



LIVING IN THE CITY OF THE DEAD

INTERNATIONAL ACTION-RESEARCH

CAIRO CITY

Italian research team

SCIENTIFIC COORDINATION:

Department of Architecture and Planning (DIAP) POLITECNICO of Milan: Prof.s Antonio Tosi, Paola Bellaviti, Marianella Sclavi;

RESEARCH GROUP: Gaetano Berni; Alessandro Colli, Maria Luisa Daglia, Luca Francesco Garibaldo, Costanza La Mantia, Erika Lazzarino, Haysam Nour, Silvia Orazi, Simona Sambati, Sarah Trianni.

Egyptian research team

SCIENTIFIC COORDINATION:

Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, Department of Urban Planning, AIN SHAMS UNIVERSITY, Prof. Ayman Ashour.

Partners

Laboratory of Co-operation to Development. DIAP –POLITECNICO of Milan; Cairo Governorate of Egypt, LIVEINSLUMS (Gaetano Berni, Silvia Orazi); ASCOLTO ATTIVO (Marianella Sclavi).

Project:

“Living in the City of the Dead”, an Italian-Egyptian bi-lateral project between Polytechnic of Milan and the University Ain Shams in Cairo.

Geographical area:

“City of the Dead”, the area of the monumental cemeteries in Cairo city

Fields of applications:

Social, architectonic, urban, anthropological scientific research.

Description of local context:

In a central area of Cairo city there is one of the largest and most ancient islamic necropolis existing in the world and called “City of the Dead”, in arabic “al Qarafa” or “al Magabar”. In this place of cultural interest and final destination of pilgrimages since the Xth century, many “inhabitants” – refugees, rural immigrants, poor and homeless people – found asylum since the end of the XIXth century among tombs, monuments, schools, and mosques. The esteem of how many persons live here varies so much, from 10.000 to 600.000, in any case it is considered one of the largest slum existing in Cairo and maybe in the world.

Although it is now spread the development of informal residences, the most of the inhabitants live inside the hosh (chapel and funeral borders): in some cases they illegally occupy the tombs, but it often happens that illegal residents and legal owners agree in an informal way recognising to the firestones the role of hosh’s guardians. A many part of those living in the cemetery carry out a task concerning the funeral rituals (responsible of the cult, gravediggers, funeral home workers, Corano’s prayers, gravers etc.); others find part-time or occasional jobs out of the place, in small factories or shops.

The “City of the Dead” is a “real city in the city” with its vivacious comings and goings, the Post-Office, its schools, its shops, the charity organizations and the neighbouring relationships. It is one of a kind place: anyone who walks into it can feel like being in a huge archeological park, the function of which is either to be a necropolis or an urban environment.

Deeply contrasting with the rest of Cairo city, because of the little car traffic, the low density of houses, the elegance of the buildings and its silence, all these elements let the visitors feel the whole necropolis like a “gift” from the Deads to the Living Beings to remind them the sacred dimension which you have to see either in Life or in Death. Nevertheless the population and the architectural patrimony of the cemetery are seriously at risk.

The lack of local recognition of the social and architectural value of the City of the Deads on one side gives right to the endemic state of environmental abandoning and, on the other side, a series of Programmes of urban “regeneration” which are menacing the demolition of wide sectors of the necropolis.

A local media advertising, indicates it as a place full of criminals and heterodoxy this way giving force to the stigmatization of the people living there and also to the ghettoization of the whole Community.

That’s why its inhabitants and particularly young people born there, try to find their home out of the cemetery. But if the people living inside this City of the Deads go away and leave it, the cemetery too, its valuable monuments and its peculiar atmosphere so sacred and healthy will be in danger.

There’s a great need that alive people not allow the death of the City of the Deads.

General goals:

The purpose of the research project is to overcome the partial and reductive vision about City of Dead as a "plague" of Cairo and make it reconsider as means of extraordinary resource, either cultural or etno-anthropological. Thus the deep aim of the project is about valorising it as cultural heritage to preserve with all its social, architectural and environmental systems, viewing it as an experimental context on which it is possible to test new strategies and development models for Cairo of tomorrow.

The research project pursues specially the following goals:

_ To promote the evaluation of this urban place unique in the world, developing an action either locally and internationally, in order to sustain the recognition and the reinforcement of its architectonic, social, and environmental patrimony.

_ To favour and spread inside the community there settled the recognition of this patrimony. With special care and interest for the housing practices which might damage or preserve it, for the ritual "knowledge" connected to the funeral cult and to the socio-cultural structure which has handed them down until now, and which could nowadays disintegrate or revitalize meeting the modern times.

_ To suggest at last a changement in the today's conditions of the City of the Deads, in order to embitter some aspects of the social and economic life of its inhabitants, thanks to the restorations of the houses and the services and the development of the working chances in the place.

In particular the research project means to add to the debate on the City of the Dead by offering a research contribution able to interact and problematise the various transformation hypotheses regarding this area. Partly developed as a consequence of the strategic plan for Cairo (Vision 2050), basically they are hypotheses of re-development and re-qualification, in which different objectives may converge, combine and oppose: real estate development and historical conservation, the development of new activities and the preservation of traditional activities, the improvement of life conditions of inhabitants and their dislocation or replacement. The research project intends to bring into the debate a perspective "from inside" the area, working out the attitudes and experience of people living in the area. In methodological terms the project will develop on three axes:

- mapping the forms of the settlement;
- an "extensive" social survey on the social conditions of the population;
- a "qualitative"/in-depth exploration of ways of life, social practices, attitudes.

In any case the involvement of inhabitants and stakeholders, in both research and policy processes, is seen as a necessary condition for an adequate understanding and representation of the process under way.

Action strategies:

To implement the general goal above mentioned, the following action strategies are crucial:

RESEARCH: developing an action/research activity about the social, economic and territorial conditions of the local context in order to single out the conditions and the resources for a programme of preservation and evaluation either of the historic-architectural patrimony and of the settled community.

The research project is co-ordinated bilaterally by the both the Universities (Politecnico of Milan and Ain Shams University of Cairo) and it will be composed of joined activities of enquiries and elaboration such as workshops, "on place" inquiries, seminars, documents, teachers, researchers and students exchanges.

COMMUNICATION: to promote public communication actions (shows, seminars, events, publishing) locally, in national and international field. The aim is to build and to divulgate a new interpretative picture which could be useful to re-define the today's local policies, which are tending to undervalue this area, letting emerge real risk of demolition and decay.

NETWORKING: to promote events to make the local people aware and networking activities. Creation of a "light" organization (cultural association, local committee, etc.) pursuing common aims of safeguarding and development of the territory, even relating to the project of eco-tourism. The aim is to absorb the inhabitants as actors involved in an active part in the retraining processes and relevant policies for the definition of City of the Dead and to settle, possibly in a hosh, a kind of Urban Center, functioning as physical aid to sustain the research and the intervention.

FIRST PILOT PROJECT: SUSTAINABLE TOURISM ACTIVITY

Developing a circuit of sustainable tourism within City of the Dead supported by local actors. This point is starting from the deep belief that this kind of intervention can generate new informal micro-economies, capable of gradually improving the inhabitants' socio-economic conditions.

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Already made activities:

_International Workshop "Inside the city of the deads. Informal settlements and strategies of development", Cairo 15/21 May 2008. The WS was organized and led by Diap-Politecnico (prof.s Marianella Scavi and Paola Bellaviti) and Liveinslum (Silvia Orazi, Gaetano Berni), co-operating with the Laboratory of Co-operation to development of Diap-Politecnico and it saw the participation of 10 students graduated in Architecture, Sociology, Anthropology. It involved about 15 students of Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, Ain Shams University, Department of Urban Planning in Cairo. It was dedicated to the starting of a "quarter Laboratory" for the enquiry of the local environment and the local community through participant observation, maps construction and qualitative interviews. It was possible to reach the following initial knowledge regarding:

- population living inside the cemeteries (social hierarchy, social diversification, formal and informal power structure, solidarity system, etc.).
- spaces and practices housing inside the cemetery (spaces typology, artistic value, care of tombs, relationships with owners of tombs, etc.)
- informal uses of the public spaces and interaction between material space and people who live there (flexibility of the space and practices, spaces creation, services creation, etc.)
- changeable processes into action in cemeteries

(See Report of WS)

_Participation of the research to the project "Future Habitat. Scenarios of the future way of living" by Olivetti Foundation, a programme of meetings about an interdisciplinary research, where the artistic and cultural perspective is the filter permitting to understand and enquiry the transforming proceedings existing in the natural and human environment. It was held in Rome on the 19th September, 2008.

_ International Workshop "Living in the City of the Dead", Milano 7/9 July 2009, organized by Politecnico of Milan (prof.s Paola Bellaviti e Antonio Tosi) in collaboration with Ain Shams University of Cairo (prof. A. Ashour). It was participated by prof. P. Gabellini, prof. M. Scavi, italian researchers and egyptian students. It was dedicated to present and discuss the visual and physical survey and other researches related to the characters of the physical space and the built environment (monumental architectures, infrastructures and services, housing practises and the use of public spaces) and the social and anthropological qualitative analysis and the social surveys. With those analysis it was possible to identify:

- estimation of the population density inside the cemeteries (40.000 in the north cemeteries, 120.000 in the south cemeteries, 160.000 total residents). Accepting substantial limitation in terms of sampling (mainly because of the lack of basic preliminary data) and of field research competence the "exploratory" was to provide (a) a first description of the population in the area and their problems; (b) useful information in order to build a sound methodology for a future, more systematic, survey. In fact interesting information has been obtained, useful to improve questionnaire, interview procedures, sample criteria.
- different typology of territorial situations (residential areas, inhabited areas, service areas, etc.).
- different services distribution.
- different typology of built environment.
- economic resources.
- problems regarding built environment (urban decay, environment damage, etc.).

Achieved outcomes:

_Framework Agreement among the Politecnico of Milan and the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture of the Ain Shams University in Cairo to develop the research activity and projects of mutual interest having as object the City of the Dead such as: seminars, workshops, inquiries, meetings, documents and teachers, students and researchers exchange.

_ Report of the first international workshop "Inside the city of the deads. Informal settlements and strategies of development", Cairo 15/21 May 2008.

_ Bibliographic compilation about other and previous researchers on the City of the Dead and, more in general terms, on the history of Cairo city.

_ Report of the second international workshop "Living in the City of the Dead", Milano 7/9 July 2009

_ Publication of City of the Dead Report on specialized academic periodical of DIAP-Politecnico of Milan, Territorio n. 50, (in the pipeline).