

***Temporary Appropriation Practices and Spontaneity in Public Spaces:
The Case of Downtown Cairo Passageways***

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The Barcelona Conference on Arts, Media & Culture 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

In contrast to the orthodox comprehensive planning approaches, several contemporary studies on public spaces have focused on the notion of how people utilize space and how they appropriate and inhabit the city. Since the 1960s, many theorists have embraced this idea and developed unconventional concepts such as spontaneous public spaces. Hence, this paper aims to investigate the forms of temporary appropriation to shed light on the role of spontaneity in Downtown Cairo passageways. While several researchers studied Downtown passageways in terms of physical aspects, there is a lack of literature that tackles the everyday spatial appropriation. Therefore, Al-Alfi and Al-Shereefen passageways were chosen for the investigation. Those passageways serve as a useful case study for examining the differences between the anticipated planned use of the space and the emergent practices that evoke spatial and socioeconomic disorder that add an unpredictable layer to urban life. We conducted multiple walk-by observations and behavioral mapping both during day and at night. The findings revealed two basic forms of temporal appropriation: economic and recreational. As a result, the research brought attention to how these temporal activities may represent the embrace of both individual and group spontaneity in passageways. Finally, this research aimed to bridge the gap between governmental strategic planning practices and the human-centered perspective in order to contribute to the formation of an alternative dialogue for future urban development of Downtown passageways.

Keywords: Appropriation, Spontaneity, Public Space, Downtown, Passageways

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Introduction

Through the years, numerous urban studies scholars had highlighted the dynamism characteristic of urban spaces, as they are beyond an independent material reality or a "design intention from which the social effect will simply follow" (Soja, 1996; Shields, 1999; Gehl, 2011; Stanek, 2011). Despite different theoretical and empirical frameworks, numerous studies had shed light on the spontaneous character of the urban space where physical production is merely inseparable from human use and action. This discussion about the relationship between the planning and lived processes as well as the physical and social production of space requires an alternative thinking for urbanism studies. As a living human being, the user is spontaneously appropriating the space as they stroll around. Being creative actors, people are always figuring out their way to adapt to their environment and modifying the space that has been shaped for particular use and function according to their needs. In response, multiple studies have been conducted on this dialogue between the spatial and social aspects of the space by pioneer researchers of urban studies (Castells, 1977; Gottdiener, 1994; Soja, 1996; Shields, 1999).

Many cities in the world have discovered the capability of pedestrian spaces in city centers to stimulate public life (Gehl, 2011). On the urban scene, the passageways are considered as a display scale of the daily life of the city, they are places where the user experiences the material and intangible elements of the city in different ways. They act as hidden places within the urban system of the city and unexpected places to be found in the dense streets as subspaces (Luz, 2006). They also can be very dynamic places, bringing many types of users together in one little strip of space, creating some very interesting corridors and nodes for the city (Fialko et al. 2009). As pedestrian spaces, these urban spaces support the discussion on linking the social and spatial realities (Jacobs, 1961).

In the case of Cairo, the passageways are one of the key elements of the urban morphology of the Downtown area. They represent the parallel network for accessibility and a pedestrian network where one can experience and enjoy city life (Nagaty, 2018). While several researchers studied Downtown passageways in terms of physical aspects, there is a lack of literature that tackles everyday spatial appropriation. Thus, this research aims to investigate the forms of temporary appropriation to shed light on the role of spontaneity in Downtown Cairo passageways. The study areas chosen for this research underwent numerous top-down strategic planning sessions throughout the years as a potential for a uniform public use, therefore, embodying the deliberate policies of urban planning and unpremeditated revelations of social life. They serve as a useful case study for examining the differences between the anticipated planned use of the space and the emergent practices that evoke spatial and socio-economic disorders and add an unpredictable layer to urban life. This study aimed to enrich the knowledge of temporary appropriation practices that are related to the Cairene passageways, and how they are crucial for maintaining socio-urban dynamics in the contemporary city.

Spontaneity and Public Space Temporary Appropriation

The discipline of urban design as we know it today was mainly born in the 1960s as a result of a desire to improve the quality of urban space, and in consequence, several approaches have been developed by urban studies scholars (Carmona, et al. 2010). In contrast to the orthodox comprehensive planning approaches, contemporary studies on public spaces have focused on the notion of how people utilize space and how they appropriate and inhabit the

city. These studies realized that people humanize urban spaces as they live and generate the social and physical layout of cities. For that, urban spaces are hoped to be places for spontaneous use where different activities take place. In the urban context, spontaneity is portrayed as a dynamic, open, and unmediated concept, and it is defined as urban actions performed without premeditation (Stevens, 2018). Additionally, the practices of temporary space appropriation represent spontaneous actions that shape the environment as well as the human process of perceiving urban space.

(Hernandez et al. 2017) define the appropriation of the built environment as an ongoing connection between people and the public space manifested via particular actions that contribute to the construction of the urban space. Furthermore, (Cruz, 2020) defined appropriation as an action in which someone takes something for their own without any approval from the authorized power. Therefore, public space appropriation is a process of spontaneous practices conducted by citizens, consciously or unconsciously, to manifest the struggle for the right to the city (Ibid,2020; Ostermann et al. 2009). It is a socio-spatial demand innate to individuals and groups (Graumann, 1976).

In this study, the investigation of space appropriation is narrowed and specified by using the term ‘temporary appropriation’. Throughout the research, temporary appropriation is defined as actions conducted by people in the public space, actions that are different from the intended or originally designed use (Hernandez et al. 2017). However, we selected this specification to distinguish spontaneous appropriations from the designed use of space. Space appropriation includes a vast number of practices and could be observed in many ways, and it can be conducted by both individuals and groups on a variety of scales (Stanek, 2011). Although the forms of appropriation are varied and countless, temporary appropriation practices can be found in the forms of economical, recreational, or political activities, and religious, or cultural events.

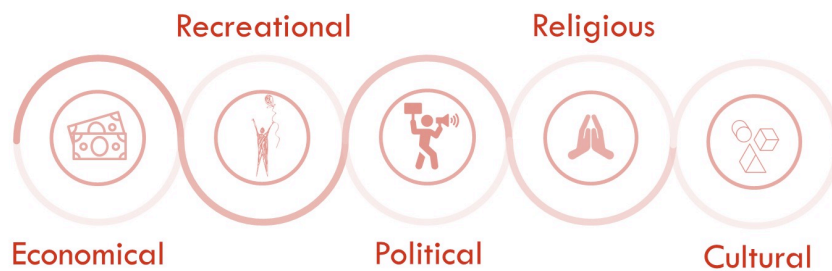


Figure 1: Temporary Appropriation Forms, Source: (Authors, 2022)

The economical temporary appropriation forms are referred to any type of activities that can be practiced in the public space by individuals or groups to gain financial benefit, whether it was directly or indirectly (Cross, 2009; Kim, 2013). However, those commerce or trade activities are usually conducted without the permission of the governmental authorities (Hernandez et al. 2019). Those activities can be found in terms of selling products such as food or clothes by vendors, by people who use the public space for advertising services, or by workers who try to attract possible clients by promoting their businesses (Cross, 2009; Ramirez-Lovering, 2008; Kim, 2013). Moreover, recreational activities such as singing, dancing, playing music, playing, or informally resting in a public space, are all examples of recreational temporary appropriation activities (Drummond, 2000; Hernandez et al. 2017; Simpson, 2011; Stevens, 2018). Due to their participatory nature, those activities play a crucial role in the process of re-activating the public spaces of the city (Stevens, 2018).

In addition, many political theorists have argued and highlighted the importance of public spaces as an arena that can hold the citizens' differences, values and gave them the chance to be part of deliberate decisions (Hernandez et al. 2017; Radwan et al. 2020). Thus, there is a direct relationship between the political changes and the public spaces in the city. One can see many political activities across public spaces, such as daily protests, rallies, manifestations of public opinion, or advocating for a certain cause (Radwan et al. 2020). Religious activities are another way people appropriate public spaces, however, this usually happens in countries with a rich religious heritage. This form of appropriation includes any activity that people practice in the public space for religious reasons, such as preaching or praying (Hernandez et al. 2019). Furthermore, city center public spaces are offering room for cultural events that can foster and enhance the livability of the city. Cultural events can serve as a meeting point for city strangers and improve socio-spatial harmony (Amin, 2008; Radwan et al. 2020; Southworth, 2014).

Methodology

Since this research is exploratory, a qualitative approach is the most logical option. As qualitative case study research excels at "telling the story" (Trochim, 2004), it allows the development of an in-depth understanding of an issue, including subjective understandings and interpretations (Marshall et al. 2006). This process helps to link the spatial and social characters of the urban space together. Therefore, focus on users' lived experiences as they are structured on daily basis.

The data was collected through multiple walk-by observations, and they were conducted with the use of base maps for each passage, photographs, and annotated notes. During each observation, the researchers walked slowly in each study area and recorded the practices of temporary appropriation that were not foreseen or supported by the original plans yet still appeared through the everyday needs and motivations of people. Also, the observations took place during weekdays and weekends, at three different time slots during the daytime as well as three different time slots during nighttime.

Passage Name	Weekend (AM)	Weekend (PM)	Weekday (AM)	Weekday (PM)
Al-Alfi	9:00-10:00	5:00-6:00	9:00-10:00	5:00-6:00
	10:00-11:00	7:00-8:00	10:00-11:00	7:00-8:00
	11:00-12:00	8:00-9:00	11:00-12:00	8:00-9:00
Al-Sherefeen	9:00-10:00	5:00-6:00	9:00-10:00	5:00-6:00
	10:00-11:00	7:00-8:00	10:00-11:00	7:00-8:00
	11:00-12:00	8:00-9:00	11:00-12:00	8:00-9:00

Table 1: The Schedule of Observations for Each Passage, Source: (Authors, 2022)

Case Study: Downtown Cairo Passageways

Walking through the streets of Downtown Cairo is a solitary experience, and it has a completely distinct flavor from everywhere else in Cairo. This district was planned through the vision of Khedive Ismail 'Haussmannian Paris along the Nile'. It was a place where the élite and foreigners invested in royal residences and rich European architecture (Abdelhadi et al. 2009). However, over the last 50 years, the situation has transformed into a chaotic district that struggled with busy traffic in the main streets and street vendors in the secondary routes and passageways.

As a result, the awareness of the need for intervention in order to rehabilitate the modern business center has caught the attention of the Egyptian government as well as private developers in the 1990s (Ashour et al. 2020). The operation has focused on preserving and promoting the existing architectural and urban heritage of the city center. Additionally, in order to enhance public life, pedestrian zones that are constructed in the passageways of the city center have received attention (El-Kadi, 2012; Raslan et al. 2020). Downtown passageways are defined as one of the urban spaces typologies that takes diverse forms, scales, and qualities (Nagaty, 2018). They represent a parallel network away from the Downtown main streets' noise, pollution, and crowdedness. Figure 2 shows the difference between the main streets grid and the passageways network.



Figure 2: Downtown's Formal Street Grid (Left) and Passageways Network (Right),
Source: (Nagaty, 2018)

Two pedestrian passageways were selected for the investigation, Al-Alfi and Al-Sherefeen. They are in two different zones in Downtown, as Al-Alfi passage is located in the Al-Alfi bey sector along with two other pedestrian passageways, namely Saraya Al-Azbakya and Zakaria Ahmed, Al-Sherefeen is located in Al-Borsa Triangle zone shared with Al-Qadi Al-Fadil passage and other small passages. However, these zones represent the concentration of the formally pedestrianized passageways and considered pedestrian hubs in the city center. Additionally, the social standard is different from one zone to another due to the land use and users' diversity. While Al-Alfi passageway is known as a commercial attraction area, Al-Sherefeen, on the other hand, is kind of a financial spot where major financial institutions are located including the Egyptian Stock Exchange Building, Central Bank of Egypt, National Bank, and Suez Canal Bank. Along with the financial institutions, there are also other governmental buildings such as the Radio and Television Union. Due to this, it is evident that the authority's power and control over the space is also varied from one passage to another.

Overview of Al-Alfi and Al-Sherefeen Passageways

Al-Alfi passageway used to be a major nightlife hub in Downtown. During the 1920s and 1930s, the passageway was frequently visited by European and elite customers seeking for entertainment. At the beginning of the 1930s, the commercial activities were started to take place in the passage, and this was the starting point of changing the Downtown area to a

diverse district. Both passageways consisted of substantial and historical commercial and residential buildings that dated back to the 1930s (Wahba et al. 2020). However, due to the negligence, the whole Downtown district was transformed into an overcrowded district with busy traffic streets and chaotic street vendors. In the 1990s, the Cairo governorate initiated 'Al-Alfi pedestrianization project' which included the western part of Al-Alfi street. It was celebrated as the first application of the pedestrianization approach for a more pedestrian-friendly city center. This development project included banning vehicles and passage refurbishment (Ashour et al. 2020). In 1999, Al-Sherefeen passageway was the focal point for the urban development intervention this time. The passage was upgraded by installing pavements on the streets, renovating buildings' façade, and creating green areas. This was achieved by the Secretary of State for Governmental Affairs and funded by the private sector (Attia et al. 2017).

After 2011, a state of chaotic behavior has stormed all public spaces of Downtown, where vandalism and street vendors' invasion led to an unfortunate deterioration of both passageways. However, it was only in late 2014 that the government decided to clear Downtown public areas from street vendors and any forms of illegal occupation aiming to restore order and derived by the sense of nostalgia to give back the Downtown area its lost identity (Ibid, 2017). Between 2014 and 2017, both passageways were formally upgraded, the vehicles were banned, again, and the passages were repaved, new passage furniture, infrastructure, and piping systems were installed, and planting trees along the passages. While Al-Alfi was redeveloped to be an active commercial hub with food and beverage stores as well as other service ones, Al-Sherefeen was introduced as a movement corridor that might host cultural events on weekends (Wahba et al. 2020). The illustrations in figures 3 and 4 show the map with land use, photos and basic information for each passage.



Figure 3: Al-Alfi Passageway Basic Information, Source: (Authors, 2022)



Figure 4: Al-Sherefeen Passageway Basic Information, Source: (Authors, 2022)

Results and Discussion

The observations revealed two forms of temporary appropriation, forms that are economical in nature or recreational. The analysis of the economical forms showed three temporal appropriation practices: informal vending, shoe cleaning, and shop territory extensions. For the recreational appropriation forms, there were two practices, namely: photography and skating. While the two forms of appropriations, economical and recreational were found in Al-Alfi, there were only recreational temporary appropriation practices that occurred in Al-Sherefeen passageway. Figure 5 shows the mapping of temporary appropriation practices of Al-Alfi and Al-Sherefeen passageways.

1. Economical Temporary Appropriation Practices

1.1. Informal Vending

The vendors were observed occupying the beginning of the passage and the intersection between Al-Alfi and Zakarya Ahmed. From a form-oriented perspective, connecting to other pedestrian passages, such as the intersection between Al-Alfi and Zakarya Ahmed increases the connectivity and visibility at the junctions, therefore attracting more customers. Physically, the street vendors seemed out of the plan and unfitting. Moreover, the street vendors tended to appropriate the public seats in Al-Alfi passage. They used the benches and the other seating forms to display their products, and this form of temporal appropriation was observed during nighttime as the passage was more active as illustrated in figure 6.

Temporary appropriation legend

Economical



Informal vending



Shoe cleaning



Shops territory extension

Recreational



Photography



Skating

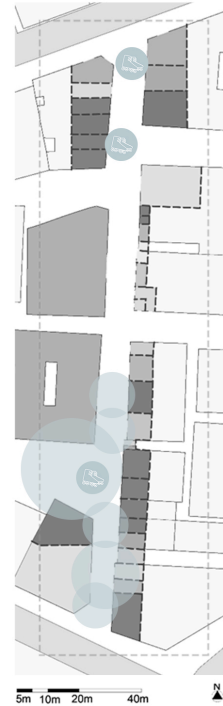
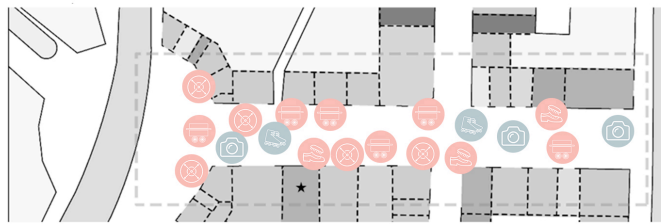


Figure 5: Al-Alfi and Al-Sherefeen Passageways Temporary Appropriation Mapping,
Source: (Authors, 2022)



Figure 6: Informal Vendors Sitting and Displaying Products on Al-Alfi Passageway Seats,
Source: (Authors, 2022)

To understand what street vendors might mean socially, we observed those vendors for more time, then we noted the smooth flow of users who come either to buy or inquire about addresses which sometimes developed into casual conversations between people who appeared to be strangers. While they might be considered odd in the space, they are becoming a part of the passages' everyday reality. From the multiple observations on different days, we found that most street vendors were regularly present in the space in the same spot as showing in figure 7. Even if they were informal, they secured their territories in the passage.

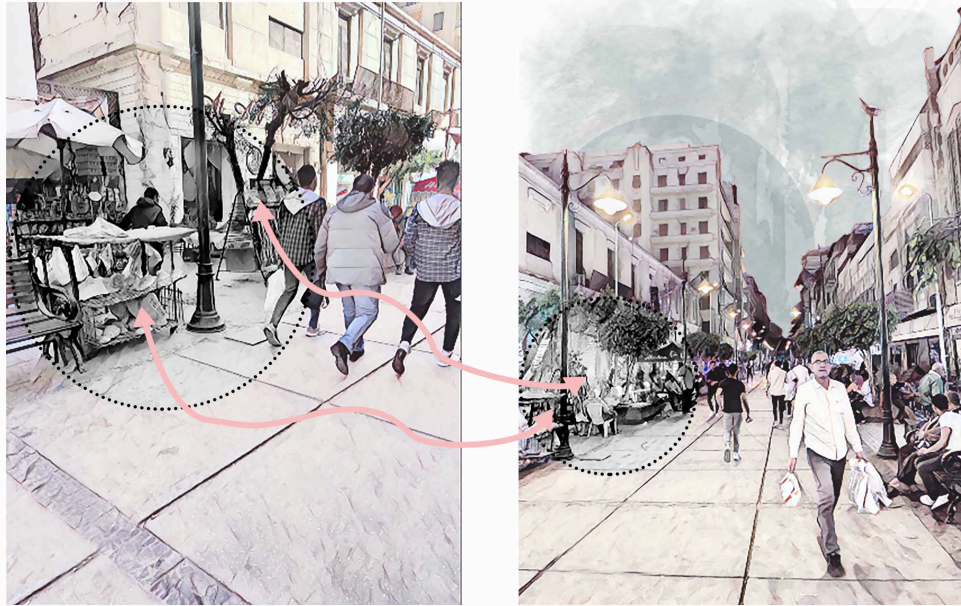


Figure 7: Same Informal Vendors Occupying Same Spots in Al-Alfi Passageway on Different Days and Time Periods (Left: Daytime) and (Right: Nighttime), Source: (Authors, 2022)

1.2. Shoe Cleaning

In addition to informal vendors, there was another type of service informality observed in Al-Alfi passageway, which is shoe cleaning. The shoe cleaners were observed at the beginning of the passage, and this type of informality did not seem to break the routine of the movement of the passage, as it is considered a one-to-one service. The shoe cleaner does not occupy much area in the passage as illustrated in figure 8. His process does not require much equipment, as he only uses his small chair and a movable box that contains cleaning tools.

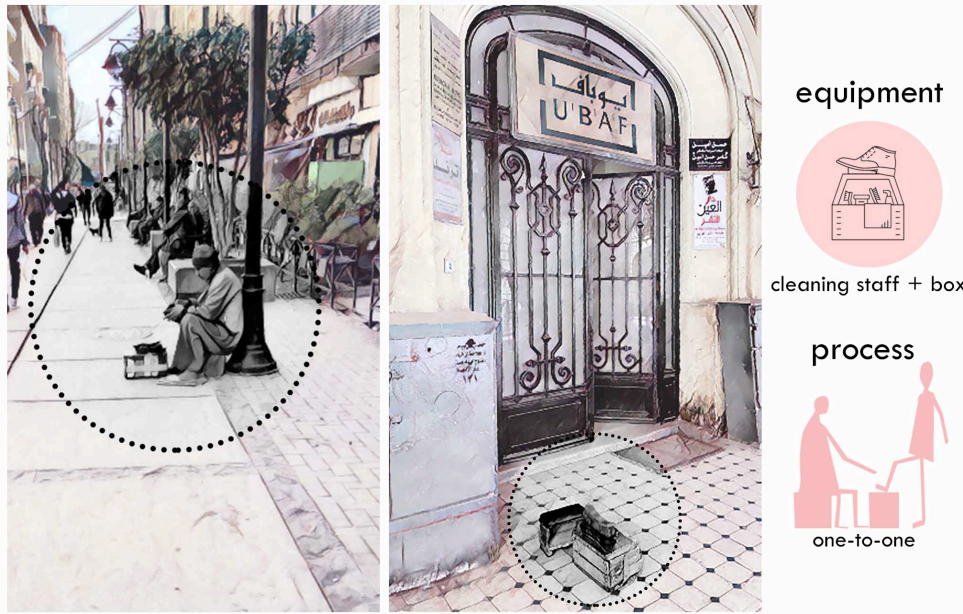


Figure 8: Shoe Cleaner in Al-Alfi Passageway, Source: (Authors, 2022)

1.3. Shops Territory Extension

Territorial markers that were found during the observations were particularly contributed to stationary activities in Al-Alfi passageway, which included the presence of seats from cafés and the display of products from various stores, as illustrated in figure 9. The spillover seating from cafés generated many seating activities, and the display of store products on the sides of the passageway invited people to stop, look, linger, and engage in buying activities. Tough, Al-Alfi passage was originally designed with a clear territory boundary for each café and restaurant, including their legal outdoor seating extensions, the observations showed that most cafes did not obey those boundaries very much.

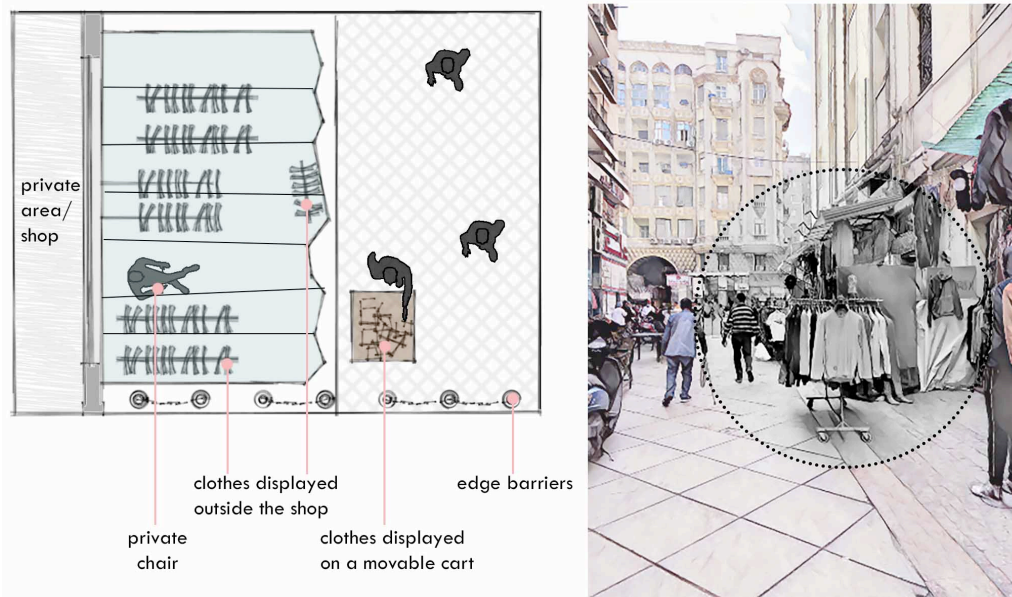


Figure 9: Shops Territory Extension Including the Spillover Seating and Products,
Source: (Authors, 2022)

The business owners of cafés tended to maximize their seats outside the boundaries, and arranged them to face the passage. It was observed that many customers chose to sit in this area, and the reason behind this might be the feeling to be integrated within the passage's daily routine and not being fenced by any kind of boundaries. After all, in order to control territory, “people will modify their environment to better fit their needs” (Lang, 1987). Also, it was observed that this area was used for chit-chatting between different actors in the space. Passers-by were observed having conversations with customers, some of them seemed to know each other, while others seemed strangers and they were just asking customers for directions to specific destinations. This area was also used by cafes' employees, and they were observed sitting in order to be directly facing the passage. They were trying attract as many customers as they can by offering some discounts or briefly showing off their options for drinks and food.

2. Recreational Temporary Appropriation Forms

2.1. Photography

The photographers were observed in Al-Alfi passage only, they were scattered along the passage and concentrated on the intersection between Al-Alfi and Zakaraya Ahmed passages as well as on the passage edges. They were usually occupying the space in groups of two up

to four, as one is the photographer, and the others are mainly assistants. They were observed offering passage users their services and they were focusing on tourists as they might be more interested to be photographed and documenting a memory within a historical scene. While photography itself as an activity does not require a physical occupation in the space, the photographers' existence, use of space, and their assistance in creating nested social settings along the passage, highlight the potential in urban space and contribute to the vibrancy of urban life.

2.2. *Skating*

Skaters are other prominent actors who were observed in Al-Alfi and Al-Sherefeen passageways. They were observed in the middle of Al-Alfi passage, and they were usually groups of teenagers playing together on the sides of the central space as they were trying to avoid the pedestrians' flow. However, they were more concentrated in Al-Sherefeen passage. In this passage, there is a whole community that is occupying a certain area on the passage almost every day. This community is created by individuals and small groups as they interact with the built environment in different forms and temporalities. What is quite interesting about this community is that it includes both genders from different age groups including teenagers, adults, as well as children. They compose a unity of rhythms and almost a harmony that is distinctive yet does not disorder the continuity of pedestrian movement.

While Al-Sherefeen passage did not have any public or commercial sitting options along the passage, the skaters tended to occupy an underutilized green area and use the physical boundaries to sit and wear their equipment or observe. This area of the passageway was transformed into a stage and a theatre, where viewers can choose to become performers at any time, as illustrated in figure 10. It became a social behavior setting where people gather, play, interact, and manage to use the neglected physical artifacts to facilitate and practice their activities. As Al-Sherefeen passage is mainly used as a transition corridor because it does not have any recreational or commercial activities, the skaters took advantage of this cons and un-expectedly transformed it from a purely transitional space to a recreational place. Eventually, it became known as a 'skating place' for many skaters around Cairo.

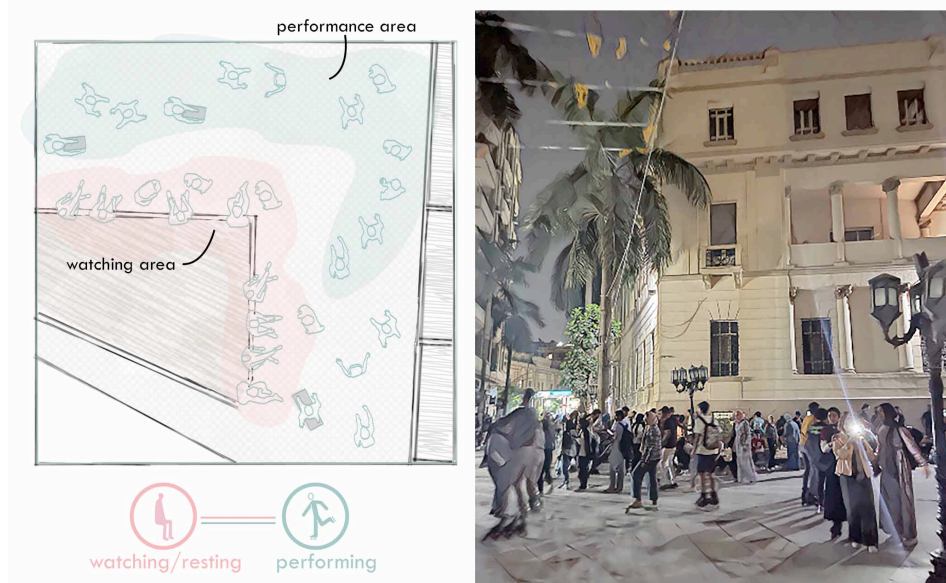


Figure 10: Skaters Occupying Al-Sherefeen Passageway During Nighttime,
Source: (Authors, 2022)

Conclusion

The phenomenon of spontaneity is defined as a dynamic process and unpredictable when studied at a small scale such as in city center public spaces. Public places are directly altered by people since they are participatory settings through regular human activity, visual engagement, and attached values (Altman et al. 1989). There have been attempts by different actors to modify the passage environment to accommodate certain activities and meet their demands, despite the fact that the passageways in the two study zones have been upgraded and modified throughout time. The observations revealed two types of space appropriation, economical and recreational, that the user adopts or applies to the passage environment. However, neither passageway had any instances of temporary political, religious, or cultural appropriation. Worth mentioning Al-Sherefeen passageway was upgraded to host various cultural events (Wahba et al. 2020), the researchers did not witness any events during the observation periods. Figure 11 represents the temporary appropriation forms observed in study areas.

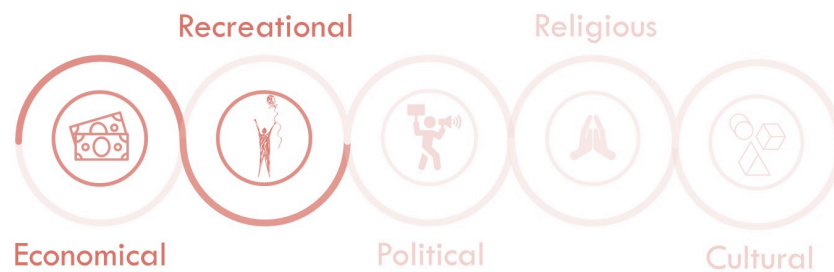


Figure 11: The Forms of Temporary Appropriation in Al-Alfi and Al-Sherefeen Passageways, Source: (Authors, 2022)

The scattering of vendors, products display, cafés furniture arrangement, and personalized physical elements, are important parts of the production of a lively and open space. Since they are easily arranging and rearrange, they can readily create visually complex and culturally distinct "passage-scapes" that express the cultural meanings associated with the specific uses. They are direct interventions on everyday aesthetics. Although the vividness of the recreational appropriation was not subjected to a legal or intentional design process, the user intervention that was observed and recorded seems to enrich urban life and bring a particular spatial appearance. The analysis highlighted the shifting of the passageway space from a movement corridor to a lively recreational place.

Temporary appropriation has been argued as emerging from local contexts out of the urban environment's culturally driven relationships and dynamics. By shading light on the importance of human spontaneous interventions in urban spaces, this research attempted to minimize the gap between governmental strategically planning practices and the everyday use of Downtown passageways. Thus, helping to develop an alternative discussion considering the human-centered viewpoint for future urban development projects.

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