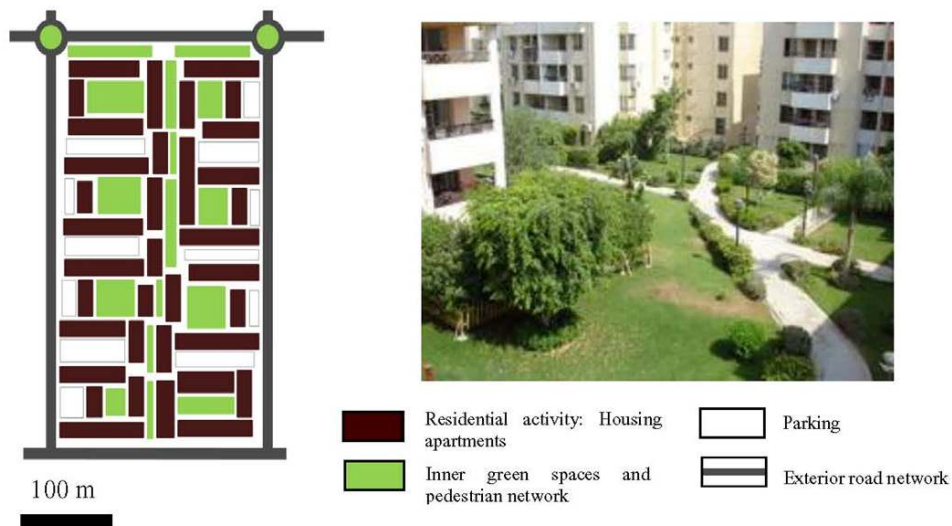
Illustration 1: Land-use plan of the western part of Al Rehab City.



SPATIAL ORGANIZATION IS BASED ON ZONING, IN WHICH THE CITY IS DIVIDED INTO ISLANDS; EACH ISLAND CORRESPONDS TO A SINGLE FUNCTION. IN THIS CONTEXT, WALLS SEEM AN IMPORTANT URBAN COMPONENT, REPEATED AT SEVERAL SCALES: A WALL SURROUNDING THE CITY; ANOTHER ONE ROUND THE CLUB AT THE HEART OF THE CITY.

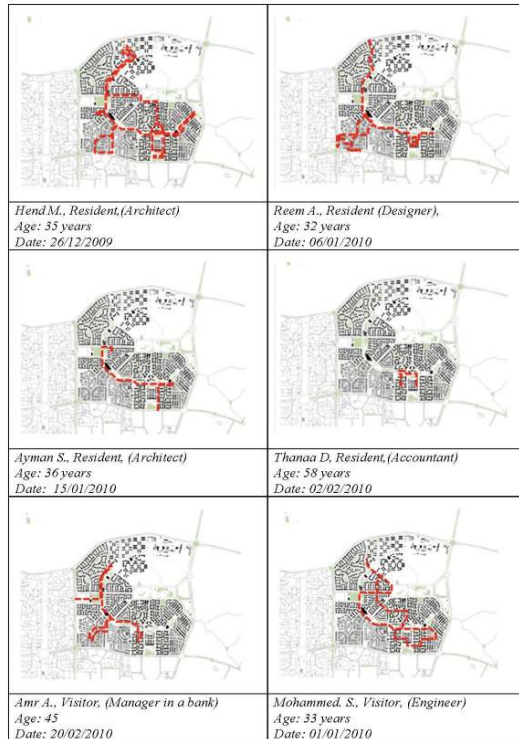
COPYRIGHT RESERVED

Illustration 2: Spatial organization of apartment blocks



RESIDENTIAL BUILDINGS ARE DISTRIBUTED AROUND A GREEN COURTYARD. THERE ARE TWO TRANSPORT MODES; OUTER ROADS FOR MOTOR VEHICLES AND CAR PARKS; INNER PATHWAYS FOR PEDESTRIANS.

COPYRIGHT RESERVED

Illustration 3: The six commented-walks carried out during the experiment

COPYRIGHT RESERVED

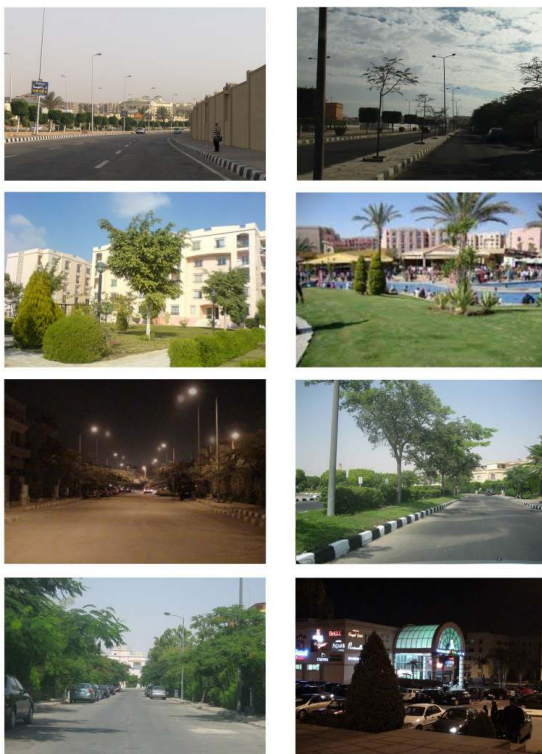
Fear defines borders

- 5 What sort of fear prompts Egyptians to build walls to protect themselves in a secure city like Cairo? In this respect Denis (2006) highlights a sort of *dismissive fear* in which the residents refuse the urban reality of the city associated with pollution, noise, congestion and poverty. The increasing number of gated communities in the past few years reflects the disenchantment that Egyptians feel towards the megalopolis. The idea of closed communities is well suited to the elite, which wants to escape the urban ugliness which prevails the capital. They pay dearly to construct their own dream and surround it with walls. The rich live, work and entertain in silos, even the journeys between these spaces are made in air-conditioned private cars that prevent the heat and muffled noise of Cairo's congested streets from reaching the occupants. Many writers compare this way of life to the film *The Truman Show*, in which the hero lives and works in a sort of constructed reality. Unlike the end of this film when the hero refuses to live in this false environment and chooses freedom, the residents of the gated communities are voluntary prisoners of their dreams - as Degoutin, (2006) calls them in his book *The Voluntary Prisoners of the American Dream*⁵.

Modernizing Cairo: importing western sensory features

- 6 Continuing the same scenario of rejecting the inner city and constructing a new hybrid Americano-Mediterranean lifestyle, the sensory features of Al-Rehab City resemble many other American or European gated-communities. This form projects an image of a modern western elite inhabiting oriental territory. It incorporates several sensory features which produce a new version of Cairo by offering a healthy and clean environment with vast green spaces. In this section, we shall try to characterize the main features making up the sensory experience of Al-Rehab City (Illustration 4).

Illustration 4: Prominent sensory features of Al-Rehab City



EXTENSIVE GREEN SPACES, FORCEFUL PRESENCE OF SKY, SPACIOUSNESS AND EMPTINESS COMBINE TO CREATE THE CITY'S SENSORY IDENTITY.

COPYRIGHT RESERVED

- 7 **Calm:** “The residential area is full of calm and greenery. In this calm, I clearly hear the voices of children playing in the garden.” (Mohamed [S.], visitor). During the experiment this was the first and the most frequently cited theme. Interviewees repeatedly mentioned quiet as a precious aesthetic sound quality of Al-Rehab. Despite being a dominant characteristic, it takes various forms in the city’s soundscape, ranging from mute to relatively noisy spaces. Three types of sound are identified in this context. Firstly background calm: in the overall calm, participants perceive the friendly voices of a neighbourhood, such as the voices of children playing in the courtyard mixed with birdsong and the rustle of trees; such voices give a feeling of being in company, conveying a sense of security. The second form of sound is urban silence, defined as a state of sonic

stillness, with nothing happening in the vicinity and no one sharing the space with participants. Finally congenial voices: in contrast to the prevailing calm, some places are classified as noisy with a congenial *ambiance*. This mainly occurs in public spaces where people are exposed to a mixture of voices.

- 8 **Greenery:** “Green spaces are found everywhere. Its colour calms me down. When walking I smell the earth,” (Hend [M.], resident). Despite being artificially planted in the midst of the desert, the presence of nature makes a major contribution to the sensory experience of the city. The earth takes on the appearance of a fragrant green carpet of lawn. The image of extensive greenery is one of the visual identities of the city (Illustration 3). The earth is smooth, soft and close, which invites the body to lie down or sit on the ground, creating special corporeal postures. It is associated with children’s voices, which evoke the image of public gardens. Moreover, greenery also affects the city smellscape as the earth has a strong fragrance, particularly noticeable when the plants are watered.
- 9 **Forceful presence of sky:** “From my roof, I have the impression that a piece of sky is mine!” (Reem [A.], resident)”, “On the horizon, I see the sky. I do not need to look up to see it!” (Ayman [S.], resident). Using these expressions, an interviewee who lives in a house indicates the constant presence of the sky in her daily life”. The sky is a prominent element since it is visible on the horizon, and when walking or driving a car (Illustration 3). Urban regulations such as building heights and setbacks help reinforce the presence of the sky. The maximum height is five floors or 18m, while the distance between buildings usually exceeds 50m.
- 10 **Spaciousness:** “I have the impression the sea is at the end of the road. I feel I am driving towards it” (Amr [A.], visitor). Participants remarked on the width of spaces and streets while stressing their visual open-endedness. Such comments were usually accompanied with references to the refreshing spaces brushed by gentle breezes. This combination of air movement and visual openness embodies the sea, invisible yet present just over the horizon. It produces a sense of space; the body is relaxed and reposed.
- 11 **Emptiness and bustle:** “Here, in the food court, I see a lot of people in the passage in front of the cafes. This space is different as I hardly see any people in the residential spaces” (Thana [D.], resident). In the vast spaces of the city all the bodies melt into their surroundings. They are far away and scattered. Bodies, when perceived, are seen simply as outlines, as moving items in the city landscape. From a corporeal point of view, children have a powerful presence in the green residential courtyards and recreational spaces. The safety of spaces, achieved by separating between the outer vehicular roads and inner green spaces, explains the children’s presence. Most city spaces are considered relatively empty. In residential spaces, corporeal presence decreases sharply, almost vanishing around the houses. On the contrary, certain spaces are animated and lively with relatively intensive corporeal presences, in particular the public spaces.

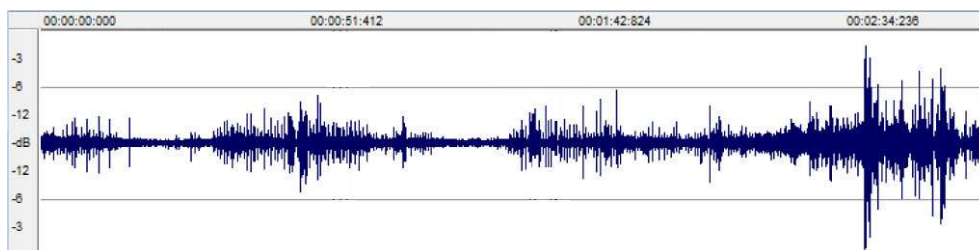
Egyptianizing the American dream

- 12 As the main objective of this type of habitat is to construct a new western environment, the pre-conceived sensory profile of the city is based on a clean sweep which wipes out all the sensory phenomena which normally characterize Cairo. For example, to provide the above-mentioned state of calm, all street vendors - an important sound feature of Cairo streets - are forbidden entry to sell their goods. Certain Egyptian sensory features

nevertheless define Al-Rehab as an oriental or Islamic city. These sensory features change the image of the western sensescape, in particular the call to prayer, perceived as a time signal or alarm due to its regular recurrence. One of the residents said: “By this call I know the time of day; it connects me to others, to the outer world” (Hend [M.], resident).

- 13 Described as a *melody* launched into the city soundscape, this term indicates the quality of this sound event, turning it into a pleasant experience. It is perceived as a *latent beauty* in this situation of prevailing everyday silence. Its presence makes people feel the space is somehow alive, adding a limited period of dynamism and helping to reveal the boredom often associated with such calm. Moreover, the City authorities restrict the volume and choose the person who makes the call, to maintain the quality of the soundscape. The call to prayer particularly affects residential areas where calm forms the sound background. It has an enveloping effect which masks all other sounds present in these spaces (Illustration 5 a-b).
- 14 The second oriental sensory feature is the smell of *shisha*, which men habitually smoke in oriental cafes. In most public spaces cafes are designed to resemble their French counterparts, supplying *shisha* to suit public tastes. This is perceived as an oriental odour, inhaled in a western context. Cafes also have large video displays, with bodies packed in front of these huge screens and eyes glued to them. This is mainly a feature of working-class cafes, allowing local people to watch television. The sound of matches enlivens the space, and, from time to time, one hears angry murmurs or cries of joy. Moreover, most events held in the open emphasize oriental behaviour, such as Eid prayers which are held in the public garden in front of the Great Mosque. Bodies assemble and the crowd invests the empty city for a few hours, then it disperses and vanishes into the cityscape. Another typical feature of Egyptian streets is young men playing football in parking lots at night.

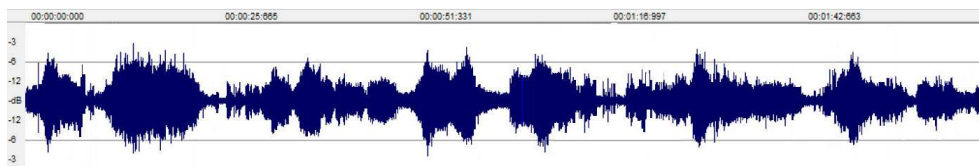
Illustration 5a: Soundgraph⁶ taken in a residential zone.



CALM DOMINATES THE SOUNDSCAPE, ACCOMPANIED BY THE FAINT VOICES OF CHILDREN PLAYING IN THE COURTYARD AND PEOPLE'S CONVERSATION

COPYRIGHT RESERVED

Illustration 5b: The call for prayer in the same residential zone and its effect masking the habitual soundscape

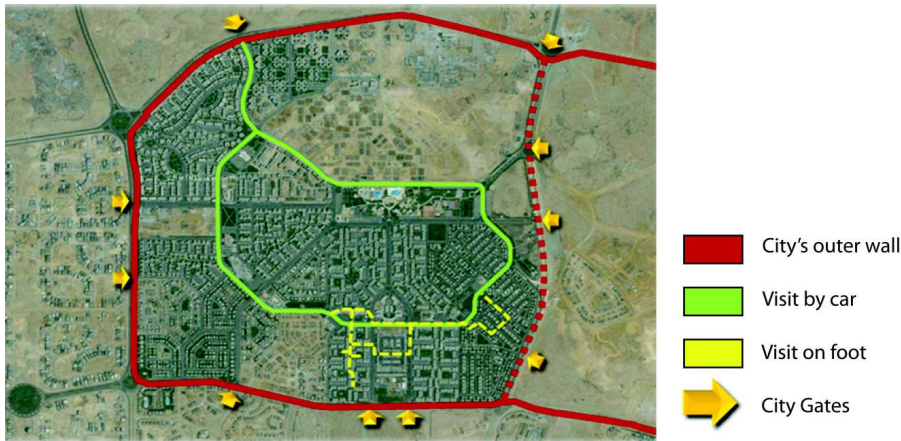


COPYRIGHT RESERVED

Sensory journey through Al-Rehab City

- 15 Adopting a more detailed scale of observation, we shall now analyze the commented-walks in keeping with a *logique de parcours* (route rationale), while repeating and analyzing the verbal comments participants used to describe the ambiance of different spaces through which the route takes us (Illustration 6 & 7). Commented walks may at first glance seem *sequential*; designed as a sequence of varying situations, which implies a distinction between different sensory configurations.

Illustration 6: The route chosen for the sensory tour



COPYRIGHT RESERVED

Illustration 7: The photos show the main approach, the entrance and the many micro-ambiances at Al-Rehab



COPYRIGHT RESERVED

16 Sequence 1 - Situation of isolation

We have left Cairo. We can see the dunes of the desert and the scattered buildings on both sides. The desert surrounds me and I feel that I am going to a faraway place. This separation from Cairo tends to calm me (Ayman [S.], resident)

- 17 This is the first limit which separates Cairo from Al-Rehab City. It is apparent when approaching the city and before entering it. In this separation, the inner city with its agitation, congestion, density, noise and poverty fades away. The separation is due to the desert and is perceived as an ambient transition between the noise of Cairo and the calm of Al Rehab. It produces a feeling of isolation, gradually inducing a state of emotional calm in participants.

18 Sequence 2 - Situation of penetration

The wall makes me feel that I am in front of a closed community, with control exerted on visitors. I feel like an outsider rather than a resident. On entering, I was astonished by the cleanliness of the streets (Mohamed [S.], visitor)

- 19 This being a gated community, a wall surrounds the whole city. The outer wall consists of fences with plants on the inside which are visually permeable, but impenetrable for bodies, smells and sounds. Visitors are exposed to negative feelings of exclusion and they return in their imagination to former eras of royalty. The gates along the outer wall act as a *sensory threshold* where two different spheres of ambiance meet. After passing through the wall, people experience a momentary shock due to the stark contrast between the ambiance of the desert outside and the green spaces within. The latter are visually dominant, changing certain characteristics of the moisture and air circulation, sounds

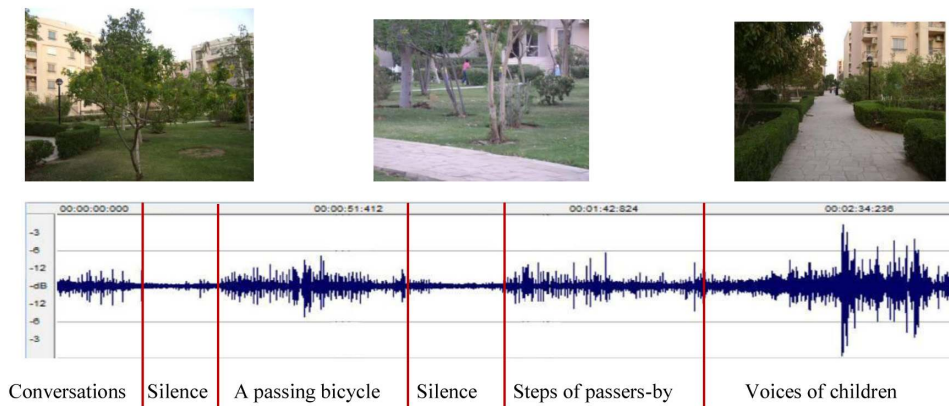
and smells. Entrance to the city is marked by a strong emotional transition to a state of calm and tranquillity.

20 Sequence 3 - **Ambiance of tranquillity**

The green colour dominates; it covers the land. I feel like I am in a public garden. The air smells natural, the earth conveying the smell of herbs and plants. It is too calm here. There are some children playing safely in the space. When I walk, I hear neighbour's conversations in their apartments; I hear them like whispers. During the night, the illuminated rooms in the surrounding buildings indicate there are people around me and that reassures me (Reem [A.], resident)

- 21 This mood is cited in most city spaces. Many sensory phenomena help create this feeling: the extensive greenery, friendly voices – of children – the presence of sunlight, the sound of birdsong, among others. These phenomena conjure up an image of public gardens. In spatial terms, this type of ambiance covers the areas where the apartment blocks are located, and the green spaces along the central concourse with its services, most public activities being surrounded by vast green spaces (Illustration 8).

Illustration 8: Soundgraph taken in a green courtyard located between apartment blocks



**THE VARIOUS TYPES OF SOUND HEARD WHEN WALKING THROUGH THIS SPACE ARE INDICATED ABOVE.
COPYRIGHT RESERVED**

22 Sequence 4 - **Situation of transition**

I am now leaving the residential area full of calm and greenery and am crossing the road to another space. Actually, the road is wide and clean, planted with various types of trees and flowers. This space is alive and animated in an informal way (Mohamed [S.], visitor)

- 23 This is the third type of physical limit which this time takes the form of roads lined by green spaces or parking lots. In this spatial organization, each zone is delimited by the road network, which acts as a sensory border, marking a sudden break (Illustration 9). On reaching the road, people used words such as “*getting in*” or “*getting out*” of an atmosphere, thus expressing their sense of crossing a border. But the road is also seen as a unifying element in sensory terms because roads feature the city’s main ambient characteristics: calm, greenery and space.

Illustration 9: Sonic transition between the residential area and the food court passing by the road and green spaces which act as sensory borders



COPYRIGHT RESERVED

24 **Sequence 5 - Ambiance of agitation**

There are people and cars coming and going in all directions. It is clear that this is the main market. I feel as if I am in a working-class area. It is a radical switch from peace and tranquillity to a situation where I feel uncomfortable (Reem [A.], resident)

- 25 Despite the luxurious image the city enjoys as a residence for the elite, certain spaces display working-class characteristics. The following phenomena make up this ambiance: the effect of a sudden olfactory assault in which the interviewees inhale a mixture of smells – food, shisha, fresh vegetables, fruit, coffee and such. Regarding bodily movement, participants perceived a kind of irregular movement with people walking back and forth all over the space. This mood prevails in the market. Pedestrians and vehicles share the same space without strictly enforced rules. In addition, an informal soundscape prevails in these spaces because vendors in different shops increase the volume of their radios so that everyone can hear them. These ambient phenomena are familiar characteristics of working-class Cairo districts.

26 **Sequence 6 - Ambiance of voluptuousness**

The space is full of movement, speech and light. Despite being better lit than other spaces, the light is dimmed and mysterious. I smell the scent of greenery and restaurants. I hear people's conversations and the screams of children playing in the green spaces. I hear some music mixed with the sound of dishes, spoons and forks (Thana [D.], resident)

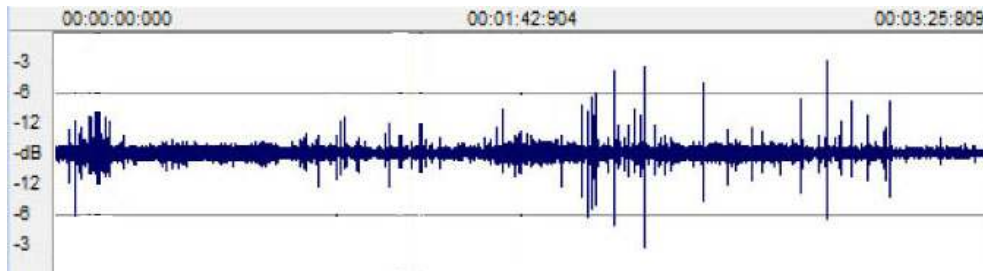
- 27 This mood is the result of luxury. It is found in certain places, mainly the food court. Certain aesthetic qualities and sensory phenomena help create this mood, such as dimmed lighting, and the act of eating and drinking in luxury restaurants. Sounds of light music, conversation and falling water from the central fountain, the aesthetic features of the surrounding landscape, and the leisurely gestures, all contribute to a sense of voluptuousness. These spaces are perceived as lively and well lit in contrast with the city's darker, more peaceful atmosphere. This ambiance has a western European image associated with French cafes.

28 **Sequence 7 - Ambiance of stillness**

It is quite dark here, I feel the absolute silence. Nobody is in the street, as if it was midnight. The walls of houses play a role in creating this feeling as they are extensively planted in a way that I cannot see behind, I am afraid and worried (Amr [A.], visitor)

- 29 This ambiance is defined as one of dark silence. It is felt to be uncomfortable and irritating. It induces negative feelings such as fear, worry and anxiety, mainly at night. This ambiance is found in the area round the houses or in administrative buildings after working hours. These spaces become dead zones and dark spots in the city, perceived as “mute” or “voiceless” (Illustration 10).

Illustration 10: Soundgraph taken near the houses displaying patches of silence in the city soundscape

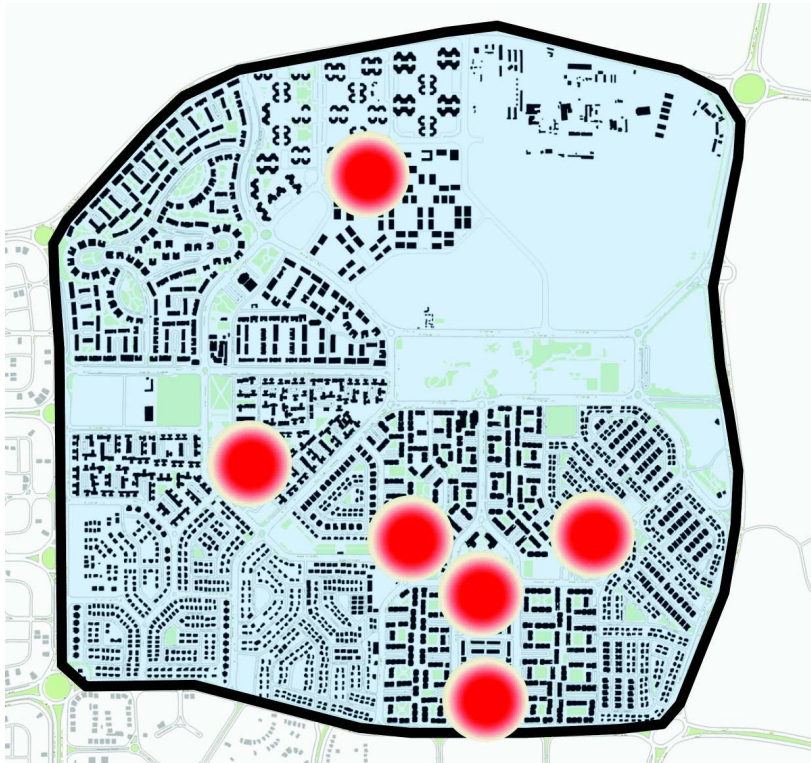


COPYRIGHT RESERVED

Mosaic ambiance as a sensory profile

- 30 The method we used enabled us to capture Al-Rehab City’s sensory profile. Despite having certain overall unifying characteristics, the specific sensory experience is heterogeneous. In general the city ambiance tends towards *calm*, or in certain cases *deathly silence*, with some public structures, such as the malls or the food-court, succeeding in generating some *noise*. Some experiences are therefore dynamic, coloured, illuminated and vibrant. Other experiences display a contrasting pattern, with monochrome colours, calm and darkness. The ambiance in this context can thus be described as a mosaic, based on many micro-ambiances, which are juxtaposed and delimited (Said, 2012). But some urban features play a major role in creating this mosaic ambiance, in particular the outside wall and zoning within. (Illustration 11)

Illustration 11: Wrapped in the predominant calm of the city soundscape, some noises emerge from public spaces such as the food court, market and malls



MULTIPLICITY OF MICRO AMBIANCES
COPYRIGHT RESERVED

- 31 It seems that the design process set out to create *pre-designed moods* which are somehow imposed on users and change their perception and affective state as soon as they enter each zone. The sensory journey readily illustrates this variation, witness the various micro-ambiances. From an architectural point of view, each of these spaces has its own form and sensory phenomena which combine to produce a specific *mood*. The shifting mood experienced during the commented walks is mainly due to the sound and bodily qualities of the various spaces, with olfactory and imaginary aspects taking second place. In this minor scale of analysis, the city is perceived as a calm backdrop in which patches of animated micro-ambiance appear.

Juxtaposition

- 32 In this context, juxtaposition appears to be the proper term to define this sensory *model* or sensory *structure*, which makes it clearer how the above-mentioned micro-ambiances are assembled in this sensory context. Micro-ambiances do not overlap; rather they are juxtaposed side by side. Each micro-ambiance has a single tone in terms of space and time. Two ambient effects reinforce this sensory structure: *interiority* and *envelopment*. Certain spatial elements – roads, buildings, changes in level, and green spaces – contribute to these effects, enveloping each micro-ambiance.

Impermeable sensory limits

- 33 This relates to the degree of interconnectivity between sensory phenomena and their ability to move from one space to another without being interrupted. In this sensory ecology, the experience is characterized by the transition phase and perception of sensory limits. Participants were repeatedly exposed to cut-out effects (Augoyard & Torgue, 2005). In general, during the experiment, participants were exposed to three successive types of limit which tend to buffer each ambiance from the surroundings.
- 34 The first is the desert which acts as a *natural buffer*, breaking the sensory experience between Cairo and Al-Rehab. This was intentional because from an elite perspective, Cairo has become a complex of unsustainable, insoluble problems. All one can do is escape or seek protection (Denis, 2006). The sensory features associated with working-class Cairo must be kept at a distance because they threaten the sensory harmony of gated communities.
- 35 *The walls* are the second form of sensory limit enclosing the city. With this wall the modern city loses two key characteristics: free access and charge-free public spaces (Paquot, 2006). This urban feature is repeated at various smaller levels inside the city. The city is perceived as a *series of walls within a wall*. At the heart of the city, another wall surrounds the city club. Walls of vegetation, in the front gardens of houses, form the third type of wall. Due to the massive vertical greenery, these fences act as solid, visually and physically impenetrable walls.
- 36 The third mode of isolation is *the void* which segments the sensory experience. The void takes the form of roads lined by green spaces and parking lots which act as sensory buffers. In this sensory analysis, roads trap certain sensory phenomena, mainly those related to proximity such as olfactory and tactile features, whereas sonic and visual aspects have more fluid contours and pervade adjoining areas. This type of limit produces a *segmented or fragmented sensescape*.

Mosaic ambiance and emotional experience

- 37 This sensory experience was rich in emotions. The sensory signals people perceived made them swing between different moods: joy, anxiety, fear, agitation, tranquillity, pride, envy, voluptuousness, among others. In the same register, participants were exposed to powerful emotions like shock or astonishment due to the sudden contrasts, between the outer desert and inner greenery, and between the various micro-ambiances. Their emotional state changed completely as they passed through the various spaces, as is clear from the commented walks. The mosaic ambiance produces three particular emotional states. The first state is "*sensory liberty*": the diversity of micro-ambiances, and the separation between them due to zoning, allow residents to choose an atmosphere to match their *mood* (Said, 2010). For most residents, the choice reflects a feeling of freedom as people are not obliged to be immersed in certain atmospheres against their will. A new contemporary sensory concept, the "*choice of ambiance*" - "*ambiances aux choix*" - , is thus emerging. At the same time and within the bounds of such freedom of choice, bodies and spirits are trapped by the physical limits and monotony of moods (Said, 2010).

- 38 The second emotional state, a “*sense of belonging*”, results from the limited size and aesthetic sensory qualities. The main concept behind this urban model involves *limiting the unlimited*; drawing borders round Cairo’s unrestricted urban sprawl. This is in keeping with Isaac Joseph’s vision of the city fragmenting into micro-societies to allow individuals to find their own milieu. This form offers residents an intimate scale. Despite the negative feelings of rejection felt by visitors when entering the city, due to the walls and gates, the well defined limits of the city create a strong sense of community for its residents. The strong definition of a community creates unwritten rules binding the residents to preserve it. In addition, a strong sense of attachment is also felt due to the sensory qualities which enshrine the city’s privilege. “This beauty and cleanliness I want to protect. I feel I own something precious and I don’t want others to destroy it. Frankly, I get so upset when I see outsiders come here and disturb the city’s calm.” (Hend [M.], resident).
- 39 In contrast to these positive emotions, non-residents had other negative, sometimes painful experiences, particularly when facing the walls. Despite being composed of light fences, people perceived this element as a sort of rejection or exclusion. This brings to mind the vision of Yves Grafmeyer and Isaac Joseph (1984) in their quest for *urban personality* or the city as “*a state of mind*”, in which they define the urban environment as a *moral region*⁷. In this context, and with the tendency to enclose spaces and the over-emphasis on protection, privacy in the city may be seen as a form of “*urban selfishness*” which prevents passers-by from entering (ibid.). The “mine, not yours” attitude implies a rejection of others, depriving them of their citizenship and turning them into *strangers* or *outsiders*.

Conclusion

- 40 Gated communities introduce a new urban vocabulary and an aesthetic of which the main characteristics are enclosure, luxury and wealth. On the macro-scale, gated communities appear to be pockets of prosperity, small cities within the city. They are easily distinguished in an aerial photo as patches of intense greenery on the desert plateau. In their present form they are the result of *isolationism* which *puts at a distance* the sensory reality of the city, creating an *artificial reality* in its place. Spatial distance reinforces the social distance which this form seeks to create. The gates and walls weaken, or even destroy, the sensory links between the outside and the inside.
- 41 Generally, the ambiance in this gated community appears to be frozen, rigid and well controlled, with strict regulations governing the city. Its static rhythm hardly varies with time. Even the natural presence is almost static because green spaces appear to be an everlasting decor, as most of them consist of a carpet of lawns and evergreen trees which do not change with the seasons.
- 42 On the micro-scale, the sensory experience is characterized by a series of sensory breaks or by sensory-spatial segregation, producing varied, sometimes contrasting micro-ambiances. Moments of transition, crossing sensory borders, recur several times during the sensory experience when passing from one micro-ambiance to another. The perception process in this context appears to be a reconstitution of the fragments of a dismembered body of a city gathered together by the outer wall. Zoning, despite being criticized from an environmental and social point of view, is sensorially praised by

participants as an urban configuration which protects calm. The total separation between dwellings and services divides the city into peaceful and lively zones. The calm of residential areas is intended as a return to the sacred and spiritual concept of home as a human refuge where people need tranquillity and where they may indulge in moments of contemplation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Al-Ba'libaki, Mounir. 2005. *Al-Mawrid: A modern English-Arabic Dictionary*. Beirut: Dar El-Ilm Lil-Malayën.
- Augoyard, Jean-François. 2004. Vers une esthétique des ambiances. In : Amphoux, Pascal ; Thibaud, Jean-Paul & Chelkoff, Grégoire (eds.). *Ambiance en débats*. Grenoble : À la croisée. p. 17-30.
- Augoyard, Jean-François & Torgue, Henry. 2005. *Sonic experience: A guide to everyday sounds*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Degoutin, Stéphane. 2006. *Prisonniers volontaires du rêve américain*. Paris : Editions de la Villette.
- Denis, Eric. 2006. Cairo as Neoliberal Capital? From walled city to gated communities. In: Singerman, Diane & Amar, Paul (eds.). *Cairo Cosmopolitan: Politics, Culture, and Urban Space in the New Middle East*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press.
- Grafmeyer, Yves & Joseph, Isaac. 1984 [1994]. La ville-laboratoire et le milieu urbain. In : Grafmeyer, Yves & Joseph, Isaac (eds. et trad.). *L'école de Chicago : naissance de l'écologie urbaine*. Paris : Champ Urbain. p. 5-52.
- McKenzie, Evan. 1994. *Privatopia: homeowner associations and the rise of residential private government*. London: Yale University Press.
- Parton, James. 2000. *The american heritage dictionary of the English language*. New-York: Boston Publisher Houghton Mifflin.
- Paquot, Thierry. 2006. Preface. In : Degoutin, Stéphane. *Prisonniers volontaires du rêve américain*. Paris : Editions de la Villette.
- Said, Noha. 2010. Place Attachment and Physical Detachment: the Ambience of Contemporary Cities *intra-muros*. In: Third International Seminar Architectonics Network. Architecture and Research, 1-3 June 2010, Barcelona. Barcelona (Spain): Department of Architectural Projects, Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya, BarcelonaTech.
- Thibaud, Jean-Paul. 2001. La méthode des parcours commentés. In : Grosjean, Michèle & Thibaud, Jean-Paul (eds.). *L'espace urbain en méthodes*. Marseille : Ed. Parenthèse. p. 79-99.

NOTES

1. A gated community is a North American expression which was defined in 2000 in the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language as: "the residential districts surrounded by a closed

perimeter of walls and fences, whose entry is controlled by guards and reserved only to residents and their guests” (Parton, 2000).

2. The notion of “ambiance” is developed in France by the UMR CNRS 1563 “Architectural and urban ambiances” that regroups two research laboratories CRESSON *Centre de recherche sur l'espace sonore et l'environnement urbain*, Ecole nationale supérieure d'architecture de Grenoble and CERMA *Centre de recherche méthodologique d'architecture*, école nationale supérieure d'architecture de Nantes.

3. Commented-walks is a term translated from the French *parcours commentés*. It is a new method developed by Jean-Paul Thibaud, a sociologist and researcher at CRESSON Laboratory, Grenoble School of Architecture. This method is based on the experience *in situ* and aims to identify the sensory phenomena that compose people's perceptions. In this method, the researcher accompanies the participant on a walk around their neighbourhood. The participant comments on what he or she perceives during the walk, while the researcher records his or her speech. Three activities occur simultaneously: walking, perceiving and describing. During the visit, the residents guide the researcher in introducing their district. They choose the places that constitute most of their sensory lived experience. The commented walks we carried out were considered relatively long, lasting from an hour and a half to two hours.

4. Al Rehab City Group. Talaat Moustafa Group Holding Company. Consulted on 8 Apr 2013. URL: <http://www.alrehabcity.com/rehab2011/>

5. Translation of the original title: *Prisonniers volontaires du rêve américain*.

6. A soundgraph is a visual representation of sound produced in spaces. It visualizes the sonic intensity of spaces and helps identify various moments of silence, or, moments when a sound occurs.

7. Isaac Joseph and Yves Grafmeyer use this term to characterize a milieu by a dominant moral code, for example the existence of certain regions where people are more dominated by a special taste or passion.

ABSTRACTS

The current research aims to elaborate the sensory configuration of a gated community named Al Rehab City in Cairo. This contemporary urban form, imported from the United States, is part of the last stage of modernizing the city. The methods used are based on analysing the sensory phenomena captured by several techniques *in situ*, such as participant observation, sound recordings, in addition to citizens' speech in the form of “commented walks”. In the first phase of analysis, the research identifies the relevant sensory phenomena which are the result of a western urban concept inhabited by oriental society. In the second part we analyse the sensory structure of this urban model by revealing the way in which the body, hearing and sight traverse the various spatial borders which make up this form of habitat.

Cet article esquisse la configuration sensible d'une *gated community* - la ville d'Al-Réhab City au Caire - forme urbaine contemporaine importée des États-Unis. L'approche adoptée par cette étude propose une analyse des phénomènes *in situ* à partir des techniques d'observation, d'enregistrements sonores et du recueil de la « parole habitante » sous la forme de « parcours

commentés ». Pour définir l'ambiance de cette ville, deux phases d'analyses ont été mises en œuvre. La première vise à identifier les phénomènes sensibles pertinents qui sont le produit d'un concept occidental habité par une société orientale. Dans la deuxième phase, l'article traite de la configuration sensible de cette ambiance en révélant la manière dont le corps, le son et la vue franchissent les frontières spatiales qui composent cette forme d'habitat.

INDEX

Mots-clés: ambiance, gated community, configuration sensible, expérience émotionnelle

Keywords: urban ambiance, gated communities, sensory configuration, emotional experience

AUTHOR

NOHA GAMAL SAID

PhD researcher at CRESSON Laboratory (*Centre de recherche sur l'espace sonore et l'environnement urbain*), Grenoble School of Architecture. I have participated in teaching L5C undergraduate courses at ENSA Grenoble and I am an assistant lecturer at Ain Shams University, Faculty of Engineering, Department of Architecture and Urban Design.

said.n@grenoble.archi.fr

nohagamal_12@yahoo.com