Contours of Cairo Revolt: Street Semiology, Values and Political Affordances

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Abstract

This article contemplates symbols and values inscribed on Cairo's landscape during the 2011 revolution and the period since, focusing on Tahrir Square and the role of the Egyptian flag in street discourses there. I start by briefly pondering how intertwined popular narratives readied the square and flag as emblems of dissent. Next I examine how these appropriations shaped protests in the square, and how military authorities who retook control in 2013 re-coopted the square and flag, with the reabsorption of each critical to that of the other and executed in the same place: Tahrir. Pro-military factions have created the pretense that they were for the revolution by altering the square and structures around it. Furthermore, the square has remained open to the public, but ceased to be inviting. This relates to post-revolutionary alterations that psychologically repel entry. I consider these changes in light of affordance theory, value sensitive design research and especially the defensible space model, arguing that Tahrir Square has been symbolically cordoned and closed.

Keywords Affordances · Arab Spring · Cairo · Defensible space · Politics · Protest · Revolution · Semiology · Tahrir Square · Value sensitive design

1 Introduction

Recent appropriations of Tahrir Square and the Egyptian flag intertwine with one another and evolving political circumstances. Already symbolizing national unity at the onset of Egypt's 2011 Arab Spring, both were seized as signs of solidarity against the oppressive and corrupt military dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. In the summer of 2013, however, the military leadership reabsorbed these symbols of defiance to fuel dissent against the elected Islamist government, dropping flags from helicopters into protesting masses in Tahrir, for example. More recently, authorities have placed an austere, massive pedestal with a flag in the center of Tahrir Square. They also demolished Mubarak's ruling party headquarters adjacent to the square, which were burned in 2011 and a hated symbol beyond re-appropriation. This is in addition to introducing design features to Tahrir in line with Oscar Newman's defensible space model that psychologically repel entry. The message appears to be: The revolt is over, and we won—"we" standing for the military and ostensibly the people since the former has branded itself as an instrument of the latter.

Reclaiming Tahrir, the flag and indeed the 2011 January Revolution seems a conscious attempt to reaffirm the 60-year status quo of military rule through the pretense of support for revolutionary aims never achieved, while simultaneously closing avenues for resistance. It is, of course, common to assert ownership over popular movements and figures, and this happened twice following the 2011 uprising. Muslim Brotherhood leaders, who took control in 2012 and who were autocratic despite being elected, spoke of defending sacrifices of the January martyrs and attempted to claim Tahrir. This is even though they had not sanctioned participation in protests at early stages and sided with military authorities in the post-revolutionary period. The current government of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who overthrew the Brotherhood in 2013 and later won elections decisively, albeit in the face of no viable opposition and widespread propaganda against Islamists, has done similarly. This is despite perpetuating the kind of militaristic authoritarianism protesters had fought.

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In what follows, I look at symbols, aspirations and values inscribed in the physical and cultural fabric of Cairo during the Arab Spring and their evolution in the period since. This means examining the intertwined history of the square and flag, and considering how popularly circulated narratives prepared both as symbols of protest. Developing hints from affordance theory, value sensitive design research and work on defensible space, I also ponder how the re-appropriation of protest emblems, together with physical alterations of Tahrir, have established symbolic barriers that close the square as a space for oppositional representation. Throughout, I contemplate how pro-military nationalists have, rather successfully, re-appropriated the square and flag into an affirmation of what has been the status quo in Egypt for over a half century, raising questions about prospects for effective dissent.

2 Tahrir Square, the Egyptian Flag and Revolutionary History

The January 25 uprising began as a demonstration against police brutality, on a holiday, not incidentally, called Police Day. The holiday, somewhat ironically, commemorates the death or injury of police who opposed British occupiers. The protest concentrated in Tahrir, but combusted throughout Cairo and other urban centers. It rapidly expanded into a mandate expressed in the slogan: "bread, freedom, social justice and human dignity" (Teti and Gervasio 2011; Pleyers and Glasius 2013).

More specific demands included the annulment of the emergency law, imposed for more than 30 years. This had facilitated arbitrary arrest, carried out by police and security forces operating with near impunity, sometimes torturing, sexually assaulting and committing extra-judicial executions (Lesch 2011; Ghonim 2012, Chaps. 6–7; Khalil 2012, Chap. 3). People additionally wanted a minimum wage and fair elections (*Ibid*.). Percolating beneath were neoliberal measures adopted in the 1990s and 2000s that had decimated ordinary living standards, sometimes even directing vital resources such as water to wealthy enclaves at the expense of partly cutting off poorer communities (Shenker 2016, throughout). The January uprising accordingly culminated from pent up frustrations, ignited by specific circumstances. Perhaps most prominent was the case of Khaled Siad, a man in his 20s beaten to death by police in public view while begging for mercy. There was also a string of self-immolations in protest to hopeless conditions, along with internet activism drawing attention to sufferings and calling people into the streets.

Tahrir Square's centrality in the protests that followed is unquestionable, but it did not come about spontaneously. Tahrir—which means "Liberation"—was not even called

such when first built. Initially called Midan Al Ismailliya or Ismailliya Square, it was an addition to Ismail Pasha's Parisian inspired downtown (Mostyn 2007, Chaps. 7–9). Over time, Tahrir and the space around it were increasingly defined by important structures such as a government building called the Mogamma, the Egyptian Museum, the American University in Cairo, the Arab League and ruling party headquarters. In the 1870s, an area around the square hosted the barracks of Pasha's Army, taken over with the rest of the country upon the 1882 British conquest (Selem 2016).

The 1919 Egyptian Revolution seeded greater control to locals, with the British government granting independence in 1922, albeit without fully withdrawing forces or surrendering the Suez Canal. During this time the square began to be informally called "Tahrir." The barracks were eventually removed and the square expanded. The 1952 Revolution completed the ejection of British occupiers, and Tahrir or Liberation Square soon after officially got its name (Gardener 2011, Chap. 1). The late 1950s saw the erection of a modernist—and more specifically, brutalist—building overlooking the square. It headquartered President Gamal Nasser's Arab Socialist Union and later the National Democratic Party or NDP, led by his appointed successors Anwar Sadat and then Hosni Mubarak, all three from the military and roughly the same generation. In the decades that followed, the square sporadically became a protest space, with the most prominent demonstrations occurring in January and February of 2011, with reoccurrences afterwards, especially in the summer of 2013.

The Egyptian flag was also a central symbol of the 2011 uprising and among those in Tahrir, and its history knots concretely and abstractly with the square. Called the Liberty flag, its inception has roots in the 1952 Revolution that toppled King Farouk and ejected British occupiers, just around the time the square was officially given the same name. The first iteration had red, white and black bands and the gold-colored Eagle of Saladin, and it appeared prominently during post-revolution festivities in Liberation or Tahrir Square (Podeh 2011, Chap. 3). It would experience alterations over the next decades, with the stars and eagle either removed or altered to reflect changing political situations, but with the three stripes—regarded as colors of Arab liberation—always remaining. The current flag, instituted since 1984, retains the tricolor pattern and a smaller version of the Eagle of Saladin, but no stars. The bands and specific colors of the broader pan-Arab design—sometimes with a green stripe substituting the red, or with a red or green triangular patch and other variations—adorn many Middle Eastern flags. The British diplomat Mark Sykes came up with the design during World War I as a revolt symbol against the Ottoman rulers, somewhat ironically, as it would later be a banner under which Arabs ejected Western powers (Podeh 2011, Chap. 2).

It is too simple to locate the Egyptian flag's role in the 2011 uprising in its revolutionary past. This is because flags not using the Pan-Arab design figured prominently in other protests, as in the case of Tunisia where the Arab Spring began. However, neither can the Egyptian use be reduced to a mere imitation of Tunisia. Among other reasons, this is because Egyptian activists gathered wrapped in flags to protest the Khaled Siad killing prior to the uprising in Tunisia (see Shenker 2016, p. 202). One stated reason for the widespread use of the flag in the Egyptian uprising was to diminish divisiveness that might arise from signs of party or religious allegiance (Ghonim 2012, p. 168), and this was also a reason for gathering in Tahrir, likewise symbolic of national unity. The square also had strategic importance because of its physical location next to representations of state in the heart of Cairo and as a focus for media attention, and both Tahrir and the flag had power as originating symbols of the country and thus emblems of national unity. Protesters widely understood all of this, as did those tussling for power in the aftermath. Tahrir Square and the flag were accordingly subject to subsequent physical and ideological battles, with the latter re-appropriated in efforts to reclaim the former, along with the January Revolution.

3 Semiology of Tahrir Square and the Egyptian Flag

During the Arab Spring, Tahrir captured the imagination of people from abroad and especially in Egypt, entering popular discourse as a kind of symbolic shorthand for a range of ideas, gaining celebrity-like value. Insofar as this is so, one might say it acquired mythic status.

The word "myth" derives from *muthos* (μῦθος), an ancient Greek term connoting speeches, conversations, sayings, narratives and grounding stories about origins (Liddell et al. 1996, p. 1151; Partenie 2014). The latter can involve gods, but also founding figures such as George Washington, along with fundamental ideologies and their physical expressions, for example, the Statue of Liberty and Tahrir Square. In grounding stories, these physical manifestations form a kind of vocabulary or symbolic shorthand, as just stated. Thus when Barthes (1957) speaks of mythic images as "a type of speech" (p. 109) in his work on semiology, he suggests that artifacts with mythic significance communicate much as words do. Language and understanding of it are emphatically socio-historical, something also emphasized by the etymology of "myth."

On the foregoing account, then, the mythical includes artifacts that have entered popular discourse and have a history such that they function like language. An image of Hitler, for example, immediately ideates evil, just as photographs of Martin Luther King evoke notions about freedom and justice, as did Tahrir Square in 2011. Non-visual materials do likewise, so that a recording of King's "I have a Dream" conjures the same ideas as photographs of him, and does so before he finishes his first sentence. Here mythic artifacts stand in for language and convey meaning as readily as words do. The notion of mythic artifacts as language additionally emphasizes that receptivity requires familiarity with background cultural-historic narratives, just as comprehending words requires acquaintance with them. Obviously a heretofore uncontacted Amazon tribe will not load meaning on photographs of Hitler, King or indeed Tahrir Square the way those with familiarity do.

Once established in popular discourse, myth becomes available for co-option. Thus, to use a shallow and arguably unsuccessful example, a Canadian telecommunications company, formally called Wind, rebranded to the name Freedom on the expressed grounds that nobody can say freedom is bad, and this because of the place that freedom has in grounding stories—or in other words, myths—of the West. In 2011 protesters did something comparable with Tahrir Square and the flag, though arguably not in a superficial way. While both had carried notions of liberty and national unity, they had also been emblems of state authority, and protesters effectively emphasized the former and turned it against the latter. In the time leading up to and following the 2013 overthrow, pro-military factions attempted to reclaim authority by reabsorbing Tahrir and the flag, though ostensibly in the name of liberty and unity, this time in a much more calculated manner.

One aspect common to the 2011 protesters and pro-military proponents that gained renewed prominence after, accordingly, is a strong sense of nationalism and the unity that goes with it. Though basically a roundabout with under-kept grass in 2011 and therefore not much of a physical space, Tahrir's history obviously makes it a nationalistic symbol. The Egyptian flag and most others similarly speak of national identity and unity. Urban structures, along with flags, can also be symbols of oppression, though this may be after the fact and to antagonists of the agendas they represent. Examples include the Berlin Wall, the Nazi swastika and the NDP headquarters that abutted Tahrir until burned and finally demolished in 2015. Other national symbols such as the Statue of Liberty can—if one is sympathetic to its grounding stories and reading it through what Hall (1980) calls a "dominant-hegemonic" mode—evoke affirming notions. The same is so of Tahrir Square and the Egyptian flag among pro-military nationalists, but also among those who fought them in 2011, albeit for more nuanced reasons.

One possibility for those challenging hegemonic views is to read symbols in oppositional ways. In this case, the interpreter "detotalizes the message in the preferred code in order to retotalize the message within some alternative framework of reference" (Hall 1980, p. 127). The oppositional reader is

aware of the mainstream code—consciously or otherwise—and reinterprets it in a manner at odds with the dominant meaning. Individuals reinterpreting originating myths of the US might be more prepared to reject humanitarian stories justifying US invasions, and might therefore deface national symbols, for example, burning flags. In the Egyptian context, such happened to the ruling NDP headquarters. However, it is questionable whether this was a genuine oppositional reading since the ruling party was already in widespread disrepute and hence did not have hegemonic control over popular ideology. This is demonstrated further by the fact that the next military government, while reclaiming the square and flag, did not bother with the NDP headquarters that abuts Tahrir, opting simply to tear it down.

A more interesting and relevant way of interpreting symbols is through what Hall (1980) calls a "negotiated" position. This involves

> a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements: it acknowledges the legitimacy of the hegemonic definitions to make the grand significations (abstract), while, at a more restricted, situation (situated) level, it makes its own ground rules—it operates with exceptions to the rule (p. 127).

A negotiated interpretation of symbols of state might recognize that the founding ideals of the country are aspirations to be celebrated, but acknowledge that they are yet achieved, with many people excluded from them. Tahrir and the flag were so interpreted by protesters. They did not deface them, but instead celebrated them as symbols of unity, as well as liberties sorely lacking. In other words, protesters accepted some of the grand significations projected by authorities, while recognizing the state apparatus had not protected these ideals, despite contrary pretensions. They accordingly took control of Tahrir and the flag, both physically and ideologically, turning them against the regime.

The preconditions for appropriating Tahrir and the flag were in fact strong, first, because both played a role in Egyptian revolts that won some measure of liberty from foreign control; second, because they were accordingly known as Liberation Square and the Liberation Flag, and Tahrir protests aimed at liberation from an oppressive regime; third, because Egypt, as compared to countries such as Libya, has a strong sense of national identity for both economic and historic reasons (Anderson 2015); and fourth, because the square and flag are associated with the military rule under which they were named, and many protesters saw the military as for the people. Protesters in fact chanted: "We're all Egyptian. The Army is ours" and "The people and the army are one hand" (Ghonim 2012, p. 215). Primary conflicts were indeed with police and security forces, not the military, which adopted a hands-off approach and pledged not to attack protesters (Shenker and McGreal 2011). It largely

abided by this during and immediately after the revolution, and helped keep peace when police officers abandoned stations and released criminals in an act of sabotage. Citizens setting up stations to guard streets and homes also kept crime at bay (Lesch 2011; Shenker 2016, Chap. 7). To at least some, this was a profound lesson against the need for strong, centralized security. As one local remarked: "People are coming together in a way they never have previously. It's really liberating—before, we lived in fear of the police and never had the chance to take responsibility for our own communities, but now we are in control" (quoted in Shenker 2016, p. 231).

In similar ways, protesters took ownership of Tahrir and the flag, rejecting them as symbols of the military regime and its security apparatus. This is even though Mubarak's political ancestors had officially named the square and introduced the flag, in addition to establishing the former as a nationalistic parade ground and hemming it in with government and party buildings (Podeh, Chap. 3). At the same time, demonstrators did not regard the square and flag as emblems of all that is great in Egypt. Instead, the square and flag—already representing unity in Egypt—became solidary symbols against oppressive conditions and widespread corruption and hence calls for what ought to be. More than just a symbol of solidarity, Tahrir became a place that concretely dissolved old divisions for a time, with people from various classes, generations and religious persuasions joining there (Alexander 2011; El-Naggar 2011; Shenker 2016, Chap. 7). Organizers saw the flag as an additional way of cementing solidarity, issuing the following guidelines:

> Please carry the Egyptian flag and refrain from carrying any signs of a political party, movement, group, organization or religious sect. Jan25 [*sic.*] is for all Egyptians. We are all demanding equal rights and social justice and do not want to be divisive (Ghonim 2012, p. 168).

Painted on faces, incorporated into placards and clothing, handed out to those in the square and waved by masses there, the square was awash with flags during the 18 day protest that toppled Mubarak (see The Telegraph 2011).[1] In a particularly dramatic display that I witnessed in Tahrir, flags were propelled upwards from air rushing from subway vents, silhouetted against an angry-looking grey sky, something of a rarity in Egypt. Flags were also draped throughout the city to mark allegiance to the uprising, and its colors incorporated in anti-government graffiti art appearing around this time.

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[1] For a visual record of flag motifs in Tahrir, click through photographs posted at https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/picturegalleries/worldnews/8314088/Egypt-crisis-protesters-in-Tahrir-Square-Cairo-wear-the-colours-of-the-Egyptian-flag.html.

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Thus where protesters flatly rejected Mubarak and burned his party's headquarters next to Tahrir, they registered and appropriated the square and flag from a negotiated standpoint. Tahrir especially came to represent the power of unified people on the streets to vanquish despotism by nonviolent means. This was already a distorted image because protesters had utilized violence in Tahrir and elsewhere, perhaps necessarily since the attacking Mubarak apparatus only relented after its security forces had been overwhelmed and shattered. Since then, and with the realization that the January Revolution only briefly pushed security machinery to the background and that economic conditions remain oppressive, the meaning of Tahrir has grown equivocal.

4 Reabsorbing Symbols, Containing Dissent

What most saw in the news and hence think of as Tahrir was not in fact the physical space, which has a diameter of less than 100 m. It was instead Tahrir plus the surrounding area, comprised of congested roads and hemmed in by buildings, including representations of state. At the functional heart of the city, Tahrir abuts Sadat Station, a hub in the metro system, and is a nexus for major streets and Qasr El Nil Bridge, a prominent landmark connecting downtown Cairo to Zamalek Island, one of the most affluent and fashionable areas in the city. While the centrality and physical space afforded are key parts of what led so many to gather in protest to conditions in Egypt, so too was the square's historic and symbolic status. The battle over Tahrir, in short, was not only about controlling space, though capturing and holding it was unquestionably important and added momentum in 2011. The battle was—and continues to be—preeminently about values, ideas and meanings, and attempts to own and re-shaped them.

Following the ousting of Mubarak, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces or SCAF took control. Though the military had conducted itself unexpectedly well during the 2011 uprising, old ways soon returned, with expression in media and on streets stifled, and protestors arrested, beaten, subjected to electrical shocks and sometimes killed. To humiliate further, some suffered strip-searches and women endured "virginity tests," carried out by male examiners in view of guards and officers (Khalil 2012, Chap. 15; Shenker 2016, Chap. 8). SCAF also created provisions limiting civilian control and dragged its feet transferring even this, something that later caused friction with the elected Muslim Brotherhood government. Despite this, faith in the military remained, with rumors circulating about counter-revolutionaries posing as soldiers and committing abuses. Even Wael Ghonim, a prominent leader of the January Revolution, publically stood with SCAF and offered criticism only

embarrassingly late, indicating the deep allegiance of Egyptians to their military at that time (Khalil 2012, Chap. 15). Amazingly, the Muslim Brotherhood did likewise, supporting the very structures that had marginalized it and would ultimately oust it, possibly because members had eyes on upcoming elections. They went so far as to physically block protesters marching up a street leading to Tahrir during a November 2012 demonstration that witnessed numerous deaths at the hands of military forces (Shenker 2016, pp. 256–261).

The Brotherhood of course recognized the significance of Tahrir Square in the aftermath of the January Revolution. They demonstrated there shortly before taking power (Fisk 2012), and just prior to his official swearing in, President-elect Morsi delivered a televised speech and took a symbolic oath before masses in Tahrir (Kirkpatrick 2012). This was some months after they had blocked anti-military protesters from entering it, a move further demonstrating recognition of its strategic importance. Once in power, Brotherhood members waxed about protecting the sacrifices of the January martyrs. This is even though they had been late in officially sanctioning participation (Khalil 2012, p. 280; Ghonim 2012, esp. pp. 169–171). This is also despite being run by a wealthy elite that deployed mechanisms and indeed individuals from the Mubarak regime to crack down on dissent (Shenker 2016, Chap. 8). The Brotherhood, moreover, continued the economic policies of their predecessors, even rehabilitating Mubarak era businessmen with dubious records and in one case on Interpol's wanted list (Shenker 2016, Chap. 9).

Though lauding the January Revolution as their victory and simultaneously one for the people, the Brotherhood never really managed to fully appropriate its central symbols: Tahrir and the flag. In this regard, the military government that followed was more successful. Military authorities were cognizant of growing resentment against the Brotherhood and agitated for it. Their actions immediately before and after the 2013 Morsi ousting further showed that they recognized the centrality of Tahrir and the flag in street protests. Arguably, they also appreciated the fashionability of public demonstration in the post-revolution period, though this is not to trivialize the seriousness of intentions and sacrifices made. The military accordingly re-appropriated Tahrir Square, the flag and the protest spirit of Egyptians, along with the January Revolution itself, turning all against the ruling Islamists who would not have taken power if not for mass demonstrations that began in 2011. Having been symbols against the corrupt authoritarianism of Mubarak, the square and flag served the same purpose in protests against the autocratic and incompetent Brotherhood regime. When numbers approaching 500,000 showed up in Tahrir, the military signaled support and fueled excitement by flying helicopters draping flags over protesters in the square and

across Cairo (Weaver and McCarthy 2013).[2] The military also dropped flags into exuberant masses in Tahrir shortly before the Morsi overthrow (Fisher 2013). This was repeated on the evening of the ousting in what resembled a Hollywood production between the helicopter above and firework and laser light displays shot up from Tahrir revelers below (Reuters 2013).[3]

Tahrir Square and the flag accordingly came to be re-associated with military rule. This was even though many in Tahrir in 2013 had also protested the military regime in 2011. Thus while many in Egypt saw Sisi and the military as emancipators, it is mistaken to suppose the majority were vying for the re-establishment of military rule. The evolution of protest art mirrored these complicated feelings and tusslings over symbols. Early examples included graffiti murals that cropped up in Cairo and depicted victims of 2011 clashes, painted in the tricolor liberation colors, plus the gold of the Eagle of Saladin. However, street artists soon began to fight over symbols and their meanings. For instance, in 2011 the artist Ganzeer painted a mural in the downtown Cairo area, not too far from Tahrir. It showed a tank aiming its cannon at a lone bread delivery boy on a bicycle. Protesters being run over by the tank were later added to reflect current events. Later still, what were presumably pro-military advocates unhappy with this representation, painted over the dead and added flags to the protesters (see Meyer 2014), illustrating the reabsorption of a key symbol of dissent.

Gradually and along these lines, Tahrir and the flag have lost their oppositional weight. The current regime has asserted ownership over both, placing an austere pedestal with a flag—typical of military cemeteries—in the center of the square. Moreover, where the flag was once displayed by protesters, in businesses and in private homes in defiance to the government and its forces, it now figures prominently in commercial enterprises as a mark of support for the current regime, though it is difficult to assess how sincere. Such re-appropriations were perhaps aided by the Muslim Brotherhood, along with fawningly supportive pieces from Al Jazeera, both of which characterized anti-Morsi protesters not as such, but simply pro-military, and Morsi supporters as anti-military (Crippen 2015), even though the latter had made ample use of the security machine. That the square and flag could be co-opted was further aided by the fact that the 2011 January Revolution was not really directed against the military per se. Rather, it targeted the security apparatus

and economic conditions maintained by a particularly corrupt leader who came from the military, and Tahrir and the flag, for reasons stated, were already associated with the armed forces.

Following the Morsi overthrow and massacre of Brotherhood supporters, arbitrary beatings and arrests continued (Shenker 2016, Chap. 8). In one of many outrageous cases, a teenager was detained in the outskirts of Cairo on Police Day in 2014—not incidentally, the third anniversary of the beginning of the revolution—for wearing a celebratory January 25 scarf and T-shirt with the caption: "A Nation without Torture." He spent over 700 days imprisoned without charge and reported torture (Safdar 2016; Guerin 2018). Around the same time, the new leadership began physically reshaping Tahrir Square. Less than a half-year after the Morsi overthrow, there was a government-backed project to build a monument to the January martyrs there. After it was vandalized, the installation was removed. In early 2015, another initiative was executed, with the militaristic pedestal and flag raised. This is just around the time that the hated NDP building was demolished. This seems to have been a way of exhibiting allegiance to the 2011 January Revolution, which was unequivocally popular in Egypt, while establishing distance from the ousted military government. These gestures corresponded poorly to reality since the new president was formerly the top general from the military, and if anything has deployed a security apparatus more brutal and oppressive than the previous two governments (see Crippen 2016a). Barely beneath the revolutionary pretense is a starker message and one expressed fairly openly by the addition of the pedestal and flag to Tahrir: that the revolution is over, and the military won.

5 Political Affordances and Values in Urban Space

In *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, Gibson (1979) articulates his theory of affordances. Affordances are openings for action, and the theory holds that we perceive the world in terms of how we can handle things and move and the ease with which we can do so. The theory applies to urban design, and without suggesting that the military regime has an understanding of Gibson, the restructuring of Tahrir Square has gone some way in closing it as an affordance for oppositional action. The reasons for this are multi-layered and linked to broader contexts that delineate public space and give it meaning.

An initial point to note is that physical space intertwines with social space, with recent theorists positing that affordances are both physical and social (e.g., Still and Good 1998; Krueger 2011; Crippen 2017). Gestures, for example, are avenues for social action, as when reaching to grasp

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[2] For video footage, visit https://www.theguardian.com/world/middle-east-live/2013/jul/02/egypt-obama-urges-morsi-to-respond-to-protesters-live.

[3] For video footage, visit https://mobile.reuters.com/video/2013/07/03/helicopter-drops-flags-as-jubilation-swe?videoId=243777417&mod=related&channelName=worldNews.

an extended hand. Standing up can conversely close social space, leading us to cut short a conversation and withdraw, even while not physically preventing us from staying. In the post-2013 political climate, the addition of the pedestal and flag did something similar, visually marking an end to political dialogue. The partial cordoning of the square with fences for a time reinforced this. These measures did not physically prevent access to the square, which was never much of a space in the first place, with the bulk of protests occurring in the surrounding area. Yet small gestures have consequences, with time-lapse recordings showing, for example, that a foot or two extra elevation in plazas discourages entry, even while not significantly impacting physical accessibility (Whyte 1980).

The gesture in Tahrir, however, did more than this: it symbolically expressed—or perhaps suppressed—values. It is as if authorities worried about being unable to fully reclaim and hence contain the idea of Tahrir and the January Revolution. This raises a second point about affordances, namely, that they show up as values (Crippen 2018, 2019). This is even so in settings bereft of social context. Thus in perceiving a river as a barrier, drinkable, navigable, cooling, freezing or treacherous, we see it in terms of possible actions and their effects on us, and hence in terms of interests or use-values. By virtue of being social, built environments manifest greater varieties of values and do so more richly. This is something to which value sensitive design researchers have begun attending, pointing out, for example, that early twentieth century garden cities place value on green spaces for everyone (van den Hoven 2013), and marble in financial institutions signifies values of reliability and security (Shah and Kesan 2007). Other urban forms place value on defensibility. Target hardening in fortified structures serves as an illustration. Expressing hostility, the bases of such structures resist intrusion, with limited entrances, no windows and rough masonry. At higher levels less susceptible to breach, design is more delicate and open to surrounding space (see Bacon 1967). An unpalatable variation of target hardening has been identified in Robert Moses's design of New York City, which included strategically placed low overpasses to impede bus transportation from poor and especially black neighborhoods to Jones Beach (Caro 1974; Winner 1980).

As compared to garden cities and banks, values associated with Tahrir at various points in its history have been less dependent on physical design. This is because they have also emerged through its name and location at a central junction surrounded by representations of state. As importantly, its values are products of what has occurred there, with events since 2011 and consequent media attention especially significant. Tahrir additionally differs from garden cities and banks insofar as it has recently reflected values other than what powerbrokers or designers intended, albeit with attempted re-appropriations from

Islamist and military regimes. Unlike the bridge and fortress examples, moreover, physical access has not been restricted by recent additions of the pedestal and flag, nor even the fences since the square was mostly left open. At the same time, these last measures achieve a kind of symbolic target hardening.

As an illustration of symbolic target hardening and how it can psychologically repel, consider Chicago's *Harold Washington Library Center*. Its design—arguably ill conceived—mirrors the *Medici-Riccardi Palace*, a Florentine Renaissance building intended to resist intrusion (Crippen 2016b). As with the palace, it appears fortified at street level, with rough masonry and windows resembling arrow slits, combined with small, exclusive-looking entrances. At progressively higher levels, the appearance grows less hardened, with sweeping windows and increasingly delicate masonry. Nothing prevents people from entering this public building, but one suspects those casually passing by do not feel invited. Along these lines, urban theorists discuss space-delineating implicit boundaries—in effect, symbolic affordances funneling movement. Jacobs (1961) and Newman (1972) are prominent in this regard. However, the latter is more relevant because he advances design specifically aimed at making strangers feel unwelcome, something Jacobs in most instances believes contrary to livable cities. For Newman, examples might include a curb or decorative fence, followed by a lawn with a walkway, leading to a lobby, indicating progression into increasingly private space. A stranger moving through these zones will feel increasingly conspicuous and in fact be so, and consequently be subject to questions. Such measures will ward off intruders and make them salient, Newman's landmark 1972 *Defensible Space* asserts that physical design can foster "latent territoriality" that translates into "a safe, well-maintained living space" (p. 3).

As of 30 June 2018—the last time I observed the square and incidentally the anniversary of both the installation of the Muslim Brotherhood in 2012 and the beginning of the 2013 uprising that augured its overthrow—the square has just the features detailed by Newman. A low, decorative wall made of masonry, with three entrances, surrounds it, albeit with one opening bricked over, thereby further limiting access. Beyond the wall, there is a well-kept lawn, combined with decorative shrubs, and pathways of polished salmon-colored masonry lead from the entrances to the central area with the flag. The middle hub is enclosed by yet another decorative wall, again with three access points. Slightly elevated masonry of a different color—this time grey—further differentiates this area. At the middle is yet another rise and then the pedestal with the flag that has the air of a mausoleum. Though physically accessible, one has the feeling of entering a restricted space, especially in the current political climate. Police patrolling the area bolster

this impression. Indeed, I witnessed officers questioning and taking identification from a group passing through, which is in fact a rarity, with the square typically bereft of people. This is very much out of place in Egypt, where people more characteristically occupy spaces with patches of grass if payment for entry is not required.

It is not difficult to see how Newman's (1972) practices correspond to the mentality of Egypt's military government. His soldierly emphasis on defense and territory and on resisting intrusion, as one commentator puts it, replaces the "fortress apartment" and "hard walls and locks" with "a soft bunker, a network of defensible territories" (Knoblauch 2014, p. 337). Indeed, at one point Newman goes so far as to suggest a neighborhood is in good order when residents recognize other locals and "strangers to the street are greeted by questioning glances and a cacophony of barking dogs" (p. 60). In effect, this is a subtle, psychological variation of hostile architecture in which, for example, spikes on surfaces discourage people from sitting, sleeping or remaining in an area.

Though it is doubtful that the redesign of Tahrir Square was explicitly based on Newman's (1972) ideas, it exemplifies his model. As he writes: "Design can make… both inhabitant and stranger… perceive that an area is under the undisputed influence of a particular group" (pp. 2–3). This is essentially what the re-appropriation of Tahrir Square has done, re-claiming not just the space, but also the idea of the January Revolution, suggesting all are under the undisputed control of the military regime. After the pedestal and flag was raised, the space took on an austere, almost sacred vibe, like a war memorial. Further, the partial cordoning of the square and other design features, exactly mirrors the curbs, decorative fences and pathways that Newman advocates and has just the effect he describes: it makes one feel as if one is not supposed to be there. This is more so in a context in which people feel surveilled, with some disappearing or arbitrarily detained (see Crippen 2016a). Adding to all this is that security forces have chased venders out, giving people passing by even less of a reason to be there. This can have a self-feeding effect since a paucity of people is less attractive to others (Jacobs 1961; Whyte 1980), in addition to which an empty space sends a social signal that it is forbidden. Together, this shrinks the space as an affordance for any kind of action, much less political action.

All this is arguably enhanced by the dour mood in the country. Experiments investigating affordances show that malaise and fatigue or conditions causing them are associated with things appearing further away and steeper (Bhalla and Proffitt 1999; Proffitt 2006; Schnall et al. 2010; Zadra et al. 2010). This means less accessible, with people accordingly less inclined to explore. Malaise, moreover, is associated with preference for sheltered spaces (Mealey and Theis 1995). It is not that people in Egypt huddle in their homes.

However, in an era of emotional deflation, with genuine danger to the politically active and even the non-political since arbitrary arrests occur, many are wont to avoid a space marked as under the undisputed influence of the regime perpetrating these abuses. In cities less overrun by fear and malaise, by contrast, a square with identical features might invite approach and exploration.[4] However, affairs are not so in Egypt. There, people feel surveilled, and they worry about discussing political matters in public or even on the phone (Crippen 2016a). In such circumstances, a cordoned square, flag and austere pedestal do not invite approach. Instead, they loom over the square like a threat and reminder that the military regime is unmovable, unstoppable and unrelenting—at least it has been for 60-plus years.

The containment of Tahrir signals closure of revolutionary impulses. However, this containment is not confined to Tahrir, or in a way it is, and this is the point. Shenker (2016) observes in his excellent history of Egyptian revolt that

> foreign leaders have spoken approvingly of the Tahrir spirit—because from afar, packaged up in that iconic stretch of concrete and grass and lauded with bromides, it seemed that the revolution could be strapped tight to a particular corner of the world and made safe (p. 224).

The interesting point is that Egypt's military leaders have likewise spoken approvingly, partly to identify with the popular side, but perhaps also to confine the revolution to a space they have symbolically enclosed and made seem farther away.

6 Conclusion

In this article, I attended to symbols, values, openings and closures that were inscribed in the physical and cultural fabric of Cairo during the January Revolution and their re-appropriations in the period since. I will review what has been affirmed.

A first point is that meaning is historical. This is obviously so with the square and flag, with the two having intertwined histories and hence shared meanings based in popularly circulating narratives and grounding stories about the country. Insofar as the square and flag were thus already available as a kind of symbolic shorthand in 2011, they came laden with what Barthes (1957) calls "mythic significance."

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[4] In many Western cities, the traffic on surrounding streets might admittedly push people away. But Cairenes do not perceive this as an obstacle. They are skilled road-crossers and incline towards even small green patches in urban centers if accessible without payment, as mentioned earlier. Thus it is not out of place to see city dwellers hanging around or picnicking on traffic medians in heavily used roads.

The 2011 uprising revived the buried historical significance of Tahrir and the flag as emblems of rebellion and liberty, in addition to taking advantage of them as symbols of unity and national identity. It also altered meanings and indeed grounding stories, so that "[i]n Tahrir, Egyptians built … a different set of borders, a different set of social relations, a different narrative about who they were and what they could do" (Shenker 2016, p. 224).

By the end of the January Revolution, the square had mythic status, this time in the colloquial sense of gaining celebrity-like recognizability. Those leading the 2013 coup recognized this, in addition to appreciating its more specific status as a symbol of unity and dissent. They re-appropriated the square, along with the flag, in fact using the latter to gain a stronger foothold over the former, and the two together to co-opt the January Revolution and turn the protest spirit against ruling Islamists. Since taking power in 2013, current leaders have symbolically distanced themselves from previous governments, despite continuing the same practices. They have done this by tearing down the old party headquarters next to Tahrir and by building the monument with the pedestal and flag, ostensibly to commemorate the January Revolution. In reality, however, this alteration issues a threat against further protests, and establishes symbolic barriers that close the square as a space for oppositional representation.

The closure of Tahrir mirrors a broader closure of intellectual space in Egypt. It is too kind to say the media was stifled, for those in charge actively collaborated, as indicated by the cancelling of Bassem Youssef's satirical show for gently poking fun at Sisi; or by the heads of 17 Egyptian dailies jointly announcing "total confidence" in government bodies and a "rejection of attempts to doubt state institutions or insult the army or police or judiciary in a way that would reflect negatively on these institutions' performance" (Ahram Online 2014). A more drastic case in point—but one typifying what goes on in everyday life—is Gamal al-Ghitani, a defining post-colonial critic of autocratic demagogary in the Middle East. In spite of this pedigree, he has called Sisi "a miracle of history," and applauded the attack on Brotherhood protesters around Raaba Square—a short drive from Tahrir—that saw roughly 600 massacred in mere hours (Shenker 2016, p. 377).

The re-appropriation and confinement of Tahrir Square and the Egyptian flag are accordingly a microcosm of the bleak state of affairs in Egypt. Here the military authorities managed to co-opt oppositional movements into an affirmation of the status quo, in this case, a 60-year old military regime. This has been part of a larger campaign of fear that has seen people arrested and held without charge, regularly assaulted and sometimes tortured and murdered and generally hesitant to speak out. If emblematic of how things generally go, then hopes for genuine revolt and effective dissent

seem bleak. Change does and will occur, but almost always far too slowly where needed most.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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