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EXPERIENCED CITY, REPRESENTED CITY: ANALYSIS OF URBAN PRACTICES IN THE NEW ALI MENDJLI CITY IN CONSTANTINE

Sandra Redjem
Ph.D. Student, University salah boubnider Constantine 1, faculty of architecture and urban planning, habitat and urban environment laboratory, Constantine, Algeria

Ahcene Lakhel
Lecturer A, University salah boubnider Constantine 1, faculty of architecture and urban planning, habitat and urban environment laboratory, Constantine, Algeria

ABSTRACT

The new Ali Mendjli town was designed primarily to meet the needs of urban expansion, and is changing as residents move in and use it on a daily basis. It is marked by a process of appropriation and reinterpretation of its urban spaces, which are strongly influenced by functional and social practices and uses. As a result, the city is an orality or a discourse made up of physical elements and symbolic representations, rituals and journeys made by social actors who in turn attribute meaning to their urban environment. The city is thus a dynamic space in which the issues of urban planning, social interaction and the appropriation of space are constantly redefined.

Introduction.

If we consider that spatialisation - the creation and use of form - is the result of the image that society has of itself, then urban space cannot be a simple product or a simple support for practices. It is one of the forms of expression of society in all its complexity. As a spatial form in which different social issues are articulated, the city requires reflection rooted in the plurality of everyday experience.

As a result, the city is a social reality that is intelligible, meaningful, oral and imaginable to those who experience it. It cannot be reduced to its material and functional aspects; it can be likened to a text formulated by our spatio-temporal appropriation inherent in the practices of urban space. The city is therefore both criticised and appreciated by its social actors, and shaped by the surrounding culture.

Kevin Lynch was one of the first urban planners to take an interest in the way people represent their city. According to his analysis, the 'imagibility' of a city or urban composition is fundamental to the experience of its users: *'the city should not be considered as a thing in itself, but as perceived by its inhabitants'*.

Lynch seeks to define the elements that forge the mental image of the city in its inhabitants and make the city legible to them. He has also studied collective images so that they can be used by urban planners and future city designers to create urban landscapes that are as satisfying as possible for city dwellers.

Raymond Ledrut has also done a great deal of research into the relationship between space and society, basing his research on individual experiences, in which he demonstrated that urban practices vary according to age, sex, social background, place of birth and place of residence, resulting in heterogeneous images of the

city. To identify these images, in 'Les images de la ville (1973)', he chose to carry out a survey using questionnaires and photographs with residents of Toulouse and Pau, where he showed the composite nature of the symbolic nature of the city.

His approach is different from Lynch's, where images of the city are highly varied because they derive from the meaning that actors attribute to the city. He has always been concerned to know whether the images of urban planners and officials who hold decision-making powers are similar to those of users. He has also considered the effect of these images on the urban practices of residents and on the transformations of the city.

A number of researchers have also been interested in the representations of the city, their work based on the methodological tool of semiology; Pierre Sansot in his book 'La Poétique de la ville, 2004' developed a good example, where he seeks to understand the essence and meaning of the city by considering it as a phenomenon of coming and going, of the objective and the subjective, where the notions of place and lived experience form the imaginary foundations of the city.

In their book 'Concerter, gouverner et concevoir les espaces publics urbains', M. Zepf and P. Amphoux propose an approach to analysis based on the 'positivist opposition between objectivity and subjectivity', combining the logics of the 'known' (that which enables space to be measured), the 'experienced' (that which enables space to be felt) and the 'sensitive' (that which enables space to be used and practised).

In the geography of perception, the notion of perceived space has been widely used, especially by Gilbert Durand in his work 'Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire, 1960'. He demonstrated the close relationship that exists between the behaviour of users and their perception of their urban environment, using this approach to measure the degree of satisfaction or attraction an individual has for a spatial entity.

Anne Sgard, in her book 'Sharing the Landscape', argues that rather than a semiology of cities, language forms and rhetorical techniques, particularly those collected from interviews, now constitute rich and original material that has taken a leading role in studies of cities and urban landscapes.

In France in the early 1970s, Alain Renier, having followed the work of the semio-linguistic research group directed by A.-J. Greimas at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales for two decades, developed the 'parcours' method, a new way of approaching both built space and the people who live in it and constantly transform it. Experienced space is closely linked to the practices of the people who live in it [1], and represents a variety of configurations of places that replace the single geometric configuration of built space. This method demonstrates that space can be apprehended in a different way to that provided by the architects' graphic representation.

The intersection of the above approaches and thinking has enabled us to define the theme of our research within a very precise epistemological framework. In our research, the starting hypothesis is to consider the city not as a physical-spatial materiality that requires reading, but as an orality, a representation in which we are interested in the gaze, the journey, the perception and the practice of the urban environment.

In order to carry out our research properly, several key questions will be addressed:

How do the social actors in the city talk about/read their city?

- Do the actors' representations become acts that participate in the making of the city? If so, how?

- Is there a co-occurrence between the city (morphic system) and the discourse of social actors (semiotic system)?

To answer these questions, several objectives were set:

- To explain the fact that the city is not simply a material production; the city is an orality that sums up the daily deployment of a set of social practices.

- To observe and approach users in order to explore the ways in which they appropriate urban space, so as to highlight the forms of antagonism and sociability that they maintain with their built spaces;

- To explore the effectiveness of the 'mental map' as an investigative tool, in order to describe the relationship between urban forms and social practices, by showing the role of perception in the creation of mental representations among users;

- Analyse the mental and physical routes, then compare them to deduce similarities/differences;

- Demonstrate that spatial forms are social and temporal at various levels.

Materials and Methods.
Case study:
Despite its rapid demographic growth, the city of Constantine has remained almost entirely concentrated around the Rock. It is the embodiment of the 'city of yesterday' i.e. the compact city, inward-looking city. But today, fifty years on, Constantine is being built far from its traditional bases, on its most remote outskirts, and

is becoming increasingly diffuse and fragmented. Today, satellite towns such as El-Khroub, Didouche-Mourad, Aïn Smara and Hama-Bouziane dot the outskirts of Constantine.

Before the year 2000, a vast operation planned on the southern fringes of the city, and more specifically on the Aïn El Bey plateau, gave rise to a brand new town, created ex nihilo: the Ville nouvelle Ali Mendjeli, which was designed and developed by architects and town planners. It subsequently attracted the interest of a number of analyses, scientific works and productions, academic debates and discussions between architects, town planners and geographers.

Despite the many works published in Algeria and elsewhere on the new Ali Mendjeli town, and the variety of disciplines involved, it has been noted that it has only been approached and analysed in terms of its urban structure, showing the role of public players and officials in its making, thus affirming the single vision of a 'manufactured town' and not a 'town that is being manufactured'.

Marc Côte (2006), in his book entitled 'Constantine - cité antique et ville nouvelle' (Constantine - ancient city and new town), points out that the new town is not set in stone and that the inhabitants must be given the time to reclaim their space 'the time of the inhabitants', the opportunity to think about their town and organise themselves among themselves".

For this reason, we have chosen the new town of Ali Mendjli as our field of investigation, and we are going to analyse a number of neighbourhood units, accurately portraying the role played by its social actors through their various practices in the profound urban changes it is undergoing. We will link perception, social practices and urban production over time with their spatial differentiation. By treating the neighbourhood unit as a field of multi-scale interaction, we hope to affirm a new approach to reading the link between space, society and functions.

Our approach consists of analysing a number of neighbourhood units belonging to five districts structuring the new Ali Mendjli town in Constantine. This analysis will be morphological and semiotic, and will be carried out with social actors, where essential criteria will guide the choice of study areas, namely the social criterion, the housing typology criterion and the spatial location criterion.

Other criteria will subsequently be developed to enrich the analysis and produce relevant and reliable results, namely the functional criterion, urban density and level of urbanisation, development of neighbourhood units and transport.

Our investigations focus on the relationships between spatial forms, uses, forms of sociability, perceptions and representations made by users within their neighbourhood units in the new Ali Mendjli town. To achieve this, we will need to reflect in depth on the interaction between the classical readings (historical, morphological and functional). Then, we will approach the sensitive dimension with the users of the neighbourhood units studied by the techniques of general direct observation and targeted participant observation, a life story and a questionnaire regrouping 6 categories of questions (closed and open):

1. The respondent's socio-professional profile ;
2. Practices and uses of the living space;
3. Users' perceptions and representations (graphic and rhetorical) of their urban space;
4. Forms of antagonism and/or sociability among users of inhabited space;
5. The affective evaluation and degree of satisfaction of users of their urban spaces;
6. The identification of significant places in the city (relevant urban fragments) that structure the path taken by social players.

Results and Discussion.

In the course of this research, we will first deconstruct the neighbourhood unit into the relevant components that make it up, and then proceed to a relative restitution of the representations based on these identified components.

The main objective of this research is to determine the relationship between a semiotic path and a physical path. The former is understood as the result of an action of walking along a precise path, an identifiable urban device that is delivered through the discourses of its actors. The second is identified by intrinsic morphological elements, sometimes also called morphological structures. Next, the superimposition and comparison of semiotic configurations and morphological components is fundamental in order to verify whether there are co-occurrences.

To do this, we will use two distinct methodological tools.

On the one hand, we will use the tool of content analysis to read the discourse of the social actors carrying out their journeys. On the other hand, we will use morphological analysis to read the physical components of the route.

Finally, we will compare the results obtained from the previous methods, superimpose them and analyse them in order to interpret the final result obtained.

The preliminary results of these analyses have enabled us to understand that each urban element and each urban construction correspond to an affective, social relationship or a practice established between the actor and his or her route. In the same way, at the end of the analyses we deduced initially that for the actors, and whatever the neighbourhood unit, the elements of the discourses and the physical elements are not completely superimposable insofar as there are within them urban elements excluded from the discourses relating to the mental routes taken. In practicing space, each actant evacuates elements of the urban that he does not consider relevant to what interests him, firstly in terms of his actantial program, and then in terms of the relationships he has established with his urban environment.

A street may seem important to one person but not to another, because no close friends or relatives used it. Initially, the sorting of urban elements turned out to be linked above all to the length of time the route was 'consumed'; this remains to be verified with the rest of the social actors I continue to interview. The richness of the route in relevant urban elements is the result of the rhythm of frequentation and the degree of appropriation of urban spaces.

I would like to point out that my results will be supplemented and finalised by data that I am currently processing and which will subsequently form the content of a second article.

Conclusions.

Through the use and practice of certain neighbourhood units in the new Ali Mendjli town by its social actors, certain physical elements become significant places. This is because each inhabitant or user selects elements from his or her urban itinerary, stimulated by spatial practices, which his or her memory then segments and integrates. The virtual succession of these relevant integrated segments produces the mental journey. Rituals and practices in urban space, such as shopping, visiting friends, relaxing, etc., then become a pretext for carrying out actantial programs.

Each practice relates a discourse and a well-defined route which becomes the support for relevant and different urban elements. Our analysis shows that there is a wealth of discourse relating to certain routes analysed as relevant urban elements. This is due to social relations, the practice and appropriation of urban space, which have become more accentuated thanks to the time factor. In this respect, we believe that spatial forms are social and temporal at different levels. Raymond Ledrut, in his book La forme et le sens dans la société (Form and Meaning in Society), asked the question: does form receive meaning or give meaning? We believe that the value of urban spaces cannot be reduced solely to what they offer in terms of their capacity or density. To grasp this intrinsic real value in all its complexity, we need to understand the city as a set of places endowed with meaning and representations. We believe that articulating space and time, the objective and the subjective, the visible and the invisible, the spatial and the social, is fundamental to the city's relevance and vitality.

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