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Revitalizing community with innovative redesign of Taha Hussein Memorial Park in Alexandria

Rewitalizacja dzielnicy z innowacyjnym projektem parku pamięci Taha Husseina w Aleksandrii

INTRODUCTION

Allan Jacobs and Donald Appleyard in "Toward an Urban design manifesto" wrote that: "A city should have magical places from the mundaneness of everybody work and living. Architects and planners take cities and themselves too seriously; the result too often is deadliness and boredom, no imagination, no humor, alienating places. (The city) has magic or should have, and that depends on a certain sensuous, hedonistic mood, on signs, on night lights, on fantasy, color and other imagery"[1].

One of these places is Taha Hussein neglected memorial park. The park is situated just in front of Alexandria University administration building at **shatby district**, Alexandria, Egypt. Alexandria University is the public research university in Alexandria. It was established in 1938 as a satellite of Fuad University (the name of which was later changed to Cairo University), becoming an independent entity in 1942. It was known as Farouk University until the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 when its name was changed to the University of Alexandria. Taha Hussein was the founding rector of Alexandria University[2].

It was then that Taha Hussein Memorial Park was designed to display a sense of affluence and power of the University administration building. The park is located in front of Alexandria University main building and exposed on Port Said Street, as shown on google earth map in fig. 1.

The development of Taha Hussein Memorial Park was taken as case study for landscape interpretation in the redesign of the urban fabric. Sequential observation of the place in different times showed that the park is not attractive for pedestrians, drivers or even the district's residents. The inventory of such a public space is essential to create unique form of open space to be used as public amenities.

All the phenomena, materials and places associated with the history of regional characteristics of the old University building create a certain historical context to the park. Any park is composed of the natural relief of the landscape alongside the authenticity of a given place, including losses and transformations occurring over the centuries[3].

As Taha Hussein Park can be considered as the approach toward the Alexandria University main building, this paper represents a thorough research analyzing the park main problems. Then a suggested redesign proposal to create an attractive park will be discussed. In addition, ideas for adaptive usage will be compared to accomplish aesthetic satisfaction and economic consideration needed in the district development. Preserving the identity of the place, creating public space and healthy environment is also main target of the redesign project of the park.

Nowadays, the assets of the cultural landscape must be used more and more intensively especially in urbanized areas. It is necessary to define how some places or objects which are less intensively used, forgotten or unwanted can be revitalized.

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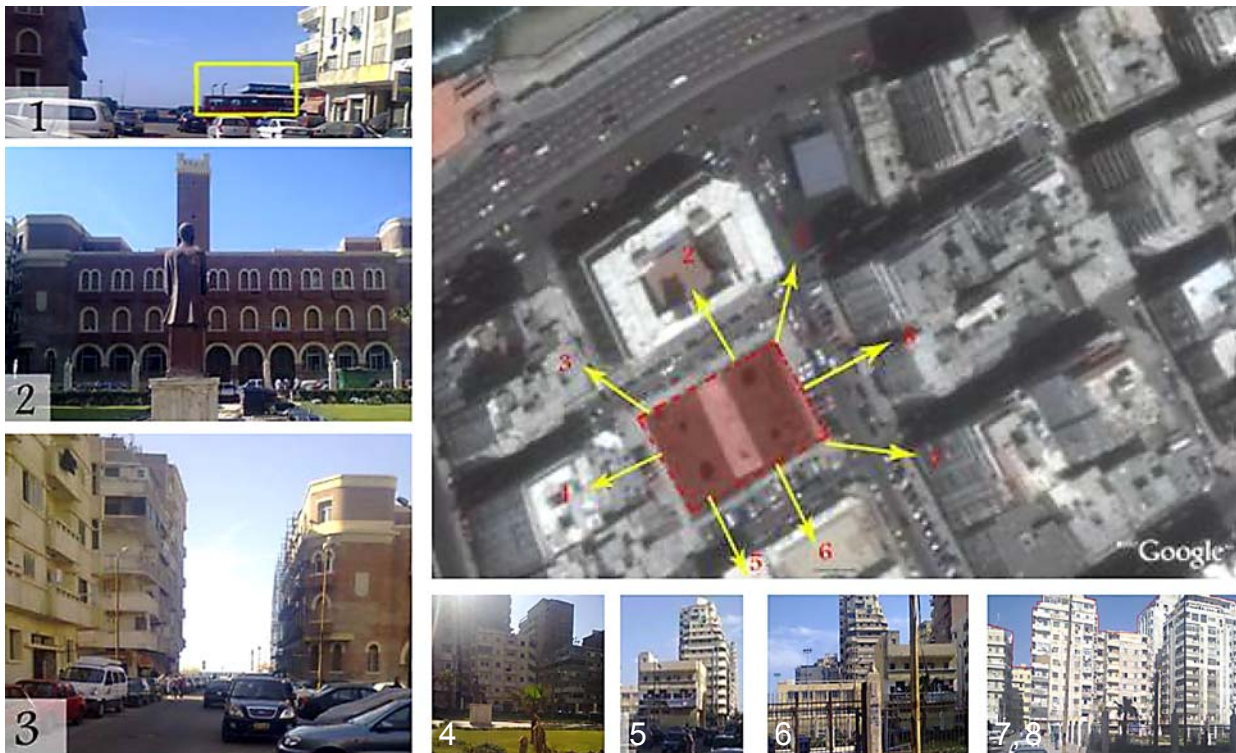
Fig. 1. Google map showing Taha Hussein park and its sourrouding: 1 – Petrol station, 2 – Alexandria University building, 3, 4 – Residential buildings, 5 – Sport center, 6 – School, 7, 8 – Residential buildings (photos by researcher)

Fig. 2. Showing the four streets around the park; A: back street separating park from residential buildings on port said street, B: Most important street separating the University building from the park, C and D: East and west street connecting corniche with port said street (photos by researcher)

METHODOLOGY

Much of this paper is descriptive and analytic diagnosis to understand the existing condition of the park and its surroundings.

Preliminary studies endorsed three analyses:

– Analysis of the natural characteristics of the site, which include visual studies.
– Analysis of the site elements of man-made as well as direct and indirect effect of the site surroundings such as the surrounding uses impact on the park, and the network of roads and traffic intensity and their relationship to the proposed redesign of the park.
– Analysis of behavioral studies of occupants and users of the park area and space, through monitoring and studying the method of dealing with the elements and components of the park.

In writing this paper, authors' research required a more micro-sociological approach, i.e., empirical and behavioral centered, in other words, to use direct participant-observation to observe public behavior in and around the park. Economic and social conditions, which constitute an inherent part of any revitalization process, regardless its scale or external conditions, were also evaluated. Data interpretation from questionnaires was an effective tool for information needed for future redesigning of the studied park.

EVALUATION OF CURRENT TAHA HUSSEIN PARK URBAN CONTEXT

A field study is an on-the-ground survey aimed at locating and recording cultural heritage items and physical evidence of human-environmental interaction. The Park is rectangular in shape surrounded by a steel gate all around the park separating it from four streets as shown in fig. 2.

The first street separates Alexandria university administration building entrance and the park. From the east and west, the park is also surrounded by two streets with less intensity traffic leading to Port Said Street which is a main transportation road in Alexandria and the corniche. The fourth street separates the park from the residential buildings exposed on Port Said Street. Taha Hussein statue is situated in the last third of the park area facing the university entrance on the same axis.

The physical environment around the park leaves much to be desired by the pedestrians for many reasons. Parking lots are placed in the front of buildings or in-between buildings and park, making it unpleasant for all pedestrians. Secondly, crossing the street is difficult in many locations along the University Avenue because of the traffic volume and the lack of pedestrian crossing indicators – pavement changes and street striping. Also, trespassing of most residents is turning the park into a place for waste and buildings' old parts as shown in fig. 3.

The park is in urgent need of upgrading. Throughout the study area, sidewalks are narrow and worn out, trees and planters are obsolete, and there are no locations for

Fig. 3. Showing Taha Hussein memorial park with all residents' trespassing and chaos leading to air pollution and safety decline. (photos by researcher)

respite. These conditions must be addressed to help preserve and transform this park into an active, pedestrian accommodating place. There must be a correlation between the public life and public space.

SITE ANALYSIS AND QUESTIONNAIRES RESULTS DISCUSSION

Community knowledge refers to the information (history, stories) and feelings that individuals and communities have for the park. This knowledge will include information that is not available through documentary research or through field studies. Collecting information on the community or social value of heritage places can be undertaken at the same time as gathering community knowledge. Community knowledge is collected by talking to people, recording people's oral histories and through community workshops. Gathering community knowledge on cultural heritage items and values can become part of the process of general community engagement for broader park management purposes[4].

For successful revitalization, the social component is essential. It is extremely important to involve the future users in the process of creating and designing a revitalized area or building, as well as to have them actively use that area or building[5].

A thorough analysis of the questionnaires for residents and users of the park was carried out – figure 4. In the beginning, it had been thought that residents and pedestrians needed some seating areas, more green areas and street vegetation, so that they could sit and relax while enjoying a nice view. Questionnaire for the pedestrians, drivers and the residents there, revealed their desire of keeping the park as it is, without any areas for football playing or any other kind of activities to avoid noise. This information which has been collected through field study was managed in a systematic and sensitive way, as it agrees with the orientation towards redesign of the memorial park keeping its sense of affluence and power, in addition to the need for a pleasing area in this region to serve the residents, the visitors, and the staff as well as the employees of the administration building of Alexandria University.

Also comparing questionnaires results with site observations led to some decisive design factors that
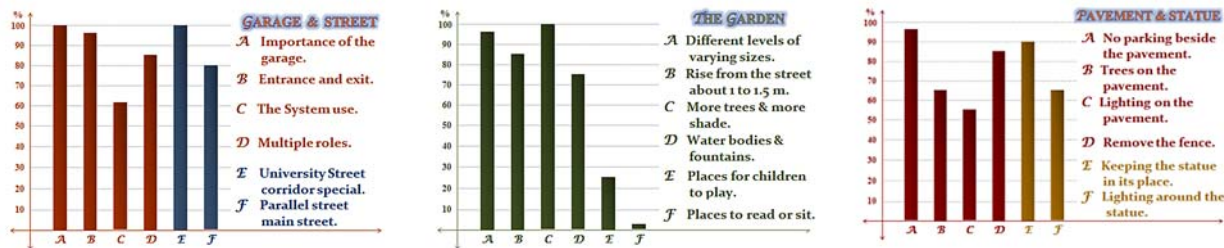
Fig. 4. Examples of questionnaires for people around the park either residents or users

must be taken into consideration while redesigning the park; table 1.

NEW REDESIGN PROPOSAL BASED ON COLLECTED INFORMATION

It is suggested that the best way to design out crime and to maximize the security and sense of safety in an urban space is to make sure that the level of use is as high as possible. Other people within an actively used space provide the best guarantee of safety, and broad social control in the context of well used spaces should be the goal of the design of all urban space[6].

The following proposed project begins with a suggestion to turn the street in front of the university administration building (separating the park and university building) into pedestrian path. Also, this path will be linking the building entrance with the new redesigned parking area located under the park.

Then in order to redevelop Taha Hussein Park, proposed development has been designed to fit in with the desires expressed by current residents, business owners, local representatives, and university officials during the interviews and summarized in table 1.

First, the community's desire for a relaxed, green park can be realized within technical constraints of implementing an underground car parking under the memorial urban space. This underground parking will be an inventive solution for car parking problem around the park and the university.

Underground structures are more challenging from an engineering and geological standpoint. They must include ventilation, hydraulic pumps, and proper rainwater disposal. Nevertheless, one benefit of underground parking is the undisturbed aesthetics of the urban landscape, because the parking area is seemingly hidden[7]. The ceiling of the car park is covered with green roofs elevated upon the park level to provide stack

Site Observations	Questionnaires results	Design decisive factors
Parked cars blocked the view of traffic and upset pedestrians	Most of the people agreed on: needing a parking garage, having fees for parking and having just one level of basement garage to avoid ground water attack.	Designing a parking garage under the park
Sidewalks were blocked with poles, signs, dumpsters,	Most people supported the idea of preventing parking between buildings and the park	Preventing parking in the streets surrounding the Taha Hussein park
Trees and planters are obsolete, and there are no locations for respite Needed more grass, flowers or trees	Many of the residents seek for having green areas. They agreed of having different levels of greeneries	Support walkability, green space development
Dirty air due to automobile exhaust	Most of the people agreed on green areas and water elements as visual aesthetic for the park	Conserve and develop green spaces Having water element in front of the statue
Trespass on the area around of the statue filling it with garbage and building materials as shown in figure ()	All people request for cleaning the park but they refused having the park as park for kids or public events to avoid noise pollution and preserve the memorial park.	Cleaning the park, proper place for waste receptacles.
Fear of crime or attacks	People are seeking for safety between the buildings and the park	Enable safety, security and crime prevention
Absence of crosswalks, pedestrian signals and traffic-calming practices	All of the people supported the idea of turning the street in front of the university into pedestrian path linking it with the park.	Modify park surrounding design to satisfy people needs.
No Lighting at various times of the day	People insisted of the importance of having lighting inside the park and on different sidewalks around it.	Designing lighting inside and outside the park
Absence of accessible, active spaces The lack of pedestrian crossing indicators – pavement changes and street striping.	People agreed on having street furniture just to serve elder people and not be a place for gathering.	Improve pedestrian crossing Public art opportunities – themes for station Provide bike parking, trees, benches, shelters, sidewalk infrastructure
The statue is placed on the same axe of the university entrance with no information on it.	People agreed having the statue in the same old place but with having a signage of information about its history and story.	Leaving the statue on its place and having descriptive signs on it. Orienting design to preserve the memorial sense of the park Strengthen visual axe by putting water element in front of the statue.

Fig. 5. Turning the street in front of the university into pedestrian path and linking the building entrance with the parking lot under the park

ventilation and natural light in each place in the parking area at a time, shown in the 3D model in fig. 6.

For the two streets between the corniche and Port Said Street, it was decided to create sense of levels in the space in the two opposite direction of the park. The circles pattern creates sideways movement making the path from the corner of the park looks generous, fig. 7.

Edges separating an urban space from its urban surroundings can be horizontal zones but they can also be vertical like in our case. The creation of urban spaces at higher or lower levels than the surrounding area can also be a very effective way of creating a clear separation between the space and its surroundings[8]. Its highly adaptable, granitic sand ground plan materials and finishes derive from the functionality and amenity of similar surface treatments throughout many parks and squares. The park's informal interaction can be supported by mobile furnishings, lighting, appropriate signage and hospitable edge activities, also shown in figure 7.

Residents and pedestrians needed some seating areas, more green areas and street vegetation so that they could sit and relax while enjoying a nice view. Resting is an integral part of pedestrian activity patterns. The provision of frequent seating facilities gives people the opportunity to rest. Apart from the number of public benches, other factors such as views, shade and comfort, location on important pedestrian links, and orientation to street activities are important in order to provide a good seating ambience respecting the idea of noise level. Widening footpaths and introducing more street trees are also main requirements in the park surrounded zone.

Temporary structures and interactive art work and digital media are also assets to create inviting public spaces. Offering spaces for contemporary art with challenging opportunities for local artists to create their works around the park, taking the function, usage pattern and history into account. The installations can be introduced at intervals and removed after certain period. This also can invite people to go and contributes to a greater awareness of the city character.

Although planting is already required in new plazas, new form of pavement, water and features with ecological functions can be integrated in the public space. In front of the Taha Hussein Statue, a linear water element was designed (fig. 7) surrounded with different materials separating pedestrian areas and landscape elements. Having the water element on the same axis with the statue and the building entrance created an imaginary visual bonding, highlighting historical details and strengthening overall spatial character. It would be advisable for such places, perceived in a new way, to have some associations with the elements of the historical, spiritual or sentimental heritage such as Taha Hussein Statue.

The suggested proposal transformed the neglected plaza into a well designed plaza with regard to pedestrians, landscape quality and circulation. Landscape arrangement and features were organized to focus on the main university building with respect of Taha Hussein art work. Underneath the plaza, an underground ventilated parking area was designed as a solution for random car accumulation and as a way of providing funds for future maintenance of the plaza.
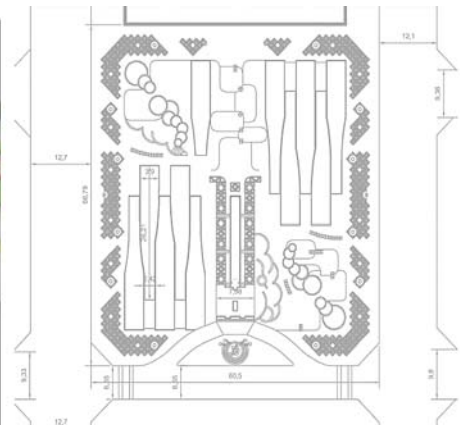

Fig. 6. Showing 3D model of the parking lot green roof in the park drawn in the left photo
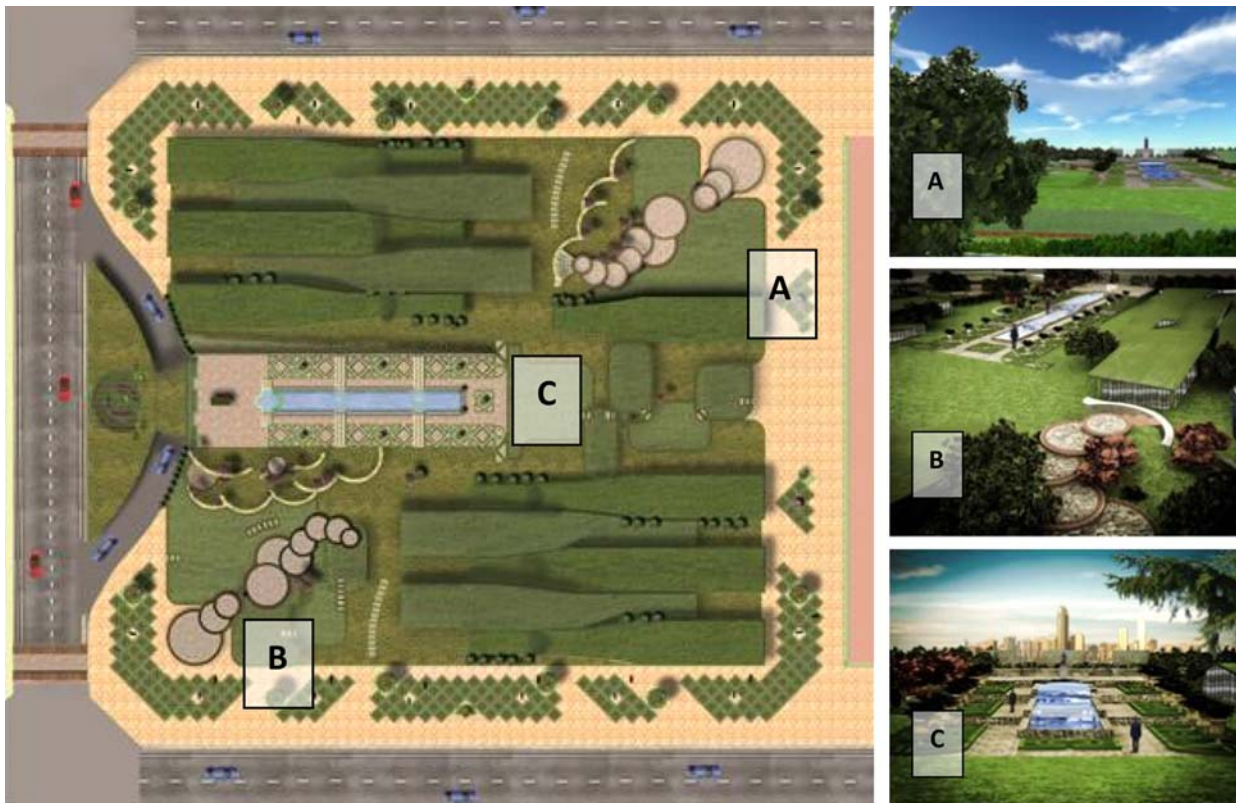
Fig. 7. Showing new park redesign proposal: a) green areas and trees surrounding the park, b) different material directing pedestrian walk and rest, c) Taha Hussein statue with water element confirming visual axis

CONCLUSION

This research was oriented to acknowledge the role of urban design within the public life and public space debates. Also this research was geared towards encouraging building owners and developers to produce high quality generic public spaces through reusing of the urban space's potential and the identity of the place.

Taha Hussein plaza can be an inspiring new public park that reinforces qualities defining Alexandria memorial park through contemporary design. In the proposed design, it focused on environmentally sustainable principles, offered diverse recreational experiences and provided a robust setting. The design abstracts the concept of water as a natural land-shaping process and visual dominating axis.

In redeveloping public spaces or plazas, community needs and amenities not being provided elsewhere were realized and reflected. This redeveloping plan resulted in enhancing the value of the place. Similar empirical project proposal must be encouraged and supported economically. Tax relief can be good incentive for developers when improving a public space.

Research should continue while implementing the project and after its usage in order to evaluate community satisfaction and to take remarks for further development. Developing and documenting indicators of success over time will lend credibility to our efforts and the use of valuable resources.

Although the value of small urban spaces can be felt across the entire city, as more people move into the city, the need for distinguished public open spaces continues to increase. The availability and the quality of urban spaces, especially in important districts, is an appropriate and sustainable approach for creating effective and desirable "urban paradises" in a city where they are needed most.

This paper is a call for Alexandria's residents and architects who need to be open and aware of parks' potential to enhance urban quality and city shape, and support the elements that are needed to make that happen.

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Abstract

Parks are complex elements of a city. They can serve scores of different uses, may be specialized in their function, or can simply provide visual appeal for residents. However they work and act to define the shape and feel of a city and its neighborhoods, they also function as a conscious tool for revitalization.

Parks can upgrade the downturn of a commercial area, support the stabilization of faltering neighborhoods, and provide a landmark element and a point of pride for residents. Cultural landscape is an object of development as well as planning processes. Because of this fact a huge number of elements in urban or rural landscapes are important for preserving the historical character of a place. Moreover, nowadays they should be base for revitalization projects.

The case study in this paper is an old park in Alexandria, Egypt, as an example from regional perspective. The paper analyzes cultural and natural potential of "Taha Hussein Park" in Alexandria through site observation and questionnaires. The obtained data analysis resulted in design decisions which were adapted to re-designing of the park. New functions for the memorial park which nowadays is notorious for crimes, physical deterioration, and social isolation, are demonstrated and discussed also from the sustainability point of view.

Also, this paper not only sheds a new light on the understanding and reading of one of neglected green areas, but also contributes to the rethinking of the role of Urban Design today within our changing public life. It is a call for Alexandria's residents and architects to enhance urban quality and city shape, and support the elements that are needed to make that happen.

Streszczenie

Parki są ważnymi przestrzeniami w każdym mieście. Mogą mieć różne funkcje lub po prostu zapewnić atrakcyjność wizualną mieszkańcom. Mają duży wpływ na klimat miasta i jego okolicy, pełniąc także funkcję narzędzia do rewitalizacji. Istnienie parku wpływa pozytywnie na rozwój obszaru, również zdegradowanego.

Krajobraz kulturowy miasta jest również istotny na drodze rozwoju, a także procesów planowania urbanistycznego. Należy zwrócić uwagę na fakt, że wiele jego elementów wpływa bezpośrednio na szansę zachowania historycznego charakteru miejsca. Co więcej, obecnie powinny one być podstawą do projektów rewitalizacyjnych.

Niniejszy artykuł dotyczy jednego z historycznych parków w Aleksandrii w Egipcie, zwanego „Taha Hussein". Autorzy analizują jego kulturowy i naturalny potencjał wykorzystując wizje lokalne w terenie oraz wywiad. Uzyskane w ten sposób dane zaowocowały decyzjami projektowymi, które zostały uwidocznione w realizacji przebudowy parku. Nowe funkcje parku, który obecnie jest znany z przestępstw, degradacji i społecznej izolacji, jako przestrzeni pamięci są istotne również z punktu widzenia zrównoważonego rozwoju. Ten dokument nie tylko rzuca nowe światło na jeden z zaniedbanych terenów zielonych miasta, ale także przyczynia się do ponownego przemyślenia roli *Urban Design* dzisiaj, w naszym zmieniającym się życiu publicznym. Jest to wezwanie mieszkańców i architektów Aleksandrii do poprawy jakości przestrzeni urbanistycznych miasta oraz wsparcia wszelkich działań, które są niezbędne do osiągnięcia tego celu.